

JAMES HUCHINGSON'S CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

by Ann Milliken Pederson

Abstract. James Huchingson's book, *Pandemonium Tremendum: Chaos and Mystery in the Life of God*, is an artistic improvisation on recurrent themes in the dialogue between religion and science. Around the *cantus firmus* of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* Huchingson composes a grand metaphysical composition that is glorious in its detail, magnificent in its overarching themes, and careful in its attention to context. Much like a suspended chord between two different harmonies, Huchingson's theological composition dangles the reader in the tensions of religion and science, modernity and postmodernity, particulars and universals, God and the world. Although this book is surely a cutting-edge development in the ongoing corpus of religion and science, I am most excited about its constructive theological provocations. This is a work in progress, a composition in the making.

Keywords: chaos; complexity; improvisation; metaphor; metaphysics; particularities; universals.

James Huchingson's *Pandemonium Tremendum: Chaos and Mystery in the Life of God* (2001) is an artistic improvisation on recurrent themes in the dialogue between religion and science. His sources for composition are the sciences of information and complexity, from which he constructs understandings of the relationship between God and the world. The *cantus firmus* (foundation) of this opus is the primordial chaos—the *Pandemonium Tremendum*—the source and matrix from which God creates, provides, and brings forth life to the created order. Around this central theme Huchingson composes a grand metaphysical composition that “is an account of the totality of things in their deepest associations, that is, a general description of the *system* of reality. But as we shall attempt to show, the telling clue to the life of God does indeed lie in the *particularities* of the

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vast throngs of beings constituting this system of creation” (Huchingson 2001, xii). This grand composition is glorious in its detail, magnificent in its overarching themes, and careful in its attention to context. We will be the richer for listening intently to this music. My critical comments are in the spirit of a fellow composer and improviser who is delighted by this new composition. The disagreements and tensions between us are not of a major chord but only of a minor tonality. I encourage the reader to listen to Huchingson with expectant ears, however; for as our composer and guide, Huchingson notes that this is finally “a study of the way things go and how they hang together and sometimes fall apart” (p. xii). I am as hopeful that he brings insight into not only how the music holds together but also what happens when the music stops.

Much like a suspended chord between two different harmonies, Huchingson’s theological composition dangles the reader in the tensions of religion and science, modernity and postmodernity, particulars and universals, God and the world. The score used for this metaphorical composition charts the territories of information science, computers, and complexity science. Where the consonant harmonies of modernity once held firm, the shifting, moving, chaotic, rhythms of living systems now provide the musings for Huchingson’s theological speculation about the relationship between God and the world. In these exciting and provocative new worlds of chaos and complexity, Huchingson demonstrates insights into the way the world is in relationship to God and how we are in relationship to each other and the whole of creation. As we shall see, the music that he writes has been thematically developed by others like him along the way. He acknowledges the company of such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Paul Tillich, Alfred North Whitehead, Gregory Bateson, and Claude Shannon. Huchingson’s book belongs to the great history of metaphysical masterpieces.

While this book is surely on the cutting edge of the ongoing corpus of religion-and-science dialogue, I am most excited about its constructive theological potential. The raw materials for a constructive theology are the data of particular traditions situated in their contemporary contexts. In this manner, he follows Tillich’s method of correlation. He notes that while the forms remain, the content changes. Huchingson defines constructive theology as “the enterprise of articulating the truths of the tradition in a new and experimental way” (p. 24). As with any new artistic exploration, exciting and surprising opportunities unfold themselves and invite further exploration. The power of his performance is in its provisionality. Like Whitehead’s *Adventures of Ideas* (1933), Huchingson’s playful project propels the religion-and-science dialogue into new territory. Huchingson’s metaphysical constructs describe both human and transhuman reality; they apply to “every puff of existence.” Like Whitehead’s airplane ride (Whitehead [1929] 1978, 5), Huchingson takes off from the

ground of systems theory into the speculative air of theological construction, to come back down again to the details of the world. The value of this project is in the play, in the ride. Huchingson takes us into territory that gives us a new view of where we have been and where we might go. This is theological construction of the best kind. This book is an “exercise in constructive theology. It is a conceptual simulation focusing initially on the primordial chaos, God, and the creation and then zooming down, first to describe creatures in general and then to specify the human creature—all within the framework of a systems-informational cosmology and metaphysics” (Huchingson 2001, x). This is a work in progress, a composition in the making.

