

## **DEVELOPING THEOLOGY FOR EVOLUTION**

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**ABSTRACT:** This speculative paper explores one idea for approaching some of the problems which arise when the doctrines of Christian theology meet the current scientific understanding of evolution through natural selection. The main suggestion is that Christian theology should relax the requirement that God controls everything. Some implications of this move are explored, with a brief look at how similar ideas might be of use for non-Christian religions entering into dialogue with the theory of evolution.

**KEY WORDS:** chaos, divine control, evolution, theology.

**SUMMARY:** Current scientific understanding of evolution claims that everything we know in the material cosmos has evolved. The evolutionary process, it is said, moves from the simple to the complex, with natural selection as the main mechanism for development.

Christian theology claims that the cosmos was created by God, possibly using the mechanism of evolution by natural selection, but always directing events to bring order out of chaos. An axiom of mainstream Christian theology is that God controls everything.

This paper explores some contradictions between these two approaches. If evolution leads to complexity, why does God use simplicity for some development? If God controls everything according to a divine purpose, why do species evolve then vanish? If God controls and directs every detail of evolution, what happens to creaturely creativity and the role of 'chaotic events' and chance in evolution?

The paper suggests that a way of meeting these difficulties is to relax the claim that God controls everything. Such a move has significant implications for Christian theology, which are acknowledged: but it is suggested that this move helps Christian theology to become more responsive to science without losing anything essential.

The paper ends with a brief note about the possibility of using similar ideas in the discussion of other religions with evolutionary theory.

### INTRODUCTION

The organisers of the second Sophia-Iberia Academic Seminar wrote in their brief for the Seminar

«Sophia-Iberia would like to approach this project involving a final theme: the type of theology which the scientific-philosophical image of human evolution leads to» (Sophia-Iberia, 2010).

This paper is an attempt to pursue that goal by exploring some ways in which theology might develop in the light of ideas of human evolution. The paper is deliberately speculative. To try to maintain clarity of argument I will mainly discuss Christian theology; but at the end of the paper there will be some indication of how the discussion might be expanded to cover non-Christian religions. My contention is that some very basic assumptions need review and revision if theology in general and Christian theology in particular is to take seriously the challenge of human evolution.

'Christian theology' includes a wide range of views and approaches. Nevertheless, there is a framework of ideas within which most Christian theologians work, a framework constructed with a set of assumptions which are so basic that they are rarely noticed or

acknowledged or questioned. I shall attempt to draw on ideas held in common by a range of theologians within Christianity, without noting or discussing the many nuances and alternatives which can be found in theological discussion.

One of the fundamental claims of Christian theology is that the cosmos we inhabit was created, that is brought into existence, by a God who is distinct from the creation. Ever since the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, a major focus of discussion about Christian theology and evolution has been whether or not this Christian doctrine of creation and the theory of evolution by natural selection are compatible. I shall not enter that discussion in this paper, preferring to focus on other issues. I shall accept the doctrine of divine creation as an important part of the Christian theological framework without discussing the merits of the doctrine or the mechanisms by which creation might have been achieved.

In modern Christian theology there is debate about the meaning of the traditional claim that God created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing; and there is discussion about *creatio continua*, the claim that God's creative work continues in the present. Both these discussions are important in the dialogue between modern natural science and Christian theology: but both are beyond the scope of this paper.

#### THE DOCTRINE OF EVOLUTION BY NATURAL SELECTION

The doctrine of evolution by natural selection is currently widely accepted as the best account of the way in which the cosmos we inhabit has come to its present form with its present inhabitants, human and non-human. Serious questions are raised from a variety of perspectives about this account. There are issues about both the broad philosophical perspectives underlying the account, and about the details of the processes and the evidence offered to support the claims made. Many of the details of evolutionary processes are unknown, and some of them may never be known, because the evidence is not available to us. For example, we do not know what steps in the process were missed, what branches were taken which led nowhere, which mutations or species failed because they were not well-adapted but left no traces. Further, many of the processes of evolution for which we do have evidence are not yet understood. In this paper, in keeping with the approach of the Sophia-Iberia project, I shall assume that the broad lines of the account of human evolution are correct; however, I shall not enter into discussion of the details of the account or the evidence offered to support it.

