Book Reviews

Paul S. Fiddes, *Iris Murdoch and The Others: A Writer in Dialogue with Theology* (London: T&T Clark/Bloomsbury, 2022), 220 pages. ISBN: 9780567703347.

Reviewed by Alistair J. Cuthbert

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Iris Murdoch and The Others is the latest monograph of British baptist theologian Paul S. Fiddes. This text is the tenth sole-authored theological book to add to the many edited and multi-authored volumes, and hundreds of academic journal papers, which span Fiddes' active fifty-year career in the academy.

As the title suggests, the overall purpose of this book is to bring the Oxford philosopher Iris Murdoch, who while rejecting a personal faith in God remained interested in the Christian faith, into theological dialogue with other theologians and philosophers in order to demonstrate Fiddes' often-stated belief that literature can *construct* theology in ways outside the traditional boundaries of the theological enterprise.

This book appears to have been circulating in the mind of Fiddes for many decades, since the majority of chapters are revised versions of previously published chapters between 1991 and 2013. Yet, despite the original independence of these chapters, Fiddes has taken them, revised and updated them, and written two original chapters, which collectively give the reader a coherent journey through the philosophy and novels of Murdoch, while examining and assessing her work against the thinking of other philosophers and theologians, many of whom Murdoch read and interacted with herself.

The range of engaged topics demonstrates Fiddes' capabilities as a theological polymath. In chapters one and two Fiddes sets out

Murdoch's vision of 'the good' as ultimate truth; an exploration, claims Fiddes, she embarked upon in reaction to a 'straw God' she believed was the object of all theology. In the revised chapters Fiddes analyses Murdoch's philosophical delineation of the sublime, the beautiful, the conflicted self, and semiotics and language, and then critiques her philosophy through interaction with a wide array of thinkers such as, *inter alia*, orthodox theologian D.B. Hart, poet G.M. Hopkins, and post-structuralist J. Derrida. The final chapter and CODA brings the book to a climactic end with an analysis of the influence on Murdoch of French philosopher and activist Simone Weil and explains the prominence of Weilian themes in Murdoch's work, such as displacement, affliction, and giving attention to the other. Notwithstanding her unwillingness to follow Weil and believe in a personal Christ, it is through Weil that Murdoch arrives at her advocacy of a mystical Christ.

This text is an excellent addition to the corpus of work Fiddes has published on the interrelationship between theology and literature. One of its core strengths is the author's willingness to polemically push back on some of Murdoch's key ideas such as rejecting personal language about God, since it is 'only' metaphorical, while accepting language about 'the good', which she admits is also metaphorical. Concerning weaknesses, Fiddes' kernel underlying presupposition of a panentheistic reality to God, which enables God to speak in different ways through different persons, with or without faith, could be viewed as undermining the revelation and authority of scripture. That said, when the book price is reduced, this book would be worth reading by those interested in the relationship between theology, literature, and philosophy.

Hannah Malcolm (ed.), *Words for a Dying World: Stories of Grief and Courage from the Global World* (London: SCM Press, 2020), 212 pages. ISBN: 9870334059868.

Reviewed by Susan Stevenson

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Hannah Malcolm, Anglican theologian, environmentalist, campaigner, and broadcaster here brings together a diverse group of 35 contributors, from across the global Church, to focus on aspects of the current environmental crisis. Scientists, theologians, poets, and pastors are amongst those who give voice to the climate grief which they and their communities are experiencing.

These short contributions are wide-ranging in scope and are insistent that grief is not an abstraction because people are grieving the death of particular things. They enable us to hear often overlooked voices. Thus, we hear the islanders of the Solomon Islands reeling from the destructive impact of Cyclone Harold and cattle farmers in Northern Namibia struggling to survive in the face of drought. The issues are not solely in the global South because we also hear the voices of communities in the southern Appalachians coming to terms with the havoc of their post-industrial landscape, as well as theological reflection on Western grief at its loss of power.

The wide range of essays explore the inter-relationship between issues of environment, race, and injustice. As well as reflecting on human experiences, these short chapters also examine the impact of climate change upon oceans, reefs, rivers, land, and soil, which helps provide a wide variety of different prisms through which to view lived experience.

