ARTHUR PEACOCKE'S NATURALISTIC CHRISTIAN FAITH FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

by Nancey Murphy

Abstract. This article is a brief overview and positive assessment of Arthur Peacocke's essay "A Naturalistic Christian Faith for the Twenty-First Century." Here Peacocke further develops his panentheist account of God and provides significant reinterpretations of a number of Christian doctrines using the concept of emergent levels of complex reality with downward efficacy on their constituents.

Keywords: emergence; naturalism; panentheism; Arthur Peacocke

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My late husband, James McClendon, once told me that you can't really begin to do theology until around the age of sixty. You have to have read all of the other theologians, of course, but you also have to be competent in biblical exegesis, and this means learning the biblical languages, and then you have to be familiar with the history of doctrine between biblical days and the present. If you add to all of this a mastery of the contemporary scientific worldview, it's a wonder that anyone could *begin* to do the kind of work Arthur Peacocke has done before the age of eighty. While he has done significant theological work for quite some time, I believe that his little document "A Naturalistic Christian Faith for the Twenty-First Century: An Essay in Interpretation" is a gem and a germ that could grow into a magnificent, truly new, and truly meaningful systematic theology. Would that God had given him more years, but I am grateful that he was able to complete this before he died.

Being a philosopher, I am interested in concepts. The thesis I present here is that Arthur has introduced and contributed to the development of

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a system of conceptual resources that allow for a significant and fruitful rethinking of Christian theology.

I was asked to keep in mind an audience comprising scholars already well familiar with Arthur's work and others being newly introduced. For the newly introduced, I will soon move on to an overview of the content of the Essay. But for those who already know the content, I want to try out this perspective of mine regarding its significance.

Professors of theology have all probably had some students who would like to think that the theological task was finished with the Bible, or at least by the time of Chalcedon and Nicaea. But this is to ignore the fact that you can keep the words the same but the concepts have a way of quietly slipping out from under them. Consider the word *substance*, so important in early discussions of Christology and Trinity. I point out to my students that the only real use we have for it now is something like "What's that sticky substance on the garage floor?"

The primary conceptual resources for the whole of modern liberal theology (it may be fair to say) have come from the sphere of human experience —from Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Gefühl,* through existential orientation, limit experiences, and now the experiences of varying gender and ethnic groups. There have been at least two significant problems with this move. One was noted already by Ludwig Feuerbach in Schleiermacher's day. How is one to know that human religiosity has to do with anything more than human religiosity? Arthur's discussion of naturalism, to which I return below, recognizes that this remains a serious problem. He says that "theologians must take far more seriously the possibility that naturalism provides the true account of our world, and indeed in its materialist . . . version" (2007, 9).

The second major problem with the turn to human experience has been the anthropocentrizing of theology and its resulting isolation from the sciences. These two issues are related. Insofar as the sciences have gone their own way independently of theology, theology has become marginalized intellectually and has come to be seen by many to be in need of a good swipe with Ockham's razor. Alasdair MacIntyre, in his younger days, tartly remarked that modern liberal theologians (the same ones that Peacocke would have been reading at the time) were engaged in the enterprise of giving the atheist less and less in which to disbelieve (1969, 24).

This is the background against which I want to paint the significance of Arthur's work. But not only his; other significant contributors are Philip Clayton, Niels Henrik Gregersen, and Michael Welker. What Peacocke has initiated is the development of a new system of concepts, needed to describe the emergence over time of the complex universe we inhabit, and then the use of that set of concepts to begin to provide new interpretations of theological realities. These interpretations grant more of what I call *on-*

tological significance to theological claims than much of the preceding liberal theology did.

Arthur played a significant role in the development of the concepts of downward causation and whole-part constraint, of a nonreductive account of the hierarchy of complex systems and the corresponding hierarchy of sciences, and of the concept of emergence. There were moves in this direction in the early twentieth century, but they were overridden by the reductionism of the logical positivists and the later neopositivists. It is telling that even though I was a specialist in the philosophy of science I was entirely unaware of this earlier emergentist movement until I was introduced to it by Arthur in his theological work. He inspired me and many others in the theology-and-science crowd to work on the project.

