THE CENTRALITY OF INCARNATION

by Ann Milliken Pederson

Abstract. What we urgently need at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a christological vision that can shape and inform a new and powerful way of helping humankind to interpret their place within the universe. A christological vision that is unintelligible and uninteresting can have a profoundly deleterious soteriological implication: the orbit of God's saving grace will not be wide enough to encompass the universal place of humankind. Arthur Peacocke's move is clear and to the point: Only when the foundations and universal scope of God's grace are fully established for all of creation, only then can the importance of God's specific work in Jesus the Christ be established.

Keywords: boundaries; christological vision; human and divine; nature; soteriology

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It is, Lord, your present and gift,
my body and soul and what I have
in this poor life.
So that I may use this for your praise,
for the benefit and service of my neighbour
may it be your will to grant me your grace!

—Johann Sebastian Bach
from *St. John Passion* (Schalling 1569)

I begin this commentary on the christological themes in the work of Arthur R. Peacocke with words from the *St. John Passion* by Johann Sebastian Bach. Arthur's life for many of us has been a gift that he so graciously lived for the benefit and service of his neighbors. He stated that his hope was to

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[*Zygon*, vol. 43, no. 1 (March 2008)]
 ISSN 0591-2385

develop a "more naturalistic understanding of the Christian faith," which he hoped "would be congenial to more orthodox believers as well as those who are seriously challenged by the scientific world view as the norm for their thinking" (Peacocke 2007b, 191). God's grace notes moved in, with, and under Arthur's life grounded in the *cantus firmus* of a sacramental and incarnational faith. He retained to the end of his life "the absolute conviction that God is love and eternally so. This remains the foundation of my prayers and thoughts for 'underneath are the everlasting arms'" (Peacocke 2007b, 192). I write as one who was deeply moved and profoundly influenced by Arthur's friendship and by his contributions to the religion-and-science dialogue, in particular his work as a Christian theologian.

Arthur's theological vision reaches to a Christ who embraces the entire natural cosmos in all of its particularities. From atoms to stars, God's grace is universal. Whether in his work in the lab as a physical chemist or in the sanctuary of Christ Church as an Anglican priest, Arthur's lifework exemplified the integration of the infinite and finite, the spiritual and physical, the individual and community. Narratives from the scientific world tell us that we have emerged from tangled webs whose boundaries between human and the rest of the natural world are blurred. The God "in whom we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28 NRSV) is the central theological commitment of Arthur's work and life. All things hold together in God through Christ.

Through the grace of God, we become living sacraments to one another. Arthur's other significant contribution to the religion-and-science dialogue that I think would have surprised him is the number of people for whom his work was so significant and influential. When Arthur and Rosemary Peacocke came to Augustana College (where I teach Christian theology) in the late 1990s, my first-year honors students had read his significant work *Theology for a Scientific Age* (1993). In the fall of 2007, I had a small group of honors students reading the same text, and several of them have remarked that his work expanded their theological horizons and helped them to reformulate their Christian faith in a way that made it come to life. I can think of no greater tribute to Arthur than the ongoing legacy of his theological work in undergraduate classrooms, seminars in seminaries, and adult forums for lay theologians. And so, in this article I offer in students' words the themes of Arthur's work. The exchange between religion and science is never abstract; it comes in the life and work of particular people who practice science and religion.

A Christology for Our Times

Peacocke hopes that his theological offerings will resonate with the "spiritual explorations of many in our times" (2007a, 4). Some thirty-six years before, in 1972, Joseph Sittler, a Lutheran theologian, captured the longings,

fears, and urgency of the spiritual times. And now his words seem even more appropriate:

> No earlier time has had the knowledge or power to put its manipulative hand upon the dynamics of evolution or upon the molecular structures of matter and energy. But our time does, and a Christology that does not propose the power and presence and grace and judgment of God in Christ with an amplitude congruent with these power potentials as an operational mode of life deeply formative of technological man's personhood will be an unintelligible Christology, even an uninteresting one. (Sittler [1972] 2000, 200–201)

What we urgently need at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a christological vision that can shape and inform a new and powerful way of helping humankind to interpret their place within the universe. A christological vision that is unintelligible and uninteresting can have a profoundly deleterious soteriological implication: The orbit of God's saving grace will not be wide enough to encompass the universal place of humankind.

In an American culture marked by individualism, consumerism, and fear, some Christians have reduced the soteriological claims of the Christian faith to a personal need for a Lord and Savior. A reductionist Christology omits the rest of the created order (and others who are not Christian). Too many Christians are ready to abandon this world for a heavenly one, ignoring the dangers that we face living on this planet. A narrow vision leads to a narrow Christology. Much, much more is needed. Peacocke's vision reaches much farther and deeper, offering a Christology that embraces the entire natural cosmos in all of its particularities.

