

## Christology, Evolution, and Cultural Change

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*Like many other areas of religious doctrine, Christology was significantly affected by the arrival of Darwinian evolutionary theory in the nineteenth century. This essay traces the history of the christological integration of biological evolution, investigating how theologians have integrated Darwinism into their understanding of the incarnation of Christ. Beginning with British theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the essay describes the “evolutionary Christology” of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, Gerd Theissen, and Arthur Peacocke, as well as more recent offerings by Celia Deane-Drummond and F. LeRon Shults. This overview illustrates the historically contingent nature of the theological enterprise, as culture and theology continue to inform and influence each other.*

### *Introduction*

The publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 famously posed a number of challenges for Christian theology: the question of providential teleology, the expansion of the problem of natural evil, and renewed concerns about scriptural interpretation, to name only three. Theological responses to Darwinian evolution followed fairly quickly after the theory gained scientific credibility in the 1870s, however. While some felt the core doctrines of the faith had been fatally undermined, others sought to incorporate these new discoveries into Christian theological understanding. In this essay, I will review the subsequent development of one of these research programs, “evolutionary Christology,” which is theology regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ considered in light of Darwin’s

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theory. Far from being a contemporary phenomenon, this has been an ongoing concern of a subset of theologians for well over a hundred years. In addition, tracing these responses through a representative sample of scholars from 1889 to the present reveals a shift over time in the questions that are considered, as well as the way they are approached. Changes since the nineteenth century in the wider intellectual environment, such as increased scientific precision, a concern with ecology, and an emphasis on interdisciplinary scholarship, are all reflected in developments in evolutionary Christology. The result is that new proposals continue to be offered that go beyond apologetics to real constructive engagement with the natural sciences.

These changes are not only of documentary importance, however. The adaptation of Christology to evolutionary theory illustrates how theology is in constant interaction with the culture in which it is produced. The issues that theology takes up, the challenges to which it responds, and the answers it finds are all significantly influenced by historical and social context. In a sense, theology is a cultural product, and vice versa. This is not a new discovery; as early as the fourth century, the church recognized in the Arian controversy that theological development in dialogue with contemporary concerns is an integral part of the Christian tradition. As a result, each age's conceptions of God are profoundly historically contingent, as theology assimilates new knowledge—scientific as well as philosophical—into its understanding of the Word made flesh.

Recognizing the mutual influence of religion and culture, and thus the historical contingency that is intrinsic to the theological enterprise, should give Christians pause when they are tempted to make absolute claims to theological finality. It should also give them confidence, however, because it shows the ongoing vitality of the Christian tradition in a world that continues to change in unpredictable ways. In looking at the relationship between theology and science regarding the discovery of Darwinian evolution, we see this dynamic at work over the course of a particularly turbulent century and a half.

### *Background*

Darwin first originated the foundational ideas of his theory while traveling as a young man to the Galapagos Islands in the 1830s and observing the variations of beak shapes on finches occupying the various islands. Noting that each beak shape was respectively appropriate

to the local food, Darwin established the preliminary assertion that animals adapt to their environments over many generations in a necessary effort to survive. These gradual changes would favor some individuals over others and, as a result, those individuals would be able to reproduce and have successful progeny. In that way, new characteristics of these once-anomalous individuals would be passed down to their offspring, who would themselves have a better chance of producing successful progeny. Darwin recognized the possibilities inherent in this practice: over extensive periods of time, it would be possible for successive generations to have changed so much from the original organisms that they would constitute a new species altogether. Several years later this and many other examples were compiled, along with the theory of their emergence, and published in 1859 as *On the Origin of Species*.<sup>1</sup>

While *Origin* did not take up the issue of human evolution directly,<sup>2</sup> the implications of the theory for human origins were clear: rather than being a group wholly set apart from the rest of the natural world, human beings were part of a web of organic life that shared a common ancestor with many other species. If all species, without exception, were differentiated through the process of natural selection, then human beings also were products of the messy course of competition for resources, with characteristics that were as contingent on local circumstances as any long-beaked finch. This would be as true for Jesus of Nazareth as any other human being.

Such a notion of humanity as embedded in the natural world, rather than wholly set apart, was not foreign to classical Christian theology. Augustine, for example, points out that on the sixth day of creation God saw that the things made were “very good,” and Augustine asks, “Why does [Genesis] not say individually about the human creature ‘And God saw that it was good,’” rather than, as it happened, it being said regarding “the cattle and the beasts and the reptiles of the earth, which also belong to the same sixth day?”<sup>3</sup> He concludes that it is because the “totality” of human and non-human creatures is what God regards as beautiful, not the human being alone. In addition,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection* (London: John Murray, 1859).

<sup>2</sup> Darwin would address human evolution in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1872).

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis,” in *On Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2002), 239 (III.24).

Augustine remarks upon how everything that would develop in the future was present, *in potentia*, “invisibly and simultaneously,” on the sixth day of creation. This developmental view of creation over time has certain resonances with evolutionary theory.<sup>4</sup> Even more pointedly, Gregory of Nyssa, commenting in *De hominis opificio* on the book of Genesis, reminds his interlocutors that the human being shares its created nature with “the gnat and the mouse,” being composed of the same elements that make up the rest of the universe.<sup>5</sup> For Gregory, the “community and kindred” the human being has with non-human animals precedes the Fall, and the facilitation of this community is a particular vocation of the human species—a composite view of humanity that is also found throughout the work of Maximus the Confessor.<sup>6</sup> Missing in many of these classical writers is the kind of strict anthropocentrism and static understandings of creation that would be found centuries later among some of the more virulent opponents of Darwinism.

