

A NEW SYNTHESIS OF KNOWLEDGE AND FAITH

by *Gerd Theissen*

The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion. By PHILIP HEFNER. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993. xvii, 297 pages. \$18.00 (paper).

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This book provides the reader with a fascinating synthesis of modern thought and theology. It is characteristic of this modern thought that it does not represent a self-contained outline; rather it is a program that seeks to persuade us, not because it is irrefutable but, on the contrary, because it is open to correction. It represents itself as a theory to be tested. At the same time, it challenges our thoughts and encourages us to think further.

I asked myself three questions as I read this book: What cognitive tensions are synthesized in this book? How does the program proposed in this book differ from a competing program which presumes to treat the same conflicts, namely, the significant program of demythologizing set forth by Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976)? Is there a point where the tensions that have been synthesized could be and should be formulated more sharply? My main emphasis in the following will lie on these three questions. I will inquire as to the way in which Philip Hefner deals with the distinctions between God and world, human being and nature, myth and kerygma.

I.

The book combines three areas of experience and knowledge which, for many people, stand in insurmountable conflict. The first area to be mentioned is the natural scientific view of nature. The author,

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within the framework of evolutionary thought, views nature as a unity which includes human culture as a phase of evolution. The task, then, is to comprehend the cosmic process as something meaningful in and of itself rather than to accept the alternative view that we live in a meaningless cosmos into which we alone bring meaning. On the contrary, we perceive the meaning of the cosmos and at the same time we make it actual. We perceive it because nature is creation. We make it actual because we are cocreators, and as such we are not only the object, but also the subject of the process of creation. Such an interpretation of nature goes beyond the natural scientific view. Hefner's proposal of a meaningful interpretation of nature proceeds in two steps which, in my opinion, must be clearly distinguished. On the one hand, he sees a teleonomy in the structures and processes, that is, a causal, explainable, objective purpose which cannot be attributed to any purpose-creating subject. As soon as a human being steps onto the stage of nature, these teleonomic structures and processes, by defining values and purposes, provide a means to orient the self. Human teleology in this respect extends the natural teleonomy. On the other hand, Hefner goes further and classifies all of nature in a comprehensive teleology—nature is the instrument through which God's goal is realized. This goal is not a predetermined salvation plan of the human race; rather, it is the free cooperation of creator and cocreator in their efforts for nature's preservation and development. It is important to distinguish sharply between these two steps in fashioning a meaningful interpretation of nature. The first is linked to natural scientific thinking, the second goes beyond it.

In the comprehensive portrait of natural evolution, Hefner sketches a picture of the human being as a creature who, on the basis of a unique symbiosis of genetic and cultural information, introduces two distinguishing characteristics into the process of nature: freedom and altruism. A causally determined process leads to the origin of freedom, defined as the competence to choose between behavioral alternatives, to act on this choice, and to justify the action. In this manner, human beings become, through the evolutionary process, genetically competitive living beings who cooperate with one another altruistically. While natural scientifically inspired portraits of human beings are often reductionistic, that is, they look at the humans as strongly determined and deny them true altruism, these two characteristics—freedom and altruism—are, for Hefner, essential marks of human being. They are not scientific facts; rather, they are part of human self-awareness: for example, the present ecological crisis characterizes human existence as the condition in which

humans have no choice but to take responsibility as free living beings for the further course of evolution, and, to this purpose, they must cooperate with one another.

