

GEORGE MURPHY'S CHIASMIC COSMOLOGY: AS IF GOD WERE NOT GIVEN

by Leonard M. Hummel

The Cosmos in Light of the Cross. By GEORGE L. MURPHY. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2003. 213 pages. Cloth. \$22.00.

Abstract. In his work *The Cosmos in Light of the Cross* physicist and Lutheran pastor George L. Murphy extends the religious rationales of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Jüngel to argue specifically for a nonreligious, scientific study of and appreciation for the world. In doing so, Murphy offers a clear and coherent theology of the cosmos within the bounds of piety alone. Like Calvin and Schleiermacher before him who strove to stay within these bounds, Murphy shares their endpoint of a practical theology—that is, faithful reflections that will encourage wise and faithful existence. In doing so, Murphy has written a brilliant and extraordinarily readable account of a chiasmic cosmos. He also quite practically and indeed pastorally offers suggestions for how the God of that cosmos may be not only understood but also worshiped and adored.

Keywords: cross; evolution; Lutheran; religion; science.

Near the center of his book *The Cosmos in Light of the Cross* (2003) George Murphy makes a claim central to its thesis: “A scientific theory *should* be ‘a-theistic’ in the precise sense that the concept of God does not appear as an element of the theory itself” (p. 116). That is, Murphy believes that the world may be understood “as though God were not given (*etsi deus non daretur*).”¹ Coined by the Dutch jurist and natural philosopher Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), this phrase has gained theological currency from its use by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to dismiss a “stop-gap God” (1967, 164) and

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by Eberhard Jüngel to argue for the “worldly non-necessity of God” (1983, 24). In this book, Murphy, a Lutheran pastor and physicist, extends their religious rationales to argue specifically for a nonreligious, scientific study of and appreciation for the world.

What particular religious approach does Murphy bring in order to value a theory that, in a sense, is atheistic? Martin Luther’s rallying cry “the cross alone is our theology” is at its center. That is, it is from theologies of the cross (Luther’s, Bonhoeffer’s, and Jüngel’s) that Murphy proposes that the cosmos may be illumined, although only dimly. In this labor of faith seeking understanding—for this is a clearly confessional work within the larger corpus of the religion-science dialogue—Murphy attempts to make sense of and even justify ways of describing the world as if God were not part of it. Out of this endeavor, Murphy has offered readers an elegantly written and engaging treatise covering major areas of both scientific study and theologies of the cosmos.

THE TEXT ITSELF

Murphy begins his book by referencing some of the perplexities brought on in a world that exists as if God were not given: “we are baffled by the extinctions of splendid creatures, the growth of cancer in someone we love, or ethical choices that seem to have no right answer” (p. 5). Having noted these moral conundrums and outright physical threats arising through the natural realm and from our involvement in it, Murphy quickly moves to questions about what can be known of the God of this cosmos from looking at nature alone. Aligning himself with David Hume and Pierre-Simon Laplace, Murphy contends that nothing can be known this way. However, in line with Karl Barth and Thomas Torrance, he further proposes that, in light of Christian revelation, some things may be known. In particular, this revelation suggests the development of what Murphy calls a *chiasmic cosmology*. This way of construing the world builds on the contention of early Christian apologist Justin Martyr that Plato’s use in the *Timaeus* of the letter χ , chi, to describe the operations of the demiurge prefigured Christ’s crosswise presence in shaping creation.² Analogously, Murphy reviews facts from science about the world to suggest how, through the eyes of his faith tradition, they may be seen to bear stigmata—imprints of the cross.

Murphy then develops his understanding of the God who appears “crosswise” in the world, using Jüngel throughout to do so. Since this God is “continuously active but unobserved in the world” (p. 37), this God cannot be explained by what is not God, nor be conscripted into serving as a hypothesis for anything in the world: “We are to seek instead the God who ‘is reigning from the tree,’ who brings life from death, and whose wisdom is the foolishness of the cross” (p. 43). Process theologies bear striking

similarities to certain propositions of this revelation—in part because they have some roots in it—but Murphy shies away from assertions that they are instances of more general religious truths about the world.