Arthur's Bampton Lectures were given in 1978. Since then there has been a growing interest in antireductionism in the non–theology-and-science world: in philosophy of biology and philosophy of mind, and in the sciences themselves. Contributions from scholars across the disciplines have filled in, elaborated, and confirmed his basic insights. The most significant contributions at present I believe are Terrence Deacon's account of the multiple levels of emergence that go into the evolution of life and mind (Deacon 2007, for example) and Alicia Juarrero's book *Dynamics in Action* (1999), which confirms at book length what Arthur has been arguing all along about whole-part constraint.

The impetus for Arthur's Essay, he says in the Preface, was the result of

> perceiving a certain connectedness between the theology [he had] been developing, constructed in relation to the scientific account of the world, and the way the natural world itself, as perceived through the sciences may be interpreted. . . . The hierarchy of complexity of the natural world, increasingly explicated by the sciences both in detail and through wider concepts, has made apparent how new realities emerge at higher levels of complexity, with all their interactions and ramifications and how these higher levels of complexity can influence, and even transform, the behavior of the lower-level entities that constitute them. It has occurred to me that this same "scenario," if I may so put it, is also manifest in those situations we denote as spiritual or religious experiences, which theology then attempts to analyze and to formulate intellectually and conceptually. (2007, 3)

So the parallels of interest between the natural world and that which theology studies involve, first, emergent *ontological* features; second, higher levels of *causal* influences; and third, *transformation* of lower-level components by means of downward influences from the emergent ontological levels.

Peacocke's Essay, then, incorporates an overview of his previous work on divine action, so as to describe God's action in the natural world as the source of these emergent ontological, causal, and transformative features. This is the main task of Part One of the Essay—to explicate his theistic naturalism and panentheism. Part Two considers several doctrinal themes and shows that they can be explicated equally in terms of emergent ontology, downward causation, and transformation.

Theistic Naturalism and Panentheism

I think that Arthur's panentheism is familiar enough that I needn't explain it here. I comment only that I found his treatment of it within the context of the Essay to be a great help, because it forced me to keep in mind the essential role that the immanence of God plays in his theology. In the past I think that the rather less common talk about the world being "in God" has led me, at least, to overemphasize transcendence in Peacocke's thought.

This comment leads naturally to an account of what he means by theological naturalism. Theological naturalism may sound like an oxymoron, because, as Arthur concedes, *naturalism* may refer to a materialist—that is, atheistic—worldview. The naturalism he develops is, of course, theistic. What he means by it is a theology that is opposed to the postulation of nonnatural beings other than God. More particularly, it is opposed to accounts of God as apart from the world altogether, as in Deism, or as occasionally intervening, as in many forms of supernaturalism. His emphases are on a metaphysics that recognizes only God and the natural world and on a theology in which God is immanent and active in the whole of creation. This is an emergentist monist account of creation combined with a panentheist account of God's relation to that creation.

Doctrines

The main theological issues that Arthur addresses in his Essay are Christology, Eucharist, and grace. I do not summarize here the whole of this part of the book but rather present two examples of Arthur's constructive work and suggest some ways one might go about assessing its value. The first is his account of Jesus' resurrection, and the second is Eucharist, or Lord's Supper.

In Chapter 6, "Jesus of Nazareth—A Naturalistic Interpretation," Peacocke takes up the thorny problem of the historicity of the resurrection. He begins with reports of Jesus' appearances after his death. Because of the number and diversity of the accounts he believes that the experiences have to be taken seriously. The question then arises as to whether they are merely psychological, with no reference to reality, or whether "they can be shown to form part of a meaningful pattern that requires higher-level autonomous concepts to render it intelligible" (2007, 34). Here we find Peacocke's typical way of talking about why putative higher-level realities are indeed to be granted ontological status: We need a different level of conceptualization to understand them, and those concepts cannot be reduced to any lower level. The primary concept here is resurrection, and it is intimately tied in to the rest of Christian theology. The postulation of Jesus' resurrection serves to explain not only the complex of appearance experiences but also the transformation of the witnesses and the witnesses' discernment of the presence of God. In that Jesus' resurrection is not reducible, the Risen

One is a new ontological reality, though continuous with the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The Risen One is God present to the disciples, capable of acting in their midst and transforming them. The Risen Christ present to the Body of Christ is the emergence of a new ontological reality with downward causal, transformative efficacy on the disciples.

