THE GIFT OF BEING: A THEOLOGY OF CREATION
By Zachary Hayes, O.F.M.
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Reviewed by Joseph L. Roche

This is an excellent volume in the New Theology Studies series whose aim according to its director, Peter C. Phan, is to offer "scholarly yet readable books dealing with certain basic Catholic beliefs traditionally associated with dogmatic theology." The volumes aim at a presentation of Christian beliefs that integrates "their biblical, patristic, medieval and modern developments" for "upper-division theology courses in Catholic colleges and seminaries," and for all who are "interested in understanding Christian faith in contemporary cultural and ecclesial contexts" (v-vi). Within the strict limitations imposed by the length of the study, these broad aims are admirably achieved in Hayes’ updated account of the traditional task of creation-theology which essentially involves the interaction of science and theology, reason and faith.

Hayes’ work consists of nine chapters, beginning with a sketch of the historical background that focuses on certain selected highpoints in the interaction of science, the Bible and Christianity (religious meaning of the Bible, Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, the new physics, papal statements, and some recent models from Polkinghorne, Haught and Gilkey). The stress is on theology as a search for a deeper understanding of Christian beliefs by developing systematic structures for communicating their saving meaning—in this case, the possible coherence and concordance of the scientific and theological visions of the cosmos. Chapters Two and Three take up creation-theology’s biblical grounds: the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis, and the Prophetic and Wisdom sources) and the Christian Scriptures (the Synoptic Gospels, Pauline Epistles, Hebrews, and Prologue of John) with a brief account of the “New Creation.” Both chapters present very concise summaries, which nevertheless are adequate for their specific purpose in this work.
Chapter Four, "Creation from Nothing," contrasts the "nothing" of contemporary physicists and cosmologists, especially in the context of quantum-wave fluctuation, with the "nothing" of traditional Christian theology. The decisive distinction between God as primary cause and secondary causality (the Big Bang model of cosmology) is developed, involving the basic recognition that human experiencing and questioning go beyond scientific methodology as evidenced in the human aesthetic and religious domains. Theology views the created cosmos as a pure gift from God, intelligible and purposeful, rejecting all radical visions of ultimate irrationality and pointlessness, and grounding the confident hope that all existence, including material reality, is meaningful.

Chapter Five on "The Triune God, the Creator," presents a brief but excellent summary of the positions of Augustine, Aquinas, Richard of St. Victor and the author's favorite medieval author, Bonaventure, to introduce "the world as symbol of the divine Trinity" and compare such a vision to "contemporary Cosmology as Revelatory." The aim is to show that religious faith should "be seen not as childish immaturity, but as a responsible vision of the meaning of reality and of human life, and then to search out the possible coherence between the insights of science and those of theology" (67).

The following two chapters are "Humanity in the Cosmic Context" and "Sin and Evil." Chapter Six discusses the theological tradition on grace, its complete openness to biological evolution, and concludes with some brief comments on the "Anthropic Principle." Chapter Seven treats Augustine's view of original sin, Trent's treatment, and current scriptural interpretations in today's context. The traditional description of original justice is replaced with Irenaeus' image of Adam as an infant in the infancy of the human race; but the effort to interpret the narrative in the third chapter of Genesis as equivalent to "the human tendency to push against limits" may not gain equal reader support (96).

The penultimate chapter, "Christ and the Cosmos," works through Irenaeus, the medieval Franciscans Duns Scotus and Bonaventure, and Teilhard de Chardin, to set the stage for "Cosmic Christology
and Contemporary Reflections.” The final chapter, “Creation and the Future,” draws together the scientific vision of the future with theology’s vision developed by inter-relating creation, the incarnation and resurrection. The ultimate future for theology is likened to the preceding study of origins to stress that it does not consist in extending the line of the “space-time context of the present world” to a specific future point, but rather concerns the “final transforming relation between the created world and God who moves creation to a new level of being” (120). This raises the basic question of how to reconcile: (a) the distinctive differences between the scientific and theological studies of origin and destiny, while (b) recognizing the theological (revelatory) meaning of the physical cosmos as read from the mystery of Christ.

One major conclusion is that the dialogue carried on throughout the book between theology and the sciences indicates the need to relocate the meaning of salvation within the context of creation-theology. Language and reflection about salvation must go beyond the negative overtones of redemption and be directly related to the destiny of the cosmos. “Christ’s destiny anticipates in one human being the universal aim of God in creating” (121).

This volume is a real gem and can be highly recommended for exemplifying a fruitful, critical conversation between Christian creation-theology and contemporary sciences.