This composition is suspended somewhere between the harmonies of the Enlightenment and the new postmodern notations. While his new model that utilizes systems theory surely challenges the Enlightenment view of the world, it must also adequately take into account the postmodern critiques of metaphysical models. His metaphysical model claims to have ontological referentiality and is not merely another “useful fiction.” Huchingson does take the critiques of postmodernism seriously; he does not merely collapse the world into self, the world into text, and experience into language. He acknowledges not only the subjective turn of Kant but also the experiential turn of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Something real does seem to be happening. While Huchingson is concerned about the modern project that pits scientific knowledge against religious knowledge, constructs identity from an individualistic perspective, and formulates universals with no attention to particularities, I believe he succeeds in developing an elaborate, yet provisional, metaphysical system that “works.” One might compare his work to a jazz composition that is ongoing, a “work in progress.” He does not attempt to develop some metaphysical system that defines all of reality for everyone but merely offers some chord progressions upon which one might build compositions. One uses the models that are appropriate to their generation to talk about God and the world. Therefore, “those children who grow up with computers may well require a model of God that reflects their postmodern experience rather than the experience of their modern grandparents” (p. 10).

Huchingson’s work is an *exploration* in the enterprise of metaphysics, an improvisation upon the particulars. He attempts to form a coherent, complete system of reality, but only insofar as it is attentive to the rich detail and context of particularity. Huchingson pays close attention to the details and richness of the physical world, recognizing and celebrating its rich physical and biological diversity. He claims that he attempts “to show, the telling clue to the life of God does indeed lie in the *particularities* of the vast throng of beings constituting this system of creation” (p. vii). This richness is reflected in the life of God. Diversity is celebrated for what it is

and not removed for some deeper unity. By examining the “dynamic systems of the physical and biological worlds,” Huchingson’s project fulfills his criterion of *mundane relevance*. In a similar manner, Philip Hefner notes: “We do not gain the truth by seeking an overview of the whole of reality, but rather by pressing on into the depths of things until we reach the point where they resist. At that point of resistance, particular things reveal their stories to us, and in and through the particularities, reality itself is known” (Hefner 1993, 80).

Like every good composer, Huchingson has excellent command of the fundamentals of both the religious and scientific backgrounds. In an academic and cultural milieu that often dismisses the symphonic masterpieces of cosmic themes, Huchingson’s metaphysical composition might be aptly titled “The Enigma Variations.” How do we compose in the quandary of acknowledging the universality of the human race with its evolutionary ancestry and the particularities of race, ethnicity, class, age, and sex? I join Huchingson and Hefner and others who claim that “the controlling conviction is that in and through our diversity we share the common destiny of one planet and the systems that constitute its life. Consequently, we must speak in terms of that common destiny, without violating our particularity” (Hefner 1993, 5). The great metaphysical epics of G. W. F. Hegel and others have fallen into the deconstructive company of those who prefer the cacophony of atonal or even of aleatory music. The very way the “music” is composed and performed is under attack. Huchingson refuses to give up, however, on the aesthetic values and vehicles of those great compositions. While the music may not fit the mood of the epoch, the tunes are not altogether unsung. Maybe they just need transposing, or require new forms and vehicles of performance. Perhaps the compositions must arise from new voices. We’ll explore this methodological issue as we examine the major themes of his work: (1) the relationship between universals and particulars, (2) a model of God for the information age, and (3) the theological implications of his doctrine of God. These traditional themes surely find new resonance in the improvisational renditions by Huchingson. He brings theological vitality to the sometimes worn tunes that the tradition plays so readily. However, in the composition he also brings the audience into a context that expresses the dissonances of the familiar modern and postmodern tensions. The music often leaves the composer, the musicians, and the listener in constructive but confusing places. I hope to give some clarity to those tensions.

UNIVERSALS AND PARTICULARS

My question to Huchingson is whether he has listened adequately to the particular stories whose songs are those of resistance. They might say something different about this diverse world in which we live. A danger in the

religion-and-science dialogue is that because the physical and biological are interesting we ignore the particularities that are painful stories in the human world. I find helpful the words of Robert McAfee Brown about how we go about listening to the voices who do the composing:

Many terms have been used to describe these articulators of the theology in a new key—the “wretched of the earth,” the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the voiceless, the exploited, the victims. Their spokespersons vary and their agendas vary. . . . The most condescending thing possible would be to try to group them, or lump them to generalize about them. But they have at least this in common: they have been denied a voice and have been without hope; they now demand a voice and that gives them hope. (McAfee Brown 1978, 25)

These are also particulars, voices whose stories press into resistance. They might be the place from which the composition must begin. These voices and experiences are also the starting point for the metaphysical airplane ride. Any flight into the thin air of speculative imagination that does not consider these voices as seriously as the lilies of the field is bound to crash.

