

THE DIALECTICS OF CREATION

Creation and the Creator
in Edward Schillebeeckx and
David Burrell

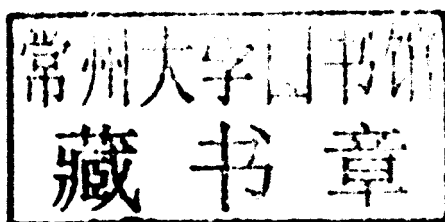
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MARTIN G. POULSOM

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Edward Schillebeeckx and
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Martin G. Poulson



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The Dialectics of Creation

For my parents

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Abbreviations used

Works by Edward Schillebeeckx

<i>I</i>	<i>Jesus: An Experiment in Christology</i>
<i>II</i>	<i>Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World</i>
<i>III</i>	<i>Church: The Human Story of God</i>
<i>EV</i>	<i>Evangelie verhalen</i>
<i>FSG</i>	<i>For the Sake of the Gospel</i>
<i>G&M</i>	<i>God and Man</i>
<i>GAU</i>	<i>God Among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed</i>
<i>GFM</i>	<i>God the Future of Man</i>
<i>GNEM</i>	<i>God is New Each Moment</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>I am a Happy Theologian: Conversations with Francesco Strazzari</i>
<i>IR</i>	<i>Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ</i>
<i>JWC</i>	<i>Jesus in Our Western Culture: Mysticism, Ethics and Politics</i>
<i>LF</i>	<i>The Language of Faith</i>
<i>O&T</i>	<i>Openbaring en Theologie</i>
<i>R&T II</i>	<i>The Concept of Truth and Theological Renewal (Revelation and Theology: Volume II)</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>Theologisch testament: Notarieel nog niet verleden</i>
<i>TV</i>	<i>Tussentijds verhaal over twee Jesus boeken</i>
<i>UF</i>	<i>The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism</i>
<i>W&C</i>	<i>World and Church</i>

Works by David B. Burrell

<i>AGA</i>	<i>Aquinas: God and Action</i>
<i>APL</i>	<i>Analogy and Philosophical Language</i>
<i>ERU</i>	<i>Exercises in Religious Understanding</i>
<i>F&C</i>	<i>Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions</i>
<i>F&F</i>	<i>Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective</i>
<i>FWT</i>	<i>Friendship and Ways to Truth</i>
<i>KUG</i>	<i>Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas</i>

Preface

The accounts of creation propounded by Edward Schillebeeckx and David Burrell offer distinctive and rewarding possibilities for philosophical theology – and for theology more widely – in a time of transition from modernity into more explicitly postmodern forms of articulation. Their distinct and, at the same time, related ways of speaking about God and the world open up the possibility of a dialogue between two approaches to theology in the Roman Catholic tradition that are frequently thought to be competitors. Burrell's philosophical thinking is often placed by commentators into a broad tradition that develops from Joseph Maréchal's (Jesuit) transcendental response to a Kantian critique of faith. Schillebeeckx's intellectual lineage, however, is said to derive from Dominic De Petter (a Dominican), who developed a different response to Kant, along situational rather than transcendental lines.

This study is an adaptation of my doctoral thesis, which started off its life precisely as the kind of dialogue just outlined. Along the way it changed twice, first in response to my reading of Kathryn Tanner's *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* Her proposal that rival theological schools might well be doing the same things in different ways was music to both my theological and ecclesial ears, conscious as I was (and am) of tendencies towards polarization in both spheres. Initially, Schillebeeckx and Burrell seemed at first to fit her model nicely, offering accounts of creation in which what was stressed as primary by each author was taken to be secondary by the other. As my analysis progressed, uncovering the dialectics of creation operative in their writings, it became apparent that the shared structure of thinking Tanner had led me to expect was not to be found.