The integration of freedom and altruism in the natural process of evolution is made possible through Hefner's concept of God; if nature is regarded as God's creation, then nature and human existence from the very outset will be thought of together. But this concept of God has neither grown out of natural scientific awareness, nor out of human consciousness, but out of mythic tradition. This book introduces the mythic tradition in a dual manner. On the one hand, it explains in an evolutionistic frame the transition from biological to cultural evolution. Hefner supports the theory that in prehistoric times, during a crisis of population growth, human beings would have found new forms of cooperation through the introduction of myths and rituals. Rituals of sacrifice lead to cooperation during the hunt; apodictically moralistic laws lead to successful control of instinctive impulses. Myth and ritual, the core of religion, are thus functionally interpreted; they have a function in the process of development of the most fundamental human characteristics—in freedom as the distancing factor to natural drives and in altruism as the ability to cooperate. A "nobler" function can hardly be thought of. It is, however, a function of the past. Although in this context myth appears to be an object of explanation in a more comprehensive evolutionary frame, in other places it is introduced as the comprehensive frame itself which explains the whole evolutionary process: God has created this evolutionary process in order to bring forth human beings as God's free cocreators. This mythic tradition contains truth that is still valid today. Myth may establish a connection between our experience of the world and our experience of ourselves with a final reality, with "the way things really are." This formula is introduced as a new equivalent for the concept of God. If human beings become aware of their obligation to altruism, they will interpret this obligation with the help of a myth as being in accordance with "the way things really are." Thus, they fulfill the will of God for the entire creation, namely, that it should bring forth freedom and altruism. Two mythical symbols of biblical tradition facilitate such a religious interpretation—human freedom through the symbol of creation in God's image and human altruism through the symbol of Jesus' death as a sacrifice; both symbols are referred to an ultimate reality.

We find in Hefner's proposal a fascinating linking together of natural science, human experience of the self, and mythical tradition. The old conflicts between these fields seem to be solved. Sometimes a natural scientific concept seems to form the framework,

within which human self-experience and mythological tradition are interpreted as further elements of an unfinished process of evolution. At other times, a humanistic self-understanding appears to stand at the focal point, since the human being asks questions about the conditions and potential of freedom and altruism. Cosmos and myth are explained with these human factors in mind. However, in my opinion, the decisive point is the perspective of the mythic tradition, because here religion fulfills its ancient purpose of showing human beings their place in the cosmos.

II.

This last suggestion is the basis for comparing Philip Hefner's approach with Rudolf Bultmann's program of demythologizing. Both seek a solution to the cognitive conflicts between modern science and Christian faith. Both provide a theory of myth. Both support a theory of freedom. Both are deeply rooted in Lutheran tradition. But their answers proceed in opposite directions.

The program of demythologizing sought to make Christian faith independent of the results of modern science and of the hypotheses of historical research. For Bultmann, the only place where faith becomes relevant and decisive is in human existence, the life of the individual. This human existence he declared to be in opposition to nature, since authentic living could only be imagined as differentiation from the world (*Entweltlichung*), as the realization of an a-cosmic freedom. In contrast to this view, Hefner interprets human existence as part of a comprehensive evolution precisely in order to show the dignity of human beings as free and humane creatures. Freedom has emerged from nature and finds its fulfillment in responsibility for nature.

Within the program of demythologizing, myth and kerygma were put in opposition to each other. Christian kerygma, as a call from transcendence, made use of the mythology of its time to transform human existence. In contrast, Hefner emphasizes the idea of continuity between myth in general and Christian kerygma, which he subsumes under the concept of myth. He sees the same function in archaic myths and rituals as in the basic biblical symbols of being created in God's image and the sacrificial death of Christ. They serve to transform human beings into free and altruistic creatures.

In short, the program of demythologizing took its point of departure from dualistic thinking that Hefner attempts to overcome. God and the world are not placed in opposition to each other, rather God is "the way things really are." God communicates through nature.

In the same way, human beings and nature are not placed in opposition to each other, since humans are a phase of natural evolution. Myth and kerygma do not stand in conflict with each other; rather, kerygma, that is, Christian myth, accomplishes the task that has driven myth from the very beginning: the realization of a truly humane human being. Furthermore, the dualistic distinction between individual and society is also missing in Hefner's approach. Human freedom is more than the realization of the life of the individual, it is also challenged by the collective demands of the ecological crisis. A tendency of his "monistic" interpretation is that it always harmonizes traditional dualisms without simplifying them. Within a "monistic" interpretation the differences between God and world, nature and human being, myth and kerygma are not ignored, but, rather, they find a new interpretation. The question is whether the differences are too strongly reduced in reaction to traditional dualistic theology. In what follows, I will put this question to the understanding of God, the understanding of humankind, and the understanding of myth.

