

THEOLOGY AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES

- Topic: The Creative Suffering of the Triune God
in the Evolutionary Theology of Arthur Peacocke
- Convener: William R. Stoeger, Vatican Observatory Group,
Steward Observatory, The University of Arizona
- Presenter: Gloria L. Schaab, Barry University
- Respondents: David A. Bosworth, Barry University
Mary Jo Iozzio, Barry University
Edward R. Sunshine, Barry University

“In view of the ubiquity of pain, suffering and death, inflicted and inherent in the cosmos, how shall we speak rightly of God?” Schaab proposed, following Arthur R. Peacocke, that the only morally coherent response to this question is that God suffers in, with and under the creative processes of the cosmos. With Peacocke Schaab compellingly suggests that understanding God’s ongoing intimate creative relationship with us and with the universe as both panentheistic and Trinitarian naturally embodies this startling conclusion. Although God is the transcendental ground of creation, God is also incarnate within it, and immanent in all that occurs. Thus, all that emerges is taken up into the Being and the Becoming of the Divine, and “all events in the life of the cosmos, including the events of suffering and death, are events in the life of God.” God intimately participates in the suffering of God’s creatures as they evolve in the unfolding of time. From our point of view this divine vulnerability, self-emptying and self-giving in love seems to involve a self-limitation of God’s divine power, as well as God being the source of unpredictability and chance. But these are in the service of giving autonomy and freedom to what God creates, inviting all into genuine communion.

Furthermore, suffering and death do not have the last word. In the course of evolution, suffering and death lead to new life, and the Paschal Mystery points to the deep meaning and assures the ultimate fulfillment of what seems transitory and futile from a purely scientific perspective. It reveals more fully the unfolding consummation of what we only dimly perceive. In Peacocke’s vision, God’s intimate relationship with nature is noninterventionist, but at the same time deeply intimate and immanent. There is a whole-part bidirectional influence, whereby the Trinitarian God is the context within which we live, move and have our being, and we become ever more taken up into it as contributors and participants in the mystery of God’s life and love.

Schaab concluded by emphasizing that this model of God’s relationship with us has much to recommend it. In particular, it fits well with both the data of the natural sciences and of Revelation—with the features of the cosmos as we have come to know them and with the fundamental insights of the Scriptures and Christian tradition. It also manifests a great deal of fecundity—leading to a whole range of fruitful developments and conclusions. Finally, it promises to have pastoral

efficacy in communicating the graces of God with us to those who seek for meaning and orientation in their lives, deeply marked by both joys and suffering.

In his response, David Bosworth supported Schaab's proposal by stressing the personal character of God, as revealed in the Scriptures—a God who is touched and affected by prayer. However, he was inclined to doubt that the Scriptures supported a suffering God. Schaab responded by emphasizing the Trinitarian aspects of God's presence and action in the world, especially in the sufferings of Jesus and those with whom He identifies.

Mary Jo Iozzio challenged Peacocke and Schaab with the reality of those who carry the stigma of disabilities. Any proposal really needs to radically affirm the value of each person as manifesting the image of God. Edward Sunshine reflected on the moral dimensions of the proposal—why God allows freedom and follows a “hands-off” policy. He suggested that the best image is that of God as spouse of creation—whose suffering is the vicarious suffering of one whose husband or wife is in pain and travail.

An extensive discussion of these issues followed. Schaab emphasized that Peacocke's approach may be unique in elaborating such a rich theology of suffering, weaving together a profound appreciation of the Trinity with a serious acknowledgment of our experience of living in an interconnected and evolving cosmos.

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