

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE BIOLOGICAL SCENE

by Peter Baelz

Abstract. The interaction of scientific, ethical, and theological concerns raises several distinct but related problems of continuity and discontinuity. The theologian's task is to articulate a unifying vision of God and the world. He must do justice to the discontinuities which exist between the sociobiological and the ethical points of view, but he cannot accept them as ultimate. Within his own discipline he is already confronted with analogous problems of continuity and discontinuity, for example, between creation and redemption. Concepts associated with love, such as freedom, risk, and patience, may prove more persuasive and coherent than concepts associated with omnipotence.

I should like to give a theological comment from a Christian point of view on the relationships between sociobiology, ethics, and theology, which have been explored in this issue of *Zygon*. I propose to restrict my remarks to a single question or rather to a single family of questions—referring to them as the problems of continuity and discontinuity. They arise in various connections, such as the relation between nature and history, events and actions, past and future. In theology they arise in connection with nature and God, creation and redemption.

Let us begin with sociobiology and ethics. Here discontinuity is of primary importance. There is a logical break between the “is” of sociobiological explanation and the “ought” of ethical evaluation. The sociobiologist may explain certain examples of other-directed behavior in terms of self-directed behavior, and in so doing may use the language of altruism and selfishness. Strictly speaking, however, these concepts properly belong to the sphere of intentional action, in which the agent's point of view is primary. The assumption of ethics is that human beings are in some sense authors of their own actions, that they

Peter Baelz, Dean of Durham Cathedral, Durham DH1 3EQ, England, presented this paper at a meeting of the Science and Religion Forum on “The Ethical Challenge of Contemporary Biology” in Durham, England, 24-26 March 1983.

[*Zygon*, vol. 19, no. 2 (June 1984).]

© 1984 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0044-5614

can distance themselves from their own instincts and inclinations and can determine what to do in terms of reasons and motives. Thus sociobiology is one thing, ethics is another. If sociobiology is to allow ethics room in which to conduct its own affairs, it must refrain from any takeover attempt to make ethics something different from what it claims to be. Sociobiology may alert us to the need to be on guard against self-deception. It may delineate the context in which moral decisions have to be made. But it must recognize the boundaries beyond which its own writ does not run. Sociobiology and ethics are discontinuous.

Turning now to a theological point of view, and assuming that it is the task of the theologian to talk of ordinary things in their relation to God, thus hoping to illuminate our understanding both of God and of the world, we find the theologian unwilling to accept as a last word the discontinuity between sociobiology and ethics. He is, as Hefner has suggested, predisposed to see an initial and a final unity between what is and what ought to be, if for no other reason than that belief in the Christian God, whatever else it may involve, is belief in One who is Alpha and Omega, Creator as well as Redeemer, on whom all else depends and in whom all else finds its ultimate meaning and significance. Thus the theologian needs to tell a story of the evolution of nature and the history of humankind which has a unifying theme and a discernible continuity while at the same time doing justice to the emergence at different levels of the radically new.

Already, however, the theologian is faced with his own specifically theological problem of continuity and discontinuity. How does he see the relation between creation and redemption? Do they not all too easily fall apart? It is no accident that Marcion, to whom is attributed one of the earliest Christian heresies, could not reconcile God the Father of Jesus Christ with the Lord God of the Old Testament scriptures. If we look at the way the world goes, its tale of ills and accidents can suggest a cosmic sadist or a spiteful imbecile rather than an all-good and all-powerful God. C. S. Lewis once wrote of the fear which nature might arouse in a religiously inclined person: "My real fear is not of materialism. If it were true, we . . . could get out, get from under the harrow. An overdose of sleeping pills would do it. I am more afraid that we are really rats in a trap. Or, worse still, rats in a laboratory. Someone said, I believe, 'God always geometrizes.' Supposing the truth were 'God always vivisects?'" (1961, 26).

