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What Religion Has Learned from Its Struggle with Darwinism

[T]he whole modern evolutionary theory is a desperate attempt to substitute a set of horizontal, material causes in a unidimensional world to explain effects whose causes belong to other levels of reality, to the vertical dimensions of existence.¹

(Seyyed Hossein Nasr)

[I]f we take evolution seriously, we cannot simply retain without transformation the static and vertical representations of the "Great Chain of Being" that moulded religious and cultural life prior to Darwin. We are compelled to think of nature's hierarchy more dynamically, historically, and ecologically.²

(John F. Haught)

Knowledge cannot be merely objective, say the postmoderns, because the universe is not mechanistic and dualistic but rather historical, relational, and personal. The world is not simply an objective given that is "out there," waiting to be discovered and known; reality is relative, indeterminate, and participatory.³

(Stanely J. Grenz)

Wisdom is an ethics of knowledge.⁴

(Jürgen Moltmann)

These four statements plait a few of the more customary and intriguing intellectual responses to Darwin and his theory of evolution. A critique against materialism, a decrinal of the departure of a metaphysical framework, reflection upon the effects of a postmodern context upon evolu-

tionary theory and religion, and the nature of epistemology: The quotes from these four thinkers—a Muslim, a Catholic, a Baptist, and a Reformed theologian—weave them together, demonstrating just some of the remarkable repercussions of Darwin and his theories.

It would be simple to center this paper on the ongoing debate about the relationship between science and religion. This topic is obviously worthy of reflection and conversation, although it has begun to have a "been there, done that" quality, as seen in the often stale books, articles, and radio and talk show treatments of the issue. For that matter, that question, namely how science and religion are to interact, if at all, has its roots long before the nineteenth-century advance of evolutionary thought. My purpose is rather to reflect upon the repercussions of evolution in religious thought. This paper, then, will review religion's attempt to gain respect amongst the intellectual community, to define itself nevertheless not against the scientific platform but on its own terms, honed of late against the whetstone of postmodernism. In this context, I will also demonstrate knowledge's requisite need for a metaphysical perspective, and to show that evolutionary theory need be no fiend to religion, but rather can illustrate in yet one more way Christian hope in the God of promise.

Although Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) contemporary Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) applauded the supposed demise of Christianity's fundamental claims in the wake of Darwin's revelations, Darwin himself was more tentative in his dismissal of traditional religious beliefs. Correspondence with W. Mengden, a young German confronting a faith crisis due to Darwin's teachings, reveals a Darwin uncertain of the religious implications of his discoveries. His responses, penned by his son Francis (1848-1925), range from a tepid, "Mr. Darwin begs me to say that he considers that the theory of evolution is quite compatible with belief in God; but that you must remember that different persons have different definitions of what they mean by God,"5 to a more definitive "For myself, I do not believe that there ever has been any revelation. As for future life, every man must judge for himself between conflicting vague probabilities."6

6 Ibid.
Since then, Darwin's personal debate expanded to affect the social, political, and religious realities confronting the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Scopes trial of 1925 still defines the antipathetic extremes of evolutionary thought in scientific and religious communities. Both sides of the trial even now unwittingly serve up caricatures of themselves, caricatures which haunt many a conversation and opinion about the pro- and antagonists of the theory. With the rhetorical glee of a Clarence Darrow (1837-1938), the lawyer who defended the young John Scopes (1900-1970) some scientists see evolutionary theory as the last nail in the coffin of Christianity. According to biologist Francisco Ayala, "Darwin's theory encountered opposition in religious circles, not so much because he proposed the evolutionary origin of living things (which had been proposed many times before, even by Christian theologians), but because his mechanism, natural selection, excluded God as the explanation accounting for the obvious design of organisms." But increasingly, many Christians say that even with a scientific hermeneutic we cannot be so hasty to divest God of a creative power, neither at the beginning of creation nor as a continuing presence.

Philip Hefner, advocate of a reconciliation between science and theology, believes that the modern understanding of nature can be pinpointed to Darwin. Thanks to Darwin's introduction of an evolutionary view, nature must be observed in historical perspective, as an unfolding historical process. The relationship of our concept of nature and our concept of God cannot be overemphasized, says Hefner, nor can he, "overemphasize how virtually all of the God-talk that is current in the plural cultures of the world today is the result of long, meticulous, rigorous effort—centuries in the process—to articulate human experience of the world under the impact of pictures of nature that no longer seem credible or even natural for us."
That is to say that Darwin necessitated not so much an abandonment of God-talk, but a reevaluation of it, in order to confront a New World Ordering, if you will. Skeptics, such as Paul Conkin, concur, pointing to Darwin as inaugurating a "world without providential guidance, a world full of not only irony, but often also of tragedy, for it is a world that exhibits no purpose, moves toward no preordained goal, and provides no promise of human redemption."10 In fact, it is due to Darwin, he says, that Christians "were forced to explore, as never before, what they meant by the word 'god.'"11

