

# *John F. Haught's Theological Contributions*

with Gloria L. Schaab, "An Evolving Vision of God"; Ann M. Michaud, "John Haught—Finding Consonance between Religion and Science"; Ted Peters, "Constructing a Theology of Evolution"; Robert E. Ulanowicz, "From Pessimism to Hope: A Natural Progression"

## AN EVOLVING VISION OF GOD: THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN F. HAUGHT

by *Gloria L. Schaab*

*Abstract.* The theology of God in the scholarship of John Haught exemplifies rigor, resourcefulness, and creativity in response to ever-evolving worldviews. Haught presents insightful and plausible ways in which to speak about the mystery of God in a variety of contexts while remaining steadfastly grounded in the Christian tradition. This essay explores Haught's proposals through three of his selected lenses—human experience, the informed universe, and evolutionary cosmology—and highlights two areas for further theological development.

*Keywords:* creation; evolution; future; John F. Haught; hope; incarnation; information; kenosis; mystery; theology of God

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"Theology," Arthur R. Peacocke once declared, "has been most creative and long-lasting when it has responded most positively to the challenges of its times" (Peacocke 1993, 7). Embracing this positive approach, theologian John F. Haught has responded to the range of theological challenges generated by his time of history. The range of Haught's contributions is made clear by the symposiasts in this volume. My task is to focus on his theology of God, which I do through three of Haught's chosen lenses: the lens of human experience, the lens of the informed universe, and the lens of evolutionary cosmology. I conclude with two proposals for further development of Haught's ideas through the model of God central to Christian tradition.

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## GOD THROUGH HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In his book *What Is God? How to Think about the Divine*, Haught considers God through “the type of cognition in which we step back from the immediacy of an experience and place that experience in a conceptual framework” (1986, 2). Because God is not “an invention of theory but the product of a unique type of experience,” Haught questions whether there might be common human experiences to which the name *God* may be referred. He proposes five ways of envisioning God through the lenses of depth, future, freedom, beauty, and truth. According to Haught, those who plumb these human desires may find “the idea of God . . . affirmed not only as satisfying but as truthful as well” (1986, 4).

Reflecting on personal, societal, and natural events, Haught observes that within such experiences there lies a dimension of *depth* that communicates itself as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of Rudolf Otto, mystery both terrifying and fulfilling, both abyss and ground. As abyss, depth causes the individual to draw back and resist in the face of the nonbeing it portends. Yet if one plunges into the abyss, one finds that it is, “in Tillich’s words, the ‘ground of our being’” (1986, 18) named “God.”

Despite its grounding in God, finite being is nonetheless transient and involves the inevitable experience of the *future*, the source of each moment’s novelty. The future too is the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that one enters by transcending present and past toward an ever-receding horizon. However, because each immediate future fails to satisfy, the human person quests for an absolute future—both disquieting and inspiring—that points again to God. God is the “dimension, condition, and future horizon of all our experience” (1986, 35). God as future is the ground of hope and promise of fulfillment, drawing one beyond the frustration of finitude toward fulfillment in the infinite.

The shape of the coming future implies the dynamic of *freedom*, which is positively perceived but difficult to define. Haught examines three philosophical viewpoints on freedom as something we have, something we are, and something that has us. As something we have, freedom is the faculty through which we make choices among alternatives. As something we are, freedom is the very essence of human existence. Although these two insights point to an element of freedom, Haught finds them lacking. He therefore turns to a third philosophical insight that suggests that freedom is that which grasps us and thus grounds both freedoms as choice and as human existence. As the comprehensive horizon of human existence, freedom also exists as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that individuals approach as both threat of nonbeing and promise of fullness of being. Human beings require courage to transcend existential threat, to confront nonbeing, and to gain a freedom that participates in the horizon of freedom itself, the “ultimately grounding and courage-bestowing horizon of freedom that becomes transparent in acts of courage”—God (1986, 58).

The encounter with the Divine discussed as depth, future, and freedom is, Haught proposes, most obvious in the encounter with *beauty*. Following Alfred North Whitehead's process thought, Haught views beauty as a "harmony of contrasts," composed of complexity and patterning, novelty and order (1986, 72). Rooted in these paradoxes, beauty itself is a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that both attracts and repels. It necessitates openness to novelty and chaos and the risk that such openness entails. Nevertheless, in embracing this risk, one finds God as the horizon of ultimate beauty to which humanity is drawn. In God, the "*narrative patterning* of [history's] struggle, suffering, conflicts and contradictions" is constructed into a "complex unity" and emerges "as one of the most obvious examples of beauty" (1986, 73).

