



# Our Creaturely Adventure: Post-Darwinian Directions for Christian Anthropology

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Christian thinkers have usually reflected the dominant thought forms of their age and have often actively engaged them. Thus students of the history of Christian thought are familiar with the long arms of Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. Now, 150 years after *On the Origin of Species*, it behooves Christian thinkers to recognize the powerful voice of science in our culture, and specifically the reality of evolution for which Charles Darwin remains symbolically the seminal thinker. It has long been recognized that the Christian idea of creation provides support in principle for the work of science. That there is discoverable order in what is created and that this order is available through empirical study and not by a priori deduction—this science-friendly understanding of things flows well from the claim that creation occurs through God’s purposeful willing. Moreover, the Genesis vision suggests that the creation is “very good” and invites study as something that is neither to be demonized nor worshiped.

But what about evolution? Many Christians who would accept the general argument supporting scientific study raise anxious voices pleading for creationist or intelligent design approaches as at least equally valid for public school curricula. At

*Thinking of Christian anthropology in our post-Darwinian time will remind us that we belong with the creatures. We live in a place that has a story, one that contains crisis; yet, with the creation, we are being taken beyond ourselves to a place of surprise.*

issue is the question what constitutes good science on the crucial matter of how things (say, species) come to be. What comes to us from Charles Darwin and his heirs comes in refined and expanded ways by a torrent of careful studies and investigations. We speak here of an observable reality, not a “theory” in the sense of an unsubstantiated proposal. At the same time, one must acknowledge that there are uses made of the notion of evolution that are not well grounded in careful scientific study. I worry about tendencies to link the descriptive reality of evolution with a progressivist understanding that is dismissive of the reality of evil. Here the theologian with integrity will insist that evil is a horribly stubborn reality, claiming membership in the world of facts. Social Darwinism has a long and troubling history, as even the most ardent proponents of evolution sadly acknowledge.<sup>1</sup> Some defensiveness seems evident yet today, if questioning voices must be “expelled” from the conversation.<sup>2</sup> The theologian will wisely resist the metaphysical inflation of scientific theory in a reductionist reading of reality. These concerns serve to sharpen the theologian’s interest in the truly scientific work. We are, after all, converging on a common subject matter: the nature of the human. What learnings about the human might emerge from evolutionary thought for the theologian and his necessary quest to offer a credible anthropology? I offer here no complete doctrine of the human, but seek to indicate certain “directions” the Christian student of the human might well take into account.

#### WE BELONG WITH THE CREATURES

On the face of it, every Christian theologian will affirm the creaturely status of human existence. But that affirmation is often covertly undercut by a tendency to deny that human beings need to be understood as being fully “with” the other creatures. There has been a latent tendency to think in terms of a chain of being extending from God at the top to the lowliest of the creatures. We then locate the human at the uppermost level of the creaturely and regard ourselves as essentially belonging with God. This way of thinking may appeal to a body-soul dualism, stressing the unique human possession of soul. Or it can appeal to the fact that, in the biblical account, image of God language is used only of the human. I will say more of the *imago* later, but what is to be said then must be said in the light of the evolutionary reality that we share a common descent with the other creatures. Moreover, in the 15-billion-year history of this universe, humankind appears only “at midnight’s bell,” as Arthur Peacocke has put it.<sup>3</sup> Humankind emerges from the preceding vast stretch of time that teems with life. Obviously we depend on that “nature”;

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, David Sloan Wilson’s enthusiastic *Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin’s Theory Can Change the Way We Think about Our Lives* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2007) 11, for a passing reference to eugenics and to Hitler’s use of evolution to justify genocide.

<sup>2</sup>This is the contention of Ben Stein’s film “Expelled,” which charges that critics of evolution have been suppressed in the realm of public education.

<sup>3</sup>Arthur Peacocke, *Paths from Science towards God: The End of All Our Exploring* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001) 72.

nature does not need us. It seems increasingly difficult to read creation's story as telling us that the whole production is about getting to "man" as the crown of creation.<sup>4</sup>

We belong with the creatures—there are pastoral, ethical implications here. We will be drawn to recognize that human life is always bodily life. We live an embodied life, and bodies die, naturally, in the flow of evolution.<sup>5</sup> Of course the pastor knows that sin has changed the face of death, but recognizing that this created life is naturally finite will matter in her ministry.