The most thoughtful response to this new post-Darwin world comes from a Georgetown scholar named John Haught. In his book God after Darwin, Haught makes the case that evolutionary theory does not strip Christianity of its basic premises, but rather complements them, and gives them a scientific foothold. He does not make this claim to cater to the scientific world, seeking affirmation the way a young child covets the attention of an older one. Instead, he sees that science and religion can mingle their respective knowledge to create a new image of reality, metaphysical and otherwise.

When Haught speaks of religion, however, he does not appeal to the sort of fundamentalism exhibited in William Jennings Bryan's (1860-1925) prosecution of Scopes. In fact, he finds that the God to whom creationists often appeal, an omnipotent, omniscient, God, is ill-suited not only to stand up to the advance of science's revelations, but also to serve as a God in the midst of creation's every-day suffering and need. He writes:

> What makes evolution seem incompatible with the idea of God is not so much the startling Darwinian news about nature's struggle and strife, but theology's own failure to reflect deeply the divine pathos. What Darwin does — and this is part of his "gift to theology" — is challenge religious thought to recapture the tragic aspects of divine creativity. Evolutionary science compels theology to reclaim features of religious faith that are all too easily smothered by the deadening disguise of order and design.12

11 Ibid., 8.
12 Haught, God after Darwin, 5.
It is critical, says he, then not only to reconsider Darwin, but also Christianity's self-understanding.

He begins with Darwin. Darwin presents two revolutionary concepts, the first being the theory that "all living beings share a common ancestry and are therefore historically and organically interconnected." The troubling element of this proposal, says Haught, is that it disrupts Christianity's traditional teaching of the distinctiveness of humanity as over against the rest of creation. Darwin's second disquieting assertion is that of natural selection. This theory is worrisome on three fronts. First, the 'selection' is utterly random, dependent on nothing but rote chance, thereby eliminating the need for a divine organizer. Second, the brutal pruning of life depicted in natural selection seems to run contrary to any concept of a compassionate God. And third, the methodical elimination of weaker forms of life seems to indicate a mechanistic universe rather than one informed by and attended to by a loving and personal God.

In his response to these critiques, Haught looks to the concept of a suffering God, as well as a God who is continually creating. In this regard it should come as no surprise that he depends on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). The revelation in Christ illustrates the God who is still active in an unfolding creative process. Haught writes, "As a Christian theologian...when I reflect on the relationship of evolutionary science to religion I am obliged to think of God as both kenotic love and power of the future. This sense of God as a self-humbling love that opens up a new future for the world took shape in Christian consciousness only in association with the 'Christ-event...""

Only a kenotic God, revealed most supremely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, can attend to both the joy and pain found in creation, the very joy and pain in creation which Darwin exposed in his evolutionary theories. It goes without saying that this God, a God often identified with a theology of the cross, is often passed over in favor of a more reassuring and common-sensical God of power who directs creation. However, it is precisely because this crucified God is vulnerable to the 'underside' of love, that is, to the suffering necessary to love, that Christians ought to notice the compatibility to Darwin's theory of evolution.

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14 Ibid., 24.
15 Ibid., 110.
The consequent insights we gain into creation unfolding reveals that "the agony of living beings is not undergone in isolation from the divine eternity, but is taken up everlastingly and redemptively into the very 'life-story' of God."16

This theory is consonant with the theological impulses of Jürgen Moltmann. His commitment to a God not just involved in but vulnerably committed to the entirety of creation is chronicled in his many volumes. Theology of Hope helped renew conversation about eschatology and its claim on the cosmos, and his recent book Science and Wisdom does not abandon this theme. "[T]heology… asks about the future of the whole—its salvation or doom—which is won or thwarted in the historical process in which human beings and nature are mediated to each other."17

But Moltmann begins to take matters in a different direction in this volume. Here he reflects upon the epistemological consequences of living in a scientific world which is still, ultimately, humanly inexplicable. Therefore the quest to fathom nature demands more than knowledge. It demands wisdom. He writes:

In seeking wisdom we discover and we learn. We discover an already given wisdom in the build-up of matter and the stages of organic life. Molecular combinations and cell organisms that further life have come into being, while others, hostile to life, have been excluded. What in our one-sided,

