

Creation and new creation

A collection of essays invites artists and theologians into conversation.

by [Melody Bellefeuille-Frost](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue

In Review

The Art of New Creation

Trajectories in Theology and the Arts

Edited by Jeremy Begbie, Daniel Train, and W. David O. Taylor

IVP Academic

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I participate in a community of theologian-artists who, along with our neighbors and the wider world, have felt a deep sense of crisis in recent years. As we see society cautiously and exhaustedly stepping further into a new normal, we wonder how our interactions have changed—and we wish for far more than a hiccup in the status quo before it settles back into the same inequalities.

This period of transition was well underway when *The Art of New Creation* landed on my desk. The book's overarching aim is to advance dialogue in theology and the arts by exploring two vibrant motifs woven through the tapestry of scripture: creation and new creation. These are familiar themes in my community. As theologians, we mull over creation and new creation; as artists, we make creation and new creation. It is what we hope for in Christ.

The Art of New Creation successfully navigates two risks. First, it risks difficulty drawing in readers who did not attend DITA10, the 2019 symposium organized by Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts at Duke Divinity School, from which the

contents are drawn. Second, it risks disappointing readers who perceive that DITA10 predated COVID and fear that the essays will therefore be detached from our current sufferings and seekings. Attentive to these risks, the editors invited several artists and art enthusiasts to contribute new chapters in conversation with those from the symposium, which have been intentionally reworked for the book's 2022 publication.

The collection frames its essays with a foreword by Natalie Carnes, who offers the image of "Mary, Untier of Knots" for contemplation. Throughout the book, the recent knots of COVID and the chronic knots of racism are described as a double pandemic. Then there are the additional—and often interrelated—knots of the climate emergency and personal suffering that also come up in the essays. Artists with tactile skills may sense our fingers twitch as we read, dexterous and eager to join in unraveling these knots and knitting our communal fabric into something new. *The Art of New Creation* invites us to imagine how theology, the arts, and new creation intertwine in our lives and practices.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, "Soundings," offers essays that highlight the scope of theological aesthetics as an interdisciplinary field. For example, in "Transcendence, the Arts, and New Creation," Kutter Callaway bridges theology and psychology by offering empirical psychological evidence for aesthetic experiences of transcendence. In "The White Savior as Diseased Creation," Jacquelynn Price-Linnartz examines racism and resistance in blockbuster movies.

I particularly enjoyed "Sketching the Incarnation," by Charles Augustine Rivera, who explores Ephrem the Syrian's poetic theology and interpretation of painting. Theology and imagery develop together through Ephrem's poems; the artist and his work reveal theological and spiritual truth. Ephrem suggests that the process of painting a portrait—which involves considering the composition, making an underdrawing of (or limning) the subject, building up colors, and finessing details—is sacramental. Painting reenacts the mystery and ineffability of Christ's incarnation. As Ephrem repeats, "Glories to your hiddenness!"

Rivera's chapter demonstrates the value of inter-artistic work, as his essay delves into poetry that itself delves into painting. However, Rivera recognizes that Ephrem's reflections are about the spirituality of painting, not the arts more generally. Reading this inspires in me further thought on the spirituality of my own art making.

Jennifer Allen Craft and Norman Wirzba open the book's second section, "Conversations," with a discussion titled "Placemaking for New Creation." Acknowledging the brokenness and beauty of our world, their conversation turns to God's call to participate in his mission to make new creation—a call that echoes humanity's original creative vocation to tend and keep Eden. We inhabit broken places. Place-making practices extend careful, loving attention to the mundane and, by extension and habit, to our neighbors and the earth. There is a relationship between who we are and where we are. As Malcolm Guite and Judith Wolfe reiterate in their conversation, "Creation and New Creation in J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis," since "we live in a world that is upheld, whose space is created," art making is natural because it reflects God's original creative work and anticipates his creative work to come.

The third section, "Arts in Action," shares artists' testimonies about engaging with creation and new creation during the double pandemic. Their perspectives enrich and challenge our understanding of what vocation and good news look like when embodied by practicing artists. For instance, dancer Leah Glenn describes dance as an "everyday ministry" that provides an "alternative lens" on the world, while musician Awet Andemicael describes singing as "whole-making" and "priestly." These artists bring together being a Christian, an artist, and a witness. I wished their references to song, music, and dance could transmit from the pages like a soundtrack or hologram.

The Art of New Creation is a book for our season. Although it is definitively hopeful in God, it does not give the definitive word. Furthermore, although responses to COVID and systemic injustices may be found in its essays (or made from them), it doesn't attempt to answer the question of evil, sin, and death. Instead, it underscores the question while offering reflections and glimpses into God's re-creative mission.

The field of theology and the arts is expanding. We participate in shaping what is to come. There is much to be recognized, named, healed, made, and remade. This book beckons us to join in, however the Holy Spirit inspires us. Perhaps it is appropriate to close with the hopefulness of N. T. Wright's sermon, "The Surprising Faithfulness of God," which serves as a pastoral and prophetic epilogue to *The Art of New Creation*. His refrain, a translation of 2 Corinthians 5:17, is, "If anyone in Messiah, new creation!"