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If we belong with the creatures, we will not be tempted to a "spaceship earth" way of thinking of this world. In this life we live with the other creatures; this earth is our home together. We will think differently about the other creatures with whom we share this home. Thus Lutheran pastor Paul Santmire proposes the "I-Ens" (from the Latin participle for "being") to describe a relationship with entities in wild or fabricated nature that is different from both I-Thou and I-it relationships.<sup>6</sup> We will avoid images that distance us from these other creatures. Even the worthy notion of stewardship may risk objectifying those with whom we live, as Michael Northcott argues: "The fundamental problem with this metaphor is the implication that humans are effectively in control of nature, its managers, or, as Heidegger prefers, its guardians. And yet so much of recent environmental history teaches us that we are not, in fact, in control of the biosphere."<sup>7</sup> Images of partnership or coparticipant come into the discussion at this point.<sup>8</sup> We are called to recognize that other than human-created realities have a role in the ongoing work of creation: "let the waters bring forth" (Gen 1:20); "let the earth bring forth" (Gen 1:24). We will seek to learn from these other creatures, belonging with them as we do. I will have a word to say later about a distinctive responsibility humans face at this stage of the story.

<sup>4</sup>Thus Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991–98) 2:136, can claim that "creation comes to fulfillment in us and that the whole universe was created with a view to us."

<sup>5</sup>Arthur Peacocke, *Paths from Science*, 81, cites as an example that 96 percent of all species in the Permian-Triassic era have expired. Or on the individual level, we learn that massive neuronal death occurs as the brain "essentially wires and programs itself." See Gregory Peterson, *Minding God: Theology and the Cognitive Sciences* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 85.

<sup>6</sup>Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000) 69–70. He goes on to wonder at the givenness, spontaneity, and beauty of the "other."

<sup>7</sup>Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 129. Cf. Larry Rasmussen's concern with the anthropocentric worldview and ethos of the stewardship image in *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996) 232–233.

<sup>8</sup>Ernst M. Conradie provides a helpful summary of alternatives (including a rehabilitation of "steward") in *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005) 211–214.

If, then, this universe is our home, we would do well to look around and see what this place looks like. Evolutionary thought calls on us to think differently about our home.

### WE LIVE IN A PLACE THAT IS A STORY

Darwin declared in *Origin's* first pages that "I am fully convinced that species are not immutable."<sup>9</sup> To speak of nature is to speak of change, variation, adaptation—becoming. Against any tendency to think dualistically, we are called to see that, in Larry Rasmussen's language, "nature and history are one."<sup>10</sup>

In taking account of this recognition of the dynamic character of all reality, Christian thinkers will have things to say of God. There will need to be greater emphasis on God as the continuing Creator of all that is, and perhaps lesser emphasis on the dogmatic category of "preservation." In a *Journal of Religion* issue at the centennial of *Origin's* publication, Jaroslav Pelikan comments that over against a Greek notion of the coeternity of matter with God (and hence God's relative dependence on the world), *creatio ex nihilo* was prized as recognizing that the dependency was all in one direction. He adds: "So began the identification of creation primarily or exclusively with *creatio ex nihilo*, which crowded continuing creation out of the attention of the theologians."<sup>11</sup> The ontological superiority of the God claim involved in *ex nihilo* will retain a vital importance, but there needs to be increasing recognition that God is reliably "doing a new thing" (Isa 43:19; Rev 21:5) in the becoming that the arrow of time marks so prominently in this post-Darwinian age. We will also need to be clearer that this continuing creative work of God is a work of grace, not simply one of power.<sup>12</sup> With this recognition of God's active presence in continuing creation the pastor may well find himself or herself joining the considerable chorus of voices speaking of God in terms of pantheism—carefully distinguishing this relational notion from the monological cadences of pantheism.<sup>13</sup>

But what is humankind's place in this adventurous story? As we speak of humankind we will not forget that "we belong with the creatures." We can get help in that remembering by attending to the consensus of scholars gathered around the notion of "emergence." The late Templeton prize winner, Arthur Peacocke,

<sup>9</sup>Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 2 vols. (1859; New York: Collier, 1909) 2:24.

<sup>10</sup>Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 259. The classic formulation of this point is Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker's *The History of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

<sup>11</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, "Creation and Causality in the History of Christian Thought," *The Journal of Religion* 40/4 (1960) 250.

<sup>12</sup>Oswald Bayer, "Creation as History," in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen, Bo Holm, Ted Peters, and Peter Widmann (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005) 253, makes that point of grace clear in Luther's thought by stressing that all the giving of the Creator is done "out of mere paternal, divine goodness and mercy" (explanation of the First Article of the Creed in *The Small Catechism*).