For this paper then I accept the claims that human beings live in and are part of a physical universe which is in a process of evolution; and that human beings themselves have evolved, and are evolving, and are increasingly significant contributors to their own evolution. I also accept without question or discussion the claim that evolution leads to increased complexity. This idea is widely accepted amongst those who support the theory of evolution by natural selection, and was taken as an axiom of the Sophia-Iberia project. In that project it was assumed that human beings are complex creatures, and the human brain was claimed to be the most complex structure yet evolved in our cosmos. While questions can be raised about these claims, discussion of them lies beyond the scope of this paper.

It is important to note that while an account has been given of evolution and human evolution, it is an account with the benefit of hindsight. That is, a description is given of the process of evolution which claims to show how the current complex universe developed from something very simple. It is difficult to discuss this 'development' without incorporating,

albeit unconsciously, some notion of 'progress' or 'direction' from the simple to the more complex. Though scientists involved are careful to state that ideas of 'progress' or 'direction' are not necessary to the idea of evolution nor explicitly part of their thought, the very language they use is full of linguistic overtones and underpinning assumptions that are difficult to avoid, but often go unnoticed. When discussion of evolution moves beyond the scientific realm into public discourse, these ideas of progress and direction in development have greater significance and influence, often being taken up without the nuances and caution of scientific discipline.

The links in the thinking of the general public between ideas of 'progress' and discussion of evolution are made easier because ideas of human 'progress' are deeply embedded in human perception and language. Ideas of this kind permeate our discussion of areas as diverse as economics, education, social structures, even the discussion of 'civilisation'. We constantly talk of 'improvement' and 'development', then 'further improvement' and 'upward development', with implicit and often explicit notes of 'moving forward' or 'moving upward'. Thus it is easy for such ideas to become associated in public discourse with discussion of evolutionary movements towards greater complexity.

One suggestion which challenges any claim of 'direction' in evolution is the idea that some of the moves in evolution were unpredictable. We do not know how they came about nor what led to them. Of course, it might be that these moves were actually predictable, and it would be possible to see how they came about if only we had access to evidence. However, even with that caveat, the popular idea of directionality in evolution rests on shaky ground.

Another difficult issue in the public discussion of evolution is the tension between determinism and indeterminism found in many areas of study of the world in which we live. Those who study the tiniest elements of matter at the 'quantum level' claim that many 'events' at the at level are unpredictable and random. However, larger collections of these elementary elements of matter behave in ways which are predictable, if only statistically. Thus there is a tension in the account of matter and the evolution of matter between behaviour which is properly described as 'chaotic' and behaviour which is properly described as 'determined'. This tension and the relation between indeterminism and determinism, particularly in relation to the evolution of human beings and their behaviour, is much discussed and little understood. For my purposes it is not necessary to enter these discussions: I wish only to note that the presence of a chaotic element in the structure of the cosmos is significant for Christian theological discussion.

#### CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Traditional mainstream Christian theology makes use of ideas of chaos and the control of chaos, with God portrayed as bringing order out of chaos. This thought underlies much Christian discussion of divine creation and is sometimes made explicit. The idea that God brings order out of chaos feeds an important aspect of the notion of 'creation' in Christian theological circles, the idea of design and purpose. In Christian theology it is claimed, usually without question or caveat that God created the cosmos, and human beings within it, for a definite end. Talk of design and purpose has led Christian theologians to embrace the idea of the 'progress' of humanity towards 'higher things'. From the early exploration of the idea of the Great Chain of Being, which placed humanity towards the top of a pyramid of beings, to the speculations of Teilhard de Chardin about an 'omega point', Christian theologians and believers have assumed that their God is drawing human

beings towards a 'higher' realm, a 'better' life. The confluence of these ideas leads readily to the claim that 'directionality' is built into the cosmos and its development; and the directionality is derived directly from God the Creator. Hence, if evolution is the mechanism through which God brings about creation, there is directionality in evolution.