III.

The Difference between God and World. The difference between God and world seems almost to be rejected when God is described as "the way things really are." This sounds very much like God is another concept for reality, unless a distinction is made between "the way things are" and "the way things *really* are." But what in particular would define this distinction?

In my opinion, the first difference consists of an epistemological distinction between the "way the things are for us" and "the way things really are as such." Especially in an evolutionary approach, every view of the world is, at best, an approximate adaptation to reality. There is a distinction to be made between appearance and reality. But if knowledge is a specific form of adaptation (namely, the adapting of our sensorial and cognitive structure to reality), we then need to go one step further and should not only, epistemologically speaking, distinguish between our view of the world and reality. Even more, in a second step we will have to distinguish within reality itself between those things and processes that need to adapt to something else and that to which they adapt. This "ultimate reality" is that to which all must adapt, but which itself does not stand under any requirement to adapt. For this "ultimate reality" there is only one appropriate name: God. As long as adaptation only takes place through selection between variants, it makes sense to define God as

the reality behind all selective processes (Burhoe 1981). Finally, there is an axiological difference to be postulated. We experience the correction of our views from the “way the things are” to “the way things really are” as an imperative of greater priority than any other. I will demonstrate this with the help of the following example. Imagine that a doctor would show us to a room where a man is hooked up to a lot of equipment and sophisticated devices and tell us that this patient experiences complete fulfillment of all his needs and desires, in short, that he feels he is in paradise. Almost all of us would prefer our actual situation to the existence of this man, even if we experience our situation as painfully limited. The obligation to live consciously in a world we experience as reality is more important than any pleasure that appears to us to be illusory.¹ We become aware of the imperative of truth, that the “way things really are” is more important to us than anything else. At the same time, we realize the high value of freedom; a human being manipulated to feel “paradise” has lost control.

Therefore, it makes sense to assume epistemological, ontological, and axiological differences between God and the world. Biblical tradition emphasizes this difference; it portrays God as transcendent. One could criticize Hefner for giving too little credence to this transcendence. Nevertheless, he certainly is right when he demonstrates that the biblical tradition does not only speak about God’s distance with respect to this world but also about God’s nearness. In the Bible, the world and humans become the sole “partners” of God, since the divine beings have been abolished. The relationship to this God, who is transcendent and yet deeply caring for the world, defines our place within nature according to the Bible.

The Difference between Human Beings and Nature. The difference between human beings and nature is also reduced by Hefner in comparison with biblical tradition by embedding freedom and altruism in evolution. Surprisingly, neither of these human characteristics is systematically related to the other. This could easily be remedied, however, with a little modification of the theory—what follows are a few ideas along this line.

First of all, we must emphasize that we become aware of freedom in a way that is quite different from our empirical awareness of nature. This is the reason why human freedom is ever and again denied, most often when theories from the natural sciences are invoked. Freedom is not an object derived from our give-and-take with the world, but rather an implicitly given presupposition of that process. Every scientific argument and discussion presupposes freedom. If our arguments were fully determined, we would not be

able to weigh them against each other. They simply would happen, as natural processes happen. A stronger argument would not persist through its greater cogency, but simply because it was predetermined to be stronger by some antecedent event. Freedom is the transcendental prerequisite of any argumentation.

To explain a transcendental human experience of self with terms derived from nature, which we experience in a very different way, might seem strange. It is important to realize that this interpretation does not reduce freedom in a naturalistic sense, but on the contrary, if we endow nature with the possibility of producing freedom, nature becomes even more mysterious and more awesome.

