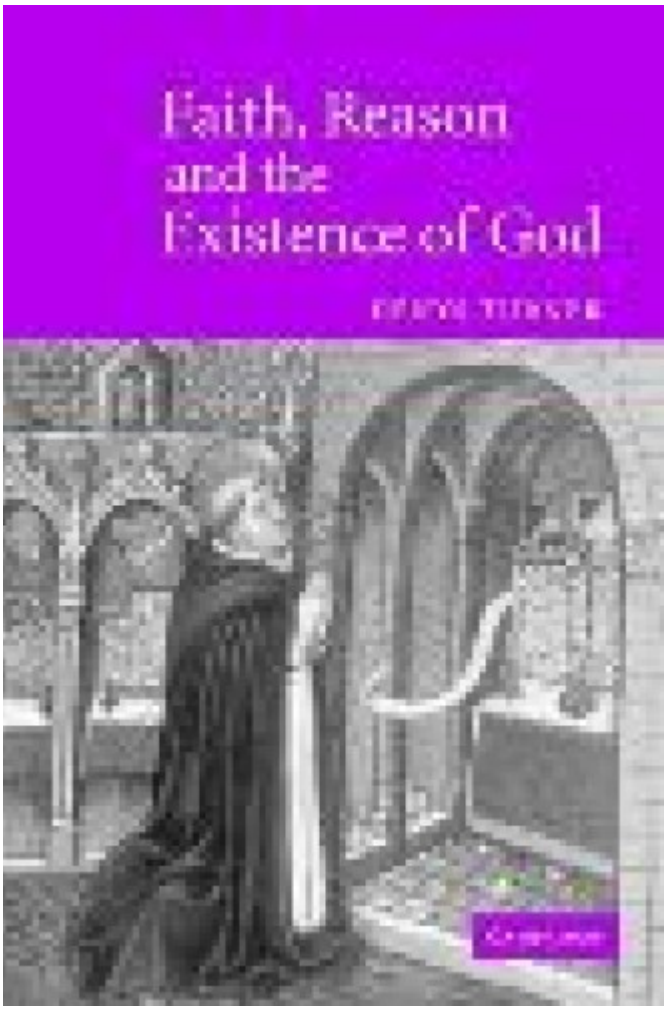
Faith, Reason and the Existence of God/The Creativity of God

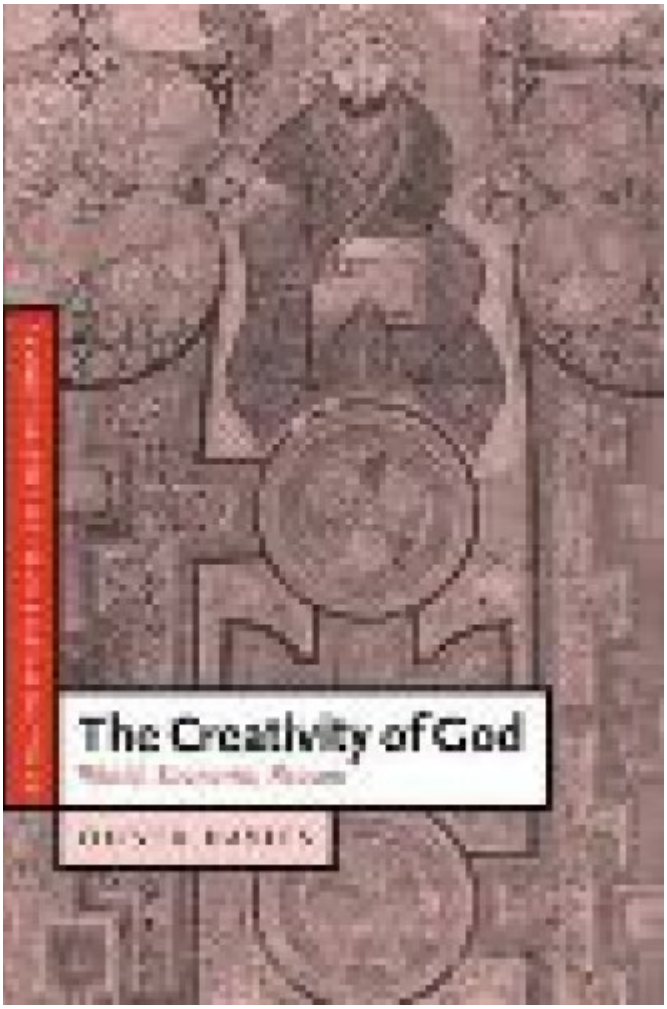
reviewed by Kathryn Greene-McCreight in the October 4, 2005 issue