Where does he begin his christological ruminations? His work begins with creation and with theological anthropology. What it means to be created in the image and likeness of God leads to his christological affirmations. He notes themes that are consonant with the sciences and natural processes: Humans are "part of nature, contingent, multi-layered, and self-conscious persons that are ultimately mysterious in being persons" (Peacocke and Pederson 2006, 36)—and then to themes that might sound dissonant with the Christian faith:

> . . . human behavior has a partly genetic basis; human beings are a relatively recent arrival on Earth and in the universe; *biological* death is not so much the "wages of sin" as it is the means of creation through evolution; there has never existed a period of human perfection (moral or otherwise) from which there could have been a historical "fall." Such themes need to be incorporated into a transformed and richer harmonious unity. (Peacocke and Pederson 2006, 36)

This is the vocation of a Christian theologian.

Humans experience a lack of integration, a sense of being out of place in the cosmos, and they live with the knowledge that they have failed to live up to their hopes and dreams. Humans fail to see what it is they should become, what they *ought* to be (Peacocke and Pederson 2006, 37). So, what permits humans to thrive and flourish as humans? Quoting Augustine,

"You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless till it rests in you" (Peacocke and Pederson 2006, 38). Humans are at home in God, and in God's world. God seeks to convey meaning and communicate God's own self with humanity. "The Christian proposition is that human beings have a potentiality, not yet realized, of being in the image and likeness of God, and that the figure of Jesus the Christ poses a basic initiative from God concerning the actualization of this potentiality" (p. 38). As a fully human person, Jesus is uniquely and totally open to God. Jesus embodies as "the divine Logos the multiple levels of creation that were present in him" (p. 38).

I once heard it said that some theologians begin with God (as in doctrine of) and get to Jesus (Christology), and others begin with Jesus (Christology) and move to God (theology). Peacocke's move is clear and to the point: Only when the foundations and universal scope of God's grace are fully established for all of creation, only then can the importance of God's specific work in Jesus the Christ be established.

> On this premise, one would expect the created world to reflect in its very nature the purposes of God, its Creator, and how God and God's relation to the created world are best to be articulated. Only when this foundation of insights into the nature of God and God's relation to the world has been laid should it be possible to develop an understanding of the significance of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, that is, an account of Jesus as the Christ of faith. (Peacocke 2007a, 6)

The efficacy of God's work in Christ is first and foremost for *ta panta*, all of creation, as explained in Colossians. Peacocke formulates a theology of nature that is coherent and adequate, intelligible and interesting, to both the scientific worldview and fundamental claims of the Christian faith.

For Peacocke, the natural world—the entire cosmos—is the scope and foundation for developing an adequate Christology for the spiritual longings of our times. Joining a host of other theological voices, he draws upon themes found in Eastern Orthodoxy to explicate his vision. The East and West emphasize different aspects of the work of Christ, the scope of God's grace, and the nature of the human person. Arthur reshapes the themes of the perspective that "creation is consummated and fulfilled in the person of Jesus the Christ in whom God was experienced as uniquely present and embodied" (Peacocke and Pederson 2006, 36).

He begins with St. Irenaeus's theological category of recapitulation (*anakephalaiosis*), and his themes of *imago* and *similitude*, to formulate a naturalistic Christology. Indeed, Peacocke might agree with Sittler that "This is not a 'natural theology' in the sense that God is disclosed in nature without the revelation in the Son; but it is a *theology for* nature in the inevitable sense that the hand of God the creator, which is the hand of the Son, should be seen, following the Incarnation, also in nature" (Sittler [1972] 2000, 124). The purpose of God's grace for all of creation comes to fruition in the Incarnation. Nature is a means of grace. All things (*ta panta*) are created and redeemed through God's sacramental and incarnational

power. The body of Christ is personal and communal, human and nonhuman, natural and technological. God's creating and redeeming grace permeates all creation deeply, and God calls it good.

Peacocke also develops the Eastern Orthodox notion of *theosis* to explain the relationship between God and the world. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, a Finnish theologian, cites two patristic texts that form the theological foundation of *theosis*. "With regard to *theosis*, the two patristic texts most often cited are from Irenaeus and Athanasius. Irenaeus: 'The word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ . . . did through his transcendent Love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.' Athanasius: 'he, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God'" (Kärkkäinen 2004, 26). All of creation participates in the divine life, which is an intercommunion of multiple species. The interesting and rather radical notion of Peacocke's development of *theosis* is that that which is natural is not only fully part of the creation but also fully part of the divine. God becomes fully human/natural in order that we can become fully divine/natural. Peacocke uses *theosis* to *naturalize* the sacramental and incarnational relationship between God and the world. We are not resident aliens in this world of God but fully naturalized citizens in our natural home. When one enters the world, one loses one's self only to find God in exchange. This is a powerfully poetic and mystical manner of interpreting *theosis* as a fully natural and worldly process.