But what happens when this wondrous global phenomenon of diversity leads to pain and suffering that is as close to evil as one is likely to see in the world? After all, in diversity we meet not only richness and texture but also otherness that is frightening and disturbing. This particularity about which many of us speak is not only a cosmological diversity. It is in the faces we see each day, in the differences of belief that confront who we are, and in the boundaries that we cross with fear and trepidation. Diversity and particularity are about the concrete lives of people with whom we live and work. I am wondering how well Huchingson has taken into account this kind of particularity and diversity, the kind that brings not only connection and promise but also disconnection and fear. Sometimes the music is difficult to listen to, the information frightening. We close our eyes, shut our ears, slam the doors. Huchingson’s attention to particularity might be strengthened by a more direct acknowledgment of the existential realities of the promise and peril of diversity.

In the constant attention to the universal and particular, to the many and the one, the question of specificity must be addressed in this text. From Hefner, “The first is that for most persons who feel comfortable with God-talk, the God question is not one of an abstract and disinterested concept, but of concrete experience. For these persons, something very significant would be left untouched were all their efforts devoted exclusively to abstract philosophical discussions” (Hefner 1993, 88). While Huchingson’s audience seems to be Western monotheism, it is unclear who his audience really is. The specificity of each tradition is not really addressed, and it is assumed that his doctrine of God will fit all three monotheistic traditions, Eastern religious traditions, and even atheism. I believe that there is great strength in this kind of pluralistic theism, but I am also

anxious that we take into account Hefner's notion that religion is primarily not abstract philosophical discussion but comes to life in ritual, myth, and praxis. I would like to address the specific issue of the doctrine of creation that renders Huchingson's constructive project, if not problematic, at least inconsistent with the traditional doctrine. Although this is not necessarily problematic (it can be helpful), traditions arise from particular beliefs and within particular cultures.

Huchingson acknowledges that having God rely on the *Pandemonium Tremendum* as the source for God's creative work is inconsistent with the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing). The main argument against *creatio ex nihilo*, according to Huchingson, is that it can lead to the metaphysical notion of pantheism—the creation of the world out of God's self. He argues that *creatio ex nihilo* is a doctrine developed in defense of God's sovereignty. If coeternal material existed alongside God rather than being created by God, Christian theologians thought, this would threaten the sovereignty of God and possibly the good of creation (Huchingson 2001, 126–27). However, Huchingson argues that neither happens in his understanding of the *Pandemonium Tremendum* as the birthplace or “grounds of all possibility” from which God speaks the world into its ongoing existence. In a sense, God can only exist in response to the other to whom God is speaking. God is self-created from the “primordial chaos through this spontaneous declaration and takes a stand in it. Henceforth, both God and creation become possible as mutual others, partners in a common context” (p. 133). Huchingson and Hefner arrive at similar conclusions from very different places: God and the world are partners in the ongoing endeavor of creation. While the theological conclusions may be similar, the ritualistic and theological implications of the doctrine of creation are radical. Hefner points out the difference between the creation myths that emphasize *creatio ex nihilo* and creation of order out of nothing. Feminist and process theologians have often criticized the concept of creation out of nothing, yet Hefner notes that “by denying the creation out of nothing, the process and feminist theologians interrupt the mythic coherence that would ground their otherwise salutary suggestions in the way things really are” (Hefner 1993, 231). Attention to particularity is not just a metaphysical necessity but a ritualistic and mythical necessity. The differences matter just so.

A MODEL OF GOD FOR THE INFORMATION AGE

Huchingson's model for his theological construction is the computer. He argues that machines are the instruments for transformation in our world. What the car was for one generation the computer is for ours. He rightly acknowledges the impact of computers on this world; we live in a worldwide web of powerful knowledge. Those who are not “informed” are both

ignorant and powerless. "Power follows knowledge; nations may soon be divided into the haves and the have-nots with respect to access to the skills and contact required to be competitive in a world progressively saturated with information" (Huchingson 2001, 3). After the fateful day of September 11, 2001, we hear Huchingson's warning that this entire information system is "vulnerable to disabling accidents and terrorist acts of sabotage." (p. 3). While I agree with Huchingson that this age of information (with the computer as its tool) offers "welcome opportunities" for constructive theology, we proceed at a great price if we do not start the construction from the position of the have-nots. Otherwise, we (once again) construct metaphors and models that fit only a few. Theology is not abstraction; it is embodied in institutions and ritualistic practices. If computer science provides the data for this construction of the composition, we must think about the majority of the world's people, for whom the computer makes little or no sense.

