

Book Reviews

The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology. By Alejandro García-Rivera. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009. Pp. 157. \$22.

Cosmological concerns abound in the world today. In this year, the tenth anniversary of the September 11th attacks in the United States, ideological fighting has manifested itself in continued war in the Middle East, debilitating political infighting in the United States, terrorist acts worldwide, and an "Arab Spring" that have shaken the stability of the human community, the environment, and our ability to see the world as it is, especially, its potential beauty and goodness. Traditionally, theologians have waded in the dangerous cultural conversations about war, human suffering, and oppression. In recent years, theologians have added environmental science (specifically, theories about climate change) and biology (specifically, ideas about evolution) to their reflections on God, the world, and the relationship between the two.

Theological attempts to join scientific conversations have been challenged from a cadre of atheistic (Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett) and "antitheistic" (Sam Harris) scientists. This group has developed a new canon of literature which challenges belief in God and theological attempts to use science to develop a modern cosmology which also serves as a faith-based foundation for moral living.

In the midst of current and future struggles and debates about the synthesis of science and theology for a theological cosmology, Alejandro García-Rivera suggests that we garden. In a way reminiscent of Gandhi's suggestion that his compatriots spin thread, García-Rivera suggests that we should all come to appreciate the cosmos as a "garden of God" in this, his last book written before his death. García-Rivera contrasts this metaphor with Augustine's "city of God." His use of the metaphor also is meant to foster reflection on the central Christian garden story, the story of the Garden of Eden. This metaphor, however, is used to do much more. García-Rivera synthesizes theology and science through the work of Charles Darwin and, in a unique way, Teilhard de Chardin and Hans Urs von Balthasar, to argue for an understanding of the cosmos as an "entangled bank" of beautiful, interdependent realities that is similar to a garden. This metaphor is helpful, García-Rivera argues, because gardens require a "creative receptivity," an approach to the world that involves an appreciation of and respect for the given, gift-like, objective quality of the cosmos. García-Rivera's proposal for attending to the realities that threaten the cosmos is for a creative, "disciplined spiritual technology." By "technology," García-Rivera means human creative activity which he believes should be "as much art as it is craft." The mission of this technology, furthermore, should be the creation of a "garden of God," a "life-giving place for human becoming" that addresses "our human frailty" (125-26).

García-Rivera's work is part of a new tradition of theological aesthetics that has developed in the wake of the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar.¹ In chapter four, García-Rivera outlines an argument that utilizes his particular use of von

Balthasar's notion of "form." García-Rivera offers a synthesis that involves an explanation of evolutionary theory based not on efficient causality but on his understanding of formal causality, that is, on an appreciation of "natural" or "living" forms. García-Rivera distinguishes his notion of form from that found in "classical philosophy or art theory" (84). "Living form," he explains, "is form that cannot be pinned down in any absolute way. It is form that is contingent, dynamic, and even kenotic" (84). García-Rivera uses this understanding and appreciation of natural forms to identify the experience of "nonequilibrium thermodynamics" in the physical sciences as an experience of a (quintessential) form of beauty, one that helps us to appreciate the beauty of the rest of the cosmos (84-5).²

García-Rivera's argument rests, in large part, on his synthesis of theological and scientific understandings of "form." In his "new understanding of form," García-Rivera describes formal causality as "the unifying principle that brings the many possibilities of parts into a living whole. It is causality from the 'inside out' as opposed to the 'bottom up.' In other words, it is an immanent causality. It is form emerging from the deep" (88). García-Rivera's understanding is that "living forms" provide a model by which we can understand the truth and beauty of the cosmos. His position is that "living forms" are occasions for us to understand the depth of the cosmos, something that will require a willingness to open ourselves "up to the depth dimension of the universe" (89).

It is at this point in the book that García-Rivera uses the metaphor of an "entangled bank," developing an image that Darwin discusses in his *Origin of Species*. The notion of an entangled bank allows García-Rivera to mix his aesthetic and scientific ideas. An entangled bank is a metaphor for the cosmos that allows us to appreciate its complex beauty because, like an entangled bank, it is a symphony of parts and a whole in a "dynamic dependence" and "dynamic unity" of forms and processes. The entangled bank, he explains, this "contingent, delicate, and fragile dynamic unity within diversity corresponds almost exactly to a 2,500-year-old consensus regarding beauty. Beauty is a unity in diversity" (92).

