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BOOK REVIEW

Adrian Langdon. *Barth and Ecotheology: The Electing God and the Community of Creation*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2025. 272 pp. Hbk. ISBN 9781032639253. \$142.50.

Adrian Langdon currently serves as the Director of Programs at the Leadership Centre of the Presbyterian College in Montreal and is an affiliate faculty member at the School of Religious Studies at McGill University. Langdon is no stranger to the theological work of Karl Barth, having previously wrestled with Barth's thoughts in his doctoral thesis at McGill, entitled "God the Eternal Contemporary: Trinity, Eternity, and Time in Karl Barth" (2008). His natural curiosity to study and his passion for creation intersect in this new compelling monograph on Barth and ecotheology.

Barth is not typically a name that is mentioned in ecotheological works. Langdon's opening statement shows he affirms this: "A book connecting Barth and ecotheology needs some justification" (1). In fact, certain branches of ecotheology suggest that the works of Barth promote a patriarchal theology which in turn leads to the modern practices of domination that a majority of ecotheologians seek to reverse. Langdon argues, however, "Barth's strength lies in his patient, creative, and life-long struggle to revive orthodox Christian dogmatics" and that Barth's theology "grounds public theology and ethics" (8). In other words, the various contributions of Barth—specifically Barth's respective doctrines of God, creation, election, and reconciliation—have the potential to ground ecotheology with a rich theological foundation.

After establishing groundwork by revealing modern gaps in ecotheology and proposing a way forward through Barth, Langdon starts the first chapter with a presupposition stating that

the earth has moved past the Holocene and is in a new geological epoch of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene, ushered in more than two-hundred years ago by the industrial revolution, marks a change in the dynamics between humans and nature as technology has enabled unchecked control over the earth and its resources. Langdon presents the modern ecotheological challenges that the Anthropocene faces, originating from the Industrial Revolution and war capitalism, leading to an abstraction of humans from nature (nominalism), ultimately culminating into what Paul Tyson has coined as Progressive Dominion Theology, which constitutes the framework within which the world still operates today. Progressive Dominion Theology “suggests that humans have the freedom and right through instrumental reason (science and technology) to use the natural world as they wish in order to establish human flourishing and/or make a profit” (37). In building upon the revelation of God through Jesus Christ, Langdon seeks to address these challenges by arguing that all things (*ta panta*) should be regarded “as grounded and participating in God” (42). Along such lines, Langdon proposes a view that reintegrates humans with nature, contrary to the implications of Progressive Dominion Theology. As mentioned in the introduction, while Barth may not be the first theologian that comes to mind when considering ecotheology, Langdon aptly defends the potential contained within Barth’s theology (albeit with revisions and integrations from other theologians) to “recover a view in which God’s universal love for ‘all that is’ (*ta panta*) undermines the lust for domination that infects modernity” (42).

In chapter 2, Langdon establishes three underlying points that construct the methodological framework. In first starting with the theological foundation of Barth, Langdon argues that a theology of nature should be based on faith in God the creator as revealed in Jesus Christ (49). Langdon’s second move is to acknowledge a coherent connection between theology and science, namely, “integrating non-theological knowledge of the natural world into a theological perspective” (49). Despite the abstract and conceptual nature of this project, Langdon defends its practicality by arguing that transformative action in societies and

churches start from theological reconstructions such as the ones proposed throughout his book (52).

Langdon shifts in the third chapter by diving into Barth's very well-known and much discussed view of divine election. Here, Langdon presents an argument for necessary revisions that would allow for the inclusion of all creation rather than just humanity. In this regard, Langdon smooths out complications of the immutability of God in Barth's theology with two suggestions from Bruce McCormack: "First, election is contained in the divine processions, and second, God self-wills himself as kenotic love" (73). Then, through an exegetical analysis of John 1:1–18, Col 1:15–20, and Rom 8:18–23, Langdon effectively argues that humanity is not elected in a vacuum, but "in Jesus Christ, God elects the Christian community and individuals for salvation *within and with the community of creation*" (68, emphasis original). This crucial distinction would imply that through Jesus Christ, *all* of creation is included in the eternal plan of salvation. Nature is not just a resource to be depleted and discarded at will but is an active participant in the kenotic love of God.