### *Early Responses to Darwin: Lux Mundi*

Early religious responses to Darwinism in the nineteenth century were as varied then as they are today. There were those who rejected it immediately: the Protestant establishment in the United States was split in its opinions,<sup>7</sup> but an increasingly vocal group found its voice in Princeton Theological Seminary professor Charles Hodge, who in 1874 declared baldly that “Darwinism is atheism.” For others, the acceptance of Darwinism was traumatic. William James wrote that, after he learned of evolutionary theory, he woke every day with “a feeling of horrible dread.”<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, however, there was a vigorous

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis,” 299 (V.23).

<sup>5</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, trans. Henry Wace, in *Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1886–1900), 5:404. John Behr refers to Gregory’s conception as an “‘evolutionary’ dynamics of creation”; see “The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis opificio*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 232.

<sup>6</sup> See Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, second edition (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Jon H. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859–1900*, History of American Thought and Culture (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*, Cambridge History of Science Series (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 317.

and constructive theological engagement with Darwinism. A particularly noteworthy example of this is the collection of essays titled *Lux Mundi*, first published in 1889 and edited by Charles Gore (later bishop of Worcester, Birmingham, and Oxford, successively).<sup>9</sup> The *Lux Mundi* authors declared their intention to examine traditional Christian doctrine in light of evolutionary theory: incarnation, certainly, but also atonement, soteriology, eschatology, and so on. Many of these theologians were heavily influenced by the philosophical worldview known as “emergence,” the belief that new properties (in the theory’s weak version) and even perhaps new objects with their own ontological status (in its stronger version) emerge from lower levels of materiality, but are not able to be reduced to their constituent parts.<sup>10</sup> Utilizing this theoretical framework, some viewed Jesus as bringing into existence a new type of human being, one that emerged from prior humanity, while differing in kind from it. J. R. Illingworth, for example, wrote that “in scientific language, the Incarnation may be said to have introduced a new species into the world—the Divine man transcending past humanity, as humanity transcended the rest of the animal creation, and communicating His vital energy by a spiritual process to subsequent generations.”<sup>11</sup> Evolution gave Illingworth another way in which to articulate the mystery of the incarnation, and its essential significance for everything that followed.

Others, responding to the controversies of the day, welcomed Darwinian evolution as a refutation of deism, then seen as the most dangerous threat to orthodox Christianity. Aubrey Moore wrote that Newtonian science had “pushed the Deist’s God farther and farther away, and at the moment when it seemed as if He would be thrust out altogether, Darwinism appeared, and under the guise of a foe did the work of a friend.”<sup>12</sup> In this view, God’s immanence was restored by Darwin, as Moore saw God as being intimately involved in the course of evolution, bringing new life into being. For Moore, the image of the distant clockmaker was replaced with a sense of God’s direct presence with creation.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Gore, ed., *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation* (London: John Murray, 1889).

<sup>10</sup> On the influence of emergence theory with this group, see W. Mark Richardson, “Evolutionary-Emergent Worldview and Anglican Theological Revision: Case Studies from the 1920s,” *Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 321–345.

<sup>11</sup> J. R. Illingworth, “The Incarnation and Development,” in *Lux Mundi*, ed. Charles Gore, fifteenth edition (London: John Murray, 1904), 151–152.

<sup>12</sup> Aubrey Moore, “The Christian Doctrine of God,” in *Lux Mundi*, 73.

Like Illingworth, Charles Gore also viewed Christ himself, by having a new type of emergent relationship with God, as bringing into existence the possibility of that new emergent relationship for all of humanity. In 1922 he would write that the Word of God, being “made man or ‘flesh,’ was thereby constituted *a new thing in nature*, a new relation of the Creator Spirit, the Spirit of Life, to matter, a new level in the evolution of life.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, Gore’s view of evolution led him to conclude that, as evolution revealed progress from lower forms of life (“animal”) to higher forms of life (“rational”), “this evolution reached a climax in Christ.”<sup>14</sup> While later interpreters would disagree with his progressive view of biological evolution, Gore showed one possible way to describe Christ’s continuity with the natural world while still maintaining his unique, divine status.

Though subsequent advances in scientific understanding of evolution would undermine some of their interpretations, the *Lux Mundi* authors, along with others of their generation, nonetheless illustrate one effort to integrate Christology and evolution. Just as importantly, the religious culture which produced these interpretations shows the possibility of doing theology in light of natural science respectfully and critically, without undue defensiveness. The *Lux Mundi* authors did not all agree with each other, and sharp divisions existed between those who remained committed to the received tradition and those more comfortable with moving away from it.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, conversations about the interaction of Christian theology and natural science were carried out in a way that was broadly constructive, and that had the result of making the interested Christian community more thoughtful, robust, and articulate about its beliefs, rather than defensive, isolated, and suspicious of scientific research.

The optimism and sense of possibility that marked that time, however, did not last. Events quite outside the realm of theology, especially the First World War, sidetracked the discussion; Stanley Grenz writes, “The guns of August 1914 sounded the death knell of the nineteenth-century intellectual ethos. World War 1 marked the

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Gore, *Belief in God* (New York: Scribner, 1922), 241.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Gore, *Why We Christians Believe in Christ: Bishop Gore’s Bampton Lectures Shortened for Popular Use*, ed. Thomas Charles Fry (London: John Murray, 1904), 17.

<sup>15</sup> The distinctions are described in Richardson, “Evolutionary-Emergent World-view and Anglican Theological Revision.”

end of the progressivism of the century of optimism.”<sup>16</sup> The war’s effects were devastating for Continental religious life, and the optimism that had marked English theology in light of evolution would come to sound hollow. The publication of Karl Barth’s *The Epistle to the Romans* in 1918 changed the course of twentieth-century theology, and the neo-orthodox school of thought that Barth founded in many ways supplanted other types of Protestant religious conversation, to the detriment of the dialogue between religion and science. Wolfhart Pannenberg notes this divergence, and its origin: “The fight against Darwinism was a momentous mistake in the relations between science and theology. German Protestant theology in particular must share some blame for this.”<sup>17</sup> Barth barely mentions Darwin in his monumental *Church Dogmatics*, for example, and disparages the study of religion and science in the *Römerbrief*.<sup>18</sup> In addition, significant changes, separate though not unrelated, were underway in the religious landscape of the United States, where an ascendant Christian fundamentalism was gaining ground, and the creationist movement was becoming a political reality.<sup>19</sup> These reactions to modernity had no room for contemporary science. The cultural moment of Illingworth, Gore, and others passed, as did much of the constructive work of integrating Darwinian evolution and Christian theology. As a result, there would be a gap of many decades before the implications of evolution for Christology would again be a mainstream topic of conversation among Christian theologians.