From a strictly theological (as opposed to a scientific) perspective, García-Rivera's most unique and complex synthesizing occurs in his use of Teilhard de Chardin to develop some of von Balthasar's ideas. Von Balthasar provides, for García-Rivera, a way to let Teilhard "speak again in a new voice" to address contemporary theological cosmological issues in an orthodox way (48). Specifically, García-Rivera believes that "Von Balthasar . . . opens up a space for the Holy Spirit in his 'seeing the Form' in the beautiful forms of the cosmos" (97). Von Balthasar's epistemology provides what García-Rivera believes is an undeveloped model of trinitarian beauty which can be developed or complemented by Teilhard's notion of a cosmic Christ. According to García-Rivera, the cosmic Christ is made present in the cosmos by the work of the Holy Spirit and by living and kenotic forms, the latter revealing the cosmic Christ through their beauty (98). What seems to make possible García-Rivera's synthesis of von Balthasar and Teilhard is their common root in the tradition of the divine indwelling: God's presence in the world through the work of the Holy Spirit sanctifies the world and makes it a graced gift.

In the final chapter of the book, García-Rivera's synthesis of von Balthasar and Teilhard helps him to develop a cosmology that allows for progressive,

evolving, human, aesthetic, and moral participation in an evolving cosmos. We, as *Homo sapiens*, are distinguished from the rest of creation not only by our ability to think but also by our ability to use our imagination. The "wisdom" (*sapiens*) of humanity is not merely cognitive but imaginative, creative, and receptive to God's gracious gift of the cosmos. García-Rivera offers a quiet, positive, prophetic call that does not condemn humanity but calls it to marvel at the beauty of the world in order that it might inspire us to be at home in the cosmos and to seek goodness. Highlighting this moral call, he observes that the Church can "no longer ignore the global interconnectedness of economies, religions, cultures, and technologies" (130). García-Rivera's call is a variation of the oft cited prophetic pronouncement that Dostoyevsky puts in the mouth of Prince Myshkin, the belief that "beauty will save the world." This is not a simple palliative but a prescient, critical strategy for cooperation rooted in the recognition of the interdependence of "forms and processes" in the cosmos. His is a call for a "disciplined spiritual technology" that "aims toward the entanglement of beautiful living form" that "seeks to create a place where life can lead to more life. And to do so beautifully" (127).

García-Rivera's synthesis of the work of von Balthasar and Teilhard is complicated and, to my knowledge, unique. García-Rivera seems to pursue his synthesis to avoid what he characterizes as the now unhelpful theological method of Karl Rahner in a post-modern era; von Balthasar seems to offer an idea of givenness and gift that he apparently did not find in Rahner *et al.*³ It seems to be true, however, that Rahner shares the same traditional roots in the doctrine of the divine indwelling and has developed an understanding of grace and our capacity to know and love God in ways that might be more consistent with Teilhard's methodology than is von Balthasar's. In fact, Rahner's epistemology seems to lend itself to an easier synthesis with Teilhard's work which can bring one to conclusions similar to those of García-Rivera which, furthermore, might address modern scientific critiques in a better way. John Haught, for example, offers a theological cosmology that finds a role for Rahner in his use of Teilhard. Relying primarily on the theological work of Alfred North Whitehead, Haught argues for an "aesthetic cosmological principle" as opposed to a "cosmic anthropic principle" for the directionality of the cosmos that is a variation on Teilhard's thought.⁴ Haught offers an effective response to the atheistic critiques of the new cadre of scientific atheists Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris who are major dialogue partners in Haught's book. García-Rivera, on the other hand, does not address directly any such critiques nor does his cosmology seem to offer a satisfying response to thinkers outside his theological circle.

A particularly insightful contribution to the discussion of theological cosmology and its implications for theological aesthetics and morality is García-Rivera's discussion of Job and Genesis 2. Building upon Gustavo Gutiérrez's reading of Job, García-Rivera argues that these stories are about human "suffering" and "integrity" (111-13). The expulsion from the garden of Eden has a positive dimension insofar as it was an invitation to cultivate a new garden of Eden wherein "the human must learn first-hand the very heart of creation's integral processes" (113). García-Rivera's exhortation is that we, in our "frailty" and with the temptation to commodify our spiritual creativity,

should work to develop a "disciplined creativity aimed at creating a place that seeks not merely to consume life but to live it abundantly" (125).

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NOTES

- 1.) See Oleg Bychkov's "Introduction" in *Theological Aesthetics After Von Balthasar*, edited by Oleg V. Bychkov and James Fodor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). Bychkov identifies Garcia-Rivera's work in that volume as "an example of a constructive appropriation of von Balthasar's emphasis on the revelatory aspect of aesthetic experience" (xxiii).
- 2.) For a more detailed discussion of Garcia-Rivera's "constructive appropriation" of von Balthasar's understanding of form, see chapter 3, "Seeing the Form," in his *The Community of the Beautiful* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999).
- 3.) See Garcia-Rivera's discussion of the capacity to know and love God ("Capax Dei") in *The Community of the Beautiful*, pp. 74-8.
- 4.) See Haught's *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), pp. 128-31.