I want to carry Hefner's thoughts on how freedom is embedded in nature further at two points in order to show the inner connection between freedom and altruism. Whereas precultural evolution proceeds by selection, which is experienced by living beings in a passive way, human freedom consists in the ability to transform such passively experienced selection into active and conscious selection between alternative ways of thinking and behaving. This freedom is freedom for good and evil; human beings have the opportunity either to sacrifice hypotheses in place of human lives or the converse, human lives in place of hypotheses. In both cases humans, as subjects, carry selection processes forward. If one understands God as Ralph Burhoe does—as the power standing behind all selective processes—then human beings really represent God's image: they are "selected coselectors" with fantastic potentials for good and evil.

The possibility for the good, in my opinion, is expressed in the ability of a human being to reduce the pressure of selection for other human beings, thus strengthening and protecting the weak and endangered who would not survive in nature. In short, the opportunity for good is contained in altruism. Altruism requires the pursuit of the well-being of others independently from one's own well-being, even at the cost of one's own well-being. Altruism thus leads to a realm beyond the biological principle of selection. The presupposition of human freedom is this, that the ability to select between alternative ideas and behaviors may contribute to reducing the experience of passively being selected against. But how are human beings motivated to use this ability for the good of other human beings?

In order to understand this, we must compare human freedom with another aspect of evolution. As Hefner demonstrates, there are some phenomena in nature that have no value for survival, that is, they cannot be explained by the principle of natural selection. The splendid colors of deep-sea fish, for example, can hardly be called a

survival trait. They develop in the dark and therefore may be interpreted as an expressive phenomenon, an organism's expression without "purpose." Such expressive phenomena seem to be of little importance to biological evolution, but to human beings, they are essential. It is the essence of human freedom that we express ourselves consciously. Ethical behavior, esthetic creativity, and scientific progress cannot be measured only by their survival value. As expressions of human freedom they have a value of their own. Modern culture has made self-fulfillment one of its highest values and this is not a degenerate phenomenon. It realizes a chance offered by evolution, in this case, to develop consciously aspects that point beyond nature's principle of selection. This may lead, of course, to the narcissism that sometimes goes hand in hand with the culture of modern self-fulfillment and self-realization. The same phenomenon, however, might just as well lead to the insight that not only one's own life but also the life of others as well has an end in itself. Altruism is an expression of this insight. Other human beings represent a value in and of themselves independent of their contribution to the survival of family, society, and culture.

This concept of human freedom interacts with our concept of creation. The formula describing human beings as "created cocreators" expresses more than the formula "selected coselector." The selection of opinions and behavior is directed by goals; it distinguishes between methods and objectives. However, if it is true that human beings express themselves freely through the things they create, then it does not make sense to distinguish between methods and objectives. Methods and objectives cannot be separated anymore; anything human beings create becomes an expression of abundance and prosperity. But if human creation is cocreation, then we might just as well regard nature as God's self-expression—nature has a purpose in itself. This implies important consequences for the concept of myth, because if myth is related to nature and nature's evolution with strict consistency, myth may be explained through its function as well as through its relation to expressive phenomena, that is, it may be explained as the discovery of something that in itself is purposeful.

The Difference between Myth and Kerygma. As I said before, Hefner does not distinguish between myth and kerygma. By *kerygma* (Greek word for "proclamation"), I refer to the essential message propounded by the earliest Christian community. He treats myth and ritual together as phenomena that exercised comparable functions from the Stone Age on through the time of early Christianity. They

transform human beings into cooperative and altruistic living beings. In contrast, I would stress the novelty of Christian myth and ritual more strongly. They constitute an element that is new enough to justify a terminological distinction between myth and kerygma, that latter being the Christian transformation of myth. I want to demonstrate this using the Christian concepts of sacrifice and commandment as examples.