Despite the beauty that emerges from suffering and struggle, many individuals seek refuge in distortions and delusions rather than embrace the truth of such beauty. Yet, classical traditions agree that only the pursuit of *truth* brings genuine happiness and, moreover, that the attainment of truth requires one to avoid the self-deception that arises from the need for acceptance and approval. Haught proposes that found in the ultimate horizon that encompasses human existence are the unconditional love and acceptance that provide the ultimate environment for the quest for truth. It is "the conviction of being unconditionally loved . . . [that] nurtures the one desire in us that seeks the truth . . . [and] the name for this truth that coincides with unconditional love is God" (1986, 109).

Having traversed the terrain of human experience, Haught nonetheless acknowledges that the all-encompassing and "most important way of responding to the question 'What is God?' is . . . to say that essentially God is *mystery*" (1986, 115), "the transcendent mystery, the origin, ground, and destiny of the universe" (Haught 2007, 13) and the "horizon that makes all of our experience and knowledge possible" (1986, 117). God is the "known unknown" (1986, 119) that continues to expand and rise up at boundary experiences of existence. It is at such limits that one encounters the fullness of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* and finds that the name of this mystery, ever gracious, self-giving, and loving, is God.

#### GOD THROUGH THE INFORMED UNIVERSE

Haught refocuses his lens from human experience to cosmic events to develop a theology from the perspective of an "informed universe" (Haught 1988). Information is part and parcel of any contemporary view of the cosmos. Therefore, he proposes, the cosmos may be imaged analogically in computer terms and God's relation to the cosmos imaged as "the incarnation of information" or "Information Incarnate." This analogy, though contemporary, is consonant with traditions in both theology and cosmology. In religious traditions, the natural world has long been envisioned as a

“book” rich in information about creation and its Creator. In these traditions, God’s “informing” presence was characterized as “Word,” “Torah,” “Wisdom,” or “Teaching” (1988, 223). In the information age, this analogy now reasserts itself as equally consonant with evolutionary information theory. In the light of this analogy, Haught images “God as self-giving love that seeks to ‘inform’ the world in a continually novel manner” (1988, 224). As such, God is neither manipulative nor coercive; rather, in the dynamic of loving and reciprocal relationship, God is gentle and persuasive in tolerance and self-restraint. A God imaged thus allows the cosmos to *become*, according to its emergent nature, rather than to *be* in an instantaneous act of creation. Unlike the intelligent-design model, which avoids “the dark and tragic side of nature’s evolutionary creativity” (Haught 2001b, 340), the persuasive God of the information model welcomes the fits and starts of the creative process and embraces the chaos of creativity as sign of a cosmos creating itself in freedom and spontaneity.

The informational model is based analogically on the hierarchical assembly of the circuitry, machinery, and programming of a computer. The highest level neither interferes with nor changes the principles that govern the processes operative at the succeeding levels of the assembly but “relies upon their predictable, invariant functioning according to fixed rules and natural laws” (1988, 231) to produce an intelligible pattern of output. The overarching meaning or purpose of the output is not to be found at the lower levels of operation but is discernible only at the highest level of input. Moreover, because the communication depends upon the lower levels of processing, it is “vulnerable to any mechanical or electronic breakdowns that might occur at the subordinate levels” (1988, 233), resulting in disruption or distortion of the information flow.

The applicability of this model to the question of God-world interaction is clear. It suggests how the informing power of God, operative at the highest level of the cosmic hierarchy, can become incarnate in the universe in noncoercive and nonmanipulative ways. It accounts for the presence of suffering and evil in the cosmos as attributable to the noise and redundancy inherent in an “actual world . . . that emerges and persists out of . . . both order and chaos” (1988, 240). This analogy also provides a response to the scientific objection that a divine informational principle is undetectable at the lower levels of the hierarchy and why the inability to detect this principle in no way implies its nonexistence. This purposeful divine influence, however, *is* discernible by those traditions that have devised ways to “render our consciousness . . . ‘adequate’ to the higher . . . levels of reality” (1988, 237). According to Haught, this kind of awareness is named “faith,” a faith in “the ultimate incomprehensible level of reality . . . symbolized [as] . . . self-giving love (no other symbolization of God being worthy of defense)” (1988, 237).