16 Ibid., 50. Here I draw attention to the insightful article "Crucified Creator: The God of Evolution and Luther's Theology of the Cross," by Alan G. Padgett. He rejects the move "from nature and natural science to the doctrine of God, [which concludes] that God must be a certain way because evolution is a certain way." Drawing upon Luther, Padgett insists that "true and saving knowledge of God comes to us in the Word of God, not in science, reason, and philosophy." He is concerned that those who wish to find God in evolution (and he names Haught, along with Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, and Philip Clayton) argue first from science, and then find the necessary substantiating doctrines in theology. Instead, we must first begin revelation. I agree, for unless we move in this direction, as Padgett points out, we reach the same conclusion as Luther did in his commentary on Jonah, namely that "the God known in natural theology does not appear to love us." However, my impression is that Haught seeks to do just that, i.e., to begin with the cross and see how it corresponds with evolution. Haught would say that precisely because we can agree with Luther that the God in natural theology does not appear to love us, we can say that the theology of the cross can be detected in evolutionary theory, for surely in evolution can one see and hear evidence of despair, alienation, and even Anfechtung. See Dialog, vol. 42: 3 (Fall 2003), 300-304, here 302.

17 Moltmann, Science and Wisdom, 6.
linear thinking we call evolution, is really a complex learning process on the part of the living. The genetic code is capable of learning, and is creative. In the build-up of matter and life, a primordial memory is stored which well deserves the name 'wisdom.'

Here we can return to Haught, who himself draws upon Moltmann at this point. Haught maintains that the concept of "divine, suffering love" is manifest in evolutionary theory. This very idea of God runs contrary to our customary depictions of God as omni-. In this way, evolution itself, says Haught, is revelatory, "precisely because it breaks through the veil of our pedestrian projections of the absolute, and does so in such a way as to bring new meaning to all of life's suffering, struggle, and loss."19

This appreciation of wisdom, as opposed to knowledge, reclaim scientific epistemology from a purely secular grip. This development is critical, says Nasr, for:

Knowledge has become nearly completely externalized and desacralized, especially among those segments of the human race which have become transformed by the process of modernization, and that bliss which is the fruit of union with the One and an aspect of the perfume of the sacred has become well-nigh unattainable and beyond the grasp of the vast majority of those who walk upon the earth.20

Moltmann would agree, though he would add that this knowledge is therefore barely related to wisdom.

But it could well be that we are finally at the kairotic moment to welcome wisdom back. It should not be overlooked that Nasr uses the phrase, "process of modernization." Grenz believes that we are now well-situated in postmodernism, an era which "marks the end of science."21 By this he means that modern science sought a uniform answer to questions, and insisted that there was indeed one truth. It is this tendancy, which Nasr criticizes. Postmodernism rejects this pursuit, and points to the pluralistic world as proof that such a quest is fruitless. While we must renounce postmodernism's repudiation of a common metanarra-

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18 Ibid., 28.
19 Haught, God after Darwin, 50.
20 Nasr, Knowledge and the Sacred, 1.
21 Grenz, A Primer on Postmodernism, 46.
tive (that which Christians claim is the Gospel), Grenz says that in accord with postmodernism, "[t]he Christian faith entails a denial that the rational, scientific method is the sole measure of truth. We affirm that certain aspects of truth lie beyond reason and cannot be fathomed by reason."\(^{22}\) To this, Christians can agree with postmodernists that knowledge alone cannot save—it cannot save our ecological crisis, it cannot save people from the tyrannies of dictators and genocides, it cannot erase poverty, nor put an end to oppression. "We must not only be saved from our ignorance but also undergo a renewal and redirection of our will."\(^{23}\)

How are we to incorporate the futility of mere knowledge with our Christian faith? Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki sees it this way:

> God has acted for us in Christ. Where else and how else God may be acting, whether on some other part of our own planet or in the outermost galaxies, is certainly material for our speculation, but it is not given to us as knowledge. What we do know is that God has acted and does act for us in Jesus Christ, that this reality we name God undergirds and supports us, judges and redeems us, and calls us to wider circles of caring for the well-being of creation.\(^{24}\)

Evolution remains a provocative theory. Faith, say some, is no more than another provocative theory. Christians respond that faith is certainty—not certainty that one knows the mysterious ways of God, not certainty that one can explain the fundamental inscrutability of nature. But it is certainty in the form of a wisdom which informs us of God's mysterious yet revealed promise, constancy, and continual involvement with creation. And here we find a hope which Darwin could never offer, and which the postmodern world craves.

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\(^{22}\) Ibid., 166.


\(^{24}\) Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 53.