A major theme which emerges is the role of lament, which is seen as a way through despair; emphasising that living with grief is a challenging but essential element in finding hope. Furthermore, these contributors argue that shared grief can lead to a rediscovery of our mutual belonging, with one another and the whole creation. 'Our tears are the salty gates for seeing a different reality' (p. 204).

The book is divided into three parts: 'As It Was Then', 'As It Is Now', and the future orientated 'As It Will Be'. As I read the first two parts of the book, I found I needed to remember that future hope in order to cope with the grief which these essays evoked in me. Living with these issues over time does, like the grief process itself, lead to new hope, but it is certainly not a cheap or easy hope.

I began to read this book as COP26 was drawing to a close in Glasgow, and I continued into Advent, reading a contribution each day as part of my daily reading. It leads me to recommend this as a helpful book to use, either personally during Lent or perhaps even better as the basis for a study group.

Discovering that a local environmental group was advertising an online discussion of the book with its author prompts me to think that *Words for a Dying World* could be a valuable resource for drawing people from many backgrounds together into discussion of these vital issues.

This book offers the opportunity to listen to many Christian voices from across the world who have acute theological insight to offer, all delivered in an accessible and relevant way. These essays, many of which contain useful footnotes and suggestions for further reading, provide a rich resource from and for the Church. A tough, but essential read for Christians wishing to offer hope for a dying world.

Brian R. Talbot, *Building on a Common Foundation: The Baptist Union of Scotland, 1869-2019*. Foreword by David W. Bebbington (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 426 pages. ISBN: 9781725298675.

Reviewed by Ian Randall

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It was the previous General Director of the Baptist Union of Scotland, Alan Donaldson, now the General Secretary of the EBF, who invited Brian Talbot to write the 150th anniversary history of the Baptist Union of Scotland (1869–2019). In 2003 Brian had written *Search for a Common Identity: The Origin of the Baptist Union of Scotland,1800–1870*, looking at how the Baptist churches came together to form a Union in 1869. This further volume is marked by Brian's characteristic care in investigating and using sources and telling a story which gives attention to detail and at the same time paints in an illuminating way the bigger picture.

In an interview in *Baptists Together* in May 2021, Brian explained that he had long been interested in how a small network of churches in

the mid-nineteenth century saw significant numerical growth over time and in the twentieth century played a much larger role in Scottish Christian life than might have been expected. It is good to see the way he highlights the role of those involved in local churches, the women and men who were members as well as the ministers.

The 'common foundation' in the title of the book is shown to have had several elements: home mission that had a particular focus on urban evangelism, the strengthening of weaker churches through a common fund, theological education, and sharing of information that offered mutual encouragement. The early growth in the Union is traced: from 51 to 60 churches in three years and by 1879, no less than 80 churches, 29 of them newly planted. In addition to the churches, there were preaching stations and home-based evangelistic meetings — numbering 155 in 1889.

There is analysis here of the encouraging way in which numbers of members and churches in the Union continued to grow up to 1935, their creative efforts having an effect at a time when general churchgoing had begun to decline. However, this book does not simply tell a story of progress. The complex factors at work in very varied local situations are probed. It is helpful to follow the account of the 1960s onwards, when secular influences became more and more dominant, and approaches to mission and ministry needed to change.

This is a fine example of how to write a denominational history. The wider social context is fully taken into account. Relationships with other denominations and other parts of the world are given appropriate coverage. It is striking, for example, the extent to which the Baptist Union of Scotland has had a connection with the EBF. The roles of individuals and churches are vividly portrayed. Perceptive comments are offered.

What Brian Talbot has written has relevance not only to those who live in Scotland, but to all who want to understand more about the way Baptists have been witnesses in local, trans-local, and global contexts. Brian is himself an illustration of these dynamics at work. He is a local church minister, a tutor with a university in South Africa, and a leading figure in the historical dimension of the work of the Baptist

World Alliance. Out of his commitments to the past and in the present, he has produced an impressive book that can provide wisdom for future mission.