## A GOD FOR EVOLUTION

The impersonal image of the Divine in Haught's informational model of God reconfigures as an interrelational model of God through the lens of evolutionary science. Developing concepts examined through the two lenses discussed above, Haught's evolutionary theology responds to the critical need "to think about God in a manner proportionate to the opulence of evolution" (Haught 2000, ix) and calls for "a revolution in our thoughts about God" (2002, 540). This revolution must respond adequately to "Darwin's dangerous idea," including creativity through natural selection; contingency, law, and time; and the problem of suffering, because these elements challenge the ways in which classical theology has traditionally conceived divine creativity, power, personhood, and love.

Haught credits Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin with being a front runner in the search for a God for evolution. Teilhard believed that evolution proceeds in the direction of complexity-consciousness toward the union of all creation in God. Such directionality implied for Teilhard that "nature has been graced all along by a providential influence" (2005a, 12) because, in his thought, "Nothing less than a transcendent force, radically distinct from but also intimately incarnate in matter, could ultimately explain evolutionary emergence" (2002, 541). This creative force, however, was not the *Prime Mover* located *a retro*, in the past, but *Omega, ab ante*, up ahead, drawing the evolving cosmos toward its absolute future. While science and theology have challenged Teilhard's scientific and theological thinking, Teilhard's influence on the thinking of Haught has endured. This is clearly seen in the "massive shift in our understanding of where to locate the divine transcendence" (Haught 2001a, 50), one consistent with an evolutionary metaphysics of the future.

*Divine Futurity.* Haught asserts that religious thought generally has operated within a metaphysics of *being* that is incompatible with the dynamic of *becoming* through evolution. Evolution demonstrates that "the abode of ultimate reality is not limited to the causal past nor to a fixed and timeless present" but, responsive to the emergent possibilities of natural history, "in the constantly arriving and renewing future" (2000, 88). This understanding is consistent not only with evolutionary thought but also with the God of the biblical tradition. "Promissory events are what brought Israel into being, and it is the intensely promissory events surrounding the appearances of Jesus to his disciples that gave rise to the Christian community and its reborn hope" (2007, 45). In both evolutionary and Christian thought, then, "the whole universe may now be thought of as anticipatory . . . grasped by the futurity of the divine promise that comes to awareness in biblical traditions" (2007, 45–46). Now firmly rooted in cosmic eschatology, "the sense of where the reality of God is to be located can . . . shift from the One . . . 'up above' to the One who comes . . . from 'up

ahead,' out of the realm of the future" (2000, 39). Moreover, God's self-revelation presupposes an evolving cosmos because "the fullness of divine infinity cannot be received instantaneously by a finite cosmos" (2000, 39). Therefore "a finite world could 'adapt' to an infinite source of love only by a process of gradual expansion and ongoing self-transcendence . . . which might appear to science as cosmic and biological evolution" (2000, 39). A theology of futurity moreover is a theology of hope, ascribing "the deepest kind of potency to what is not yet available" (2000, 97). "Faith reads the universe now only 'through a glass darkly,' and the darkness and risk that go with faith are somehow inseparable from the fact that the cosmos is still incomplete;" nonetheless, "the resourcefulness embedded in the same universe cannot fail to give us even now 'a reason for our hope'" (2007, 64).

*Divine Descent.* The cosmic resourcefulness mentioned above arises from creativity embedded in the cosmos itself. Evolutionary theory suggests that such cosmic creativity entails deep time, natural law, and contingent events precipitated by chance. These further imply a kind of human and nonhuman "freedom" that challenges traditional conceptions of divine creativity, power, and providence. Nonetheless, "both the processive character of the cosmos overall, and the troubling Darwinian recipe in particular, are precisely what one should expect if the world is both grounded in and ultimately saved by the God revealed in Jesus Christ" (2005a, 15), a God of humble and self-giving love disclosed in the incarnate Christ. This descent of God into creation is the ground of creation itself, "the condition of there being any world distinct from God at all" (2005a, 17). This implies that "the omnipotent and omnipresent Creator must be humble and self-effacing enough to allow for both the *existence* of something other than God, and a *relationship* to that other" (2005a, 18) in autonomy and freedom. In this dynamic, the descent of the infinite God into the realm of the finite does not blur the ontological distinction between Creator and creation because "true union differentiates" (Teilhard, quoted in Haught 2005b, 66). Further, it does not jeopardize divine transcendence or cosmic autonomy because the Spirit of God invites creation into emergence "by offering to it a virtually limitless range of possibilities within which it can become . . . distinct from its creator" (2000, 56). Hence, chance and indeterminacy are expected when divine creativity is persuasive, not coercive. Suffering and tragedy are predictable when freedom, risk, and adventure are inherently open to the possibility of suffering (1995, 62–63). Thus evolution expresses God's humility, God's self-gift to the world. Evolution "is the story of the emerging independence and autonomy of a world awakening in the presence of God's grace . . . the story of the world's adapting to the mystery of endless Love" (2001a, 59).