This led to a second shift in the life of the project, in which Tanner's proposal was disrupted on the basis of the dialectic expressed in Schillebeeckx's account of creation. In fact, it became clear that this dialectic, once identified, could serve as a hermeneutic for his philosophical theology in general, allowing seemingly contradictory or paradoxical elements of his thinking to fall into place. The term I use to describe it is relational dialectic, terminology that is intended to offer a contribution not only to Schillebeeckx scholarship but also to two debates currently taking place in theological literature more widely.

The first of these concerns the interaction between dialectical and correlational theologies and theologians. Whether it is the modern debate between Barth and Schleiermacher that is attended to, or the more recent one between George Lindbeck and David Tracy – who, in different ways, are striving to develop theologies that engage a postmodern era – the tendency towards polarization seems almost inevitable at times. My use of the term ‘relational’ to describe the dialectic operative in Schillebeeckx is partly intended to show that the interesting ground of these debates is to be found between the extremes, whether they be rival theological schools or thematic poles.

Another intention is to show that it might well be possible to articulate theology in a relational key by using the doctrine of creation as a hermeneutic for such a theology. Many current responses to the call to place relation at the centre of theology start with the Trinity. However, this is made somewhat complex (at best) by the way in which the relations and relationships that pertain between the persons of the Trinity are by no means identical with those between human persons, or those that may pertain between human persons and the other creatures with which we share the planet on which we live. This study proposes the relational dialectic of creation as a hermeneutic, not only for Schillebeeckx’s thought, but also for a philosophical theology that follows in his footsteps. Such a theology has retrospective and prospective advantages in its interpretation both of the tradition of Christian faith and also of the current situation in which Christians live and to which we must craft a faithful response.

My grateful thanks go out to many people who were significant animators of this process. Philip Kennedy, my supervisor in Oxford, gave me great support over the course of my studies, encouraging me in particular to disagree with him in my text. (I am glad to say that I managed it in the end!) Other interlocutors in Oxford were invaluable for the insight they gave me into the various authors in the background of the study. Particular mention must be made of John Webster, Philip Endean and Gerard J. Hughes in this regard, from whom I learned a great deal. I spent four very happy years at Campion Hall and am deeply grateful, too, that I was able to return there during a term’s sabbatical to work on this version of the text. The pastoral ministry that I undertook with the Salesian family in Cowley, and more widely in Oxford, during my years of study, helped me to relate the ecclesial and academic vocations of the theologian in ways that enrich me still. I was blessed with many opportunities to discuss Schillebeeckx’s thought with Jennifer Cooper in Oxford. It was a delight to meet Erik Borgman and Ted Schoof in Nijmegen in August 2004. Schillebeeckx himself was unwell that summer and unable to receive academic

visitors, but the personal insights that Erik and Ted passed on to me in those few short days were invaluable.

I thank Michael Winstanley, Michael Cunningham, Francis Preston and Martin Coyle, the confreres of the British Province of the Salesians of Don Bosco who have been my Provincial so far in my Salesian life, for their support of my studies and for allowing me to pursue the dream of serving the young in tertiary education. The members of my community in Battersea, both when I was in Oxford and today, have been great companions on the journey of life in the footsteps of Don Bosco. A special vote of thanks goes to my good friend Anita Cobb, who was the first to suggest that I read Schillebeeckx on creation and who kindly helped proofread both my doctoral thesis and this text. I thank my family, especially my parents, to whom this book is affectionately dedicated, for all you give and are to me. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the two authors themselves: I thank David Burrell for his encouragement, assistance and support during my research. I give thanks to God for Edward Schillebeeckx, for the inspiration and example of his life as a theologian. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

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August 2013

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Introduction

The importance of creation

The theme of creation is one that is gaining a good deal of attention currently, mainly prompted by environmental and ecological changes that may well threaten the survival of large numbers of our – and other – species on the planet.¹ David Burrell and Edward Schillebeeckx agree that creation is of crucial importance in theology. Burrell says that the second article of the creed has so overshadowed the first in Christian theology that there is a need to restore a balance – something, he believes, that can be done by adopting ‘an expressly interfaith perspective.’² This helps restore the sense of the universe as gift rather than as given, helping to overcome a naturalistic attitude towards the world that has all too often marked Christian theological discourse.³ Schillebeeckx avers that creation is the foundation of theology:⁴

For me, creation-faith is ultimately the foundation of all theology. At present, the demand is put to theology from many sides to treat the doctrine of creation in its rightful place. There is so much said about the history of salvation that there is

¹ See, for example, Catherine Cowley (ed.), *Faiths in Creation* (The Institute Series, 8; London: Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life, 2008).