The imperfection of the world has always been one of the starting points for Christian affirmation of transcendence. Perfection is to be found in God, not in the world. However, the perceived imperfection of the world can be understood in either a positive or a negative way: it

can represent work in progress or work impaired. Does the world point forward to a consummation in God's kingdom, or is the world so incoherent that reality must be other and elsewhere? Clearly both positive and negative aspects of the world need to be taken into account in telling the Christian story. Equally clearly Christianity has always held to the goodness of creation over against all views that creation itself represents a fall from grace. But this leaves the Christian with what Austin Farrer has called "the strange appeal from God to God, which no religion can wholly escape. . . . Here is the paradox—if the God who saves us is the author of nature, then the evil from which he saves us is part and parcel of the nature he has made" (1962, 13-14).

Frequently Christian tradition has extended the theme of the fallenness of humanity and applied it to the world too. Thus nature itself is said to be infected with the consequences of human sin. Alternatively, the world is said to be under the control of Satan, and disaster and disease are instances of demonic rather than divine activity. Obviously, the scientific knowledge which we now possess of the history of the universe makes it impossible to ascribe its imperfections to the consequences of sin, unless one permits some arbitrary "precosmic" fall. Therefore the themes of creation, fall, and redemption have to be given a different development and harmony, and the way in which the world has come to be must be allowed to affect our understanding of the Creator, even though we take as our paradigm what we perceive of him and his activity in the person and work of Jesus Christ. All that I wish to do now is to make a number of suggestions where and how a modification of the traditional Christmas story might be made.

First, if the existence of anything in the world as we know it means that it persists in doing its own thing, then survival, in some sense of that word, is a basic and natural value. It might be said to provide an underlying and continuous theme. If anything is to survive it must find a way of persisting in face of the limitations and obstacles which circumscribe and impede its activity. Now, when human beings come on the scene, survival takes on more than a merely physical or biological significance. To survive as a *human* being calls for other values than those which have been biologically built into the human organism. For example, purely selfish interest needs to give way to concern for the common good. Put more sharply, only those who are prepared to lose their lives will find their lives. Thus in one sense there is a continuity of survival-value, although in another sense self-concern must give way to a larger and deeper concern for the well-being of others. "Self-sacrifice is the supreme test of love and even the supreme expression of love, but it is not the supreme fruition of love" (Mitchell 1980, 143).

Second, the idea of the fallenness of humanity may be associated, at least in part, with our failure to respond to the new challenges of newly

perceived conditions. When survival at the human level calls for responses of a different order from those appropriate at lower levels, to persist in the old manner of response may be a refusal to hear the voice of God. What is more, the move from the old to the new may be marked by a radical discontinuity, such that the language of salvation and re-creation is more to the point than that of development and growth. And the final discontinuity may be the acceptance of biological death as the possibility of resurrection to new and eternal life.

Finally, we may ask whether the theological story which incorporates the millions-of-years-long process of physical and biological world-making with the briefer episode of human history has anything to suggest about the character of God himself. Traditional ideas of God have concentrated on his independence and power. Thus, although the world is totally dependent on him, he is in no way dependent on the world. Again, he utters a word of command, and what he commands immediately comes to pass. A very different picture, however, is presented by the world as we know it. Here one cannot but be impressed by its features of time and chance, of trial and error, of experiment and learning. What sort of God is it who creates in this fashion? Perhaps the answer is to be found if, from the norm of his activity in Jesus, we make primary the concepts associated with love rather than with power. Love needs to give freedom and independence, even while seeking to establish a deeper relation of interdependence. Love has to take risks and needs time in which to accomplish its purposes. Love lets go in order to win back. Love suffers as well as acts. In short, the features of the world which the sciences reveal to us are perhaps easier to reconcile with a God who creates in and for love than with a God whose every command is instantaneously and ineluctably carried out.

If God is love, he will do all that love can do, but there are limits to what love can do. Some of these limits, perhaps, are written into the continuities and discontinuities of his creative and redemptive venture with the world.

REFERENCES

- Farrer, Austin. 1962. *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*. London: Collins.
 Lewis, C. S. 1961. *A Grief Observed*. London: Faber and Faber.
 Mitchell, Basil. 1980. *Morality: Religious and Secular*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.