

THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

Topic: Evolutionary Cosmology and Metaphysics
Convener: James Le Grys, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
Moderator: David Fleischacker, University of St. Francis
Presenter: Michael Hoonhout, Immaculate Conception Seminary
Respondent: Terence Nichols, University of St. Thomas

This session posed the question of whether or not it is possible to reconcile, on the basis of classical metaphysics, a modern scientific understanding of nature with the traditional theology of a God of absolute being. In his paper, "What Kind of Metaphysics Does the God-World Relation Require?" Michael Hoonhout noted that the new scientific understanding that the world evolves has led writers like Ian Barbour and John Haught to argue for a new conception of God's relation to the world. They favor process thought over traditional metaphysics in order to express how God is affected by a world of random development and constant change. Instead of the absolute perfections of being, God has a mutual relationship with the world that in its autonomy evolves in manner free from divine control.

Drawing upon the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, however, Hoonhout challenged this use of process metaphysics and the corresponding new theology of God as mutable and argued for the compatibility of traditional theism and classical metaphysics with an evolving world. In fact, he argued that in light of the doctrine of creation the traditional notion of God's transcendence, far from being an obstacle to understanding God's immanent presence and action in the world, is required precisely in order to come to an understanding of divine immanence. At the same time, an affirmation of divine transcendence is necessary in order to keep divine causality and theological explanation distinct from natural causality and scientific explanation.

Instead of process thought's identification and thus conflation of divine process with the world's becoming, Aquinas uses the notion of participation to express how the world is in God. He understands creation as a relation to God, a relation that has its existence, intelligibility, and goodness by sharing in God's essential act of being God. Since for Aquinas, God is the first, exemplary, and final cause by which the universe exists, develops, and is ordered back to God, divine action in the world can be seen as upholding, rather than interfering with, natural causality. This ordering of creation is twofold: all the many parts to the universal whole, and the whole in turn to God. The first, the cosmic order, is the province of science; the second, the transcendent or providential order, is the domain of theology.

In his response, Terence Nichols agreed with the basic proposition that God's transcendence makes possible God's immanence, as the (continuous efficient) cause of being, in which all created beings participate. He pointed out, however, that the opposition of Thomistic metaphysics and process metaphysics is a bit of a simplification; there is a wide spectrum of metaphysical positions on the God-world relation, including those of some Thomistic philosophers who adapt certain

elements of process thought. He also thought it was important to call attention to concerns other than that of evolutionary cosmology that have led some people to search for answers outside of Thomist metaphysics: the concern for human freedom, the issue of natural evil, the lack of receptivity or responsiveness in Aquinas' concept of God, and the idea of substance as a static substrate (though some philosophers, such as Norris Clarke, assure us that this was not Aquinas' own idea of substance).

An informative discussion followed.

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