Next, Murphy offers a stunningly simple and beautiful “Scientific Picture of the World” summarizing Newtonian, post-Newtonian, and quantum physics, and basic science on origins and development of life forms on Earth. Not content with what he considers a “naively realistic” rendition of this basic science, he puts forth biblical and (though he may not like the term) postmodern rationales to explain why “few scientists operate in accord with some explicitly formulated philosophy of science” (p. 61). Even so, he here again flatly argues that there is no basis in wish or metaphor to look for religious truths in science: “God’s activity in the world is hidden, and encourages a methodological naturalism in which scientists rule out explanations in terms of divine causation” (p. 61).

As he develops his chiasmic cosmology, Murphy employs elements of Ian Barbour’s now classic typology to describe divine action in the world. He prefers Luther’s proposal that secondary causes within creation are God’s masks (that is, appearances of God wherein God is hiddenly present) rather than neo-Thomistic “instruments” that “call to mind things like screwdrivers and hammers that function in accord with the rules of mechanics” (p. 79). Murphy is wary of a Bultmannian dualism between physical matter and spiritual meaning but also warns that we not confuse the two. However, it is a kenotic theology that Murphy most favors, in part because this complex description of God’s self-diremption best accounts for the complexities of our world: “In some cases we can explain why a natural disaster has happened or why one person rather than another develops cancer, but this is not always the case” (p. 87). He also prefers it for the favor that he perceives it to bestow on the cosmos. For example, Murphy proposes that God was certainly present during the enigmatic early minutes of creation but adds: “God’s kenosis means that we do not expect to observe astronomical phenomena that science *cannot* explain (p. 102) . . . kenosis means that God does not cling to privileges of divinity and insist upon credit for creative work” (p. 104). Just as in Haydn’s oratorio *The Creation*, the soft voice of the creator gives way to the powerful voice of created light, so God gives way to both creation and the sciences that strive to apprehend it. In so doing, Murphy avers, God gracefully gives the glory to both.

Evolution is the means of creation—the means that most clearly manifests that the world may develop as if God were not present (p. 116). In the light of Jacques Monod, chance and necessity may be discerned as the principles of this process. Accordingly, the individuals and species that emerge from evolution are not necessarily the best and the brightest: for example, “a smart one could have been killed by a falling tree, while her stupid sister survived” (p. 123). This evolutionary march has a decidedly

“unpleasant look” (p. 124) not made more attractive by any religious proposal that chance and necessity are the means God must employ to move creation on to a good conclusion. Rather, Murphy argues, “God is not just a transcendent creator who manipulates terrestrial life, but himself becomes a participant in evolution and dies as did the dinosaurs and Neanderthals” (p. 124). In so doing, the divine has created a world in which things can and do create themselves—and herein Murphy does discern some good at work and some good work.

The problems and possibilities of human being in such a world—where we have the power both to enhance or destroy creation and care for or corrupt our own existence—are explored by Murphy in his subsequent chapters on “Technology and Ethics,” “Medicine and Bioethics,” and “The Natural Environment.” Next, Murphy argues that the goal of creation is finally not discernible through any anthropic principle operative within the universe but rather, in his neologism, the “theanthropic” principle manifest in the crucified God. In light of that principle, Murphy offers modest proposals for understanding a number of natural phenomena, including how the universe might be transformed from its predicted gravity-induced dead-end of either freezing or frying into a biblically prophesied new and everlasting life. None of these proposals, however, contains clear and distinct ideas of the divine will for and ways in the world. Rather, for human being in the meantime, Murphy offers in his final chapter reflections on how he believes the creator of this universe may be adored in liturgical worship. He states clearly that these final remarks are “not meant merely to be a pious benediction to an academic discussion” (p. 196); rather, they describe how creation and its creator may be appreciated in a particular piety.

BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT IN THEOLOGIES OF THE CROSS

In this work, Murphy adds to the numerous positions that have evolved regarding the nature of religion-science dialogue by developing one from the cross—or, more accurately, from theologies of the cross. What are those theologies, and how do they contribute to his position? And how do they lead him to favor descriptions of the world as if God were not given?

