

PAUL HELM**Reflections on the Boyle Lecture**

Professor Haught offers a rhetorically powerful, synoptic response to the problem posed to the Christian belief in providence by the mechanistic soullessness of the Darwinian picture of life. In this brief comment, after summarising what I take to be the main thrust of his lecture, I shall offer two general points of criticism about what he says, and then suggest an alternative way of looking at things that reading his lecture prompted reflection on.

However, to begin with I think we need to reflect for a moment on the ‘idea’ of providence because it is not altogether clear what this idea is or what the problem is that it gives rise to. At times – as when Haught reflects on the impersonality and blindness of the Darwinian account of things – it seems like a metaphysical problem: How can there be a purposive use of a mechanistic system?¹ But this does not seem to be any more of a problem than how it is that one can use a lawnmower for the purpose of keeping the grass tidy. At other times the question seems to be, Can we reasonably interpret life as benignly providential in a Darwinian world? Does it make religious sense?² Or perhaps, does a Darwinian evolutionary scheme provide evidence for divine providence? Or, does the acceptance of that scheme make the provision of such evidence impossible, bringing theodicy to ‘breaking point’?³ Haught’s requirement for belief in providence seems to be that the data must provide pretty good evidence that nature is personal and benevolent – its divine origin and nature must be fairly readily ‘read off’, and so be readily comprehensible in religious or theological terms.⁴ There is, finally, the question, Can we trust divine providence?⁵ Though this plethora of distinct questions may be distilled from his lecture, it seems from its thrust that Haught is concerned with fitting evolution into a theological framework that will make the beneficence of the natural order apparent and so engender renewed trust in God’s providential order.

Faced with the problems – or the challenges – that Darwinism poses for our interpretation of life as benignly providential, Haught rejects two responses to it: that of blind faith, and that of regarding providence as pedagogical, an exercise in ‘soul-making’, after the manner of John Hick. He favours instead a version of what he calls the ‘cosmic directionality’ of Teilhard de Chardin and of A.N. Whitehead, or rather he builds on this approach in what he takes to be more explicitly Christian terms. ‘If, as Christians believe, the roots of its tradition lie in the story of Jesus, the one taken to be the visible face of the invis-

1 Haught, John F. ‘Darwin, Design and the Promise of Nature’ p.6

2 *ibid.* p. 7

3 *ibid.* p. 7

4 *ibid.* p. 7

5 *ibid.* p. 6

ble God, and in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily, then a theology of evolution must make this teaching its very point of departure.⁶

This develops as an account of the history of evolution in which God is himself heavily involved. As in Christ God has accepted human limitations, so God enters 'into the deepest layers of the evolutionary process, ...enfolding and healing not only human struggles and suffering but also the epochs of evolutionary travail that preceded our emergence... the aeons of evolutionary suffering in the universe are also God's own suffering. And this would mean that the whole of nature in some way participates in the promise of resurrection as well.'⁷ The argument seems to be: if the Incarnation reveals the heart or essence or character of God, then that essence will also be revealed in anything else God does. Redemption through suffering is thus the key to understanding everything else, including physical nature.

In Professor Haught's thinking God's activity is to be seen almost exclusively within the evolutionary process. The willing of the universe into being is an act of divine humbling, divine power and presence becoming constrained enough to provide space for what is distinct from God.⁸ And then – if we call this Phase One of God's providential purpose for the cosmos – in Phase Two God comes alongside his evolving creation, entering into its deepest layers through personal relationship, embracing it and suffering with it.⁹

Professor Haught's quoted language from page 15 is not altogether clear, but the picture seems to be like this: That God restrains himself in order to allow for the existence of something distinct from himself and in order to form a relationship with that other. This is borne out by passages like the following:

...the piecemeal, experimental and profligate way in which the cosmos and life evolve should come as no major surprise to those who believe in a God of love. It is not unreasonable to speculate that by gently presenting to the world relevant new possibilities for 'becoming itself', a persuasive God would provide a much sounder metaphysical explanation of the evolutionary story of life than pre-scientific versions of theism, mechanistic materialism or Intelligent Design Theory could ever hope to offer.¹⁰