Huchingson intentionally tries to construct a new model that challenges the prevailing mechanistic, dualistic Enlightenment worldview. I applaud him for this. Metaphors for God prevail in every cultural epoch and are derived from the dominant worldview or cosmology. I would like to point out, however, that any dominant worldview or cosmology is precisely that: dominant. Given the strong warnings from postmodern groups about the relationship between power and knowledge, one must not ignore the critiques of the dominant views by the voices of those not heard. We shall see whether Huchingson pays adequate attention to these critiques. For example, feminists note that the models developed from the scientific revolution coupled with the Enlightenment emphasize that nature is subordinated to man in much the same way that woman is. Much of Huchingson's project resonates with aspects of feminist theology and thought, but I think that from the beginning he needs to be more attentive to the "chaos" and "noise" of those voices and perspectives left out by the dominant cosmology, or once again the model of God and the world that emerges will be not only irrelevant to most of the world but dangerous to their well-being.

Huchingson's constructive project hinges on using the computer to represent the "window to the whole of things, inclusive of heaven as well as of earth"; the computer serves as a "tool for self-understanding and as a research tool revealing novel dimensions of dynamic complexity in nature" (p. 219). We must ask preliminarily whether this model will function not only in the academic world of religion and science but also in the communities of faith that express their traditions in liturgies, myths, and scriptures. Sallie McFague reminds us that metaphors must be neither irrelevant nor idolatrous. For example, she critiques the model of God as king in which very few cultures understand the relationship of king/kingdom as

mirroring the way they understand the world. Also, from her own Christian perspective, she critiques the model of king as one that has been idolized by its exclusive male ideological status. McFague and Ian Barbour would remind us that we take metaphors seriously but not literally (Barbour 1997, 119). Barbour offers the following criteria for the evaluation of theological models: (1) Agreement with data (primarily with story and ritual), (2) coherence with other accepted beliefs in a tradition's paradigm, (3) a scope of beliefs that can be extended to interpret other kinds of experience and also be consistent with the findings of science, and (4) the fertility of encouraging ongoing research programs (1997, 113). While I believe that Huchingson's model more than adequately accomplishes the goals of these criteria, the "fertility" of the model could be furthered by incorporation of other words and different perspectives that are always readily available to those in the worldwide web of the global market.

Does naming the computer a living, open system actually transform the mechanistic, market-driven model of the Enlightenment? Or does it subtly reinforce the mechanistic part of our world consumed by information from which we cannot escape? Everywhere we go, the tentacles of information surround us: e-mail, voice mail, "snail mail," priority mail. Huchingson acknowledges the adverse effects of the "modern mechanistic age." This worldview is deeply ingrained in our psyche, and "the conclusion must be that wholesale changes in the forms and spirit of technology are needed to reshape the modern world view" (Huchingson 2001, 9). Huchingson's project would benefit, I believe, from perspectives of others like Donna Haraway and Martin Luther who know the dangers of a market-driven information place that separates the receiver from the sender. Huchingson comments that computers embody a postmodern view of nature and technology: "The very reason that the computer experience reflects the postmodern integrative ecological age is that as a dynamic system it embodies principles that apply to natural systems, including amplification causality or the tendency of a delicately balanced system to respond dramatically and as a whole to small perturbations," and "those children who grow up with computers may well require a model of God that reflects their postmodern experience rather than the experience of their modern grandparents" (2001 10). That is also my fear about this metaphor. Until we realize its dangers, we utilize its strengths in unhealthy ways. Postmodern skepticism can also lead to deconstructive despair; the very tool that seeks to join us together rends us asunder. While I am quite intrigued by the use of systems theory, I am apprehensive about the model of computer for God and the world. Without deconstruction of the notions of *machine* and *computer*, many people will conjure up their personal computer at home as the image of God. Suddenly it may seem as if one mechanistic model is simply being substituted for another, with different ontological relationships emphasized.

