

# Prologue to Incomplete Book Manuscript

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*The resistance of conservative Christians to evolutionary theory is well-documented and widely known. What is rarely acknowledged is the failure of mainstream theology in the West – which accepts evolutionary theory – sufficiently to integrate its insights into its thought. The Western, Augustinian doctrines of original sin and the fall, for example, are based on that which modern science has declared impossible: The existence of a primeval human pair, Adam and Eve, from whom all humanity is descended, who were created fully developed and lived in a pristine, primordial state, but fell from that state in an act of sinning; that Adam's sin is the immediate cause not only of death but also of the world's evil, sin and suffering; and that all humanity bears both the guilt and consequence of this sin. Yet if the Augustinian paradigm is no longer viable, how is the church to understand sin, evil, the Incarnation and the atonement? In this introduction to a projected book-length treatment of the atonement, Goetz argues that modern science's demonstration of the primordially violent nature of creaturely existence demands a long overdue re-thinking of these and other principal loci of Christian theology. Theology must acknowledge not only the "primordially violent nature of the biological existence" that the Son of God assumed, it must also do the "unthinkable": It must recognize "that with God's sovereign power comes God's terrible responsibility" for all that occurs in his world – even sin, suffering and evil.*

## Introduction

*"What a book a Devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horribly cruel works of nature."*

Charles Darwin

Western Trinitarian theology of whatever stripe: Roman Catholic, Neo-Orthodox Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Radical Orthodox Protestant, et. al., has been in fundamental denial for well over a century – denial because at its most basic level, it treats the atoning death of Jesus Christ as if Charles Darwin had never lived. As such, it finds itself curiously lopsided, affirming that the Son of God has come into the world, yet failing to integrate that affirmation with the primordially violent nature of the biological existence which he has assumed.

The denial to which I refer is not along the lines of those fundamentalists who view Darwin's theory of evolution as a conspiracy against their conceptions of the Bible's inerrancy. Even Trinitarians who have long since seemingly accommodated their faith in such doctrines as creation and biblical inspiration to Darwin's theory of evolution have not yet begun to confront the implications of such a terrible view of creation for the atoning death of Jesus Christ, thereby revealing the shallowness of their accommodation.

Darwin's theory of evolution is, of course, not without its legitimate critics. There are glaring gaps in the fossils records. Mathematicians have calculated that the earth is not nearly old enough for the extreme diversity of living beings to have appeared on it, especially given Darwin's picture of evolution grinding its wasteful, inefficient, and above all accidental course from a purposeless past to a purposeless future. Darwin's insistence upon this accidental course cannot account for the empirically discernible, highly intricate and interrelated structural order which must be in place for even the "simplest" life forms to exist. Even those neo-Darwinians committed to the absolute randomness of the evolutionary process reveal a certain disquiet as they resort to "metaphoric" language to allow them both to acknowledge a certain "intelligence" at work in genes without granting that they have made serious concessions to "Intelligent Design" theory.

However, the fact that Darwin's theory of evolution leaves questions unanswered and problems unresolved ought not to detract from the fact that it has made an irreversible contribution to our understanding of the terms on which biological existence has been granted, i.e., "natural selection" – or the description Darwin himself accepted as perhaps more descriptive, "the survival of the fittest."

My intention is not an apologetic one. I am not suggesting that a defense of Christianity be built upon some supposedly "truer" understanding of Darwin's theory of evolution, thus domesticating, indeed trivializing, Darwin's agonizing challenge. My intention is precisely the opposite. It is to show that Darwin's demonstration of the primordially violent nature of biological existence forces a radical, if long delayed, recasting of Trinitarian theology with reference to creation, evil, sin, suffering, and finally, the atoning death of Jesus Christ—that if we take Darwin's theory of evolution to heart, we will be awakened from our "dogmatic slumbers" and be forced to confront what centuries of Trinitarian theology would regard as unthinkable about God's responsibility for evil, sin, and suffering.

Given the hostile attitude of fundamentalist Trinitarian theology toward Darwinian science, non-fundamentalist Trinitarian theology, in order to distinguish itself from such hostility, has been quick to admit that faith in creation tells us little *per se* about the physical basis for creation—that this is the descriptive and theoretical province of science. The creation accounts in Genesis are not to be confused with a scientific natural history of the cosmos.