<sup>13</sup>See the remarkably diverse group of theologians gathered in the volume *In Whom We Live, Move, and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

stresses that we are dealing here with “naturally occurring, hierarchical, complex systems constituted of parts which themselves are, at the lowest level, made up of the basic units of the physical world.”<sup>14</sup> Peacocke notes that Harold Morowitz has identified “some twenty-eight emergent levels in the natural world.”<sup>15</sup> The point is that such a thing as choice, which we link with human distinctiveness, develops naturally within the dynamic processes of nature: we do not leave the other creatures on another planet.<sup>16</sup>

Such locating of the human in the process of life’s dynamic becoming will connect theologically with the biblical recognition that we are created “good (indeed very good), but not perfect.”<sup>17</sup> There is new life ahead also for the human creature in the Creator’s intention.<sup>18</sup> How shall we then speak of the *imago*? There are tendencies to speak of the *imago* in wholly future terms, reflecting New Testament emphases on Christ as the perfect image. It is true that the Christian vision is not circular: we are intended for a life beyond Eden. Yet a wholly future reading of the *imago* compromises the goodness of the creator’s originating work. Perhaps a triadic understanding can preserve the needed balance: we are created with an endowment in relationship for a destiny. I will say a word about how such an understanding “with the creatures” plays out ethically at a later point, but here it may suffice to cite Kierkegaard’s oft quoted aphorism: Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward.<sup>19</sup> We will be prepared for ambiguity, for surprise.

This stress on the future is all starting to sound quite cheery. We need to retain some realism at this point, resisting a “bailing out to the future” that compromises the seriousness of what is going on in the present—human action and God’s action. Such realism will call us to recognize a crisis in this creaturely story.

### CRISIS IN THE STORY

I do realize that this essay is not being written or read in 1859. The nineteenth century could accommodate an evolutionary optimism; the twenty-first cannot. Christian thinkers who read the newspapers or watch their TVs in 2009 cannot ap-

<sup>14</sup>Arthur Peacocke, *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007) 14.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>16</sup>Ian Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature, and God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002) 14–15, draws on the work of Stuart Kauffman on complexity theory where the role of self-organization plays a role in evolution as well as chance and selection. He also notes that Prigogine and others “have described the emergence of new types of order in dissipative systems far from equilibrium.”

<sup>17</sup>I have written extensively of this in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, 3 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984) vol. 1, locus 5.

<sup>18</sup>One wonders here how to understand the path-breaking work with robots that Anne Foerst is involved in at MIT. See her *God in the Machine: What Robots Teach Us about Humanity and God* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>19</sup>*Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967) entry 1030, page 450, reads more fully: “Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other clause—that it must be lived forwards.”

peal to such “explanations” of evil as a time gap in evolutionary processes such that “even the vaunted mental processes associated with human intelligence do not entirely prevent us from dancing with ghosts.”<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard will remind us of what I have called “clear-eyed evil” when he admonishes his beloved Socrates by insisting that sin lies not in lack of understanding but in a misuse of will.<sup>21</sup>

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An evolutionary understanding will also affect how we think of the dynamics of sin. The traditional emphasis on sin as self-elevation or pride connects well with the aforementioned human tendency to deny that we do belong with the creatures. The more neglected dimension of sin as self-denigration will be recognized in our refusal to respond to the call forward given to a creature good but not perfect. Moreover, we will be encouraged to see that sin has very much to do with our relationship to the creation and does not depend on a conscious confrontation with God.<sup>22</sup> There we reach the center point of the crisis in our creaturely adventure, as we ponder the reality of what humankind is doing to this planet.

We will seek to understand what is “going on” in such violence. How can we still praise the Creator of this whole process? We may be led to helpful perspective if we think about how there is suffering and loss built into the natural world. The theodicy issues seem to press the more unambiguously there. Kierkegaard’s robust appeal to the will does not seem available as we face the reality of natural evil, after all. But perhaps there is wisdom in still remembering that we belong with the creatures. John Polkinghorne has developed a balanced approach in which both moral evil and natural evil make a strange sense in this universe: “Only a universe to which the free process defense applied could be expected to give rise to beings to whom the free will defense applies. I do not believe that God directly wills either the act of a murderer or the incidence of a cancer. I believe God allows both to happen in a creation that has been given the gift of being itself.”<sup>23</sup> Polkinghorne’s “package deal” makes excellent evolutionary sense, for “our nature is tied to that of the physical world, which gave us birth.” We do, indeed, belong with the creatures.

<sup>20</sup>David Sloan Wilson, *Evolution for Everyone*, 64–65.

<sup>21</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 88–93.

<sup>22</sup>Marjorie Suchocki makes this point eloquently in *Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994) chapters two and three.

<sup>23</sup>John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion*, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1996, 2005) 60–61.