Nicola Slee, *Fragments for Fractured Times: What Feminist Practical Theology Brings to the Table* (London: SCM, 2020), 274 pages. ISBN: 9780334059080.

Reviewed by Lina Toth

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Fragments for Fractured Times is a captivating example of recycling — and I mean this in an utterly positive sense. Indeed, the author takes her inspiration from artist Jan Richardson, whose art adorns the cover of *Fragments*: 'in God's economy, nothing is wasted' (https://sanctuaryofwomen.com/WomensChristmasRetreat2020.pdf). Why should good things — such as talks or lecture notes or occasional articles spanning over fifteen years, about half of them previously unpublished — not get a second lease of life? Slee's variety of themes, from reflections on feminist spirituality to the significance of poetry, the spiritual practice of scholarly work, and feminist possibilities of conceiving, imagining, and approaching God, have been reassembled for this volume, and emerge with new emphases and interconnections.

Slee describes herself as a poet and a feminist practical theologian. Both of these aspects of her identity are clearly visible in this book, reflected in the specific contexts which occasioned each piece of this collection — from invited talks to chapters in multi-authored volumes, to poetry written as a response to specific experiences, to preaching occasions. Given the 'fractured times' in which we live, Slee proposes a 'third way' between the insistence on a unified system that has characterised Christendom, and an unequivocal embrace of ever-separated discourses in theology: a feminist practical theology that seeks to reconstruct as well as deconstruct, 'refusing to impose an artificial unity upon the many fractured parts', yet pulling towards 'a larger whole

that might be assembled from the fragments—a whole that is always ahead of us, never fully envisaged or realized' (p. 13).

Readers of this journal might be especially interested in Slee's (previously unpublished) chapters on reading, writing, and research in practical theology as a 'transformative spiritual practice' — a highly recommended read for anyone engaged in theological research. Her insistence on the primacy of our faith journey, through the highs and the lows of our intellectual (and other) endeavours, illustrates the kind of deep awareness and celebration of spiritual underpinnings which permeates the whole collection. Whilst Anglicanism is Slee's theological home, her conversations naturally span the ecumenical spectrum. This is hardly surprising and reflects Slee's own position as Director of Research at The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education. It is also delightful to see IBTS listed alongside other collegial institutions in the acknowledgements.

This is not a polished work, but, as such, it provides a unique opportunity to get a glimpse into the life and thought of a noteworthy contemporary theologian.

Jonas Kurlberg and Peter M. Phillips (eds), *Missio Dei in a Digital Age* (London: SCM Press, 2020), 274 pages. ISBN: 9780334059110.

Reviewed by Peter Stevenson

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In response to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, churches across the world rapidly moved many of their activities online. In some contexts, moving online enabled congregations to connect with new groups of people, beyond the walls of the church.

As obstacles to public worship ease, many fellowships have opted for hybrid models of being church which contain an ongoing online dimension. While this is happening, digital culture continues to undergo rapid changes. Times such as these require robust theological

reflection about the digital world in which we live and move and have our being.

This book provides a very useful contribution to that necessary conversation by exploring aspects of the *missio Dei* in a digital age. Most of the book's chapters originated as contributions to a symposium at the CODEC Research Centre at Durham University in 2019. It is interesting to note that the symposium's convenors Jonas Kurlberg and Pete Phillips, who edited this stimulating collection of papers, are now staff members at Spurgeon's College, where they oversee the *MA in Digital Theology*.

The book benefits from an international panel of contributors from various Christian denominations, and its value arises from the range of topics which they explore. For example, one chapter helpfully views digital culture through the lens of the missiological principle of inculturation. Another essay questions whether search engine algorithms help or hinder people searching for God online. Illustrating that *missio Dei* embraces more than just evangelism, in his contribution Tim Davy examines 'some of the ways in which digital technology is being used to exploit vulnerable children and young people' (p. 223).

This book does not claim to provide all the answers but raises questions which invite us to join in a serious conversation about the Church's mission in this digital age. This conversation is unavoidable because, as Jonas Kurlberg explains, 'digital culture is not "out there" in a foreign land, it is in the midst of us all […] we are already digital natives' (p. 11). This contextual reality forces Christians to ask what it might mean to translate the gospel into this digital culture.