### *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*

The world of French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), a theologian and paleontologist, did not overlap with that of the English Anglicans, and the Christology that he produced in light of evolution shows the significant theological distance between the

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<sup>16</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 63.

<sup>17</sup> Though he appropriately adds that “we can understand its resistance to some degree as a reaction to the one-sided interpretation of the theory by leading biologists.” Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 119–120.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Hoskyns, sixth edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 267.

<sup>19</sup> For a notable history of the creationist movement, see Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

two, both in form and content. The *Lux Mundi* authors hewed closely to the guidelines of a traditional theology as a reference point, even if doing so was in the service of proposing significant revisions. Teilhard, on the other hand, wrote in a mystical vein only loosely tethered to the outlines of systematic theology as traditionally conceived. Like them, however, Teilhard felt sharply the need for Christology to adapt to contemporary science, if only for reasons of contemporary relevance: he viewed it as “absolutely essential” that the understanding of Christ presented to the educated public is one that is comprehensive of the magnitude of the universe, the immensity of which is “continually growing greater, beyond all measure.”<sup>20</sup> In a universe the size of ours, how can Christians assert the primacy of God over all creation, and the central importance of Jesus Christ?

Teilhard responded to this challenge with an elaborate metaphysical system, a “cosmo-Christology,”<sup>21</sup> that posited a future point toward which all history is aiming, a point that he termed “omega.” In addition to being the point in the future, omega is also the force that is driving the evolutionary process forward. As the process of biological evolution seems to increase complexity in living creatures over time, Teilhard predicted that this continually increasing complexity would eventually result in a final unity of all things, and that the last stage of this process was begun in the human being Jesus Christ. Christ is the omega that holds together the universe in its development: “From the ultimate vibration of the atom to the loftiest mystical contemplation; from the lightest breeze that ruffles the air to the broadest currents of life and thought, [Christ] ceaselessly animates, without disturbing, all the earth’s processes.”<sup>22</sup> Christ both transcends the universe, in his function of supporting it, and is immanent in the universe, in his function of holding it together. Teilhard found scriptural justification for identifying that immanent, transcendent source of attraction as Christ in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, when he writes that it is in Christ that “all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). Christ,

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<sup>20</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Georges Crespy, *From Science to Theology: An Essay on Teilhard de Chardin* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1968), 76; quoted in Philip J. Hefner, *The Promise of Teilhard: The Meaning of the Twentieth Century in Christian Perspective* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Lippincott, 1970), 101.

<sup>22</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ*, 59.



therefore, is “the organic centre of the entire universe” and “its principle of synthesis.”<sup>23</sup>

While Teilhard’s innovations in theological anthropology, cosmology, and Christology continue to inspire Christians interested in both science and a religious worldview, later thinkers have identified problems with his thought, both theological and biological. Most problematic is his teleological view of evolution, an assumption that evolution is end-directed toward an ultimate goal, proceeding in a progressive fashion. While it is true that the history of evolution evidences an increase in complexity, it is not a uniformly progressive development. Teilhard’s view of evolution drew less on Darwinian evolution by natural selection than on the theory of progressive evolution espoused by Herbert Spencer. He also combined this progressive view with a belief in the redemptive possibilities of science. Such an unreservedly positive view of scientific practice is hard to square with the dramatic destruction that has been wrought by scientific work, destruction that exists alongside science’s undeniable benefits.

In addition, there are significant issues in identifying Christ with the evolutionary process itself, as Teilhard does. For example, Teilhard writes that “evolution, the way out towards something that escapes total death, is the hand of God gathering us back to himself.”<sup>24</sup> This vision comes very close to justifying the horrors of natural evil by redeeming them in the name of the goodness of the results of the evolutionary process. Finally, Teilhard’s “Super-Christ” (a term that a sympathetic commentator would later describe as “unfortunate”)<sup>25</sup> bears very little resemblance to Jesus the Galilean Jew, and Teilhard runs the risk of veering off into a timeless mythology divorced from the historical particularity of first-century Palestine.

Nonetheless, Teilhard’s evolutionary theology was highly influential in the development of the contemporary study of Christology from a scientific point of view, even if his writings make clear that he was “not a theologian, nor a philosopher, strictly speaking, but a mystic.”<sup>26</sup> Karl Rahner also references Teilhard appreciatively: “It would do no

<sup>23</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ*, 14, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ*, 213.

<sup>25</sup> Robert L. Faricy, “Teilhard De Chardin on Creation and the Christian Life,” *Theology Today* 23, no. 4 (January 1967): 516 n. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin*, trans. René Hague (New York: Desclee Company, 1967), 84. De Lubac is one of the more insightful interpreters of Teilhard; see also his *Teilhard de Chardin: The Man and His Meaning*, trans.

harm for a present-day Christology to take up the ideas of a Teilhard de Chardin and to elaborate them with more precision and clarity.”<sup>27</sup> Teilhard’s attempt at evolutionary Christology remains influential and popular, as its mystical tone resonates with the wonder with which many view the vastness, complexity, and beauty of the cosmos.