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Christians will testify that the creation of such a relationship is not the end of the story. The faith sings of the God who creates taking a new initiative in one named Jesus of Nazareth. The science of evolutionary understanding does not, of course, deliver a ready-made Christology for our adoption. It will have less to say of the “for God” dimension of the coming of this Christ. But evolutionary understanding can help us grasp more fully the “for us” dimension. Theologians have been on to this for some time. Half a century ago, Joseph Sittler was speaking eloquently of how the “work” of Christ could not be reduced to redemption.<sup>24</sup> Or centuries earlier, Martin Luther would preach not only of an alien righteousness “that swallows up all sins in a moment” but also of an alien righteousness that “begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.”<sup>25</sup>

The idea that the work of Christ “evolves” in the sense of a becoming, an efficacy, is not new. What presses newly upon us is the need to understand that efficacy in relation to the creation “groaning in labor pains until now” (Rom 8:22). In responding to that need we will find ourselves reclaiming “the whole Jesus,” so that Jesus the teacher, Jesus the healer, the prophet, the liberator, are not forced through a priestly understanding. I find especially helpful the efforts to appropriate an image from the field of physics and so to speak of the “field of force” generated by the coming of the man from Nazareth.<sup>26</sup>

There are resources to be drawn upon as we ponder the crisis in the story. Yet one hungers for a hint at least of the story’s ending. Biblical faith speaks of God doing a new thing also at the end of the story. Could that make sense in an evolutionary understanding?

#### COMEDY OR TRAGEDY? ONE MORE SURPRISE

We must not forget that we live in the “middle” of things, a middle that is often a muddle. We do not see the end of things. But we do look to it. Christians read a book that speaks of a time when God will do a new thing, and behold, every tear

<sup>24</sup>Joseph Sittler, *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 76–115.

<sup>25</sup>Martin Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness” (1519), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 298–299.

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, John Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 111–125, and Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 239–248.

will be wiped away (Rev 7:17). They know the lines: death will be swallowed up in victory (1 Cor 15:54), and, “We will see face to face” (1 Cor 13:12). Can an evolutionary approach shed any light on such passages, or even consider them credible?

We dare not forget the middle. Sharon Betcher, a mid-life amputee, knows the language of Christian faith as a pastor. But she warns against a trust that would “theologize our frustration with dependence on earth as a transcendent longing for elsewhere.”<sup>27</sup> While “nothing can stabilize the risk in existence,” she finds “justice *can* provide a clearing for livelihood.”<sup>28</sup> Evolutionary wisdom can specify the call of justice. Holmes Rolston III, after tracing the tracks of kenosis in nature, envisions “the possibility of kenosis in a still richer sense, where self-interested humans impose limits on human welfare on behalf of the other species.”<sup>29</sup>

Rolston is surely right in recognizing this kenosis in relation to nature as “a Christian calling for the next millennium.” Yet in the middle of kenotic service the Christian does look to a new life. Again the question presses, can evolutionary thinking offer anything about that time ahead? Perhaps our experience of ecological emergence can point the way. The truly new emerges from the old, but it also carries the old beyond itself. So, too, if the hope we have is hope for us, our life must somehow be carried forward into that fulfillment. Thus, in the year 2000 a group of scientists and theologians emerged from a three-year study process on “The End of the World and the Ends of God” confessing that “the strongest theme to emerge...is the need to wrestle with the necessity for both continuity and discontinuity.”<sup>30</sup>

Is not that mix of continuity and discontinuity precisely the rhythm of the cosmic dance we tag with the term evolution? So it seems reasonable to expect a “new regime” (Polkinghorne), a new “cosmic epoch” (Whitehead)—“one more surprise.”<sup>31</sup> Or more than one, if Moltmann is right in arguing “that the Spirit of eternal life is first of all a further *space for living*, in which life that has been cut short, or was impaired and destroyed will be able to develop freely.”<sup>32</sup> Faith’s talk reaches beyond what Darwin’s legacy can give us to speak of every tongue confessing the lordship of Jesus. Thus Christians claim the good news of comedy, not trag-

<sup>27</sup>Sharon V. Betcher, “Wisdom to Make the World Go On: On Disability and the Cultural Delegation of Suffering,” in *God, Evil, and Suffering: Essays in Honor of Paul R. Sponheim*, ed. Terence E. Fretheim and Curtis L. Thompson (St. Paul: Word & World, 2000) 98.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>29</sup>Holmes Rolston III, “Kenosis and Nature,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001) 64.

<sup>30</sup>*The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. J. Polkinghorne and M. Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 12.

<sup>31</sup>Polkinghorne, *Quarks*, 106, yet stressing continuity of pattern, 111; A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978) 97, and 199, where this mathematician imagines a world “in which arithmetic would be an interesting fanciful topic for dreamers.” I take the phrase “one more surprise” from the beautiful hymn by John Ylvisaker, “I Was There to Hear Your Morning Cry,” *With One Voice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995) #770.

<sup>32</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 203.



edy. But even in the middle of things we know that our life is part of a vast creaturely adventure story. The miracle of this story as studied by evolutionary thought may ready us for a last chapter with endless surprise.<sup>33</sup> ⊕

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. Polkinghorne, *Quarks*, 37ff., for a readable account of the “anthropic principle” regarding this “incredibly special” universe.