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Book Review

Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril

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Creation and the Cross:
The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril
By: **Elizabeth Johnson**

Publisher: Orbis Books (Maryknoll, New York, U.S.A.)

Year: 2018, Pages: 256 pp.

ISBN-10: 162698266X

Price: \$28.00 (hardcover), \$25.00 (paperback)

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“How can the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ be understood as good news for all created beings, to the praise of God and to practical and critical effect?” (29) *Creation and the Cross* is Elizabeth Johnson’s attempt to answer this question by outlining an understanding of God’s redemptive work in Jesus in the light of the ecological crisis. The book directly responds to the traditional account of atonement by Anselm of Canterbury by proposing a way of thinking about the Christ-event that emphasizes God’s merciful accompaniment with the created world. It is structured as a dialogue like the work it critiques, Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Human). Johnson’s dialogue involves two individuals: Elizabeth and Clara. “Clara” represents for Johnson many of her interlocutors over the years, mostly graduate students she has taught.

The book consists of six parts. Part I is a discussion of Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement and its critiques and introduces the question on which Johnson’s text rests. Part II takes the reader through a discussion of prophetic literature, particularly Second Isaiah, to make the point that God as Creator is a saving and merciful God. Part III discusses the life of Jesus and how a historical understanding (i.e., Christology “from below”) informs the theology Johnson wishes to outline in this work. Part IV describes different metaphors used in talking about God’s saving work in Jesus Christ and concludes with an argument for retiring the satisfaction theory of atonement. Part V discusses a Christology “from above,” tackling first the concept of Wisdom in itself and as revealed in Jesus, and then Niels Henrik Gregersen’s concept of “deep incarnation” and her

supplemental ideas of “deep cross and resurrection.” Part VI outlines a process of ecological conversion consequent upon the theology of accompaniment previously discussed.

This book is both very accessible and scholarly, dense enough to be read as a source for close study of a particular Christological paradigm. The text relies heavily upon scripture for highlighting texts that exemplify Johnson’s theological arguments. For example, in outlining how Second Isaiah speaks of a God who redeems, Johnson cites one after another Is. 43:14, 44:5, and 44:24 (47). In another example, crucial to this work, she unpacks an understanding of John 1:14 that may surprise those who have always seen it in anthropological terms (168-9). In key places, she evokes vivid imagery to make a point. Towards the end, for example, Johnson relies upon vivid and imaginative exercises to facilitate the process of developing a Christianity-informed ecological consciousness.

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What I appreciated about this work is that it brings a theological concept that has become notable in some circles, especially in the field of science and theology, to a wider audience. “Deep Christology,” as Johnson described in a 2015 essay, is founded upon Niels Gregersen’s concept of deep incarnation.² This approach is based on the theological premise that in the Incarnation, the Son assumed not only humanity but all creation, and on the cross, suffered the pain experienced by the created world in evolution and social competition. Johnson extends this understanding both in *Creation and the Cross* to explicitly speak of a deep resurrection, completing the theological picture that might have otherwise reduced Gregersen’s theology to something more like Anselm’s satisfaction theory (188-9). Earlier in her book, Johnson argues that it is precisely that silence of the resurrection that weakens the premise on which Anselm’s theory stands. This book makes a case for a comprehensive understanding of

¹ In a briefer form, this is similar to the work of Christopher Uhl. See for instance Christopher Uhl, *Developing Ecological Consciousness: The End of Separation*, Second Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

² Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Jesus and the Cosmos: Soundings in Deep Christology,” in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 133–54.

God's saving work in Jesus Christ and its implications for the redemption of a world ravaged by the ecological crisis.

I also appreciated the argument for a theology of accompaniment flowing from prophecy to low Christology to high Christology in a way that allows readers to follow these developments. For example, Johnson begins book V with Clara summarizing her argument so far, then raises the point that Elizabeth wishes to make in her theological exploration (158). In a work of theology, it is helpful to set guideposts for the reader to follow so they get lost on the journey, especially with an argument that at first glance seems complicated. Johnson's argument is persuasive at its core, and how she guides the reader in her theological direction is admirable and nuanced.

However, there are two things about her work with which I have concerns. The first is that, while Johnson identifies fidelity to the Church's tradition as one of the criteria for evaluating her project (30), there are ways in which this fidelity might have become more explicit. This explicitness is especially evident towards the end of her discussion of deep incarnation, where Johnson reveals that the view of cosmic redemption she posits is echoed in the theology of the Eastern Churches (191-2). At the very least, as a curious reader, I want to know who of these Fathers (and Mothers) had something to articulate about this topic and to be directed in the author's citations to that theologian.³

My second (and more serious) concern has to do with her explicit dismissal of atonement theory itself. Again, I find Johnson's argument persuasive, and I have adopted deep Christology as key to my current research. However, how would it speak to the faith of millions of people who have believed in the saving work of God in Jesus by an understanding of the cross that speaks to their burdens and fears? While Johnson acknowledges that Anselm's theory makes him the most successful theologian of all time, and although she is careful to emphasize that at no time has the Church defined a particular model of salvific understanding, she has to come up against a formidable obstacle. The relation between sin

³ For an example of how one of Johnson's theological colleagues discusses a patristic source and its resonances with "deep incarnation," see Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering With Creatures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019). Edwards uses Athanasius as his paradigmatic thinker for the Eastern Christian tradition.

and the cross is part of the *lex credendi* for millions of Christians. This is especially true of the fastest-growing Christian communities in the Global South. Is this the last gasp of a particular part of Western Christianity hoping to make itself relevant in a crisis faced by the whole planet? I think not.

Johnson's work makes clear a willingness to admit the challenge (198) and responds to it by way of "rearranging the faith furniture" (another beautiful metaphor she uses) through imaginative thinking. An important question remains unanswered: How do we make this theology relevant to those outside the principal context to which she is speaking? This quest is the next challenge theologians face. *Creation and the Cross* is a helpful starting point for theologians serving church, academy, and society to reimagine other *loci* of theology in light of what Johnson proposes: a radical understanding of God's mercy that encompasses all creation.

Renato Paolo V. Aguila is a Graduate Theological Union Common MA student specializing in liturgical studies. He is completing a thesis on deep Christology and Eucharistic theology and hopes to pursue future research on deep Christology and its implications for other aspects of Christian thought and action.

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