### *Karl Rahner*

Karl Rahner (1904–1984), like Teilhard a member of the Jesuit order, shared Teilhard’s opinion that it was essential that theologians took Darwinian evolution into consideration when thinking about Christology in the modern world. As the apostle Peter noted, the believer “has to give an account of his faith not only to himself, but also to the world in which he lives” (1 Peter 3:15), a world that is now shaped by an evolutionary understanding.<sup>28</sup> In the seminal essay “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” Rahner set out to construct a Christology that displayed “an intrinsic affinity and the possibility of a reciprocal correlation between” evolutionary theory and the doctrine of the Incarnation, which is “the most central and most mysterious assertion of Christianity.”<sup>29</sup> Rahner does not refer to evolution itself frequently, but instead presupposes it, and then seeks to articulate his Christology not in an apologetic tone, but rather to see whether Chalcedonian Christology “is compatible or can be compatible with [evolution], and not vice versa.”<sup>30</sup>

As a theologian influenced by Thomas Aquinas, Rahner operated within a metaphysical frame that was less dualistic than some others in Christian history. Therefore, while some theologians might maintain that matter and spirit are intrinsically opposed, and hence that the spiritual aspect of the human being could only be a matter of supernatural infusion, separate from bodily existence, Rahner held

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René Hague (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1965), and *The Faith of Teilhard de Chardin*, trans. René Hague (London: Burns & Oates, 1965).

<sup>27</sup> Karl Rahner, “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Hugh M. Riley, vol. 21, Science and Christian Faith (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 227.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych, second edition (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 178.

<sup>29</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 179.

<sup>30</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 178.

that there is no “essential opposition” between matter and spirit.<sup>31</sup> Rather, matter develops toward spirit; spirit is the self-transcendence of matter, and it is that transcendence that allows the human being to become conscious of himself, and therefore conscious of the mystery that is his existence. It is this awareness that leads him to the goal of his life (acknowledged or unacknowledged), which is God. As a result, the biological development that provided for self-transcendence is the means of accomplishing the world’s *telos*, which is “God’s self-communication to it.”<sup>32</sup>

This absolute self-communication is realized and affirmed in the person of Jesus Christ, the God-man. The hypostatic union, the joining together of divine and human natures in Jesus Christ, is “an intrinsic moment within the whole process by which grace is bestowed upon all spiritual creatures.”<sup>33</sup> This hypostatic joining must be a moment in time, not “sudden and acosmic and purely meta-historical,” somehow separate from the universe of creatures, but “in time and space from one point” in a bodily and material sense.<sup>34</sup> This view favors an emphasis on materiality as essential to the significance of incarnation, and moves away from Teilhard’s more mystical, less concrete Christology. Christ himself, while being the decisive self-communication of God, must remain fully creaturely; the possibility of incarnation itself, along with the potential for new life that it contains, depends on this evolutionary biological background. To use Thomistic vocabulary, the “final cause” of the evolutionary process is the Christ event.

It is a virtue of his writings that Rahner did not make any far-fetched claims about biology; nor did he stretch his theology artificially to make it fit this modern idea. The biological, and thus evolutionary, nature of Jesus is maintained, while the divine identity with God is maintained as well. In the decades to come, Rahner’s evolutionary christological views would continue to exert a powerful influence, especially among Roman Catholic theologians, serving as a touchstone for further work. Celia Deane-Drummond, for example, refers to Rahner’s evolutionary Christology as a “highly successful resolution of the difficult problem of how to connect Christ with evolutionary

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<sup>31</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 184.

<sup>32</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 192.

<sup>33</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 201.

<sup>34</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 201.

ideas in such a way that no violence is done either to theology or to evolution.”<sup>35</sup>

In addition, in Rahner’s work one sees the role antecedent context plays in theological projects, as his particular location as a transcendental Thomist shapes the approach he takes. This is obvious in two dimensions: first, in terms of a philosophical framework that includes vocabulary about causation, a utilization (albeit critical) of substance metaphysics, and the primacy of the christological doctrines of the patristic era. Second, he clearly assumes that facts about the natural world should in principle be able to be understood theologically in an orthodox way; nature is not opposed to grace. Similarly, current events in the ecclesiastical world may have been influential as well: the same spirit that led to the Second Vatican Council, which began the same year that “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World” was published (and at which Rahner played an influential and important role), may have led to his interest in engaging with contemporary science in the first place. The dialectic of theology and culture, and the interplay of past and present, is visible in Rahner’s work in a particularly clear way.

### *Gerd Theissen*

A very different discussion of Christology and evolution emerged from another German theologian, this one Protestant, Gerd Theissen (b. 1943). In his book *Biblical Faith: An Evolutionary Approach*, first published in 1984, Theissen views the Christian story as a whole through the lens of cultural, rather than biological, evolution, while maintaining the terms and concepts of biological evolution.<sup>36</sup> Where the Darwinian paradigm favors “survival of the fittest,” Theissen sees the dawning of religious faith as an example of the human transcendence of that Darwinian process. The development of culture allows people to live their lives outside of the process of natural selection, by utilizing values that would act against selection in a “natural” context; that is, without the mediation of culture. One of the most significant aspects of culture is religion, and it is in religion—mainly, but not only, the Judeo-Christian tradition—that Theissen finds fundamental

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<sup>35</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution: Wonder and Wisdom*, Theology and the Sciences (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2009), 42.