Christians have a track record of using mass media to communicate with large numbers of people. One theme emerging from this collection of essays is that such uni-directional communication does not fit comfortably with the interactive, participatory culture of social media. Recognising the 'interactivity of web 2.0' leads Kurlberg to suggest that the Church needs to be 'attentively listening rather than blasting its message to passive media consumers of a bygone age' (p. 7).

John Drane and Olive Fleming Drane observe that if 'this is God's world then we must be able to find God at work in it', from which it follows that 'there is nowhere that God cannot be found' (p. 152). This leads them to offer some ideas about searching for signs of divine activity within the digital environment. Rather than seeing that environment as a foreign land to be feared, this collection of essays encourages us to engage in the challenging and exciting task of discerning ways in which God is already at work within digital culture so that we can participate in the *missio Dei*.

Steve Aisthorpe, *Rewilding the Church* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2020), 144 pages. ISBN: 9780715209813.

Reviewed by Andrea Klimt

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'It is time to rediscover the adventure of faith', asserts Aisthorpe in his view of the decline of Christianity in Europe. Stating that the Church is domesticated, he asks for 'rewilding the Church'. In a way the book contains impulses for church development, or change management, and an invitation to refresh one's personal spiritual journey.

As a nature-loving person and a mission development worker (Church of Scotland), Aisthorpe reveals himself as an expert, who skilfully combines scientific observations of nature with biblical perspectives. The book is intended for both church leaders and ordinary members. In the centre of his considerations the author places the ecological concept of rewilding, which means that in many places there is a call for more wilderness, as an innovative concept of nature conservation. Instead of cultivating large areas of landscape through human intervention, nature is left to itself. It regenerates itself and, for example, apparently extinct species return. Rewilding is a powerful metaphor and Aisthorpe considers what it can mean and achieve when applied to the Church. Step by step the author convinces the reader — by quoting a variety of scientific studies as well as pointing to historical

events — to observe nature's phenomena and learn to trust in the regenerating power of nature. Rewilding is an innovative perspective on finding new ways to deal with a declining church membership. Rewilding stands for what God is doing in the Church rather than what we are able to do with our plans and programmes. 'Rewilding the Church' is a plea for a radical step to follow Jesus and for letting the Holy Spirit work.

But has the author thought through the consequences of his approach? Does it mean to observe a declining church and only take a step back, trusting that life will bounce back by itself after a while? The author speaks about change and transition and that this is never an easy ride. Reading the book can be challenging as well as inspiring. On the one hand, the idea of 'rewilding the Church' gives hope to discover life where there seems to be none. On the other hand, it challenges the intense efforts being made to help dying churches and communities. Nevertheless, it shows possibilities and gives ideas on how we can deal creatively with this situation.

In summary, this book *Rewilding the Church* represents a valuable change of perspective that can be innovative in individual cases. However, serious consideration must be given as to whether this approach is appropriate for every situation.

Andrey Kravtsev, *Russian Baptist Mission Theology in Historical and Contemporary Perspective* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Monographs, 2019), 336 pages. ISBN: 9781783687473.

Reviewed by Peter Penner

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This monograph is based on a PhD dissertation submitted by Andrey Kravtsev to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois, USA. It is the first study of this kind that tries to identify and describe the mission understanding of Russian Baptists. Two research questions guide

Kravtsev in his research. First, how do some of the most influential Russian Baptist leaders understand the following issues: (a) the nature of the gospel; (b) the Church's identity and purpose; (c) Christian cultural engagement; and (d) holistic mission? The second driving question asks: What missiological revisions, if any, do these leaders deem necessary in the current socio-political and religious contexts of Russia? The study therefore intends to listen to voices on the ground and identify aspects necessary to adjust and deepen mission understanding among Russian Baptist leaders. These include possible inadequacies of traditional formulations; specific areas and issues to reconsider; and potential strategies/obstacles in the process of introducing missiological revisions. The research design implies a hypothesis, which it subsequently proves, that corrections and improvements are needed.