² David Burrell and Elena Malits, *Original Peace: Restoring God's Creation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), pp. 3–4. This book is co-authored with one of Burrell's long-term associates (see David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* [New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1973], p. xi [henceforth APL], and David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979], p. xiii [henceforth AGA], where he thanks her for her assistance). Despite this, and despite them saying that they take joint responsibility for the text (see Burrell and Malits, *Original Peace*, pp. 1–2), Burrell is clearly willing to make his own the views that are expressed there, as can be seen by the way that many of them are reprised in some of his more recent articles found in David Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) (henceforth F&F).

³ David B. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 3 (henceforth F&C).

⁴ Edward Schillebeeckx, *I Am a Happy Theologian: Conversations with Francesco Strazzari* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1994), p. 47 (henceforth HT).

need now for a new reflection on creation-faith [. . .]. It is necessary to find new words in order to render a point of faith [. . .] an understandable notion.⁵

Like Burrell, then, Schillebeeckx also seems to think that there is a need to restore a balance between creation and redemption.⁶ He also advocates it in the way he links the two themes, stating that 'the beginning of the history of human liberation coincides with the beginning of creation'⁷ and that the kingdom of God 'has its ultimate foundation in the divine act of creation'.⁸ Speaking more particularly about the relationship of faith, he says that 'creation is the beginning of a relationship of dialogue between God and the human person'.⁹

Creation is not just important as a theoretical theme, however, as the current situation makes all too clear. Creation-faith also has practical implications. According to Schillebeeckx, 'the conciliar process, "justice, peace and the integrity of creation", has everything to do with Jewish-Christian belief in creation' and, together with 'the significance of redemption in Jesus Christ [. . .] belongs at the heart of the Christian creed'.¹⁰ He maintains that creation-faith helps a prophetic impetus to emerge in Christianity, leading to a liberating praxis, such that

⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch testament: Notarieel nog niet verleden* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1994), p. 85 (henceforth *TT*) (author's translation). This text is not altogether unrelated to Schillebeeckx's *HT*, published in the same year. As he points out in the Foreword to *TT*, it is based on the series of interviews that he gave to Francesco Strazzari in 1992, which were subsequently published in Italian (and English). Rather than simply reprinting this version for Dutch readers, he reworked it, so that it now reads more like an openhearted conversation with himself, as well as a kind of reply to the many questions he has been asked by readers who contacted him (see Schillebeeckx, *TT*, p. 7).

⁶ It must be said, however, that how this balance is achieved and whether creation or salvation is prior in Schillebeeckx's theology are contentious matters in the secondary literature. This raises the possibility that another way of thinking about it might be useful and it is, ultimately, this search that is undertaken in the present work.

⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 119 (henceforth *IR*). Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *God Among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 99 (henceforth *GAU*).

⁸ Schillebeeckx, *GAU*, p. 99.

⁹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *World and Church* (trans. N. D. Smith; Theological Soundings, 3; London: Sheed and Ward, 1971), p. 244 (henceforth *W&C*).