Concerning the function of sacrificial rites, Hefner has presented a concept which, in several respects, is very close to Burkert's analysis (1972; 1983; 1990), which essentially confirms Hefner. Since Burkert began his investigation with the practice of sacrificial rituals in antiquity, rather than in prehistoric times, as Hefner does, he did not have to rely on an analysis of prehistoric procedures, something that is very difficult for us to do with reasonable certainty. According to Burkert, the function performed by ritual sacrifice consisted in the redirection of destructive aggression away from the community of hunters toward the slaughtered animal, thus enabling human beings to cooperate during the hunt and to share the prey. Later urban cultures, relying on agriculture, retained bloody sacrifices of animals for precisely the same reason. Without being aware of it, it was because of this latent function of sacrifices that they performed those rituals and considered them to be obligatory. In antiquity, people felt that without sacrifices the commonwealth was threatened. Early Christianity put an end to sacrifices, as we see in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews, which asserts that through the unique self-sacrifice of Jesus it has become unnecessary to perform sacrifices of animals over and over again. What is the reason for this change? The answer is that sacrifices, together with their latent function, express the evident intention that sacrifice entails killing in order to save lives. This is a way to give expression to the rigid law of biological evolution which all living beings are invariably subject to, that life is always life at the expense of other lives. At this point, the kerygma of early Christianity offers a counterthesis: The sacrifice of Jesus is not understood as killing others in order to improve one's own life, but rather as self-sacrifice in order to improve the lives of others. It is a myth, an archetype of radical altruism, and as such it counteracts the myths and the sacrificial rituals on which, for centuries, life in complex social orders was based. The message is that life does not have to be lived at the expense of other lives.

Early Christian kerygma has a new message concerning the phenomenon of commandments as well. With good reason, Hefner derives the apodictic form of religiously founded moral commandments from the necessity to counteract instinctive impulses with

culturally sound imperatives of comparable force. In this case as well, I would ascribe to commandments a manifest intention over and above their latent function (of which people are unaware). They intend to safeguard the status of other human beings as ends in themselves, that is, as God's image. It is no coincidence that the apodictic prohibition against murder in Gen. 9:6 is grounded in the character of human beings as created in God's image. Consequently, it is irrelevant whether the commandments are understood as promoting the recognition of human beings as ends in themselves, created in God's image, or as flowing from this recognition. In any case, myth is not only functional, but also "revelational." It not only changes human life, it also opens our eyes to the value of human life. As in the case with myth and selection, early Christianity also proposed a fundamental alteration in how we understand the relationship of human beings to commandments. This is reflected in Paul's critique of the law. Commandments appear to be given from outside, as juridical sources that enjoin death and are hostile to life precisely because they confront human beings, who, being "flesh," protest notoriously against God's will. Paul senses that some of the energy of flesh (*sarx*) which is hostile to God, adheres in the same commandments that intend to work against the impulses of this *sarx*. Paul is aware of the latent function of apodictic commandments. Precisely in that awareness the law loses its unconditional power. A human being who is transformed by the spirit fulfills the law spontaneously, but only insofar as the law functions prosocially. The Love Commandment becomes the hermeneutical rule for interpreting the law. Even if there is no consensus concerning Paul's critique of the law, the existence of that critique can hardly be denied.

In my opinion, early Christian kerygma is a myth, but it contains a transformation of the mythical tradition, a transformation which begins in the Old Testament. Therefore, there is justification also for distinguishing between myth and kerygma. The exact terms used to describe these differences are not the critical issue.

I have tried to grasp some of Philip Hefner's ideas and develop them further. He does discern the differences between God and world, human beings and nature, myth and kerygma, and I share his intention not to let these differences become grievous fractures. Reality is a unity. Whatever we may learn about reality through different areas of experience—natural sciences, experience of the self, and mythical thinking—all point to the same reality. Its unity becomes all the more amazing the more clearly we emphasize the differences in our experiences and perceptions.

A personal remark is appropriate in conclusion: This book con-

tains a synthesis of modern thinking and theology for which I have searched for a long time. It does not provide a final picture of reality but rather presents a program that is open to correction and suggestions for investigating and interpreting reality. This is why this approach fascinates me so much. For this same reason, it might very well be that I do not see some weaknesses of this program that would be apparent to others. Because I share this program, I want it to succeed. I am partisan. For me, this book, along with many other articles from the circle of *Zygon* contributors, sketches a theology which will carry us over the threshold of the third millennium and into the future.

NOTE

1. I take this parable from Spaemann (1986, 30f.).

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