The book comprises four major parts. Firstly, Kravtsev presents the history and present worldwide understanding of mission since the mission conference in Edinburgh in 1910. Secondly, he provides an overview of Russian Baptist developments and influences in history from 1867 (when the first Russian Baptist church was founded in Russia) up to the present. Thirdly, through semi-structured interviews with Russian Baptist leaders, he collects and summarises responses on their understanding of mission. Finally, these findings in discussion with present evangelical understandings of mission (Lausanne is considered normative) help him to analyse Baptist mission thinking and what aspects may need adjustments and widening.

The study offers very helpful and, in some ways, surprising insights. Even for readers who are familiar with the history of the Russian Baptists, it is still good to look at it from a mission perspective. This offers nuances not identified before. The broad evangelical perspective on mission, primarily following Lausanne, is well known and much has been written on this. But it is helpful to look through these lenses at the mission understanding of the Russian Baptists, at their historical mission involvement, and at their present ministries, or partial absence of mission activities. The surprising parts result from the interviews of the thirty leaders who are part of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists. Views on both the historical and

contemporary broader understanding of mission among Baptist leaders of Russia, reflected in their actual practice, unearth some surprises.

Churches in the post-Soviet context of Russia still find themselves in a difficult setting. While some formerly Warsaw Bloc countries can speak of post-communism and evangelical and Protestant communities have the freedom to be involved in the mission of God, Russian evangelicals continue to ask for their rights and need to prove their belonging and relevance as church in the Russian Federation.

The findings on mission that Kravtsev presents might be quite similar in most other countries of the former Soviet Union, and many Baptists and other evangelical groups in Eastern Europe and Central Asia would possibly agree with those results in mission understanding and praxis. Some of them also feel limited in their participation in the mission of God. The current geo-political tensions between Russia and the West present some limits but also opportunities for mission theology and praxis. The monograph is a very good study that is worth attention not only from those in Russian evangelical circles but also from Russian Orthodox and those in the international mission community. For impact in Russia itself it would need to be translated into Russian.

Ksenija Magda, *Blessing the Curse? A Biblical Approach for Restoring Relationships in the Church* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2020), 253 pages. ISBN: 9781783687923.

Reviewed by Fran Porter

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The central thesis of this book is that Christ's redemptive work has overcome the curse (Genesis 3) of damaging hierarchical gender relationships: 'Jesus challenged and reversed hierarchies because he wanted to redefine the world from the perspective of a new creation rather than the curse' (p. 18). Ksenija Magda is a Baptist-by-conviction

woman who loves the Church while recognising its shortcomings, arguing that Baptists 'fail women miserably from a global perspective' (p. 7).

The book begins with a description of the damage of 'curse' for women and girls, men and the earth, before moving to outline how churches embed sinful structures among themselves and in families, and to describe the detrimental social and economic impact of hierarchies. It then delves into the New Testament, and Paul in particular, to show how Christ is the solution to this problem of sin. The book concludes with a consideration of church as a new creation and the possibility of it as a place where hierarchical practices can be challenged and changed. In her argument, Ksenija Magda draws on scripture (with the book usefully having a scripture index) and tradition, historical and contemporary global perspectives and examples, and personal narrative drawn from two decades of international work with women. Indeed, the

> […] female perspective needs to be the starting point for this kind of investigation, since the problem of "the blessed" curse, so to speak, is not evident if we do not recognise the deep, ongoing pain of women and the ripples this pain creates for everyone else (p. 1).

To read this book is to be faced with the subjugation faced by so many women and girls, often said to be in the name of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Blessing the Curse? reflects themes and language typical of evangelicalism (with sin — and women and men as sinners — as a primary analytical category, for example, and God spoken of as 'he' rather than in gender neutral terms) and hence speaks in a medium and from a starting point to which evangelicals can relate (rather than, for example, a discourse of rights or feminist critique). It diverges from much (most?) evangelical culture, however, in that its critique of gender hierarchies is uncompromising: how women are viewed and treated is not peripheral to the gospel but foundational. Ksenija Magda's critique is bold. Her descriptions are stark and incisive. Her narrative is, at times, shocking as she unmasks the patriarchalism still hidden in plain sight in churches.