<sup>36</sup> Gerd Theissen, *Biblical Faith: An Evolutionary Approach*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1985).

shifts in values, which he terms “mutations,” which then allow for the “evolution of evolution,” a transcendence of the dictates of biological evolution, from selection to solidarity.<sup>37</sup>

Using the pattern of genetic mutations that result in new traits, Theissen identifies three great “mutations” in the history of the Christian faith: first, the development of biblical monotheism, preceding Christ; second, the faith in Jesus of Nazareth that developed after his death and resurrection; third, the experience of the Holy Spirit in the community. For each of these events, he makes the case that they are sudden, not gradual, changes; that they are “protests” against the principle of natural selection; and that they are efficacious in adapting humanity to “the central reality,” which he describes as a hidden “unity of all reality” “for which there is no better word than ‘God’.”<sup>38</sup> The advent of monotheism, which he dates to the mid-sixth century BCE, displays a sharp break with previous belief systems, represented by the language in Jeremiah and Ezekiel of being given new hearts and new spirits.<sup>39</sup> This development also instituted new forms of valuation that moved beyond pure survival interests, in order to benefit the widow and stranger as well. The success of these cultures proves “that the ultimate reality supports groups which would have vanished from history had the usual processes of selection prevailed.”<sup>40</sup> In addition, we also see with Theissen the fruits of the environmental movement, as he notes that humans are the first creatures to be able to value the natural world apart from survival interests: “Adaptation becomes harmony with reality—without exploiting it.”<sup>41</sup>

He follows the same pattern of valuational development when interpreting the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, finding that “in some passages the New Testament itself interprets the person of Jesus as a new form of life, in which biologically pre-programmed conduct is overcome.”<sup>42</sup> Examples of a disregard of survival of the fittest from scripture include the praise of eunuchs, encouragement of abstention from sexual activity (even in marriage), love of enemies, preference for the weak, solidarity with outsiders, and self-sacrifice for the good

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<sup>37</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 17, 80–81.

<sup>38</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 19, 30.

<sup>39</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 65–66.

<sup>40</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 80–81.

<sup>41</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 106.

of others, even to the point of death.<sup>43</sup> Jesus' whole teaching was "a protest against the principle of selection,"<sup>44</sup> and one can see this development outside the Christian tradition as well; Buddhism displays a similar dynamic, for example.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, the experience of the Holy Spirit is what transforms individuals and communities so that they become part of the new creation that transcends natural selection. The "spiritual mutation" is an "inner transformation" that supports people in resisting their urges toward selfishness, urges which are rooted in both biological and cultural systems.<sup>46</sup> Theissen is still aware that religious traditions, founded with the promise of human liberation, can become instruments of oppression. He writes, "The church is an institutionalized compromise with human inadequacy," with the result that it always "contains a latent conflict within itself"; it is "a paradoxical institution."<sup>47</sup> The evolution of humanity is not complete, and it is all too easy to neglect the hard-won developments and return to selfishness and violence.

More than in the work of other theologians in this essay, it is possible to read Theissen's work as an extended exegesis on scripture, using the hermeneutic of biological evolution. This is fitting, as biblical studies is Theissen's primary discipline. In this situation, however, the Christ event strains against the limitations of the biological vocabulary that Theissen transfers to culture. As he acknowledges, there is no single, decisive, and final mutation in biology (mutations are possible at every occasion of DNA replication),<sup>48</sup> though "mutation" as it is being used here to refer to "the decisive move from a world of disaster to a new creation" in the life and death of Jesus, for example, is a singular and conclusive event.<sup>49</sup> Theissen's elision of the differences between biological and cultural evolution removes some of the pointed challenge of Darwinism for Christology. Perhaps for these reasons Theissen's legacy in evolutionary theology has not been as extensive as the other writers surveyed in this essay.

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<sup>43</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 115.

<sup>44</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 116.

<sup>45</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 117–119.

<sup>46</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 140.

<sup>47</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 162, 149.

<sup>48</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 106.

<sup>49</sup> Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 112.

Arthur Peacocke

In terms of theological style, the later decades of the twentieth century would see a movement toward more scientific precision than was shown by previous writers. With the writings of Arthur Peacocke (1924–2006), we move into the mainstream of the present religion and science conversation, of which Peacocke was one of the founders. Peacocke identified his theological outlook as “Emergentist-Naturalistic-Panentheistic” (ENP).<sup>50</sup> The term *emergentist* refers to “emergent monism”: the belief that out of the one stuff of the universe “new and distinctive kinds of realities at the higher levels of complexity may properly be said to have *emerged*.”<sup>51</sup> (This represents a revival of the emergence theory seen in the *Lux Mundi* authors.) Peacocke also considered himself a “theistic naturalist,” in that he saw God “acting creatively in the world often through what we call ‘chance’ or random processes, thereby operating *within* the created order.”<sup>52</sup> In those natural processes, “possibilities and propensities become actualized.” This view does not require God’s intervention into the world in ways that suspend the natural laws of the universe. Finally, panentheism is “the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in God and (as against pantheism) that God’s being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe.”<sup>53</sup> This ENP paradigm served to frame Peacocke’s theology until his death in 2006.

In a tone different from earlier theologians, Peacocke was also concerned about the person of Christ at the level of the specifics of basic physiology. For example, and perhaps because of his training as a molecular biologist before his ordination to the Anglican priesthood, he was particularly ill-disposed toward descriptions of Jesus’ conception as occurring “without the agency of a human father,” as he put it.<sup>54</sup> He noted that the physiological feats required would be

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<sup>50</sup> Arthur Peacocke, *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century: A Theological Proposal with Responses from Leading Thinkers in the Religion–Science Dialogue*, ed. Philip Clayton, Theology and the Sciences (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2007), 12–25.

<sup>51</sup> Peacocke, *All That Is*, 13.

<sup>52</sup> Peacocke, *All That Is*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Peacocke, *All That Is*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine, and Human*, Theology and the Sciences (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1993), 275.

extensive, and certainly unnatural: God would have to create “either (1) a complete spermatozoon, which then entered an ovum of Mary, or (2) a completely fertilized ovum.” Either one of these interventions would result in “an act producing an entity resembling a human being but not actually sharing in our evolved humanity.”<sup>55</sup> He identifies this view as intrinsically “docetic” (from *dokeo*, “to seem”), a reference to the Gnostic heresy that held that Jesus’ humanity was only apparent, not real.<sup>56</sup> Peacocke cites the famous quotation of Gregory of Nazianzus regarding the necessity of Christ’s humanity for the salvation of humankind—“what he has not assumed he has not healed”—in emphasizing the importance of understanding that Jesus is “not only flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, but also DNA of our DNA.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, if Jesus did not fully assume human nature, which is rooted in human biology, but only seemed to do so, then this poses a serious problem for soteriology.