Some Problems

Leaving aside the somewhat questionable theistic metaphysics inherent in Phase One, I concentrate on Phase Two where Haught's positive account of divine providence is focused. The problem here is this. He wishes to think of the

6 *ibid.* p. 15

7 *ibid.* p. 17

8 *ibid.* p. 18

9 *ibid.* p. 17

10 *ibid.* p. 14

Darwinian cosmos as the tool of divine providence.¹¹ The danger is that Haught's 'evolutionary theology' becomes a mere redescription in religious terms of the evolutionary process itself. For example, 'The Spirit of God stretches the divine compassion out across the totality of time and creation, *enfolding and healing* not only human struggles and suffering but also the epochs of evolutionary travail that preceded our emergence.'¹² 'Enfolding' looks like a mere redescription. To what in the evolutionary history does 'healing' correspond? Why, suddenly, is the evolutionary tale evidence of God's care¹³ for the totality of life? By describing it in these terms what has changed? In so far as it is not a mere redescription, what Haught's rhetoric implies is unclear in terms of what we can expect of it. Does it have any scientific implications? Is it merely heuristic? Does it enable us to predict things that otherwise we could not? Does it, so to speak, add value?

Or again, 'Redemption must mean, then, at the very least, that the whole story of the universe and life streams into the everlasting bosom of divine compassion'.¹⁴ If Christ's resurrection after suffering guarantees the redemption of the physical cosmos after God's participating in its suffering, what exactly might this mean? Haught recognises the mysteriousness of what he says,¹⁵ but thinks that the answer is that evolution by natural selection (given this religious framework) is a necessary condition for the emergence of autonomy in a way that it cannot be in secular Darwinism.

At times Professor Haught lays on himself a very stringent epistemological requirement, that Darwinism is 'precisely what one should expect' if the world is both grounded in and ultimately saved by the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Accordingly he believes a rather weaker, but nevertheless pretty impressive claim, that theology 'may effectively display the theological harmoniousness of divine providence with Darwinian evolution'.¹⁶ He appeals to the surely debatable principle that for an arrangement to be reasonable its occurrence should come as no major surprise to us.¹⁷ It is not clear why he thinks that the Christian should burden himself with such requirements when he confronts the problem that evolution poses for God's providence. Nor when he thinks the display of harmony between providence and mechanistic evolution might be achieved, what would count as its being achieved?

An Alternative

My chief concern is that, in his zeal to integrate some Christian theology with

11 *ibid.* p. 14

12 *ibid.* p. 17, emphasis added

13 *ibid.* p. 17

14 *ibid.* p. 17

15 *ibid.* p. 17

16 *ibid.* p. 15

17 *ibid.* p. 14

evolutionary theory in an effort to provide an explanation of the harmony of the two, Haught is in danger of paying too great a price. We have already noticed his transposition of the Incarnation – Resurrection motif from its original home in the New Testament¹⁸ onto the entire cosmos. Many will regard this procedure as questionable. No doubt the New Testament leads us to expect a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet.3.13). Yet it is illegitimate (in my view) to relocate the idea of divine promise, which (though it permeates biblical literature) has chiefly to do with God's covenant of grace with Abraham and what follows from this, to the cosmos as a whole. The relocation is illegitimate because, quite simply, there is no warrant in Scripture for doing this, nor any hint that doing so might be a profitable exercise.

There is, of course the Lord's covenant promise to Noah, (Gen. 8.22) but here the emphasis is on the stability and dependability of the cosmic order, its fixedness, which does not quite chime with the note that Haught is sounding. No doubt the work of Christ has cosmic implications. But it does not follow that we should expect that the history of the cosmos mirrors the history of Jesus, any more than we might expect that human history does. More generally it is not the case (as far as I can see) that Christians are charged to attempt to impute immediate theological significance or justification to every scientific theory any more than (say) to every contemporary political event.