¹⁰ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (trans. John Bowden; New York, NY; London: Crossroad; SCM Press, 1990), p. 238 (henceforth *III*). This way of referring to the Christological trilogy written by Schillebeeckx is one that is often used and which, in fact, goes back to Schillebeeckx himself. In the original Dutch version of *IR* – Edward Schillebeeckx, *Tussentijds verhaal over twee Jesus boeken* (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1978) (henceforth *TV*) – he refers to the 'two Jesus books' of the title as I and II. The nomenclature is also adopted partly to overcome the difficulties that arise because the English editions of the texts have somewhat different titles from their Dutch counterparts: in the original Dutch, *III* is Edward Schillebeeckx, *Mensen als verhaal van God* (Nelissen: Baarn, 1989) (henceforth *Mensen*), which, translated, becomes *Human Beings as the Story of God*. Admittedly, the title of *III* might not seem so different in Dutch and in English, yet, while one main thrust of the book is, indeed, ecclesiological, Schillebeeckx would not want to limit the story of God to those men and women who are members of the Roman Catholic Church.

creation-faith is not just another theory.¹¹ It is also the foundation of prayer and mysticism¹² and the basis of Christian humanism.¹³

Burrell says that the 'common confession of God's creating initiative'¹⁴ bears practical fruit in interfaith dialogue, too. Indeed, he holds that it 'must be utterly central to any philosophical theology executed by Jews, Christians, or Muslims'.¹⁵ In the search for truth that is a common element of both Christianity and Islam, for example, 'there can be no truth without creation'.¹⁶ Burrell's work is very much centred on that of Thomas Aquinas. In almost all of his major works, Burrell refers to Josef Pieper, who, he says, characterizes creation as 'the central though often hidden element in Aquinas's philosophical discourse'.¹⁷ Creation also plays a key role in many of Burrell's cardinal themes. He holds that analogical language depends on it and, thereby, the ability to use perfection terms of God.¹⁸ It is central to securing the metaphysics that Aquinas adopts, adapting his Aristotelian sources to take a distinctive position on being (*esse*) and adapting his Neoplatonic sources to take a distinctive position on participation.¹⁹

Creation and philosophical theology

Burrell notes that it could be said 'that the vast majority of endeavours in philosophy of religion over the past few centuries in the west have been devoted to ways of confirming creation'.²⁰ However, he does not think that the analysis of creation is best located in that discipline. Although Aquinas, according to Burrell, sought to acknowledge, at the outset of the *Summa Theologiae*, the intrinsic connection between theology and 'the exigencies of the human mind to understand how all things stand', he did not intend, thereby, to propose 'that those intellectual exigencies could *ground* this study of God'. That grounding

¹¹ Schillebeeckx, *GAU*, p. 100.

¹² Schillebeeckx, *IR*, p. 122; cf. *GAU*, p. 102; *III*, p. 234.

¹³ Schillebeeckx, *W&C*, p. 23.

¹⁴ David B. Burrell, 'Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?', *Theological Studies* 43 (1982), pp. 125–35 (131) (henceforth 'Mistake?').

¹⁵ Burrell, *F&C*, p. 113.

¹⁶ David B. Burrell, *Friendship and Ways to Truth* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 3 (henceforth *FWT*).

¹⁷ Burrell, *AGA*, p. 136, referring to Josef Pieper, *The Silence of Saint Thomas* (trans. J. Murray and D. O'Connor; New York, NY: Pantheon, 1957). He also refers to this work in *APL*, pp. 150–51; David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 34 (henceforth *KUG*); *F&C*, p. 11 and *FWT*, p. 48.

¹⁸ See Burrell, *F&F*, p. 118 and pp. 129–30 respectively.

¹⁹ See Burrell, *F&C*, pp. 33, 100 and 200; *F&F*, p. 118.

²⁰ Burrell, *KUG*, p. 5.