In Review



Faith, Reason and the Existence of God

Denys Turner
Cambridge University Press



The Creativity of God: World, Eucharist, Reason

Oliver Davies
Cambridge University Press

Denys Turner and Oliver Davies previously collaborated on *Silence and the Word* (2002), so it is not surprising that in these two books they have something compatible and complementary to say. Turner, professor of divinity at Cambridge, addresses the possibility of making an argument for the existence of God; Davies, professor of Christian doctrine at King's College, London, tries to find a new way of talking about the doctrine of creation. Both of them seek a renewed vision for the role of reason and sacrament in theology.

Turner reexamines the widely doubted proposition that God's existence is demonstrable by rational argument. He is careful to point out that he is not offering a proof of the existence of God; rather, he is contending that there are faith grounds

for the principle that the existence of God should be rationally demonstrable. He revisits Thomas Aquinas for this, as well as the Vatican Council of 1870, which relied on Aquinas: “I rather think that the bishops of the Vatican Council were right on a score of general principle in saying that to deny the rational demonstrability of the existence of God on grounds of faith is to get something importantly wrong not just about reason but also about the nature of faith.” Specifically, it is a matter of faith that reason can point to God.

Turner suggests that philosophical objections to proofs of God’s existence succeed because the proofs rely on an impoverished notion of reason—based either on a prescientific realism or on modern metaphysics. Such a notion of reason, says Turner, should be rejected by all monotheistic traditions. (I might ask: How can a Christian theologian be so bold as to speak for all monotheistic traditions?) Turner proposes that a deeper conception of human rationality is needed that would be open to the “sacramental shape” of creation, to participation in the sacramentality of all things.

Davies points out that the theological guild has lost a language that can speak of the createdness of the world without succumbing to a prescientific worldview. A primary task of theology, according to Davies, should be the regeneration of a Christian account of the world as sacramental; this would bring about a new Christian understanding of reason. The Johannine tradition’s notion of creation through the Word and what Davies calls a “eucharistic semiotics of Christ,” which is the sacrificial and embodied speech of God, can together repair Christian cosmology. The cosmological idea here is that the relation between God and the world is more like that between the authorial voice and the text; Davies wants to replace the traditional metaphysical view with a nonmetaphysical dynamic of voice and sign.

Davies has two theses. First, he contends that “successive attempts to accommodate theology to modes of scientific reasoning, for all their legitimacy, may have distracted the theological community from a generous and creative exploration of the *meaning* of the world; and thus, in turn have led to an inadequate reception of the theology of creation.” Second, he proposes that “if reason itself is fundamentally the interface between ourselves and the world, then the way that we reason, our understanding of rationality itself will determine the ways in which we perceive and experience the world.”

He argues throughout that scriptural cosmology, which he bases on key texts from Genesis and Exodus, challenges the ideology of scientism, which offers a shallow and materialistic image of the world and reason.

Interestingly, both of these books speak positively, albeit briefly, of what they call Barthianism. They never, however, define what they mean by it. Indeed, they make precious few references to Barth's work, and Turner cites his colleagues' opinions on Barth as much as he does Barth's own writings. I would have preferred an honest engagement with Barth, especially since his own argument about creation is implicitly problematic for both Davies and Turner. Barth makes a clear distinction between God and God's creation, and both Turner and Davies end up blurring this distinction—one that has most of the history of tradition behind it. Can a new argument about creation, reason and the existence of God be made without a blending of creature and Creator? One would hope so, but Turner and Davies fall short.

These works are advertised as making important contributions to modern theology. Certainly this is true. However, I wonder how useful they will be to most pastors, who have to preach week in and week out on the Word. A eucharistic semiotics of Christ, for example, may not be easily translatable to the pulpit. The reader will have to hunt to find exactly what is meant by reason and sacrament amidst an elite vocabulary. Although the books raise important questions, their language is so esoteric as to be off-putting to the beginner or layperson.