It is important to note that this is an example of knowledge about biological evolution acting as a constraint on christological thought, while at the same time appealing to an orthodox and traditional reading of Christian theology (in its resistance to docetism). For Peacocke, this is not only a matter of maintaining consistency with modern science in the service of contemporary relevance. On the contrary, it is a “theologica[l] imperative” that the Virgin Birth “be regarded in the same light as [the stories] about Adam and Eve—that is, mystical and legendary (and beautiful) stories intending to convey non-historical and non-biological truths.”<sup>58</sup> Peacocke remained in many ways committed to the orthodox Christian tradition, while also being interested in constructing scientifically credible theology.

Peacocke’s ENP perspective speaks to the relationship of divinity and humanity in Jesus’ person as well. The relationship between the biological and divine levels in the person of Jesus “is parallel to the way God creates new realities by emergence in the natural world.”<sup>59</sup> Rather than an invasion from the outside, Jesus’ divinity is “a unique manifestation of a possibility always inherently there for man by his potential nature, i.e. by virtue of what man was, or rather

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<sup>55</sup> Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, 277.

<sup>56</sup> Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, 278.

<sup>57</sup> Peacocke, *All That Is*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Peacocke, *All That Is*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, 36–37.



might be, in himself (which is, of course, as God evolved him).<sup>60</sup> In line with Peacocke's emergentist view, the divine becoming in Jesus is "emergence-from-continuity," the same way that all new things come into being through the creative act; God is always creating by means of discontinuity.<sup>61</sup> In this combination of continuity and discontinuity, something truly profound occurs: "In Jesus the Christ a new reality has emerged and a new *ontology* is inaugurated,"<sup>62</sup> one that is, in principle, available for all human beings.

Peacocke's Christology is one that is well adapted to, and constructed in conversation with, a modern evolutionary worldview. Peacocke both affirms Jesus' unique status as sharing God's divine nature and maintains the continuity of DNA-based biology that links Jesus with the rest of humanity. Biology has not dictated doctrine, in this case, but the theologian has incorporated it as a way to refine doctrine in order to better articulate religious truth as he understands it. Peacocke's work marks a significant shift in what theology done in the light of science looks like, and indicates a movement toward sophisticated interdisciplinary interests that was lacking in earlier writers. With Peacocke, working alongside John Polkinghorne, Ian Barbour, and others, there begins to be a community of scholars, trained in both disciplines, who bring scientific expertise to bear on theological questions in a systematic way over many decades.

### F. LeRon Shults

F. LeRon Shults has moved in a slightly different direction from Arthur Peacocke and Peacocke's peer group. In his more recent text *Christology and Science*,<sup>63</sup> Shults frames his project by identifying three trends in philosophy of science that bear on relating the fields of religion and science. The first is the adoption of the principle of relationality as an essential element of understanding the natural world.<sup>64</sup> Classical physicists, quantum physicists, and scientists in the biological and social sciences have all determined that understanding the

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<sup>60</sup> Arthur Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science: The Re-shaping of Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 241–242.

<sup>61</sup> Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, 301.

<sup>62</sup> Peacocke, *All That Is*, 37.

<sup>63</sup> F. LeRon Shults, *Christology and Science*, Science and Religion (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

<sup>64</sup> Shults, *Christology and Science*, 5–7.

relationships between elements of a complex system is essential to understanding the system as a whole. Used in Christology, the category of relationality can mitigate the lingering presence of substance metaphysics, and theologians' concomitant "substance abuse."<sup>65</sup> Second, philosophy of science in the twentieth century recognized the importance of context for determining the meaning of data.<sup>66</sup> Claims to purely objective inquiry have been undermined by the recognition that "all data is theory laden." Without resorting to subjectivism or pure relativism, the recognition that science, like theology, is always accomplished from a particular theoretical perspective can allow for the maintenance of a dynamism that is intentional about taking other perspectives into account; indeed, some philosophers hold that it may be that openness itself which makes objectivity possible.<sup>67</sup> Third, the project of theology and science is being undertaken in an intellectual environment that increasingly sees the value of interdisciplinary investigation.<sup>68</sup> The perspectives of the social sciences, history, evolutionary biology, philosophy, and other fields must be considered when constructing a doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ. This positive view of interdisciplinary study is related to the previous two points of the importance of relationality and contextualization.

The discussion of humanity and divinity in Christ is realigned with his view of the importance of relationality, over against substance metaphysics. Instead of the classic questions about the presence of two substances in one person, Shults writes, "We might learn to ask different kinds of questions such as: how is the life of Jesus related to the identification of God and identifiable with God?"<sup>69</sup> Shults holds that Christology must move from substance to relational metaphysics; the broader contemporary philosophical change "from static sameness to dynamic differentiation" must be reflected in Christology as well. Darwinian evolution has shown that "dynamic differentiation," not unchanging essence, is the natural state of all living creatures in nature, suggesting that it is a more accurate lens through which to view reality.

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<sup>65</sup> Shults, *Christology and Science*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Shults, *Christology and Science*, 7–9.

<sup>67</sup> See Helen E. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> Shults, *Christology and Science*, 9–11.

<sup>69</sup> Shults, *Christology and Science*, 23.

Shults recognizes that the loss of substance metaphysics may push up against the doctrine of two natures as set forth in the fifth-century Chalcedonian Definition: “It remains an open question how we might conserve these intuitions [from Chalcedon] in dialogue with contemporary scientific and philosophical discussions of anthropology.”<sup>70</sup> (By contrast, the Chalcedonian “hypostatic union” was at the center of Rahner’s influential essay.) As an alternate project, he writes, “Why not critically engage the relational and dynamic thought forms of *contemporary* anthropological discourse as we seek to articulate belief in the Word become flesh?”<sup>71</sup> Even though it may be challenging to shift to a more holistic and relational perspective on human personhood, it “humanizes” Jesus in a way that is impossible when attempting to use philosophical categories that are inadequate to capture the relational and dynamic experience of being a person.