Therefore, both the person and work of Jesus the Christ must be natural in order to redeem that which is natural. Throughout the history of the Christian tradition, the church has argued over what it means for Jesus the Christ to be both fully human and fully divine, but I have found very little evidence to indicate that nature itself is part of the discussion. Peacocke reclaims nature as the matrix for understanding both human and divine. This provides creative ways for reformulating the divine/human relationship and the incarnation of God in Jesus the Christ. God's incarnation in the natural world should not be opposed to or radically different from God's incarnation in the person of Jesus the Christ. In fact, as divine and human participate in the process we are calling *theosis*, it may be that both divine and human are so transformed and transmuted that the categories themselves become changed.

God's presence in the world is radically immanent and radically natural—which is why it also is radically transcendent. When the divine embodies all of creation, all of creation in its beauty and brokenness is redeemed. And this redemption is not separate from God's intentions established in creation. Creation and redemption are processes of participation of the natural communities in which we live, move, and have our being. When we enter into the joy and sorrow of the natural world, we find God present in us through the power of transforming grace. We emerge again, divinized—naturally, of course.

Peacocke emphasizes the physical embodiment of the Logos—in all of creation, and in Jesus the Christ. Here he uses a musical analogy: embodiedness is essential to improvisation. The physical rhythms and notes are actually filled and felt by the musicians (Peacocke and Pederson 2006, 39). Creativity is the way in which the divine Logos embodies the integration of a divine and human spirit in a human body. We know through our bodies that the Word becomes flesh. Here I find Jeanette Winterson, a contemporary British author, rather helpful. Her book *Written on the Body* (1992) is a postmodern love story written in the style of the Song of Songs. While not intended as such by Winterson, I think her words can explain how God knows us and we know God: that is, in and through our bodies. Winterson writes about the lover's experience of the beloved:

> I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair, and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away. . . . The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body. Your Morse Code interferes with my heart beat. I had a steady beat before I met you. . . . Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulation of a lifetime gather there. (1992, 89)

The potentiality and actuality of all levels of creation are embodied and transformed in Jesus the Christ. The meaning of creation is embodied in Jesus the Christ.

Although Jesus is a unique focal point in Peacocke's Christology, he is not an exclusive one. He is inclusive in the sense that he embodies all of God's intentions in creation. Peacocke often uses this quote from John Macquarrie:

> Incarnation was not a sudden once-for-all-event . . . but is a process which began with the creation. . . . It is the progressive presencing and self-manifestation of the Logos (the self-expressive Word of God) in the physical and historical world. For the Christian, this process reaches its climax in Jesus Christ. . . . The difference between Christ and other agents of the Logos is one of degree, not of kind. (Peacocke and Pederson 2006, 39)

This Christology Peacocke names as inclusive—that the Logos of God is discerned and experienced in all human cultures and in all of creation.

How to understand the full humanity and divinity of Jesus is a perennial problem of interpretation for the Christian tradition. Peacocke claims that the language of substance is unhelpful for describing the relationship between divine and human and that consequently more dynamic models and language are needed for christological reflection. Divine *activity* is present, not divine *substance* as such. Drawing on the work of Jeremy Begbie, Peacocke uses the example of music, in which we hear a chord—notes sounded separate and yet together. One note, followed by another, sounded together, creates a new sound, an integrated sound. This chord can be the end of a cadence (I, IV, V, I) or the beginning of something new. But it is

in relationship to what has gone before it in the auditory space. Or polyphony, the sounding together of two or more independent musical voices, is a paradigm of understanding the way divine and human love reverberate together (Peacocke and Pederson 2006, 41–43). Consonance and dissonance dance together in this composition of God's life with the world.

Peacocke raises a major question about Christology for theological anthropology: "If God was in Christ, what does the Christ-event tell us about God's ultimate purposes for human nature, for human becoming—that is, for the realization of human potential, for human fulfillment, creativity, flourishing, and even consummation?" (Peacocke and Pederson 2006, 44) Jesus is like an icon reaching into the heart of God, into God's own nature. God's is kenotic love. Jesus takes on his particular life, is incorporated into God, and this divine life can now take on our life. This is a transformation of all humanity—an experience of *theosis*. "To become one with God, to be fully open to God in self-offering love, is now to be perceived as the ultimate realization of human potential" (p. 45). Christ in-forms us, with the shape of himself, which is cruciform. The incarnation is an act of new *creation* (p. 45). How can this happen? "By seeing the life, suffering, and death of Jesus the Christ as an act of love, an act of love of God, an act of love by God" (p. 46). The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ as love for the world is the most important theme in Christianity. It is a trinitarian kenotic event.

