
As Oxford Handbooks go, this volume is no exception to the general rule in terms of its price and what one gets for it. The editor, a recognized author on the general topic, has gathered a group of thirty-nine other mostly renowned scholars, each of whom has written state-of-the-question articles while at the same time, nudging the discussion forward. Each includes end-of-chapter notes as well as an appended bibliography on the chapter topic, while the volume itself concludes with an index of more than thirty pages that facilitates focused reading within the book. The bulk of the volume (6-3/4 × 9-3/4 × 2-1/4 inches) is consistent with its encyclopedic and comprehensive discussion of the topic.

The scope of this Oxford Handbook will engage even the most zealous “end-times” aficionado. The Handbook is divided into three parts — historical eschatology, eschatology in distinct Christian traditions and theological movements, and issues in eschatology — although parts I and III each are further subdivided: I into biblical/patristic eschatology and eschatology in world religions, and III into theological issues and philosophical/cultural issues. (As a reader, I did not see the logic of the subdivisions and thought that a five-part handbook works just as well.) There are a few surprises in each part alongside the expected discussions. For example, part I, sub-section one, has chapters on the eschatology of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and apocalypticism, besides a discussion of eschatology in the early church fathers; but it also has an essay on eschatology in the historical Jesus quests. Then, sub-section two has overviews of eschatology in Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, but concludes with a fascinating yet grim synopsis of eschatologies in new religious movements.

Readers of this journal will be pleased to find an essay in part II — which begins with articles on Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Reformation Protestant eschatologies — on Pentecostal and Charismatic theology by Frank Macchia. Interestingly enough, Macchia’s discussion is sandwiched between the chapters on fundamentalist and process eschatologies! Whatever is indicated by this arrangement, Macchia’s framing of the eschatology of Pentecostal/Charismatic movements does, almost literally, have a foot in both worlds — that of fundamentalistic dispensationalism on the one hand and that of at least two of the four types of eschatological soteriology found in process theology on the other. This part of the Handbook ends with eschatologies in liberation theology and feminism, with the former article (by Vitor Westhalle, a Lutheran theologian) teasing out aspects of what he calls a “liberation and latitudinal eschatology,” and what I am tempted to call a geographical eschatology, as derived from the Lukan reference to the εσχατου της γης (the “ends of the earth”; see Acts 1:8 and 13:47). Pentecostal theologians and scholars working in eschatology will have much to rethink about the eschatology of Luke in light of this insight.

It is probable that many scholars or serious students of eschatology will gravitate to the twenty chapters in part III. Most of the disputed topics in eschatology are treated here: millennialism, resurrection, heaven, hell, purgatory, universalism, annihilationism, final judgment, politics, theodicy, personal identity, cosmology, and others. Again, Pentecostal
scholars will be engaged with the broad spectrum of biblical, theological, hermeneutical, and philosophical perspectives on contested eschatological matters within the global movement. The chapter on eschatology and politics (by Stephen H. Webb at Wabash College) will be intriguing if for no other reason than that it goes against the grain of academia in suggesting the plausibility of a progressive dispensationalist perspective and how that plays itself out in the public square. This is not necessarily to recommend such an approach to contemporary Pentecostal theologians or political scientists, but to indicate that there are other construals of the heritage of dispensationalism that may be redeemable at the theological if not other levels.

There is much to comment on that will need to be left unsaid in a review of this length, but I cannot resist registering the following two observations. First, the article on human nature and personal identity (by philosopher Charles Taliaferro) mounts a fairly rigorous defense of dualism against the monism or physicalism (especially in its non-reductive versions) that has become more popular in recent times. Although the author does not engage seriously with biblical exegesis on this issue — which, especially in the Hebrew Bible, may lean in what I call the socio-physicalist portrayal of humanity — the article reflects the kind of boldness seen here and there in the Handbook whereby authors buck the current academic trends in favor of less fashionable notions.

Second, I concluded the sub-section on theological issues wondering about the cryptic declaration in John 5:29 regarding the resurrection of “those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (NRSV). A host of questions clamor for consideration: Is resurrection simply “in the cards” on the other side of death or is resurrection an intentional divine act apart from which it does not occur (the majority position among Handbook contributors)? If the latter, is hell to be construed more in terms of God’s respecting creaturely freedom (again, the majority position) or of divine punishment for sin? If the latter (again), then is there any way to avoid the suggestion of this text that God will raise some whom God intends to punish, and if so, what does this suggest about the nature of God? This last question is not answered directly in the Handbook, but the line of reasoning leading to it challenges the more prominent tendencies among the volume’s authors.

Finally, there are even “surprise” articles at the end on near-death experiences, and eschatology in fine art and (separately) in pop culture. I don’t often recommend reference-type volumes like this, but The Oxford Handbook on Eschatology is a must for any theological library and a must read for those who do not want to be left behind regarding the “end times”!

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