Through the questions he asks, Shults suggests possibilities for future methods of theological investigation, and this movement toward a more diverse interdisciplinary effort represents a shift in theology more generally of attending to and seeking contributions from all the realms of human knowledge: sociology, anthropology, and psychology, as well as biology. Further, he displays a sharp awareness of the historical and contingent nature of theological doctrine when he describes the history of christological atonement theories as representing then-contemporary jurisprudence: Origen’s “ransom” theory spoke to people who lived in fear of bondage by evil spirits, for example, and Calvin’s notion of penal substitution fit well with the mores of sixteenth-century Geneva.<sup>72</sup> Shults’s discussion of how the judicial models of each era affect that era’s theology of atonement makes concrete his claim of the importance of context for theological construction, and this narrative underlines the present essay’s emphasis on the dialectic of theology and culture: the terms used to articulate even the most central of Christian doctrines do not fall from the sky, but are the products of the vocabulary and customs of the time.

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<sup>70</sup> Shults, *Christology and Science*, 33.

<sup>71</sup> Shults, *Christology and Science*, 34.

<sup>72</sup> Shults, *Christology and Science*, 74–81.

Celia Deane-Drummond

Unlike Shults, Celia Deane-Drummond, a specialist in both theology and plant sciences, keeps her focus on evolutionary biology. She highlights the relationships between all of creation that evolution implies, in order to explore more generally how the nonhuman parts of creation fit into the christological plan of redemption. With *Christ and Evolution* (2009), a different hermeneutic is used than those that have been seen previously. While the relationship of Jesus to humanity has been central to christological discussions in light of evolution since the early responses to Darwin in the late nineteenth century, the implications of evolution for the relation of Jesus to *all* of creation is what drives Deane-Drummond's text. Since evolution reveals the common lineage of all living things, this places *homo sapiens* within, rather than alongside, creation, and the way in which the rest of creation fits into Christology is the real subject of *Christ and Evolution*.

Most importantly from a constructive point of view is Deane-Drummond's adoption of the category of "theodrama," a concept originating with Hans Urs von Balthasar, rather than "narrative," as a way to describe the process of evolution. She gives three reasons why this is beneficial for theology. First, the traditional view of "the epic of evolution" is primarily a passive one for the individuals involved, as history carries on in one event after another.<sup>73</sup> The changes that occur genetically do so quite outside the influence of any human agency. Theodrama, on the other hand, is participatory. She quotes von Balthasar: "By wanting to find such an external standpoint, allegedly because it will enable us to evaluate the events objectively . . . , we put ourselves outside the drama. . . . In this play [the theodrama], all the spectators must eventually become fellow actors, whether they wish to or not."<sup>74</sup> Rather than being passive witnesses, humans are agents in the evolutionary world; because humans are equipped with the unique ability to be both self-conscious and other-conscious, they bear a special responsibility.

Second, the use of theodrama, rather than epic or narrative, provides the proper perspective on the unity of nature. A view of natural history as the sequential unfolding of events risks seeing

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<sup>73</sup> Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution*, 51.

<sup>74</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison, vol. 2, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 1990), 54; quoted in Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution*, 52.

evolution as unfolding on an “ecological stage.”<sup>75</sup> From this perspective, the nonhuman natural world is merely the backdrop against which the real action takes place, rather than being an intrinsic, even active, part of the experience. Using the metaphor of drama, on the other hand, makes explicit the biological solidarity of all finite creatures.<sup>76</sup> Creation is not just the “stage” for salvation history, but is intrinsically bound up in redemption itself; Christ is significant for the cosmos as a whole, not just human beings.

Deane-Drummond makes her own constructive contributions toward an evolutionary-aware Christology, utilizing two theologians not frequently paired together: the Roman Catholic von Balthasar alongside the Russian Orthodox Sergei Bulgakov. Deane-Drummond suggests an alternative vocabulary in explicating Christology, utilizing the categories of “wonder” and “wisdom.” From von Balthasar she finds that wonder is a way of maintaining a suitable humility in the face of nature, a humility best practiced poetically and sacramentally.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, wonder is “the context in which all theology is developed,” and is reflected in “an apophatic liturgical silence of all creation before God, an image of God’s glory in the mode of wonder.”<sup>78</sup> Then, drawing on Sergei Bulgakov, Deane-Drummond uses the figure of “Wisdom,” that is, “Sophia,” as a way to describe Jesus. In this “Wisdom Christology,” God is conceived of as divine Sophia, “active in the world through creaturely sophia.”<sup>79</sup> Jesus Sophia is where divine Sophia and creaturely sophia are uniquely and intimately joined, through the person of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The use of Wisdom terminology has the added benefits of emphasizing continuity with Jewish tradition and mitigating solely masculine imagery of the divine.

In all of these areas of christological interest, Deane-Drummond emphasizes the participation of creation as a whole and the implications of the Incarnation for it. Insofar as nonhuman animals or other living creatures have moral awareness, and therefore the potential for sin, it is through Christ’s resurrection that their reconciliation with

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<sup>75</sup> A term from Jeffrey P. Schloss, “From Evolution to Eschatology,” in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed. Ted Peters, Robert John Russell, and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 58; quoted in Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution*, 199.

<sup>76</sup> Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution*, 200.

<sup>77</sup> Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution*, 154.

<sup>78</sup> Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution*, 253, 255.

<sup>79</sup> Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution*, 126.

God is effected: “The scope of the atoning work of Christ . . . takes up and includes the voice of all creaturely Nos, including and especially that of humankind.”<sup>80</sup> In the eschaton, all things will achieve wholeness in the new, cosmic community, without remainder. Deane-Drummond writes, “The new community is, in other words, inclusive of the evolutionary history of creation, not just the history of individual human beings. The question of which form(s) may or may not have their place in heaven—do dinosaurs enter the kingdom?—is impossible to answer, but with Balthasar, we can affirm a universal hope for the whole cosmos.”<sup>81</sup> Again, Christ is the salvation of all of creation.

