

Reviews



David Fergusson, *Reformed Humanism: Essays on Christian Doctrine, Philosophy and Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2024), pp. x + 291, hardback 978-0567712745 £85.00; paperback 978-0567712783 (Dec 2025) £28.99.

David Fergusson has been the distinguished occupant of three historic chairs of divinity, in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and most recently Cambridge. This book brings together a wide-ranging set of his essays written over a fifteen-year period. Some are new and some have been published previously. Since the original place of publication for a few of the essays is relatively inaccessible, their availability within a single volume is especially welcome. More importantly, however, bringing them all together reveals an over-arching intellectual ambition that lends unity to what might otherwise seem a rather diverse collection.

It is an indication of its diversity that the volume is divided into three parts. The first seven essays address key concepts in theology, including the divine attributes, Christology, creation, providence, and the last judgment. Part Two, entitled “Philosophy”, comprises three essays in the philosophy of religion, focussing on David Hume, Adam Smith and Darwinism. Part Three – “Church” – is the longest. These seven essays offer sustained theological reflection on important aspects of the Church’s life – worship, visual art, mission, the authority of scripture, social ethics, pastoral therapy, and the place of theology in universities. An intriguing Epilogue is devoted to the highly unusual topic of theology and laughter.

The title of the collection – *Reformed Humanism* – gives a clue to the common ground underlying all the essays. How is theology, and especially theology in the Reformed tradition, to accommodate the huge growth in human knowledge, and the seismic change in mindset, that was brought about by the development of humane learning and empirical science over the course of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? On the one hand, if Christian theology is to be faithful to its Apostolic commission, it must look back beyond this period, to Nicaea, Chalcedon, and to intellectual giants such as Augustine, Aquinas and Luther. Christian theology properly so called must acknowledge that it was in the period



before the rise of modern science that theology developed an indispensable part of its intellectual substance. On the other hand, contrary to the conservative inclinations of some theologians (and Christians more broadly), who are understandably anxious about losing or inadvertently abandoning the ancient foundations of the faith, theology can only ignore this gigantic shift in human understanding at the cost of intellectual irrelevance. If Christian faith is to speak in ways that enhance and illuminate the lives of human beings, it must speak to the world in which it finds itself. Theology can no more cling to the mentality of the Middle Ages than medicine or public policy can.

Against this background, Fergusson has set himself the challenge, pursued over many years, of finding a theological path between the Scylla of dogmatic assertion and the Charybdis of theological vacuity. Moreover, the purpose of this investigation is not only theoretical. As Part Three of this book confirms, he is also endeavouring to apply his conclusions to the life and mission of the Church. His approach to this task, as represented by these essays, is not in the strict sense systematic, but it is comprehensive, and in his brief introduction, he identifies the issue that effectively sets the agenda – historical situatedness. Faced with ‘loss of intellectual plausibility in our culture’ it is tempting to think that ‘a strong theology is likely to prove more attractive and enduring’ than the ‘radical or liberal theologies of the postwar period’. Yet, the questions that were raised by thinkers alive to ‘the historical situatedness of Bible, doctrine, and church’ remain (p. 2). It is possible to ignore them, and pure self-deception to suppose that ignoring them in any way addresses them.

This realization underlies what in some ways are the two most important essays in the book – “The Bible in Modernity” and “Natural Theology After Darwin”. In the first, the problem is the long-perceived tension between the ‘higher’ criticism of biblical texts and the attribution of special authority to Scripture. Fergusson favours a functional theory of biblical authority, which he holds to be ‘broadly correct’. That is to say, a theory that focusses on the function of Scripture in the life of the Church, ‘has the virtue of combining an account of the authority of Scripture with a claim about its distinctive content. It is by virtue of its capacity to refer to Christ that the Bible is authoritative. This capacity, however, requires also some account of the activity of the Spirit here and now upon the reader of the text’ (p. 209). In a similar spirit, he observes that contrary to what many nineteenth-century theologians and their critics supposed,



evolutionary theory ‘did not sound the death knell for natural theology’. On the contrary, a ‘revitalized natural theology has viewed science and theology as complementary forms of understanding, not competing with each other [...] but respecting the particular questions, domains and procedures of these different forms of inquiry’ (pp. 152–3.)

What are theology’s distinctive questions in this context? In “The Place of Christian Theology in the University”, the concluding essay before the Epilogue, we are given an answer. What holds theology together in its various manifestations, he suggests, is

a shared commitment to offering some insight into the religious self-understanding of human beings and of the world in which we are situated [...] [A] theological enterprise in the broadest sense does not require a consensus in favour of any creed [...] but it does entail a commitment to pursuing some questions of perennial importance in the time and place in which we find ourselves.
(p. 247)

Philosophers might question this description as marking out the distinctive province of *theology*, but allowing this to be the case, we may still ask what place this allocates theology among the other disciplines. Fergusson says theology ‘may be more embedded in the academy than some appearances may suggest’, and he observes in this connection that (in Cambridge at any rate) theologians are actively engaged with other scholars in, for instance, the sciences, healthcare, literature, history and philosophy. The critical question, to my mind, is whether this engagement is equally productive for both participants. Theologians are indeed often open to what scientists, literary theorists and moral philosophers have to say, but the relationship tends to be one-sided. Is there equal interest the other way round? Does knowledge of contemporary theology cause biologists, health specialists, metaphysicians, and so on, to change intellectual direction or reframe their inquiries?