However, such an apparently modest acknowledgement of the limits of theological discourse can ironically provide cover for self-servingly sidestepping Darwin's challenge. To wit: Science and theology are utterly distinct undertakings. Science describes the physical basis for existence while theology probes the prior and higher question, "Why is there something and not nothing?" This argument might

provide a certain vacuous assurance for some species or other of philosophic theism; however, it is essentially beside the point for a theology that is in the service of the God declared by the Bible to be creator of heaven and earth. For if God has revealed himself in the history of Israel, old and new, then faith in God does not stand or fall on any scientific analysis of that which God has created. It is in fact presumptuous and dis-integrated for the faithful to stand in the presence of the God who their faith declares has dwelt among us in Jesus Christ and is ever present in the promptings of the Holy Spirit and deliberate whether there is still a place for him in the gaps of scientific theory, or in the philosophic question, "Why is there something and not nothing?"

The faithful know why there is something and not nothing as a matter of course, for fundamental to the self-disclosure of God is the recognition that God stands in ethical relation to his creation—"God saw that it was good"—and that God as an expression of his ethical commitment to creation sent his Son to die for sin. Thus, to know that God is creator of heaven and earth is to know why creation exists. It exists to be redeemed and brought to its fulfillment in and through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the real question for theology is a far less abstract question: What has God done in pursuance of his ethical commitment to his creation? With that nail well driven and firmly in place, the faithful do not have to resort to evasions of the clear and obvious fact that they cannot help but take the science of their time into account when they speak about creation, that is, faith in God the creator. Creation cannot even be contemplated except on the basis of some underlying understanding, whether it is scientific or pre-scientific. Simply put, one must have something in mind about how creation works—irrespective of how "correct" or "incorrect" it might be—when one affirms God is, so to speak, its ethical Lord. As such, theology cannot avoid being involved in the question, "What is creation really like?" Of course, it must remain cognizant that every understanding of creation is historically and culturally limited. But the question cannot be answered with an uncritical affirmation of the biblical creation accounts as though our understanding of creation comes to us through the self-disclosure of God. It is the other way around. Our understanding of creation is conditioned by our inherited understanding of the world. God does not give us propositional revelation which might provide data about the cosmos; nor does God give us myths, philosophies, science, or any other cognitive artifact of culture. God gives us himself, and when we speak about God's self-giving we do not speak with the perspective of the angels but as people of the first or twenty-first century.

For example, traditional Western hamartiology is predicated on an Augustinian reading of the pertinent biblical texts as if they constituted a natural history, i.e., a natural history which, among other things, locates the origin of the savagery of nature in the sin of a historical Adam and Eve. This is biologically as much in error as the

Babylonian cosmology. We do not reside within a firmament suspended amidst the waters it holds at bay, the sun does not revolve around the earth, and sin did not introduce violence into creation. How long can Trinitarian theology, which is dead right on the question of the divinity of Christ, operate in a schizoid manner *vis-à-vis* the nature and origin of the sin for which Jesus Christ atoned? That is, knowing that a historical Adam and Eve never existed, how long can Trinitarian theology persevere in a conception of sin as if its origins lay exclusively in a primordial act? How long is Trinitarian theology to tie itself to the moribund exculpatory theodicy of the Augustinian tradition which portrays God as wholly without any responsibility for sin, portraying it, rather as wholly the result of “the fall?”

Alternatively, many liberal theologians embrace a scientific-philosophical vision of creation so unreservedly as to assert that naturalism must determine, indeed censor, what faith can say in response to God’s self-disclosure. In “process theology” this leads to a theodicy which conjures a God of limited power—from the biblical perspective, no God at all. That God is the *almighty* creator of heaven and earth is axiomatic for the Christian faith. This is the indubitable biblical witness to say nothing of the well-nigh universal proclamation of the Christian church. Yet with God’s sovereign power comes God’s terrible responsibility. In the face of all that goes wrong in creation, the almighty God does not retreat to a place of diminished responsibility given the limits creation imposes upon him—there are no such limitations. The hard truth is that to say that God is the almighty creator is to say that the buck stops with God. There are no theodicies in the Bible. For all theodicies finally boil down to one or another attempt to excuse God for the existence of evil with the claim that God’s power is limited. In the last analysis the Bible’s only “theodicy” is a stark refusal to make any excuse of God at all. Per Deutero-Isaiah, “I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord who do all these things” (Isaiah 45:6-7).

This is not God’s last word, of course. It is a preparatory word pointing to the coming of Jesus Christ. If God the creator were not the God of Jesus Christ, he might have rested on the claim: “I am God. I know what I am doing. I answer for it to no one.” The answer God gave to Job might have been the only answer human consternation over God’s often tormenting providential rule would ever receive: “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?” (Job 40:2) However, in the light of God’s plunging himself in the person of Jesus Christ into the morass of biological existence, and in the process revealing that his sovereign dignity does not exclude his suffering with us, it becomes manifest that though God will not answer Job on Job’s terms, God will answer Job on God’s terms.