‘is deemed at the outset to require something beyond philosophy, namely revelation.’²¹ As a result, Burrell portrays his study of creation as belonging more properly to philosophical theology than philosophy of religion.²² Situating the study thus stresses the importance of analysing the particular faith-traditions with which he is concerned, rather than considering an abstraction called theism; it also emphasizes that each of those traditions seeks to appropriate a revelation in its articulation of creation.²³

Schillebeeckx never considers such matters explicitly in the way that Burrell does. However, he is a theologian who is very philosophically aware, as Philip Kennedy points out. The majority of the influences that Kennedy traces in Schillebeeckx’s work are philosophical and, as for Burrell, ‘it is important to note that religious faith is always prior to philosophy in Schillebeeckx’s writings’.²⁴ The way that the two elements go hand in hand is clear from the parallel that Schillebeeckx draws when he says: ‘I usually speak of the “Christian belief in creation” without separating the Christian and the philosophical aspects.’²⁵

A project for today

Both writers speak of the contemporary character of their discourse. Schillebeeckx insists: ‘I am not writing for posterity. I am writing for people here and now.’²⁶ This could be taken as implying that his contribution is evanescent, but that is not what he means. As with many elements of his theology, Schillebeeckx wants to take a position between two extremes. On the one hand, he makes it clear that he is writing ‘for the men and women of today who are in a particular context’, yet he also insists, at the same time, that the ‘relevance of a theology is not an ephemeral relevance’.²⁷ On the other hand, he does not wish to found a school of theology which will last for ever, since, “school making” in theology is now, fortunately, *passé*;²⁸ yet he says that if ‘a particular theology can nourish and inspire a coming

²¹ Burrell, *F&C*, p. 21.

²² See Burrell, *KUG*, pp. 2 and 114, Notes to Introduction, n. 1; *FWT*, p. 96; *F&F*, p. 76.

²³ See Burrell, *F&C*, pp. 1 and 42–43 respectively.

²⁴ Philip Kennedy, *Schillebeeckx* (London: Chapman, 1993), pp. 31–32. (See pp. 31–52 for the various influences that Kennedy catalogues.)

²⁵ Schillebeeckx, *IR*, p. 151, n. 83 (also see the text to which this endnote refers on p. 126).

²⁶ Edward Schillebeeckx, *God Is New Each Moment* (in conversation with Huub Oosterhuis and Piet Hoogeveen, trans. David Smith; New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1983), pp. 120–21 (henceforth *GNEM*).

²⁷ Schillebeeckx, *HT*, p. 80.

²⁸ Schillebeeckx, *TT*, pp. 171–72 (author’s translation).

generation, that's what it's all about.'²⁹ He recognizes, of course, that he is not the best judge of this: 'Whether my theology does that, history will tell.'³⁰

Burrell's interfaith studies are in a more explicitly historical mode, but his aim is partly to enable something to take place in the present that he can demonstrate has occurred in the past. He does this by practising interfaith dialogue in his academic work, such that the advantages of comparative study are 'displayed, rather than argued for'.³¹ In *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*, he makes reference to a number of interfaith colloquia that he has been present at and has helped to organize, something that he continues to do still.³² In more recent works, he also speaks favourably of postmodernism, observing, for example, that 'to suggest that faith and reason might complement one another in executing human inquiry is to move beyond the thought categories of modernism', in which such a suggestion 'would have displayed a severe breach of etiquette, if not constituted an oxymoron'.³³

What their project is not

It is important to stress that neither author presents the history of theology as a one-sided narrative of decline. Burrell does chart a series of steps that result in the separation of creation and redemption a number of times in his works, but notes that these are 'more rhetorical than logical'.³⁴ These consist in the cumulative effects of the liturgical shift from the Sabbath to the day of Christ's resurrection in the early church, the distinction of the supernatural from the natural in the thirteenth century and the separation of history from nature in the nineteenth century.³⁵ Although Burrell maintains that a *ressourcement* project in the philosophical theology of the medieval era can shed light on the contemporary situation, he is not advocating a return to a perceived Golden Age. It is, he says, only if a linear model of history is followed that there is a narrative either of development or of decline; a dialectical approach is more promising: in a similar

²⁹ Ibid., p. 172 (author's translation).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Burrell, *F&C*, p. x.