The book is unlikely to convince those who are invested in hierarchies, because texts (on their own) rarely do; but it will provide illumination, resources, and validation for those for whom gender hierarchies do not make sense, are intuitively discerned as antithetical to the gospel, and/or are known to be damaging, particularly for girls and women. For it is to both the necessity and possibility of working towards restoring gender relationships in the Church that this book bears witness.

C. Douglas Weaver, *Baptists and the Holy Spirit: The Contested History with Holiness-Pentecostal-Charismatic Movements* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 573 pages. ISBN: 9781481310062.

Reviewed by Scott Kohler

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'Have Baptists treated the Holy Spirit like a shy member of the Trinity?' This is the question with which C. Douglas Weaver, Professor of Baptist Studies at Baylor, begins his comprehensive volume. As the subtitle suggests, it is not so much a study of Baptist theologies of the Spirit, but rather an investigation into the ways Baptists have engaged various Spirit-centred movements, especially during the twentieth century.

Baptists and the Holy Spirit unfolds in three parts, each devoted to a particular group. Part I concerns Baptist engagement with the Holiness Movement from the mid-1800s to the early twentieth century, including the Keswick holiness teaching that would exert a longstanding influence among Baptists. Part II plots the connections between Baptists and the first two generations of Pentecostalism, some of whose early leaders had formerly been Baptists. Part III, which takes up about half of the main text, focuses on Baptist responses to the Charismatic movement from the 1960s to the present. Each part includes some exploration of race and/or gender questions, which are by no means tangential to this contested history, as Holy Spirit movements have tended to be more deliberately egalitarian than have some Baptists.

Drawing on an array of denominational periodicals as well as standard theological texts, the first two parts bring to life many significant figures who are now mostly forgotten. The contemporary responses highlight the various issues at stake in these historic, and often cyclical, debates. The third part benefits from a wealth of available material — many figures in Weaver's narrative are still living and active in the conversation.

The book suggests that, with all three of these movements, Baptists were among those drawn to the new teachings and also among those most concerned to oppose them. This is understandable, as Weaver points out in the Introduction, because all of these groups had restorationist perspectives that were in tune with that of Baptists, each claiming 'in some form that they best restored the New Testament church' (xiii). Shared reverence for the Word, desire to follow the Spirit's leading, and hunger for an experiential faith (p. 407) make these groups natural dialogue partners for Baptists, if also natural disputants.

In addition to his basic (and convincing) argument, Weaver's work is a rich compendium of information, and may well be used as a gateway for further research into individual episodes in this history. As the story nears the present day, the narrative becomes harder to tell in a strictly linear way, so that some of the stories overlap or are told piecemeal. One small complaint: some of the chapters begin with what amounts to an abstract of what is to come, while some simply introduce the chapter. More consistency here would have made the book somewhat easier to navigate.

Weaver's book is clearly the fruit of many years' work and will be of value to anyone concerned with the lively question of the place of the Holy Spirit in Baptist life.

John Swinton and Brian Brock (eds), *A Graceful Embrace: Theological Reflections on Adopting Children* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 248 pages. ISBN: 9789004352896.

Reviewed by Arthur Brown

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This book is an important contribution, within the field of ethics and practical theology, on a topic of significance for the Church and wider society. While adoption is a recurring theme within the biblical text, it is an area that has been neglected within the context of theological reflection in contemporary life.

John Swinton (Professor of Practical Theology and Pastoral Care) and Brian Brock (Reader in Moral and Practical Theology) at the University of Aberdeen participated in conversations over five years with practical theologians and Christian ethicists. This volume attempts to distil key theological and ethical ideas from these discussions. The introduction briefly sets the context within the biblical narrative and states the aim of the volume:

> The common contemporary conception of a child as legally adopted into a nuclear family primarily to serve the child's need for belonging and love and the parents' desire for offspring or the experience of childrearing stands at quite a distance from the Greco-Roman world and that of scripture. Any theological account of adoption will need to articulate the relationship between divine action toward humans and human adoptive behaviour toward other humans. And it will do so in the face of the complex dynamics of contemporary understandings of adoption. (p. 10)

The book brings diverse perspectives to the theme of adoption. Many of the contributors bring their personal experience of adoption into their theological reflections, creating a rich tapestry of insights for

the reader. Additional contributors from the majority world would have added to this volume, with most coming from the West.