The other price that Haught pays is an almost complete neglect of the Scriptural idea of God's transcendence over nature and of the consequent mysteriousness of the interface between God and his creation. Divine transcendence and the sense of mystery it should engender is most eloquently and fully expressed in the later chapters of the book of Job, chapter 38 and following, and in the Psalms, (e.g. Psalm 8) but it is of course a pervasive biblical theme.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?...Who determines its measurements?...Have you commanded the morning since the days began?...have you entered the springs of the sea?...Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness?...Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion?...Can you hunt the prey for the lion?...Who provides for the raven its prey?...Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south?...Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? (Job, chs. 38, 39, 40, ESV)

Such transcendence has both metaphysical and epistemological implications, each of which we will briefly glance at.

On such a view the Lord, whose glory is 'above' the heavens, brings the cosmos into being, sustains it by his power, and attends to its every detail in a way

18 *ibid.* p. 17

that is beyond human imagining. This is surely the starting point for any biblical, Christian understanding of divine providence. The picture that it offers us is not of a God who suffers with his creation, but of one who upholds a suffering creation as its Lord and end and who does *not* suffer with it, even though he loves it and has compassion on it, and who, incarnate as the Suffering Servant, procures our redemption.

Recognising divine transcendence of the created order should also make us cautious about mapping scientific theories of a cosmic character, whether these involve considerations of time or of space, onto Christian theology. Why should we expect to have the resources to do such a thing, we who spend our years like a tale that is told, we whose life is a few handbreaths, mere breath, a shadow (Ps. 39)? And isn't our incapacity compounded by the fact that, as Haught reminds us, for the evolutionist there are unlimited amounts of time for the asking, just as for the astronomer there are endless supplies of space?¹⁹ Does not the ease with which scientific speculating about the temporal and spatial limits of our cosmos can call on additional millions of years or billions of light years suggest that such science does not so much explain the cosmos as underline its present inexplicability? Haught's attitude to the science of evolution sees it more as the sketching of a narrative using scientific language rather than as offering an empirically falsifiable hypothesis. What sort of an explanation is it that, when problems arise, can effortlessly stretch the time frame or space frame of the universe to accommodate them? 'We have a scientific puzzle which only postulating a few billion more years will solve. May we have them, please? Certainly, no problem.'

As Haught says in the opening words of his lecture, accepting Darwinian evolutionary theory provides further troubles for divine providence, but not different troubles, more of the same. Droughts, famines, earthquakes, plagues and pestilences, have caused consternation from time immemorial. Darwinism systematises some of this, particularly the part that predation plays, and provides evidence that these selective mechanisms are built into the fabric of nature. But then so are the mechanisms of decay and death, appreciated and feared long before Darwin. Nor should we allow ourselves to be transfixed by the idea of Darwinism as being inimical to Christianity. Many evolutionists have been theists and Christians. And the idea of a slowly evolving cosmos had been canvassed by Christians long before *The Origin of Species*, for example by Descartes and much earlier by Augustine.

Professor Haught may say that to place trust in the God of providence in these circumstances would be an expression of blind trust, of fideism. Here I think we need to make a distinction. This is not blind trust²⁰ but it is not a direct, unmediated trust in providence either. There are reasons for thinking

19 *ibid.* p. 18

20 *ibid.* p. 9

that there is one good providential order, but these reasons are not drawn directly or solely from that providential order itself. If the question is, 'Do we have reason to trust divine providence?', then the answer for the Christian must be an emphatic 'Yes', because the God of Providence is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. If there is reason to trust the Son then there is reason to trust the Father. No blind faith or fideism here, as far as I can see. But if the question is, 'Can we here and now understand the workings of natural and human history as benignly providential?' then we have to recognise that we cannot, neither in the pre-historical or non-historical aspects of the cosmos, nor in human history. As we contemplate both, and look for a providential pattern, we are often struck dumb. As noted, the relation between God and the cosmos, or between God and history, is utterly unparalleled. That history, we are now taught to believe, embraces millions of years and billions of light years. In these circumstances, do we not have good reason to be utterly cautious in attempting to relate these data to the mind and will of God? Why should we be the first to know?

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