³² Ibid., pp. ix–x. For an example of one such colloquium that Burrell was involved in organizing, see David B. Burrell and Bernard McGinn (eds), *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

³³ Burrell, *F&C*, p. 140; cf. pp. 143–45.

³⁴ David B. Burrell, 'Creation or Emanation: Two Paradigms of Reason', in David B. Burrell and Bernard McGinn (eds), *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 27–37 (28).

³⁵ Burrell, *F&C*, pp. 3–4; *F&F*, p. 235; Burrell and Malits, *Original Peace*, pp. 57–59 (Burrell, 'Creation or Emanation', p. 28 mentions only the first two of these).

way that modernity ‘could be called “post” or even “antimedieval” [. . .] some forms of “postmodern,” in the sense of “antimodern,” discourse would display affinities with medieval inquiry, since “postmodern” could be translated as “anti-antimedieval”’.³⁶ Schillebeeckx’s philosophical theology by no means ignores medieval sources, but, again, he employs them not in order to return to a prior age in theology, but to shed light on the contemporary quest. He says that, even after he had stopped using Aquinas as the focus of his theology, ‘Thomas kept playing an important role in my work, from now on, however, more as a kind of touchstone; someone you cannot ignore, and who keeps you from making stupid mistakes.’³⁷

The characterization of creation is not a search for an indubitable foundation on which to rest the whole of theology. Burrell opposes this in two ways, the first of which is by stressing that creation has to do with faith.³⁸ He also opposes foundationalism more generally, in this way following his guide and mentor Bernard Lonergan,³⁹ who Burrell says anticipated that critique ‘by starkly contrasting the “need for certitude” to the “quest for understanding”’. Burrell notes that despite ‘the anxiety pervading Descartes’ endeavour’, the various proposals that have been made to supply ‘the need for bedrock’ have all failed. As a result, ‘it may prove more fruitful to expose the need itself, as Lonergan set himself to do.’⁴⁰ In Burrell’s review of Karl Rahner’s *Foundations of Christian Faith*, he suggests that Rahner’s turn is not so much to the subject as to subjectivity, not so much to descriptions of human actions – most importantly knowing, understanding and judging – as to the transcendental conditions of the possibility of such actions.⁴¹ This helps to distinguish Lonergan’s concerns as well as his intellectual lineage from those of Rahner.⁴² It could also, as far as Burrell is concerned, make Rahner vulnerable to the charge of foundationalism.

³⁶ Burrell, *F&F*, p. 141.

³⁷ Eric Luijten, ‘Scholastic Concepts Tend to Become Almost Eternal Concepts – Interview with Prof. Edward Schillebeeckx o.p.’, *News Archive of Thomas Instituut te Utrecht* (29 July 1999) <www.thomasinstituut.org/nws.php?nws_id=32> [accessed 29 July 2013], paragraph 10 of 22.

³⁸ In addition to the earlier references, see also Burrell, *F&C*, pp. 4 and 15.

³⁹ He refers to Lonergan as mentor in Burrell, *KUG* (p. ix), a book that he dedicates to the memory of Lonergan as ‘Mentor and Liberator’ (p. v); he speaks of Lonergan as one of his ‘mentors and friends’ in *FWT*, p. 45 (also see the section on Lonergan in *FWT*, pp. 46–50); he also refers to him as one of his ‘mentors’ in *F&F*, p. viii. (Also cf. *APL*, p. xi; *F&C*, p. x; and *FWT*, p. 25.)

⁴⁰ Burrell, *FWT*, p. 45. Burrell’s description of the Cartesian endeavour as anxious sounds somewhat similar to the presentation of Cartesian psychology, made along Wittgensteinian lines, in Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 22–28. It is also perhaps significant that Kerr uses creation in his critical response to the Cartesian pull towards epistemology (Kerr, *After Aquinas*, pp. 30–32).

⁴¹ David Burrell, ‘*Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* by Karl Rahner’, *Theology Today* 36 (1979), pp. 425–30 (426).

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 429–30.