The text is divided into two sections. The first provides a range of theological perspectives on the practice of Christian adoption. Chapters include 'Belonging: A Theological and Moral Enquiry into Adoption' and 'Entrusted for Creaturely Life within God's Story – The Ethos of Adoption in Theological Perspective'. Section Two moves towards considerations around the practice of adoption and starts with an autobiographical chapter by Swinton entitled, 'Why Would I Look for my Parents? Living Peaceably with the Only Family I Have'. Other chapters include 'Theological Reflection on Inter-country Adoption of Special Needs Children from Mainland China' and a chapter that reflects on homosexuality and adoption, drawing on Queer theology as a framework for reflection on the adoptive family.

Throughout the book is the challenge to reconsider our understanding of family and the nature of the ties that create family in Christian understanding. The parent-child dynamic is repeatedly discussed, focusing on the centrality of calling and vocation. The term 'natural' often used in a discussion on biological-parenting in contrast to adoptive-parenting is brought into question. At the heart of this book is an encouragement to reconsider what we mean by Christian parenting and family.

> Christian parents are natural, not because they are biologically equipped to have children, but because they have a calling to parenthood and a willingness to be faithful to that vocation. Children are best understood as gifts given to us in the Spirit, rather than possessions that are defined by their biological origins. In this way human adoption can be seen to be analogous with the divine adoption that Paul presents to us (Romans 8:15-17). (p. 126)

As an adoptive parent I found this a really helpful, if not challenging, book to engage with. I would encourage students and readers of theology and ethics, as well as those in church leadership, and those who are considering adoption, to read this. The volume brings insights into the many blessings that can come through adoption, as well

as a foundation for understanding of the Body (family) of Christ, the Church.

Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes, and Richard L. Kidd, *Communion, Covenant, and Creativity: an Approach to the Communion of Saints through the Arts* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 210 pages. ISBN: 9781532668630.

Reviewed by Henrikas Žukauskas

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The book title itself is intriguing. Communion of saints is a topic which leads to ecumenical conversations about the theology of the Church. Covenant, as the authors further explore in this second book they co-author, is what marks a Baptist contribution to the conversation. The first book is *Baptists and the Communion of Saints: a Theology of Covenanted Disciples* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014). But what about creativity and the arts?

The authors build on a shared journey in experiencing and reflecting on art theologically to make an argument for creativity as a valid member of the trio. Their goal is to be properly (i.e. in a non-dualist way) concerned with human bodies and those of the natural world. Thus, the doctrine of communion of saints would be at the centre of transforming the life and mission of Christian churches, contributing to a distinctively Christian approach to aesthetics and to the understanding of communion to those beyond embracing covenant ecclesiology (Baptists). Such exploration of the commitment of the triune God to the material world would provide a way to integrate the horizontal and vertical aspects of communion.

It helps to know that this book builds on an earlier one. The themes of an ongoing communion of prayer which encompasses alive and dead, and covenant which provides a non-dualist approach to communion, continue in this book. But the focus is on what creativity contributes and so questions pertinent to the communion of saints are posed to different creative arts. The first part, 'The Communion of Saints: Indications', engages the works of writers Thomas Hardy, James

Joyce, and T. S. Eliot; painters Paul Nash and Mark Rothko; and composers John Tavener (together with librettist Gerald McLarnon), Edward Elgar, and Johannes Brahms. The authors take pains to access art on its own terms by means of analysis and biographies, enabled by their philosophical and theological insights.

In 'Indications' one follows Fiddes as the themes of presence and absence, connectedness between past and present emerge through literary works. Then, with Kidd, one sees how through the visual arts one perceives absent presences of the special places, explores the edges of materiality, and ventures into transcendence. With Haymes one wonders how the narrative of a Catholic saint through an opera leads to the reflection on sainthood and suffering in a contemporary world. Fiddes concludes 'Indications' by discussing how music creates a sense of journey and dwelling and gives body to a theological reflection about living after death.