The inclusion of animals in christological reflection also represents an issue of growing importance in the twenty-first century: the necessity of stewardship of the whole of the environment, a concern increasingly in the center of theological discussion. The unity of creatures and the emphasis on human participation and responsibility reflects a mainstreaming of environmental interests in both Protestant and Roman Catholic communities. Environmental ethics has become more explicitly a part of systematic theology, and that is reflected in the work of Deane-Drummond and others.<sup>82</sup>

### Conclusion

The theologians discussed here, though writing on similar topics, exhibit a range of interests, backgrounds, and cultural contexts, all of which are reflected in their work. This selection far from exhausts the schools of theological thought that have addressed the biological sciences recently.<sup>83</sup> Even in the group considered in this essay, however, one can discern a noticeable shift in tone over time, a shift that mirrors changes within theology as a whole. Where Teilhard and Rahner, in their different ways, present particularly abstract and metaphysical

<sup>80</sup> Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution*, 185.

<sup>81</sup> Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution*, 246.

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Willis J. Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Jenkins explores the theologies of Maximus the Confessor, Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth, and, like Deane-Drummond, the “wisdom” motif in Bulgakov.

<sup>83</sup> Of particular interest, for example, both for the thoroughness of their scholarship and the diversity of their approaches, are *Darwin’s Pious Idea* by Conor Cunningham (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), and the recent Gifford Lectures of Sarah Coakley, “Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God.” While currently unpublished, Coakley’s text is available at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/gifford/about/2012-giff>.

systems, later authors are more contextual. Deane-Drummond expands the scope of her work from the anthropocentric considerations common in earlier writers to an exploration of the role of all creatures, great and small, in salvation history. Earlier versions of evolutionary Christology tended to be overly positivistic in their view of evolution as inevitable progress; the theologians shared those errors with many in the sciences themselves. In contrast, an increased scientific precision marks contemporary work.

These changes in evolutionary Christology illustrate the intertwined nature of theology, science, and culture. Far from being solely driven by scientific discoveries, the process by which changes in theological understanding occur is dialectical and multifaceted. It is not only advances in understandings of the scientific facts of the matter, but also changes in social context and trends within the broader discipline that shape the religious conversation. In the real world of history, seemingly fruitful theological trajectories may be sidelined by the demands of responding to other concerns, as is seen in the development of Barth's neo-orthodoxy after the failures of the German church during the First World War. Political events may press against established ways of thinking, such as the way in which the events in Latin America spurred the development of liberation theology and a renewed focus on social justice. And it may not be an overstatement to say that the professionalization of science in the nineteenth century, as a discipline entirely distinct from theology, has as much to do with the current perceived antagonism between theology and science as any of the specific discoveries themselves.<sup>84</sup>

Even from the limited examples included here, it becomes clear that the story of modern theology and science is not one of defensive, rearguard actions against the encroachments of alien, and perhaps hostile, outside forces, but represents a series of episodes in a continuing conversation that occurs in the midst of social, political, cultural—as well as scientific—transformations. Many voices, themselves embedded in local contexts, have been, and continue to be, heard, and evolutionary theory is only one of the more recent conversation partners that theologians have used to reexamine the faith. From the beginning of the Christian theological enterprise, it has been the tools available in particular times and places that theologians have used to

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<sup>84</sup> See Jon Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

undertake the difficult task of understanding and interpreting their tradition. As John Henry Newman wrote about theological development in 1845, a theological idea is “modified, or at least influenced, by the state of things in which it is carried out, and is dependent in various ways on the circumstances which surround it.”<sup>85</sup> Indeed, one can see in the tracking of the relationship of theology and scientific knowledge about evolution since the nineteenth century an example of theology attempting Newman’s description of a doctrine’s “power of assimilation”: the ability of theology to conform to what is known about the world without losing its own integrity.<sup>86</sup> It is far from a finished project, and the possibilities for it are still unfolding.

The authors presented in this paper illustrate that combination of continuity and discontinuity that occurs when fundamental theological doctrines are reconsidered in light of present-day concerns. Religious communities should expect such combinations of continuity and discontinuity in the future. This is beneficial for theological development, however, not harmful. Newman continued:

In time [an idea] enters upon strange territory; points of controversy alter their bearing; parties rise and fall around it; dangers and hopes appear in new relations; and old principles reappear under new forms. It changes with them in order to remain the same. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.<sup>87</sup>

Evolutionary biology is certainly strange territory for a theologian to enter into; parties have risen (environmentalists) and fallen (Teilhard); old principles (emergence theory) have reappeared under new forms. For many reasons, not all of them either scientific or theological, the clusters of concerns around Darwinism have been particularly disruptive to the self-understanding of Christian communities. If the future is anything like the past, it will not be the last historical phenomenon to demand such a rearticulation of fundamental beliefs.

This history should inform the way that theologians go about their work. Because issues that once seemed settled about such

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<sup>85</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, sixth edition, Notre Dame Series in the Great Books (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 39.

<sup>86</sup> Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 185–189.

<sup>87</sup> Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 40.



fundamental matters can then be unsettled by events that happen in such disparate areas of intellectual concern, theologians must be modest in the absoluteness and finality of their religious claims. If theology is influenced and formed by myriad factors, then, given a different history or the rise of a different set of contemporary issues, a community's understanding of God and God's plan for the world would be different. Since there is no "God's-eye point of view" accessible to human interpreters, separate from the vagaries of history, contingency will remain a mark of Christian theology, even in its most fundamental doctrines. Awareness of the one hundred and fifty years of christological reflection on Darwinism should serve to illustrate the necessity of caution when the temptation to theological closure arises.

