

CONTEMPLATING CREATION, RESURRECTING TIME: SYMPOSIUM OF
 BRIAN D. ROBINETTE'S *THE DIFFERENCE NOTHING MAKES* AND JOHN E.
 THIEL'S *NOW AND FOREVER* – INVITED SESSION

- Topic: Contemplating Creation, Resurrecting Time: Symposium of Brian D. Robinette's *The Difference Nothing Makes* and John E. Thiel's *Now and Forever*
- Convener: Brian D. Robinette, Boston College
- Moderator: Chelsea J. King, Sacred Heart University
- Presenters: Andrew Prevot, Georgetown University
 Jennifer Newsome Martin, University of Notre Dame
- Respondents: Brian D. Robinette, Boston College
 John E. Thiel, Fairfield University

This panel invited engagement with two recent book publications that explore the relationship between creation and eschatology: Brian D. Robinette's *The Difference Nothing Makes: Creation, Christ, Contemplation* (2023) and John E. Thiel's *Now and Forever: A Theological Aesthetics of Time* (2023). Both books offer constructive proposals concerning the interpersonal and social dimensions of eschatological fulfillment. Both books also share interest in the role of contemplation and aesthetics in theological reflection. Andrew Prevot and Jennifer Newsome Martin served as the two main presenters on the panel, with Robinette and Thiel offering brief responses before opening the session to general discussion.

Prevot's paper offered a concise summary of both books for the benefit of those attending. Focusing first on Thiel's proposals for rethinking time in view of eschatological fulfillment, Prevot noted that such an effort builds upon trends from *nouvelle theologie* to overcome the *duplex ordo* of neo-scholastic theology. With emphasis on the plenitude of resurrected life, a compelling portrait of human existence is provided by highlighting the continuity of our present relationships and moral actions with the life to come, which should be viewed in dynamic, not static, terms.

Shifting to Robinette's book, Prevot noted that while ostensibly the opposite of Thiel's focus, themes of protology and nothingness associated with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* turn out to be complementary by virtue of their emphasis on creation's gratuity, the inviolable dignity of creatures, and the trustworthiness of the creator God who summons creation out of love's fullness. Prevot also highlighted Robinette's focus on contemplation throughout the text, which bears practical, as well as aesthetic, significance for the way it releases human desire and imagination from acquisitiveness and rivalry.

By way of constructive engagement, Prevot noted that both books explore at length the noncompetitive nature of the God-creation relation. He proceeded to raise perspectives and questions regarding ways we might best understand the human role in God's creative activity, particularly in view of artificial intelligence, ecological degradation, and economic scarcity.

Jennifer Newsome Martin's paper opened with evocations from the Psalms, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Charles Péguy to emphasize the precious fragility of creatureliness explored by both Thiel and Robinette. The latter's focus on the

metaphysical poverty of creatures, and the former's focus on the finite temporality of creaturely life, turn out to be complementary in their portraits of the God-creation relation, which at once points to an abyssal difference, or ontological distinction, as well as our intimate relation with God for creaturely existence.

Martin's further engagement with Robinette drew out the theme of contemplation for the way its kenotic attitude of "letting be" means to relax human beings into their ontological dependence in trust while also eliciting compassion for fellow creatures who share such dependence. Her further engagement with Thiel focused on the aesthetic dimensions of his proposals, which emphasizes the future fulfillment of our present lives, i.e., virtue formation, diverse relationships, and eschatological hopes.

Pivoting to constructive questions, Martin posed two sets. The first concerned the authors' views of suffering and death, and how we can ever say that they are a part of divine providence. The second concerned the question whether we can say that God hopes with us.

Thiel responded first by highlighting points of convergence with Robinette's book, particularly the non-competitive relation of God and creation. Noting differences in method, he posed a question to Robinette about the degree of his apophaticism. Thiel then entertained Prevot's reflection on human creativity, indicating his agreement that much of it shares in a tragic condition in need of redemption and hope. In response to Martin, Thiel reiterated his conviction that theodicies are intellectually and pastorally problematic and elaborated some examples by way of support. He then indicated that attributing hope to God risks (problematically) a process metaphysics of God.

Robinette responded by affirming Thiel's overall proposal regarding the inclusion of temporality in eschatological blessedness. Observations on different, though complementary, approaches in method and style were then offered. Turning to Prevot's question, Robinette emphasized the contemplative character of human creativity, which, when authentic, has more to do with nongrasping and fortuity than with instrumental control and prediction. In response to Martin, Robinette expounded upon the question about suffering and death, suggesting that evolutionary processes require theologians to cautiously acknowledge their creative role in the emergence of life as we know it.

The subsequent general conversation was wide-ranging and explored such topics as theodicy, apophysis, theological method, and the doctrinal history of *creatio ex nihilo*.

BRIAN D. ROBINETTE
Boston College
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts