***Creation Made Free: Open Theology Engaging Science***

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**PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Evangelical Theology after Darwin

Clark H. Pinnock

 The US National Academy of Sciences recently produced a third in a series of books that proposes that accepting evolution does not require abandoning belief in God. The seventy-page book, *Science, Evolution, and Creationism*, says that attempts to pit science and religion against each other create controversy where none need exist. Theologians respond positively to this apparently friendly proposal. Such a positive theological response might best be labelled, “theistic evolution,” and it differs from scientific creationism and intelligent design theory. Theistic evolution can more helpful than the other two, because scientific creationism seems to ignore many truths about the universe -- such as the age of the cosmos and deep time -- while intelligent design brings back a “god of the gaps” kind of thinking and relies too much on episodic divine interventions.

 Scientific materialism, which claims that the world is “all there is,” is much more unsatisfactory. How are we to account, on purely naturalistic principles, for human freedom, openness to the future, human self-transcendence and creativity, and our perception of aesthetic, moral, and religious values? There are many facets of the world that materialism cannot do proper justice.

In this paper, I explore the difference that emerges when Christian theology accepts general evolutionary thinking. I argue that a general theory of evolution poses no threat to faith and may even shed light on faith. I argue that the general theory of evolution can enrich our teachings about God and creation.

I am not a scientist. But I am persuaded that evolution is not just a theory in the weak sense, as if it were “just a theory,” take it or leave it. I regard the general theory of evolution a well-researched hypothesis that accounts for large bodies of evidence. It has proven an effective way of organising an abundance of data and rendering it intelligible. Because of this, I assume that the general theory of evolution is sound from a scientific point of view. Evolution seems to be the best model for making sense of phenomena that would otherwise have remained unintelligible. I think that one could say that the theory of evolution gives us reliable information about how the Creator went about his work.

I am not the first Evangelical, let alone Christian, to say that the general theory of evolution is compatible with theology. In the nineteenth century, which were the early years of Darwinian thought, evangelicals scholars like B. B. Warfield hoped for the possibility of a fruitful dialogue taking place between religion and evolutionary science. But in recent years, some Evangelicals have become suspicious and even hostile to evolution and its supposed negative implications. The primary blame for this hostility, I claim, should be laid at the door of the anti-intellectualism in American culture.

Evangelicals might learn from our Catholic brothers and sisters when it comes to considering evolution. Because of the Galileo affair, many Catholic scholars have worked through the issues of science and theology more carefully. This work has led them to take science in general and evolutionary thinking in particular more seriously. The late great Pope John Paul II went beyond former papal pronouncements and stated that the biological evidence for evolution is “compelling.” His speech signalled a new openness on the part of Catholicism to evolution. Evangelicals would be wise to consult their Catholic colleagues and their research in this field.

1. God of Evolution: Light shed upon the Doctrine of God

A theology that takes evolution seriously will need to re-examine aspects of the doctrine of God. In particular, evolution asks us to re-examine what should be said about the power and creativity of God. If we take evolution seriously, it would seem that God does not impose a rigid plan as to the world’s development. God apparently experiments with different and sundry possibilities. While God remains the source of all creaturely possibilities, he does not force them upon creation coercively. The process is adaptive in nature and the world has liberty to take its own path. God lets the world “be” and lets the world “become” a reality other than Godself. God seems to exercise a kind of constraint in use of his power. Such creativity, far from diminishing God’s handiwork, seems very grand indeed.

Evolution also prompts us to reconsider natural theology on a broader scale. Formerly we would look for remarkable features of some specific organism, like the human eye, and look for design. Now, however, we are drawn to consider grander things, such as the physics of the early universe and the fundamental conditions that make creation possible.

Evolution prompts us to view the universe as a work in progress and more of an unfinished story. Creation is still happening, and the process requires lots of time to realise its promise. Had the world and its creatures as we know now them been made in an instant by overwhelming power, we could hardly call it a creation. It would seem more like a magic trick. It would be more like an extension of God’s own being. God seems to allow the creation unfold gradually and not have it burst into being a few thousand years ago.

Evolutionary history should not lead us to deism, however. God should not be considered busy designing the really difficult facets of the world (the so-called irreducible complexities) that would not otherwise have surfaced. Instead, God has given the earth a vast “potential for life” and richly endowed it with the capacity to move toward the complexities that we see in nature. God did not have to tinker around the edges of the world’s development in order to make it work. Rather than coming up with new designs, God seems to have “seeded” the world with possibilities. The dynamism and diversity of life testifies to the extravagance and breadth of God’s creativity. And given the huge multiplicity of creatures, we are made vividly aware of the majesty of God who is never (it seems) satisfied with the status quo but always creating anew.

Let me go out on a limb. I think that evolution works with features such as lawfulness and randomness in tension, with a fertile blending of invariant lawfulness and contingent happenings which open the world up to ever new possibilities in the long reaches of time. These three items create the evolutionary process: lawfulness, contingency, and deep time, which are themselves unexplained. The fundamental character of reality seems to be relational with entities being inter-related at all levels. A single animal or plant is a community of communities analogous, I would dare to say, to the triune God who is a God with mutual relations. The world might be thought of as existing and unfolding within the Trinitarian relations of love.

2. God of Evolution: Light shed on the Doctrine of Providence.

As to God’s providence, one may suspect that given deep time, God has goals for the world but not blueprints. One could say that God has a vision and a hope for the future as to what the world may become. The fact that there is no fixed plan is a welcome one, at least to me, because it means that we have a more open and dynamic world. God does not determine every outcome in advance but gives the world a part to play in shaping its own future. Evolution is “biased” it seems in the direction of complexity and consciousness. One can see God’s hand in it as creatures have been brought forth and the world has become ever more complex as time passes. One sees much experimentation, risk taking, room for novelty, and flexibility. To say that God has a purpose is not to say that he predetermines everything.

In the past, we have tended to think of providence as guaranteeing orderliness. We have forgotten that disorderliness is also part of the world. We live in an unfinished universe: good, but not finished. Many creatures adapt but many others do not. God, though the source of cosmic order, is the source too of novelties that confound the present orderly arrangements. This is a good thing, because without novel events, the cosmos could become locked into a fixed order. A static cosmos would become lifeless and mindless.

What we call “accidents” in nature are events that do not fit our present idea of order. But that does not mean that there is no place for them. There is nothing that says evolution is going to be smooth and resemble our expectations. We must not be too simplistic in trying to understand how divine care will manifest itself.

We do see order in the evolutionary process, of course. We see it in organized complexity and in the intensification of consciousness over the course of history as God directs the world toward a positive future. We cannot say exactly how God works in the world. Mortals cannot fathom the divine modes of action. Although we would like to know how God is involved, we cannot pin God down to the details. If we could, God would just another force in the world. The Spirit breathes life into the creation and lures the world to greater and greater complexity. God guides the emerging universe and is the source of serendipitous creativity everywhere.

Evolution is compatible with a kenotic model of providence, in which God decides to self-limit for the sake of love. God does not seem to be coercing the response of the others but respecting their freedom, which (in turn) means being vulnerable and accepting the limits that love requires. In human experience, those with the greatest capacity for love are those who are free and secure enough to make room for the other. Those who need to control others cannot risk the vulnerability of friendship.

3. God of Evolution: Light shed on Suffering in the World.

The argument from design has always been popular. But due to our increased awareness of the lengthy and painful process of trial and error in the flow of evolution, we also notice today the role of predation and violence. Our attention is focussed on the evidence of imperfect adaptation and the apparently wasteful history of experimentations. Paradoxically, the present orderly facade of nature masks epochs of suffering alongside amazing creativity. It raises the question, how can this be justified? Why has God allowed such suffering and waste in the millions of years of evolution?

For starters, one cannot rule out a demonic dimension in evolutionary suffering. There seems to be a power at work in opposition to God, a destructive power capable of hindering God’s good purposes. We often face what appears to be a warfare situation, which if we ignore it dooms theodicy. Not everything is now what it ought to be and (I trust) will be.

Second, we need to view suffering in the light of God’s own self-sacrificing love. It is a suffering that can become grace. The suffering of creatures is not undergone in isolation from God. Creaturely suffering but can be part of God’s own story, until all is redeemed. God shares in the suffering of the evolving creation. God is not apathetic but shares in the birth pangs of nature that anticipate new creation. We are wrong to think of the present world as a “happy place” in a superficial sense when very often it is the place of significant suffering. In our living and dying, we share in the sufferings of the Lord. We do not know exactly why suffering played such a major role in history. There is something mysterious about it.

Third, let us remember that the gospel is about a new creation. Only the new creation will put an end to violence, suffering, and death. We hope for not only the salvation of individuals, but the restoration of the whole cosmos. We live in an unfinished world and a future full of possibilities as yet unrealized. Evolution is opening the future up as God is calling the universe to reach beyond itself to new creation. We cannot “prove” it, but we can surely hope for it. We can hope and believe that the cosmic journey is heading somewhere and is not a pointless process. Our mission is to display this hope of a better world.

4. God of Evolution: Light shed on the Doctrine of Humanity

There are some who think that the theory of evolution lowers human dignity by blurring the distinction (for example) between primates and human beings. We should stop kidding ourselves, because we are surely animals! Evolution looks at things historically and observes the emergence of different forms of creatures of common ancestry, the latter forms arising from earlier forms. Slowly the variety of creatures appears and gradually their capacities increase in quiet and unobtrusive ways. Evolution looks at things in its own way, but it leaves a picture of stunning complexity and the emergence of a constellation of creatures over time. However it happened, it is an achievement at which we should marvel.

Gradual descent does not rule out the existence of the distinctly human. It sees us as receiving our subjectivity in a different way. There are animal souls as well as human souls in the Bible. Subjectivity is also more widely spread than we have assumed. Evolution is the story of the emergence of soul, gradually producing creatures more conscious, free, and able to love. God’s Spirit is present in all life, animating every species in a manner proportionate to its complexity. The emergence of the human soul is not an exception to the animating process but an intense example of it. Evolutionary emergence allows us to envision all life as sharing in the dignity bestowed upon us by God. We may be the only species endowed with freedom, responsibility, and the capacity to love selflessly.

As for morality, survival of the fittest is not a principle that takes us very far. Survival of the fittest does explain entirely what occurs in human culture. The rise of culture, including religion, represents a new stage in the cosmic story. And this rise cannot be easily fitted into the natural sciences. In fact, it may act to reduce the power of natural selection. Social institutions, laws, customs, and religion often protect the weak rather than facilitate their elimination. In the area of ethics, even the unfit get the opportunity to survive.

Can evolution be reconciled with the truth of original sin? I think it can. . . so long as the Bible is read responsibly. The basic truth of original sin is widely recognised - everyday experience teaches us about it. In fact, few doctrines are so well supported empirically. Original sin refers to the state of human estrangement from God. We are born into a world deeply flawed, in great measure by human greed and violence. Only God can save us. All this is quite credible. But we must admit that the doctrine refers not so much to a specific act in pre- history by a single couple but to the general state of estrangement from God.

The panorama of evolution creates the need for a cosmic Christology too. The risen Lord, having defeated the powers of darkness, has begun to set the universe right. God’s power and love are radiating through the whole world, revealing the magnitude of God’s redemptive love. Evolution stimulates us to recover themes such as cosmic Christology, truths that were familiar to the early church but are less so now. It can be the occasion for a renewed and expanded Christology. In a nutshell, Jesus Christ is the guarantee that the self-transcendence of creation will come to pass, because such self-transcendence has already come to pass in him.

5. God of Evolution: Light shed on Christian Hope.

Evolution is a very big story. The universe has been advancing and evolving in the direction of increasingly organised complexity. It has passed through many stages over many aeons and is now at work guiding human community toward the future. During the course of evolution, consciousness has grown in proportion to the increase in organised physical complexity, and integration is occurring on higher and higher levels. The end and goal of evolution is what Teilhard de Chardin called the Omega point. God will have drawn the whole universe to himself. In Teilhard’s view, the whole universe is evolving toward good ends. Evolution has already brought forth a sphere of matter (the geo-sphere) and a sphere of life (the biosphere) on earth. And evolution is now bringing to pass something new on our planet - a sphere of mind (the noosphere). There is direction to the evolutionary story, even though the text can meander in its long journey.

Such ideas have been increasing in recent years. Many understand the world now as a dynamic order that is in the process of becoming. Many see the world open to new creation and restless in moving toward this end, pregnant with hope. We can see God as more interested in “new things” than preserving the status quo. We see God as a deity of persuasive rather than coercive power, from which order and novelty both arise. God’s world is a world open to new creation.

Our God is one who does not force the universe into a rigid design. Rather, God calls creatures to listen to his voice and to follow. God made a world in which chance and randomness exist alongside order, because God values both order and novelty. Even random occurrences play a role in an unfinished and open universe. The present order is moving away so as to make way for new order. True, this replacing of the old with the new can be painful. But, in the last analysis, we trust and believe that the power of love will prove more influential than coercive power. Nature’s beauty, vitality, and creativity are intimations of new creation and the promises of God.

The divine project is one of greatest value. Ours is a world that can give joy to God while giving joy to creatures. In giving himself away, God also adds valuable experiences to his own life. God’s love is not only self giving. It is also a self realization, in which God acquires new kinds of value, freedom, and community. One can only assume that creating a world in which finite and free agents exist adds value to the divine experience. Ours is a world capable of becoming the kingdom of God. The purpose of our lives is to carry forward the values of the divine project. Sin is the refusal to participate in it. One can think of the omega point, not as a rigid goal, but as God’s vision for the world and what the process can become. God calls forth the possibilities that are inherent in the very fabric of the order God creates.