

THEOLOGY AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES

Topic: Reconstructing Attributes of God—Power, Wisdom, and Goodness

Convener: William Stoeger, Vatican Observatory

Presenter: Jame Schaefer, Marquette University

How God's power, wisdom, and goodness can be understood today in ways that are consistent with our current scientific understanding of the world, relevant to the times in which we live, and helpful for addressing current circumstances was the focus of Schaefer's paper. She proceeded from assumptions that Catholic theology is an ongoing effort to engage in discourse about God that is biblically grounded, sensitive to our understanding of the world affects, and aware of the radical inadequacy of language. She examined various portrayals of these divine attributes in the works of eminent patristic and medieval theologians, like Ephraim the Syrian, Hugh of St. Victor, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Gregory of Palamas, who urged the study the world to discern something of God's character. She compared their prescientific world views with our contemporary understanding, which is based primarily on broad findings of cosmology and evolutionary biology, and she stressed the need to reconstruct God's power, wisdom, and goodness so that they are meaningful today.

Following the method of theology of nature, Schaefer drew upon the ongoing efforts of contemporary theologians to reconstruct patristic and medieval theologians' understanding of God's power. The reflections of John Polkinghorne on God's *kenosis*, Arthur Peacocke on modeling God as a conductor of an orchestra and as a choreographer of a dance, John Haught on God's vulnerable, self-giving love, and David Ray Griffin on God's persuading the universe to achieve its greatest intrinsic good, together contribute to a reconstruction of God's power as voluntarily self-limiting and non-controlling, freeing the universe to evolve at its own pace while continuously holding it in existence as it continues to self-organize and differentiate.

Patristic and medieval theologians' understanding of God's wisdom as providing an explicit design through which the world functions as intended yields today to an understanding of God's wisdom in providing a basic structure of the universe within which chance occurrences are operative as the universe becomes itself in increasing diversity and complexity, life, and consciousness and evolves towards an uncertain future. God's goodness as a benevolent bestowal of blessings to humans can better be understood today as God's generosity in endowing matter and energy with many potentialities through which a vast array of creatures have emerged who are blessings to one another in their interdependency.

Schaefer offered other compelling attributes that surface when theological discourse is stimulated by contemporary scientific findings. Through the dynamic unfolding of the universe, God is discerned as *freedom giving* through the ability of the universe to self-organize and produce new systems. God is discerned as continuously *empowering* the universe while serving as its invigorating

spiritual ground. God can be discerned as *humble* in allowing the universe to emerge without interference and to evolve in surprising ways amidst considerable suffering, decay, waste, and death. God is discerned as *patient* through the billions of years of the universe's expansion from a very small entity to billions of galaxies out of which at least one planet evolving around a medium-sized, middle-aged star has produced a magnificent array of ecosystems with their varied biota, including intelligent beings who have the ability to reflect on and respond to God's self-communication. And, God can be discerned as *encouraging* the universe to realize its full potential.

Schaefer closed with a brief explanation of how helpful these reconstructions of God's attributes are when thinking about the human place in the world, addressing ecological degradation, and grappling with suffering in face of illness and death.

In an extended discussion, the group developed and refined these ideas, particularly the meaning of God's self-limitation, the connections with Christology, the emergence of intelligent creatures, the tradition of predestination and need to decouple power from will.

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