Although all theologies of the cross are relatively biblically based and, as noted, have certain affinities with process philosophy and theology, Murphy locates his in what Luther first articulated in his “Heidelberg Disputation” ([1518] 1957). In that 1518 treatise, Luther developed a typology between theologies of glory and theologies of the cross. Theologies of glory essentially strive after two things: exposing the very nature of God and detailing glorious instantiations of the divine in the world. Contra such theologies, Luther contended that these are matters about which we, by faith, may have only clues or indicators; however, there is nothing about

them that can be rationally laid out or conclusively demonstrated. Believing that God both hides from creation and also remains hidden in creation, he derided all such attempts to comprehend God or to demonstrate God's glory in creation as frustrating and foolish.

Luther's approach to creation was like that to many other matters—paradoxical. Without the eyes of faith we may perceive the present tense of creation but may not recognize its intended meaning or future purpose. However, with corrected vision, we may discern how God puts in appearances through current limits and laws. Accordingly, Luther argued, it shows no lack of faith to flee from a deadly plague or to fight it off with medicine, because such fight and flight are among the many means God has given us to be about our business in this world.

God not only hides from the world but also dons a mask in God's revelation to it. This is the subject matter of theologies of the cross. In this way of thinking and believing God appears in an improbable manner—by dying on a wooden instrument of execution. Centuries later, Georg Hegel offered a fair summary of this theology's construal of God's relationship with the cosmos: "God himself is dead," it says in a Lutheran [Good Friday] hymn, expressing an awareness that the human, the finite, the fragile, the weak, the negative are themselves a moment of the divine, that they are within God's very self, that finitude, negativity, otherness are not outside of God and do not . . . hinder unity with God" (Hegel 1985, 326). Luther himself never quite said that God died on a cross, but he did pinpoint God's presence there as well as the transcendence of God in God's being hiddenly present in that suffering.

Another source for Murphy's thought are the final letters of Bonhoeffer: "The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God" (Bonhoeffer 1972, 360). Drawing on Grotius, Bonhoeffer argued that *Homo sapiens* need not morph into *Homo religiosus* in order to know the world, nor need the world itself be "religiocified" in order to be lived in. In faith, though, one may perceive the ways in which God stands continually with and for the world.

Of course, discourse about God's apparent absence from or actual death in the cosmos could be expressions of or inducements toward varieties of atheistic experience. For example, Feuerbach's contention that the essence of faith in Luther was essentially faith in human possibilities before the limits of the world was a bit of both. However, there are other ways, theistic ways, of appropriating this language, as clearly exemplified in Jüngel's *God as the Mystery of the World* (1983). Rather than dismissing modern atheism, Jüngel accepts and develops it in order to give the dignity due to both God and the world. That is, he concurs with atheists such as Feuerbach and Nietzsche that God is not necessary for the world to be what it is. Rather, he argues that God is "more than necessary" to the

world, the very meaning and mystery of the world (1983, 33). Accordingly, Jüngel enjoins his theological audience to search not for the meaning of God in the world but for the meaning of the world in the crucified God: “Jüngel’s point is not that God lacks excellence, but rather we must learn what is truly good and excellent in the world by looking at God” (Dehart 1999, 159). Throughout his own work, Murphy takes Jüngel’s theology and runs with it by proposing that the God of the cross is hiddenly present in the suffering of the cosmos as well as in indicators, also hidden, of the end of its suffering (2003, 41–42).

SOME WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING A CHIASMIC COSMOLOGY

While Murphy roots his particular take on the relationship between science and religion in a theology of the cross, that taken by many other religionists, theologians, and scientists bears a strong affinity with his. In their work *Evolution: From Creation to New Creation* (2003) Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett identify analyses of science and religion that they believe are marked by roughly the same theology. Murphy’s work, however, is perhaps the clearest exposition of science and religion from a theology of the cross. In an interlude in which they sketch features of this theology, Peters and Hewlett single out earlier work by Murphy as exemplary of it (Peters and Hewlett 2003, 140–41).