I hope that I am correct in assuming that nothing more needs to be said to make clear the parallels between this account of resurrection and accounts of emergent realities in the natural world. It may be worthwhile attempting to anticipate reactions to this claim. These are likely to be of two sorts, because they will parallel the two typical objections to emergentist or nonreductive physicalist accounts of mind. The two objections in philosophy of mind come from dualists and reductionist physicalists. The first says, "You've actually given away the mind, and I can't accept that." The second says, "You haven't convinced me that there is anything here beyond neurobiology."

The parallels here will be to say either that Arthur has given away the resurrection or that it really is nothing but psychology. Arthur has placed his account of resurrection alongside his account of incarnation. I suspect that his answer to objectors who think that the resurrection has been stolen from them by this interpretation would go along lines such as the following. Just as some accounts of incarnation speak of the second person of the Trinity descending into the world and temporarily being located "in" Jesus' body, so (the objector must be supposing) the Risen Christ must be "in" Jesus' body, raised from the tomb and showing up at various locations thereafter. Probably my putting this mental imagery into words is enough to call it into question.

To reply to the reductionists Arthur could enlist the aid of Wolfhart Pannenberg, whom I paraphrase roughly: To say that the resurrection accounts are merely expressions of the disciples' "Easter faith" is to be unable to explain how those bumbling cowards suddenly came by their Easter faith in the first place (cf. Pannenberg 1977).

My own assessment, briefly, is that Peacocke's account of resurrection does indeed offer more than the psychological reductionists, but I would want to place more emphasis than he does on a genuine localizable bodily presence (although a transformed one) as a model for our own future transformation. On the positive side, there would be interesting parallels to pursue further between the nonreducibility of mind to brain and the nonreducibility of the Spirit of Christ in the Body of Christ.

I turn now to his treatment of Eucharist/Lord's Supper. Peacocke emphasizes a distinctive complex of interrelations here: Individual believers obeying Jesus' teaching; the authorization of the church to carry on the ritual; the use of bread and wine, not only parts of the material world but the material world made over by created co-creators; the tie to Jesus' self-sacrifice; Jesus' promise to be present again in this recalling of the events of

his death and resurrection; the presence of God; and the transformation of the community. Arthur writes, "Do we not have in the eucharist an exemplification of the emergence of a new kind of reality requiring a distinctive ontology? For what (if one dare so put it) 'emerges' in the eucharistic event *in toto* can only be described in special non-reducible terms such as 'Real Presence'" (2007, 43).

Deacon's motto for emergence is "something more out of nothing but." Again we can imagine objections on two sides, one emphasizing the nothing but and the other asking for something more, but a "something more" of a different sort. The something more would presumably have to be the kind of supernaturalistic intrusion into the scene from a God off in heaven—a God of the sort that Peacocke is at pains to avoid. Some older sacramental theologies might object again on grounds of more specific localization: God's action is supposed to be localized "in" the bread and wine. But this is not a very sympathetic objection if the sacrament is expected to affect its recipients, for how to locate God if not by means of the location of God's effects? The reductionists' objections seem lame as well. What more could one want besides the obedient participants, the gathered community, the elements, and God working in the midst of all?

Conclusion

Arthur's Essay is brief, and its brevity makes it tantalizing—there are so many possibilities for development. I hope that I have succeeded in convincing readers, with my even tinier bite of a summary, that it is well worth reading and thinking about.

I am happy for Arthur that he had a chance to write it, and not only for the personal satisfaction it must have given him. He started with what he thought of as two relatively independent projects: an account of the world as known to science, written for the theological reader; and an account of theology, written in a way that was answerable to science. More than thirty years later he recognized that there was an intrinsic relation between the two projects, an isomorphism between God's work in nature and God's work in the church, which he had been describing all along in projects 1 and 2 respectively. The recognition must have felt something like the way it feels to be chief engineer on a project to tunnel through a mountain from both sides, when the two bores meet in the middle.

This congruence, this convergence, is important for more than Arthur's own satisfaction, however. It suggests that there is something deeply right about his basic insights and that his friends and students are likely to do well by pursuing them further.

NOTE

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