'The Communion of Saints: Reflections' sums up the interaction. The arts insist, firstly, that the world is one and help to resist dualism (Haymes). Secondly, they harness imagination through different forms of 'hiddenness' in fellowship with others and with God (Kidd). Thirdly, they enable exploration of the nature of communion as journey with others to communion with God, how they interweave, how the first is discerned in and developed into the second (Fiddes).

This book is a needed workshop for Christians and churches wishing to engage with arts and to discern theological concepts in human experience. One would wish such engagement to be ongoing. Two questions might further this. Firstly, would the artists themselves agree with approaching their work in terms of tendency towards openness and desire of self-transcendence in the overlap with self-revelation of God? Whilst this book sets these side by side, the Christian concepts provide a critical role in organisation and limits of such engagement. Would not the commitment to embodiment and materiality require that the roles could also be reversed and review and criticise the issues of sainthood and communion, for example? Secondly, are arts really necessary to faith? Do they provide anything which cannot

be accessed elsewhere? This book is an invitation to further tap into the theological potential of this important and interesting topic.

Miranda Klaver, Stefan Paas, and Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman (eds), *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2016), 293 pages. ISBN: 9789086597352.

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This highly relevant book for evangelical and reformed churches today honours its title. The tragic paradox is that those who promote 'Biblical Authority' are traditionally most involved in church-splits, ironically proving that there are other sources influencing what is actually at work as authority. Various examples from daily church life show the reader how the issue of a biased human understanding and conduct regarding authority and its implications is often not well understood. Too easily people assume that biblical authority guides their thought and action. This book shows how *other* factors easily play a significant role in determining their behaviours and convictions.

Fourteen esteemed, experienced, reformed, and evangelical scholars, specialists in their fields, address the subjects. The book commences with six examples of authority-workings in ecclesial practice and these are evaluated. This is followed by four examples of authority-workings in theological debates. The work concludes with three chapters about the functioning of the authority of Scripture with the interdependence advantage of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. This rich variety adds to this publication's usefulness.

Church leaders may value the thirteen essays especially because they deal with matters recognisable as possible issues in their own churches. Tensions with hermeneutics, empowerment, and discernment are addressed; in addition female authority, gender issues, impersonal social media, selective dominant worship themes, the creation debate,

and 'mission' to 'Christians'. Even common but often fallible proof-texting and failing fixed meaning projections in translation are addressed, closing with a view on modern absolutist doctrines while disregarding ancient text genres.

This book has the potential to initiate for 'White-Western Theology' some welcome authority supremacy soul searching, and consequently to lead to some fresh examination of theological emphases. Such may not only benefit world Christianity, but also provide domestically fresh perspectives for the reeling Western protestant church. For example, starting to seek Jesus's communal intent, instead of the American Bible Belt Evangelicalism's John Wayne style and militant individualism (Kobes Du Mez). Bakker focuses on this in 'The Atlantic Citizen' (p. 41), as does Erwich: 'the spiritual I should be embedded in the collective we' (p. 54). Michener's quotation from Levinas, 'There can be no knowledge of God separated from relationship with men' (p. 93/Facebook chapter), points to viewing Genesis 1:27 as God's image in '*hu***man***ity*' (collective), and God's incorporation in 'tov' community (Matthew 18:20; Acts 9:4).

The book illustrates the need for a better understanding of history and the implication of the authority recognition process for the sixteenth-century protestant canon, as well as God's wise intentional choice for notoriously ambiguous Hebrew language. Both Graighton-Marlowe's and Staalduine-Sulman's chapters could find nuanced enlightenment by recognising the need for more careful attention to the Hebrew language's complexity and ambiguity.

Attention to such issues should caution our current theological reasoning style. Such caution could lead to serious consideration of van Kralingen's '*agent*' concept (p. 250), which might better serve as a core scriptural emphasis rather than penal substitution atonement, which Riphagen rightfully recognises as a too limited theme (p. 113). These examples point to necessary emphasis shifts in 'White male theology authority'. The overall impression from the book, highlighted in various chapters and emphasised in the conclusion, is the need for a broader reading of scripture rather than narrow reading or proof texting.