This same critique crosses over into Huchingson's use of the orchestra and conductor as a similar kind of model for God and world related to information theory. Huchingson embraces the model of God as the great orchestra conductor and the great improviser. There may be some musical similarities, but the actual experience of playing the music is radically different. For Huchingson, God's power relates to the expression of the primordial chaos. The chaos actually enables and frees God's working in the world. The image that Huchingson uses for God's creating the world is similar to that of composing. "All composition is the result of communication" (p. 140). In several places he compares God to an artist, a composer, or a choreographer, joining others, such as Arthur Peacocke, who use these aesthetic metaphors for the God-world relationship. While he mentions the image of jazz, Huchingson might draw further upon the improvisational arts as the ones that work well with his understanding of communication between God and the world. Jazz and blues communicate differently than the traditional symphony orchestra does. Stephen Richter notes that "it is not the monologue of one composer or conductor using his musicians to realize his vision of the master plan. Also, it's a dialogue not only of four players, but also of their particular histories and traditions" (Richter 1995, 259). This improvisational model works best with the particularities that Huchingson so richly draws upon for understanding God and the world. Unlike the intelligent designer reveling in order and uniformity, the God of Huchingson revels in individuality and particularity. "The deep texture, richness, and diversity of the creation are far more suggestive of a God who lives with the vital chaos than one who configures the creation in accord with static forms" (Huchingson 2001, 167). Surely this richness and diversity offer contexts and settings for depth. "This wondrous global phenomenon of interexistence is as close to a miracle as one is likely to see in the world" (p. 176). The celebration of diversity is doxological in Huchingson's praise to God and to the co-creators of the world. I have argued elsewhere that the model of God and the symphony orchestra might actually fit the modern construction of a mechanistic world in which God is still "in control" in a way that dictates the score, the rehearsal, and the final performance of the piece. While he hints at other musical forms, Huchingson should be encouraged to reach deeper into the improvisational arts as the place where one finds the kind of mutual co-creating partnership that he lifts up so richly in the book.

Part of the value of systems theory is the emphasis upon relationality, communication, and interdependence of life. This complexity needs to be applied not only in images that create intellectually interesting propositions but also in ones that evoke a way of living in the tradition of theism. The computer is not personal in the sense that the stories of the Judeo-Christian tradition convey God's relationship to the world. Although the

ontological realities of systems theory are important and challenge the modern mechanistic view of material determinism, the computer model in general does not foster a kind of intimacy that relates to people's everyday lives. I would encourage Huchingson to build on other metaphors of the improvisational arts as models for conveying his rich use of the sciences of information and complexity.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

My final comments relate to Huchingson's discussion of God's providence and judgment as related to the evil we experience in our world. In the final and most traditional theological section, Huchingson pays attention to the perennial problem of evil by attending to the doctrine of God. He does this through the exploration of the theological categories of providence and judgment. Creation gives praise on account of God's sustaining, providential grace. The doxological expression of creation by the creatures is given in praise for the creation's composition. "Indeed, 'glory' itself may be understood as this splendid noise initially given by God for the purpose of being returned eventually to God as the fullness of phrase, a composition arranged and performed by the grand orchestra of creation that is constituted by this noise" (Huchingson 2001, 203). I cannot help but hear the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony echoing in my ears. However, that musical doxology of the Western world does not rise from every orchestra and is not heard with the same doxological celebration by all cultures. For some, this music or splendid noise sounds like the chaotic noise of their lives that is created by the very orchestra that performs it "for them" and yet "without them." While I appreciate the detailed discussion of Huchingson's understanding of providence and judgment, I wonder what would happen if he began these discussions not only with the texts he has chosen but also, and more specifically, from the texts of those whose lives are beaten down by the music that can be oppressive. After all, we know that the creation groans in travail. Our doxology must also be lament. The gospel music of those enslaved and the secular blues of the groans of creation are the information from which we need to understand this doxological celebration of creation. Otherwise this splendid noise turns into the cacophony of deafening disorder. Huchingson notes that this is a study of "the way things go and how they hang together and sometimes fall apart" (p. vii). What happens when all hell breaks loose? when there isn't any more music? I was intrigued and yet disturbed by his reference to the wrath of God and judgment of God toward the world. God withholds nourishment and releases "torrential variety in annihilating proportions" (p. 208). These actions are expressions of God's wrath. Huchingson notes that "divine intention and historical context both count in a complete understanding of any particular instance of the

infusion of excessive variety” (p. 209). This process of discerning God’s wrath, however, must also include the information of who is doing the discerning and for whose benefit. Figuring out such divine intention is always problematic. For example, Huchingson goes on to say that in addition to divine retribution “God may engage in similar acts of rescuing judgment that are especially pertinent to this description of demonic systems. Divine intervention is necessary in situations where distorted and demonic systems move to enslave and destroy others. . . . In this way God does not rescue creation so much from chaos as through chaos” (p. 211). Are the cries of Auschwitz a kind of rescue from chaos through chaos? Maybe these critiques are too harsh, but Huchingson’s brave new theology allows me to raise them. The cries after all are the particulars of this world, the groans that give voice to the travail of a *pandemonium tremendum mysterium*.

My comments end finally with a round of applause at the wonderful risk this theological text places before the reader. I am not the same for having read it. I am challenged to think differently not only about the God of this world but, even more important, about the world in which this God “in-forms” our very being. The in-formational wonder of this project is in the improvisational moves it provokes in the ongoing religion-and-science composition.

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