The two chapters which follow go on to observe definitive characteristics of the triune God for the purpose of further fleshing out this critical addition to Barth's view of divine election. Chapter 3 established that concerns regarding God's immutability in Barth's view of election could be resolved if it is included as part of the divine processions. In proceeding chapters, Langdon further argues that in addition to election, creation through Christ and the Holy Spirit are also included as a part of the divine processions. He clarifies the triune roles "as the distinguishing work of the Son [ch. 4] and the empowering work of the Spirit [ch. 5]" (103). Both chapters are accomplished by "reading Wolfhart Pannenberg back into Barth" (90). Essentially, Langdon cites Pannenberg to argue that Jesus—by way of distinguishing himself from the Father through the incarnation—is the basis of the distinction and differences of all creation that is distinct from God. Langdon then adopts McCormack's notion of the ontological receptivity of the Son and grafts it onto Pannenberg's theology to argue that creation was anticipated (akin to the incarnation) and also reflects the distinguishing work

of the Son. Moving onto chapter five, Langdon seeks to “explain how the Spirit as the dynamic power of God gifts time and space to creatures and creation” (128). It is only in this time and space, as empowered by the Holy Spirit, that the Son’s distinguishing work in all of creation can take place. Langdon adopts Pannenberg’s contribution surrounding the three themes of the “*unity of nature and history, creation by Word and Spirit, and the participation of all things in God*” (144, emphasis original), noting, “Pannenberg advances a theologically responsible view of creaturely participation in the triune life” (146). The Son’s distinguishing act forms all that exists within the space-time continuum upheld by the Holy Spirit, implying a much more intimate and dependent relationship between creation and creator than Progressive Dominion Theology would suggest. As Langdon remarks, “For Pannenberg, ‘all that is’ (*ta panta*) truly exists ‘in God’” (146).

Academically speaking, chapters four and five are the least accessible due to the abstract nature of the topics covered. Readers who possess a solid theological background will certainly be benefitted when it comes to fully appreciating the work of these two chapters. In terms of structural content, however, Barth’s theology takes a backseat in these two chapters while Pannenberg’s theology takes center stage. In consideration of the monograph’s title, this theological overtaking is slightly awkward but does not detract from the rich description and constructive use of Pannenberg’s theology and its contributions. Granted, Langdon is aware of this discrepancy as he prefaces chapter four with the comment that “in this chapter and the next we go beyond Barth while still remaining within the orbit of his theology” (104).

Chapters 6 and 7 both seek to expand and revise Barth’s theology to be more inclusive of a more-than-human creation. In terms of anthropology, chapter 6 shows Langdon taking “the Christological agency of Christ’s life for others” (177) and extends that to include the rest of nature through rigorous exegesis and from contributions of philosophers and theologians such as David Abram, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Richard Bauckham, and naturally Karl Barth. Langdon proceeds to engage with the afore-

mentioned philosophers and theologians to expand the scope of the I-Thou relationship to include nature towards what he refers to as a “Christian Animism.” At first glance, the terms “Christian” and “Animism” seem to be antithetical, but Langdon makes a convincing case for Christian Animism, which he defines as “recognizing the agency, livingness, and relatedness of the created world, both human and non-human” (171). In other words, Christian Animism involves acknowledging the inherent value of the non-human creation, which is an ancient concept that has been lost in our modern age in the name of “progression.”

In continuing with the threads of chapter 6, Langdon makes moves to “spatialize the atonement” in chapter seven. In addition to the agency of Christ, he expands the substitutionary atonement and reconciling work of Jesus Christ to cover all of creation rather than just humans. By doing so, he first argues that the permeation of sin also extends into animals and, as such, the atonement of Christ applies to animals as well as to human beings. Furthermore, Langdon argues, “Reconciled creatures, human or otherwise, need land and places to flourish and live out their forgiven and liberated existence” (226). In this regard, because a spatial environment plays a vital role in what constitutes a creature, land and places also have a part in the reconciling work of Christ. Langdon goes on to argue, “The life and ministry of Jesus Christ up until the cross includes a recapitulation of Israelite covenantal spaces, while the resurrection inaugurates the transformation, healing, and reconfiguration of all spaces, including the promise to transform cosmic structures” (218). Though Langdon does not comprehensively draw out the full implications of spatializing the atonement (as such would exceed the scope of his immediate purposes), the implications of this type of broadened spatialization are certainly an area ripe for further exploration in future work.

Overall, *Barth and Ecotheology* provides ambitious, clear, and profound critical revisions of and constructive additions to Barth’s theology in an ecotheological framework and does so in a way that appropriately addresses our current environmental challenges. Theologians, pastors, and anyone with a solid theo-

logical background who is interested in Barth or ecotheology have much to gain from the nuanced insights detailed in this book. One very minor critique is that certain proposals, specifically as found in chapters four through seven, seem either to be loosely related to or simply compatible with Barth's theology rather than being a true development of Barth's own thought. For example, throughout the book, Langdon highlights the integrating of science with theology as one of his main themes, yet this theme is not developed from the theology of Barth but is primarily developed from that of Pannenberg instead. Nevertheless, Langdon's contributions compel readers to reexamine the scope of the triune God's grace that is extended towards the created universe, presenting a novel perspective on the infinite love of God as more abundant and comprehensive than we could ever imagine. *Barth and Ecotheology* also meets modern needs by proposing an alternative way forward for the community of Christ in place of the modern Progressive Dominion Theology that sadly continues plaguing much of our world today.

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