Christian theology goes further. When Christians talk of God bringing order out of chaos, they invest God with powers of total control of the cosmos: chaos is bounded, checked and controlled by divine power. The Christian God is omnipotent and omniscient, so has the knowledge and ability to control and direct all that occurs within the cosmos, including quantum processes. It follows that God is able to direct every step of the evolutionary process. God can control every change, every adaptation, every leap from one stage to another, and drive the movement from simplicity to complexity.

I have written 'God is able to direct' and 'God can control': generally in Christian theology the reserve, the overtone of possibility, in these statements is removed. Christian theologians claim that God *does* direct every step of the evolutionary process and God *does* control every change, every adaptation, every leap from one stage to another, and God *does* drive the evolutionary movement from simplicity to complexity. It is here I contend that Christian theology has problems and needs revision.

Before considering the problem in detail, we need to note that the notion of total divine control of events within the cosmos is challenged within Christian theology in discussion of the related issues of free will and the so-called problem of evil. In order to cope with the clear evidence that human beings do not always behave as Christian theology claims they should, theologians ascribe to human beings, and other creatures, 'free will'. This means that the creatures make their own decisions about their behaviour, and are allowed to do so by God, even if their decisions and actions are contrary to the divine will and pleasure. On this view, God does not entirely control creaturely behaviour. Similarly, the Christian God is supposed to be all-loving, yet there are many events in the world which do serious harm to human beings and other creatures: how are these to be explained if a God of love is in total control?

Much ink has been spilt by philosophers and theologians in dealing with these paradoxes, but there are no universally accepted resolutions to them. However, every effort to resolve the conundrums requires in some way that some at least of the divine control over events is relinquished, albeit relinquished willingly, by God.

#### CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND EVOLUTION

We have seen that the account of evolution, including human evolution, widely accepted currently claims that evolution moves from simplicity to complexity in ways which are sometimes unpredictable and even chaotic; while Christian theology works within a framework which sees God as bringing order out of chaos and knowing, even fore-knowing, and directing every event in the cosmos, including every step of evolution. In principle there is no reason why these two approaches to the doctrine of evolution should not be compatible. However, compatibility brings with it questions, of which three are significant for this paper.

First, if every detail of evolution is directed, then every step of the evolutionary process takes place in an ordered sequence. Given the assumed complexity of the evolved and evolving cosmos, some of these ordered sequences must be very, very complex and convoluted. This is not inconceivable. In principle, there is nothing to stop God making use of some very intricate, twisting, entwined paths to achieve divine ends. However, we

must ask the question: why? If simple, ordered sequences are adequate for some developments, as the available evidence seems to suggest, why not for all? Why choose, as God must do on this view, to adopt winding paths to evolutionary goals?

Of course, some Christian believers will simply suggest that it is not for us to question God. If God has chosen to use winding paths, then so be it. However, the Christian God is claimed to be consistent in dealing with the cosmos: this is an important part of the Christian concept of a 'faithful' God. So if inconsistency is apparent, if both straight and winding paths are used by God in evolution, intellectual rigour demands a rational explanation.

Secondly, we are fairly sure that some species evolved but have not survived, and many mutations perished because they were not well adapted. If we accept the idea that all this is directed by God, we are left with a picture of a God who keeps changing direction, a God who appears to delight in blind alleys, a God who could be regarded as wilfully wasteful of creaturely existence. None of these perspectives sits well with the Christian idea of a God of purpose expressing that purpose in loving action. Again, in principle, the apparent wastefulness of lost mutations may be simply another part of the mysterious ways of God. It may be that a fecund God is bringing things into being and disposing of them liberally for reasons which are beyond the grasp of human minds. However, it is not obvious that this picture is consistent with Christian claims about a God who cares for everything created. Again the Christian picture of God is challenged.

Thirdly, the exercise of tight divine control over every detail of evolution takes away the possibility of genuine creativity within the creation. The complex web discussed by students of evolution offers rich opportunities of developments which follow no necessary path but occur by chance. This is creative. Further, the most creative creatures we know, human beings, are becoming more and more able to take decisions and carry out activities which affect evolution, the evolution of their own species and the evolution of other species. A doctrine of tight divine control of every detail requires all these creative possibilities to be driven by God. At very least, this seems at odds with Christian claims about the endowment of humanity with creative abilities. It also raises questions about the direction in which some of those decisions take us, where large ethical discussions are already taking place. For example, not every Christian is willing to accept the manipulation of human genetic material or the future as posited by trans-humanists as being consistent with God's purposes. Questions of the use and abuse of 'free will' begin to loom large.