His answer is not theodicy; it is atonement, which can only be distorted if it is accompanied by spurious attempts to reach beyond Jesus Christ to some other and thus

inevitably faithless human attempt to justify God beyond God's own self-justification in Jesus Christ.

It is not that we should take our lead in these matters from Charles Darwin. However, Darwin does constitute a painful spur to Trinitarian theology to reconsider what it has been doing all these years in its attempt to justify God by such contrivances as the fall and the free will defense. The atoning work of Jesus Christ takes its power from God's own recognition that if God wills to confront his creature's victimization by and questioning about evil, sin and suffering, then God will do so as a sacrificial victim of creation.

A word to those who might wish to mount a rear guard action against the crisis Darwin's theory of evolution poses for Trinitarian theology and observe that like all human ideas, his is but a finite human theory. It may well be supplanted by a less disrupting scientific theory. Who would have imagined in the middle of the nineteenth century that Newton's seemingly indubitable theory of gravity would be supplanted as it was by Einstein's? Perhaps we need not be fully awakened from our dogmatic slumbers by Darwin, for perhaps he too will pass away.

It would be facile, however, to suppose that everything that science has taught us over the past several centuries will be subject to radical revision. The nature of the cosmos presents us with an enormous mystery, and one suspects that the cosmos will forever confound a "theory of everything." Yet science is doubtless correct about the solar system. There will be no sea changes in our understanding as when the Copernican system replaced the Ptolemaic. Louis Pasteur's germ theory of many diseases is also doubtless correct. In like manner, Darwin's contention that when human beings first appeared on the planet, they were subject to the process of natural selection which mandates that biological survival is a deadly contest, a contest in which all living beings since the first emergence of life are inescapably engaged, is as doubtless correct as any historically conditioned judgment can be.

It might well be the case that neo-Darwinians have engaged in what are in the last analysis, metaphysical and not scientific speculations concerning the ultimately accidental character of the cosmos. As such, their metaphysical assumptions are as indeterminate and speculative as any metaphysics. On such matters, one can rationally agree or disagree; however, one cannot rationally affirm that the sun revolves around the moon or that gonorrhoea is a function of the imbalance of the humors of the body to be remedied by bleeding, or that the first man and woman sprang *de novo* from the earth—perfectly innocent, perfectly free—and then by sinning changed the far more benign natural order which God originally created into the savage order of nature Darwin's theory of evolution describes.

I am not tilting at wind mills or knocking down straw men. I am aware that no Trinitarian theology which is remotely in phase with science interprets the biblical account of Adam and Eve literally. Rather, the account is generally read as a mythopoetic representation of the universal plight of humanity in its broken relationship with God. As such, the account is not the first chapter of a divinely authorized, indeed divinely authored, natural history of humanity. Non-fundamentalist Trinitarian theologians likely all agree that there was never a time when the first pair of human being lived in deathless innocence in the Garden of Eden. However, what is not forcefully and honestly confronted by Western Trinitarian theology is that such an acknowledgement forces upon those who make it, not just a rejection of the traditional Augustinian understanding of sin and the recognition that we are back to square one on the theodicy question, but also a radical rethinking of the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

Put as simply and directly as possible, the issue is as follows: Human beings evolved from pre-human primates—primates which were incapable of sophisticated, linguistic expression, incapable of comprehending such abstract formulations as, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Genesis 2:16-17). When a creature appeared that was capable of comprehending such a formulation it was a product of the evolutionary process in all its violence and was involved in the brute biological given that it is necessary to compete, often ruthlessly, to survive. Quite obviously such a creature could not have been the primal source of the planet’s terrible violence, to say nothing of the primal violence postulated by the Big Bang theory. The violent order of creation renders the idea that human beings could ever have lived blamelessly a simple absurdity. If we are biologically, even cosmically, preordained to violence by God the creator, who else but God could be ultimately responsible for the misery that this violence imposes on all living things?

That which we call “sin” is bound up with—it did not create—the natural human response to violence; that is, to protect oneself at all costs, one must react not only in kind but act preemptively and therefore exacerbate nature’s violence and the misery consequent to it . If one says one believes in God, one has the moral responsibility to deal with the question, “Who can atone for our primordial predicament which requires that in order to live we must take life?” If we dare to confront this question, perhaps we will discover even deeper dimensions of the righteousness of God.