Summary and Reflections: The Dialogue about Stories of Origin

R. Alan Culpepper

The essays in this volume are rich in both their depth and their diversity. They provide a thoughtful introduction to the significance that various religions and cultures assign creation stories, or stories of origin. They also provide an orientation to the current state of the debate between theistic and naturalistic understandings of evolution and the origin of human life. The dialogue between science and theology has become increasingly nuanced, as the essays in this volume attest.

1 Creation and Science

The six essays in Part 1, “Creation and Science,” explore current understandings of the origin of the universe and the evolution of human life in science and theology. David Christian, the originator of the Big History project, addresses the “naturalistic fallacy,” that is, the tendency to move from statements of what is to statements of what ought to be. David Hume first noted how writers slip from “mapping” to “meaning,” that is, from descriptive statements to statements about significance, purpose, and ethics, from “is” to “ought.” For example, scientists have a strong sense that they “ought” to map reality accurately. What is the bridge to meaning, purpose, and ethics? Christian contends that the predisposition to find meaning can be traced to the importance mapping had for the survival of our ancestors. All living organisms require manageable flows of energy. The mapping needed to locate and acquire such energy lends purpose and meaning to the organism’s activity.

Ted Peters starts with the same concern David Christian addresses, namely the question of meaning and purpose: “The theologian needs to excavate the scientific landscape and uncover questions of origin and meaning hidden just below the surface.” Peters, however, responds that naturalistic accounts that dismiss questions of meaning and purpose fail because they assume the viewpoint of a third person spectator and thereby rule out meaning and purpose. Naturalists, he claims, do not account for the role of consciousness, mind, and subjectivity which reside in the first-person perspective. Further, he argues that contingency belongs to the physical character of the universe at the
quantum level, which is important because “physical contingency is a precursor to human subjectivity, consciousness, free will and, hence, the interpretation of meaning in history.”

John Haught also addresses the significance of “the recent arrival and flourishing of the new story of the universe,” arguing that, “instead of diminishing reasons for Christian faith and hope in a personal, infinitely generous, and promising God,” it offers fresh perspectives for theological reflection. Taking up this challenge, Haught rejects both the naturalist’s exclusion of meaning and intelligent design’s orchestration of the process and end of creation, preferring instead to understand creation as a yet unfinished drama.

Graham Walker takes up the humanist E. O. Wilson’s call for conservative Christians to join him in working to save the earth from humanity’s destruction of its plant and animal life. Specifically, Wilson calls for a rejection of the Platonism and Christian apocalypticism in the Christian tradition that devalue the world around us. Responding to Wilson’s appeal, Walker suggests that Karl Barth’s incarnational theology of creation, rather than Wilson’s “excarnational” version of Christianity, can be a foundation from which the Christian community can join Wilson in his “Appeal to Save Life on Earth.”

Kurt Richardson offers another approach to the dialogue between science and theology by observing that the notion of creatio ex nihilo is not present in Genesis but is “a brilliant monotheistic gloss on the text.” Genesis asserts that there is no other creator, but significantly it recognizes that earth and water are co-creators that bring forth life under God’s dominion. This relationship between agency and instrumentality, creator and co-creator, suggests further the role of human beings as agents who share the imago dei in the continuing work of creation.

Randall Zachman asks whether Christians can “bring the evolutionary history of life in the cosmos into their narration of life with God taken from Scripture,” and if so “how would they interpret Scripture in general, and the Gospel of John in particular, if they saw human and cosmic life from an evolutionary point of view?” (96) To address this question, Zachman turns to the evolution of human consciousness. He suggests that “the consciousness of the presence of God is an essential part of every human consciousness, which has developed into a universal human capacity by means of that same evolutionary history” (103). If this is the case, however, then the consciousness of “Absolute Unitary Being” cannot be rooted in Jesus but is potentially possible for all human beings.