Other questions could be raised. Enough has been said to support the contention that insistence on divine direction of every detail of evolution leads Christian theology into some difficult places. As already indicated, there are ways of responding to these issues which stay firmly within the mainstream of Christian tradition. Essentially these responses amount to: God knows, we do not. For some Christians that kind of response is unsatisfactory, an abandonment of the intellectual quest for understanding.

#### DEVELOPING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

An alternative approach to the issues discussed above can be found, drawing on discussion of the so-called 'problem of evil' and the discussion of human free will, mentioned above. We could relax the requirement that God directs every detail of evolution.

We note immediately that this does not necessarily mean that God does not have control over evolution: the details come together into a whole, and it is plausible and

consistent to suggest that God controls the whole. This is consistent with the current understanding of chaotic events which collectively generate stability. The suggestion is that God exercises control at some level, but does not direct every detail, every tiny step, every mutation.

One obvious question is: where do we stop? Where do we draw the line between divine direction and undirected event? I do not know the answer to that question, partly because nobody has yet looked at the evidence for evolution from this perspective. A detailed examination from this perspective is required, and might yield interesting results.

What is clear is that if we adopt this approach, the challenges to Christian theology from the theory of evolution mentioned earlier look different. First, theologians are relieved of the necessity of seeking 'the hand of God' in every twist of the evolutionary tale. Instead, they can celebrate the richness of the creation and seek to understand how it all knits together and what the totality might reveal about the nature and activity of God.

Second, we have a response to the question: why did God pursue so many dead-ends in evolution? On this view, the answer is: God did not. The dead-ends arose through the creative interaction of created things, without direction from God. We might conjecture that God allowed to survive only those which met with divine approval, but this conjecture is not necessary.

Third, using this approach we can celebrate the creativity of creatures. Created things have room to innovate. At the same time human beings at least are burdened with responsibility. For if we are freed from divine direction to be creative, we must nevertheless consider how our creative activity fits with the overall direction of God. In other words, we must learn to regulate our creativity. Even this looks different under this approach. Instead of simply re-iterating that a particular development is 'against the will of God', Christians must now develop a view of responsibility which argues that particular developments are contrary to, say, the harmony of creation or the well-being of creatures.

As noted at the outset, this paper is speculative. The suggestion of denying divine direction in all things runs counter to mainstream Christian tradition and much current theological assertion. It raises many questions and has considerable implications, for example for the Christian doctrines of sin and salvation, which I have not explored here. Nevertheless, I contend that this approach allows Christian theology to respond in a credible fashion to some of the challenges of the theory of evolution. I dare to suggest that not only are the further theological issues raised by this approach potentially resolvable, but that this approach might also help in resolving some of the other questions which press on Christian theology from the activities of the natural sciences. Thus it seems worth offering this speculation for further discussion.

This paper has focussed on Christian theology. It remains to note how this approach might be extended to the thought of non-Christian religions. Some non-Christian religions, such as Islam and Judaism, share Christianity's claims about divine direction of events within the cosmos. As with Christianity, the extent of divine direction is debated within these religions. However, to the extent that these religions make similar claims to those of Christianity about divine direction of details, they face the same challenges from the theory of evolution as Christianity, though the force of the challenges may be different. Thus the approach advocated here may be of interest and use in developing responses from within such religions to the challenges.

Religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism and many African and aboriginal religions do not appear to have strong ideas of direction to events in the cosmos. I suspect that this is illusory and the sense of direction is present, but not in a personal form. Thus, for example, the idea of cycles of birth, life, death and re-birth through which

one progresses eventually to a 'highest' form contains some sense of direction, if not of directedness. To the extent that any religion contains, even implicitly, any idea of 'progress' through the cosmos, that religion faces some challenge from the current account of evolution. To that extent, the speculations of this paper may be relevant to more than Christian theologians.

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