This brings us back to the difficult terrain that Fergusson hopes to traverse. Christian theology, while holding fast to its fundamentals, must learn from (some of) the vast range of studies that comprise the modern academy. What must, or can, these other subjects learn from those fundamentals?



Two essays in this collection seem to me to raise this question very acutely. The first is Fergusson's inaugural lecture in Cambridge, "Maker of Heaven and Earth: Theology for Creationtide". In it he identifies some 'traditional deficits' in the theology of creation, and then goes on to explore 'three themes, each of which can enhance a theology of creation today'. One of these themes – 'The World is our Home' draws rather heavily on the familiar warnings of the proponents, often self-identifying Cassandras, of environmentalism. 'With global population set to rise above nine billion [...] our habits of consumption, modes of travel, food production and use of technology need to be significantly adjusted if we are to survive and prosper [...] Without a sustainable environment, we have no future' (pp. 51–2). This sits a little oddly with the age-old Christian anticipation of an end to the world and its completion and transformation into a new creation that is 'devoutly to be wished'. More strikingly, it seems to subscribe to the view that if we change our ways, and *only* if we change our ways, can we as a species expect to survive. Where is God in this? From a religious perspective, this belief constitutes an expression of astonishing hubris on the part of humanity. The theologian surely is called to address to the environmentalists the question that God speaks to Job out of the tempest: 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? In all your life have you ever called up the dawn or assigned the morning its place? Does your skill teach the hawk to use its pinions and spread its wings to the south?' (Job 38: 4, 12; 39: 26; REB). Faced with the challenge of 'saving the planet', humanism declares and must declare that humanity alone can address them. Christian faith, as I understand it, says, 'Thank God it is not up to us.' Theology does have something to say here, but only when it counters the scientific prophets of doom with a hopeful vision that arises from humility, and makes no concession to the great sin of overweening human pride. When the disciples in the Gospels declare 'Even the wind and waves obey him' (e.g. Matthew 8:27), they are recognizing Christ's divinity, not his technological mastery of the environment.

The second essay where there is some reason to think that Fergusson concedes too much to modernity is Chapter 16, "Theology and Therapy":

Twentieth-century debates have taught us much about the ways in which the languages of psychotherapy and religion can fruitfully interact. There are positive and enduring gains which include a



better understanding of the self with its unconscious and half-conscious anxieties and hurts. (p. 235)

This is one of the earlier essays, first published in 2013, and to my mind it has a slightly dated feel. Partly this is because the theoretical world of therapists and counsellors has always been highly eclectic, and subject to powerful fashions that dominate for a while and then, not infrequently, are heard of no more. Freudian psychoanalysis and Carl Rogers's non-directive counselling are especially striking examples of this. Both still have some adherents, and both have left their mark on the practice of therapeutic counselling, but neither can truly be said to have left positive and enduring gains. More importantly, both these and most of the other approaches that Fergusson alludes to share an underlying subscription to the medicalization of mind. That is to say, they are conceived in a search for psychological 'treatment' that will bring about mental well-being in something like the way medical science has so hugely advanced the possibilities of physical well-being.

The problem here, I am inclined to say, is that human hearts and minds are more mysterious than anything else in creation, far more mysterious than even the most complex physiological processes. In my estimation, and despite the decades-long research efforts of psychology and pharmacology, the medicalization of mind has largely failed. Fergusson rightly draws attention to the obstacles to understanding thrown up by any Cartesian-style dualism of body and soul, and he is, perhaps properly, wary of re-introducing the language of sin and repentance which the language of ailment and cure has largely displaced. Still, without some of the concepts that pastoral theology employed in times past, the fruitful interaction he refers to will remain one-sided. For the most part, the theorists of therapy have ignored spiritual diagnoses, or set themselves positively to reject them.

My reservations on this score do little to diminish the value of this book. Its bibliography is astonishingly extensive, and yet the essays are notable for their lucidity. Fergusson has managed to combine great learning with no less great accessibility. This in itself is a major accomplishment, but more significant still is his articulation of an intellectual framework that contemporary theology cannot avoid.



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Kirstin Anderson, ed., *The Barlinnie Special Unit: Art, Punishment and Innovation* (Sherfield-on-Loddon: Waterside Press, 2024), pp. xxii + 294, ISBN 978-1914603464. £25.00

The GalGael Trust's boatbuilding and training workshop is in the hard-pressed Greater Govan area of Glasgow, close to Ibrox football stadium. We hold a simple community meal every Thursday evening, open to all. The fare varies. Thick lentil broth. Bean salads. Venison stew, humanely culled along the local motorway. We process it on-site, making a nourishing connection between city folks and the rural world.

The meal usually ends with everyone reciting the GalGael Grace. Secular, for common comfort: but a grace for a' that. The first verse will give a flavour:

We're cast into a crazy world
Wi' many a sore disgrace
Where greed o'er turns compassion
And respect is laid to waste

I was prompted to review this book on the erstwhile Special Unit in Glasgow's Barlinnie Prison by a fellow Quaker, the criminologist Professor Mike Nellis. How fitting, therefore, to have found myself huddled around a blazing brazier, on a chilly Thursday night in January, with some thirty of the GalGael; and I said: 'How would you like to hear some passages from Jimmy Boyle and Johnny Steele?'

Once two of Scotland's most notorious criminals, these are men born 'cast into a crazy world' from childhoods soaked in Glasgow's ruthless