How is Murphy’s work like other kenotic theologies? Murphy himself believes that it bears features like that proposed by Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis but differs in not proposing that this theology orders the universe with lawlike regularity (p. 81). He contrasts it with that offered by Robert John Russell: “The idea that results of *all* observations are directly determined by God in a way that the laws of physics cannot describe is a return to the rejected classical model of divine action. If we instead pursue the kenotic theme to the end, then it seems that chance would play a fundamental role in the universe, and that God’s sovereignty would have to be understood as eschatological: In the end, the House always wins” (p. 82). Indeed, it is with the eschatology of Peters’s ongoing theological enterprise that Murphy’s own theological proposals evidence the greatest overlap. For example, Peters and Hewlett argue that, while there is a divine purpose for nature, there is none discernible within nature itself. Accordingly they claim, “One temptation is to cheat a little bit, to spy out some theologically visible *telos* within nature that scientists allegedly cannot see with their microscopes and telescopes” (2003, 159). Murphy similarly warns against adding the element of God into scientific studies of nature because the divine purpose within nature cannot be apparent to scientists, religionists, theologians, or to anyone else except God.

In the end, it is Murphy’s unabashedly Lutheran confessional stance that distinguishes his chiasmic cosmology from all other kenotic theo-

gies in science-religion studies. Does his position on the relationship between science and religion thereby fall within the ideal-type of their “independence” as described by Barbour—“Each has its own distinctive domain and its characteristic methods can be justified on its own terms” (1997, 84)? In some ways, I believe the answer is yes. Murphy develops his chiasmic cosmology by playing a theological language game into which some may judge they cannot enter and whose rules some outside of it may only vaguely recognize. Furthermore, Murphy strongly argues both that the language of science ought not be contaminated by that of religion and that the scientific method of rational inquiry is unlike the “unconventional” methods of his confessional theology.

This affirmative answer is misleading, however, because there are a number of ways in which the very theology of the cross represented by Murphy can and often does fit within Barbour’s other ideal-types of “dialogue” and “integration,” whether or not such fitting is within Murphy’s original intent. Just as Luther never quite said that God died on the cross but left it for the relatively unorthodox Hegel to do so, the theology of the cross informs many attempts (some noted the work of Peters and Hewlett) for dialogue between and even integration of science and religion. Furthermore, prototypes for Murphy’s chiasmic cosmology may be discerned outside of traditional Lutheran discourse. Indeed, Hegel’s own philosophical take on the truths he perceived to be represented in Luther may be discerned as a model for a nonconfessional appropriation of Murphy’s confessional work. In particular, Hegel’s developed arguments that the divine becomes the divine by permitting the emergence of the nondivine cosmos suggest one way of doing so. The evolutionary cosmology of Charles Sanders Peirce (a piece of Peirce’s larger Hegelianism “in strange costume”) that embraces the chance, necessity, and love permeating the world suggests another way, and it seems that Karl Peters has employed Peirce’s worldview in calling for “harmony with cruciform nature” in his *Dancing with the Sacred* (2002).

That the theology of the cross can be fitted into not strictly confessional forms of discourse, however, does not mean that it always needs to be. In his work Murphy has not done so but instead offers a clear and coherent theology of the cosmos within the bounds of piety alone.³ Like John Calvin and Friedrich Schleiermacher before him who strove to stay within these bounds, Murphy shares their endpoint of a practical theology—that is, faithful reflections that will encourage wise and faithful existence. He has written a thoroughly brilliant and extraordinarily readable account of a chiasmic cosmos. He also quite practically and indeed pastorally offers suggestions for how the God of that cosmos may be not only understood but also worshiped and adored.

NOTES

1. Murphy also employs Thomas Torrance's preferred phrase, *acsi deus non daretur*, "as if God were not given," throughout this work (see Torrance 1985, 61.1).
2. For a penetrating analysis of this passage by Justin, including a notation of his inaccurate citation of Plato, see Norris 1965, 56.
3. In discerning this, I have been influenced by Gerrish 1982.

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