*Divine Kenosis.* An evolutionary theology of the descent of God is informed by more than the incarnation of Jesus Christ, however, for "if

Jesus is truly the Incarnation of God, then his experience of the Cross is God's own suffering" (2005a, 17). God's creative power is revealed not only in the loving letting-be of divine self-restraint but also in the "vulnerable defenselessness of a crucified man" (2001a, 114). This is not a weak or powerless God but a God "who lovingly renounces any claim to domineering omnipotence" (2000, 50) and "who pours the divine selfhood into the world in an act of unreserved self-abandonment" (2000, 48). The God for evolution revealed in the crucifixion gives new meaning to "the unfathomed epochs of wandering experimentation, struggle, apparent waste, and suffering . . . of evolution by natural selection" (2000, 49).

This meaning stems, first, from God's compassionate identification with the suffering of all creation in the suffering of Jesus, as opposed to "the Absolute that remains in splendid isolation from the hopes, tragedies, sorrows, and struggles of weak human beings and . . . of cosmic and biological evolution" (2008, 99). Second, new meaning arises from "a universe that is still emerging into being," which "allows for the transpositioning of the ideal of perfection from an imagined past to a possible future" (2007, 106). Third, meaning resides in the promissory nature of God who "opens up a new future whenever dead-ends appear . . . in the direction of a creation yet to be realized" (2007, 106). Finally, from a process perspective, new meaning derives from God's transformation of the absurd and contradictory occasions of history into a harmony of contrasts, maximizing cosmic beauty and "endowing even tragedy with redemptive significance" as it passes into the immediacy of the divine experience (2000, 127).

#### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The theology of John Haught is exemplary in its resourcefulness and creativity in the face of ever-evolving worldviews. He presents insightful and plausible responses to theological questions arising from diverse contexts while remaining steadfastly grounded in the Christian tradition. Many of Haught's early insights have endured and developed, including his concepts of the Divine as future and as mystery, as self-giving and as self-communicative, as hope and as love.

There are other insights in Haught's writing that, with further development, might expand his theological proposals. One is that of God as Trinity. Although his recent work *Christianity and Science* (2007) shows hopeful signs of development toward a fuller theology of God as Trinity, a more systematic treatment may provide balance and versatility to images that seem to imply a monadic approach to God and the God-world relationship. A trinitarian approach can, for example, nuance Haught's concept of the futurity of God. Although Haught vigorously asserts the need for the arrival of God from the future in an evolutionary worldview, his position—and that of others whom he references—runs at least two risks. First,

despite Haught's statements to the contrary, it devalues the present and the past that provide the limits and potentialities on which evolution and emergence depend. Second, it locates divine creativity in a future that some would contend has dubious ontological status in an evolutionary paradigm. Moreover, if "true union differentiates," an explicitly trinitarian approach seems indispensable. Using a triune approach in dialogue with notions of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing), *creatio continua* (ongoing or continuous creation), and *creatio nova* (new creation) may affirm the evolutionary significance of the present and past, differentiate the triune action of God in evolutionary processes, and suggest loci of divine creativity that stretch throughout the eons of time.

Haught's theological proposals might also be enhanced by a more explicit development of the paradigm of pantheism in his work. In a response to the critics of his 2003 Boyle lecture (2005a, b), Haught rightly acknowledges that "in many instances" pantheism "is a completely orthodox theological position" that firmly supports both divine transcendence and divine immanence (2005b, 68). As such, it is perfectly suited to an evolutionary theology that claims God's ongoing involvement in the creativity of the cosmos while simultaneously avoiding pantheism. Moreover, combined with a trinitarian understanding of God, pantheism provides the means to speak of God's transcendent, incarnate, and immanent relation to an evolving cosmos in ways that validly articulate Christian belief in God's creative, salvific, and transformative self-gift to the cosmos in love. In so doing, it well proclaims a God for evolution "who in Christ and through the Spirit makes all things new" (2008, 12).

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