Implications of the Christological Vision

So, what are the personal and pragmatic implications of this christological vision of the natural world? As a first response, I offer these comments made by first-year students at Augustana College after their reading of Peacocke's *Theology for a Scientific Age:*

"God is in, with and under us: Perhaps the intent of Jesus was not just to reveal that God is with us, but to reveal that we are with each other. So, if God becomes human, then are we supposed to become the other? Perhaps the journey does not have a single destination, or God does not have a single answer. Perhaps it is about the way we relate to God and others, the way we travel the path with the world."

"All of this scientific talk of atoms and creation helped to show that God's acts are phenomenal, and that science and theology can really relate to one another. Not only is God active in our lives, through creation and communication, but God became one of us. To me, a God who can understand suffering through his own direct experience is a God that is easy to relate to. A God who suffers is more personable, and easier to turn to for help, rather than looking for comfort in some big, impersonal deity."

"The very concept of the world as God's creation requires us to study and understand the work of God. Humans are not complete but are called

to flourish according to their full potentiality. Discovering my potential, and realizing how I could be whole enabled me to understand my own individual 'becoming' into a truly complete human being. This becoming characterizes itself through a transformation. Human existence requires a complete openness to God. Jesus is not wholly unique because he was free from sin, but he had an open communication with God."

"It seems the more we learn and the more we strive to learn, the more elusive the answers become. This may be because our world is constantly changing, constantly becoming. There is always a story to be told. God is ever-changing and dynamic. And God is exploring just as we are, and taking some chances, and this makes God more personal. We are called to be co-creators with God, and this means that rather than a human being we are a human becoming."

Like the early Docetists, we can leave the flesh out of nature, out of both divine and human nature. We forget the dynamic webs of social, cultural, political, and technological relationships in which we understand human personhood. We prefer to think that our origins come from some pristine, pure garden of original nature to which we longingly want to return. And yet we are placed east of Eden where the purebred, pristine boundaries of perfection are left only to idyllic memories. We are here—in this time and this place—in a world created by a God whose own incarnation within it is messy, bodily, and finite. We bear the body of God within our selves. We enter into the body of Christ given for us.

For many people, naturalistic Christian faith would appear as an oxymoron—words paired together that cancel the meaning of the other. For example, think about when someone is very ill and we say we must "let nature take its course." Or we speak about the value of "natural childbirth" or "natural death." We become living sacraments to one another. When we delight in God and in God's world, we find that the delight of self and other is given back to us as the sacrificial love of God. This kenotic love is the very opposite of what we often expect the divine action to be. This divine discontinuity, however, is continuous with God's creative purposes.

Sacraments are naturally that which signify how the finite bears the infinite: the divine, transformative grace of God working in the world.

> For those who aspire to co-create *with* God in nature—working harmoniously with the grain, as it were, of the natural order—will need more and better-informed science and technology in order simultaneously to provide for human needs and to respect the rest of the world, living and non-living. This, it seems to me, is the direction which we should be looking for a sound basis for that "creation-centred" spirituality and a theo-centric ecological ethic which many in our contemporary society are now seeking. (Peacocke 1993, 154)

To be christologically formed is to serve the neighbor—the natural world in all of its intricacies. In an odd way, this service for others becomes a kind of self-service. "We would also have to be recipients of that divine grace

that can transform individuals into creative community, to really becoming 'church' in its most basic sense as the channel of transformative grace to all of the world, including those human beings not consciously members of it" (Peacocke 2007a, 53). I wonder if church is really ready for the radical *nature* of this vision. Mission is so much simpler when its scope is reduced!

I have just barely addressed Sittler's question. Peacocke's christological vision is interesting, intelligible, and inclusive of all life precisely because of its naturalistic scope. The question is whether or not the Christian community can embrace that which God embraces—that we as humans are the naturalized citizens of the created order fully embodied, enfleshed, *and natural*. That which is natural is created and loved by God. And yet, as we have noted, that which is natural is neither pristine nor pure. But neither is the Christian faith. Some Christians have wanted to find easy, pure, clear answers to the messy, difficult, impure dilemmas of our world. But such is not the case, for the divine answer to the world's questions comes naturally—in the Word made flesh.

NOTE

A version of this essay was presented at the Arthur Peacocke Symposium, 9–10 February 2007, organized by *Zygon:Journal of Religion and Science* and the Zygon Center for Religion and Science with support from the John Templeton Foundation. It is adapted from "Response 6: The Juxtaposition of Naturalistic and Christian Faith: Reappraising the Natural from within a Different Theological Lens," in Arthur Peacocke, *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Philip Clayton, copyright ©2007 Fortress Press. Used by permission of Augsburg Fortress Publishers, *www.augsburgfortress.org*. Brief portions also appeared in "Tribute to Arthur Peacocke," *Theology and Science* 5:15–16.

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