

# *The Boyle Lecture 2012*

with Celia Deane-Drummond, “Christ and Evolution: A Drama of Wisdom?”;  
F. LeRon Shults, “Wising Up: The Evolution of Natural Theology”

## WISING UP: THE EVOLUTION OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

by F. LeRon Shults

*Abstract.* This essay is in response to Professor Celia Deane-Drummond’s 2012 Boyle lectures. The first part calls attention to the value and significance of her “sophianic theo-drama hypothesis” for the contemporary engagement between Christian theology and evolutionary science. In a sense, her proposal itself is a religious “adaptation” to changes within an international, interdisciplinary academic environment. The second part of the essay explores the rapidly shrinking “niche” of Christian natural theology and briefly summarizes an alternative set of hypotheses from the biocultural sciences of religion.

*Keywords:* biology; Robert Boyle; Christology; cognitive science; evolution

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### INTRODUCTION

I have titled my paper “Wising Up: The Evolution of Natural Theology” as a play on words to introduce the images and metaphors developed by Deane-Drummond in her Boyle lecture and elsewhere (Deane-Drummond 2012). I reflect on her particular proposal and its place within the broader context of the contemporary encounter between science and the Christian religion. In more than one sense, her work illustrates the “wising up” of theology that, also in more than one sense, has been and must continue to “evolve” within its own complex niche of overlapping ecclesial, social, and academic environments.

My response has two parts. First, I call attention to the value and significance of Deane-Drummond’s proposal, which I call “the sophianic theo-drama hypothesis,” for the ongoing development of Christian theological responses to the empirical findings and theoretical formulations within sciences such as evolutionary biology and psychology. In fact, I think

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her proposal is an exemplar of a particular type of theological response that offers the most promising adaptation of the Christian tradition within this broader dialogue.

However, simply praising the main speaker does not get us very far, so in the second part of my response, I outline some challenges to this *way* of proposing, challenges that, in my view, must be taken yet more seriously, even—and perhaps especially—by those in the vanguard of theological engagement with the natural sciences. What further adaptation, if any, will be necessary for “natural” theology to survive, or perhaps even thrive, within the competitive intellectual environment of the contemporary academy? Can it find its own niche, or will it be compelled to migrate or adapt in some other way?

#### THE SOPHIANIC THEO-DRAMA HYPOTHESIS AS A RELIGIOUS “ADAPTATION”

My use of the term “adaptation” is not intended negatively in any way. The transmission of any tradition from generation to generation requires a balance between maintaining the integrity and coherence of the system and developing new functionally adequate responses to environmental changes. This also applies to the tradition of Christian theology and the subtradition of “natural theology” within it, which has indeed evolved since the first Boyle lectures and now must continue to adapt. Metaphorically speaking, we can think of Christian theological hypotheses as complex functional strategies for nourishing and nurturing a particular set of religious communities within a late modern scientific and philosophical environment that sometimes feels very hostile indeed.

Some might find it tempting to repeat fossilized formulations without engaging any scientific challenges, whereas others might concede to any and all scientific challenges without concern for communal integrity. One path leads to the petrification, and the other to the dissolution of the Christian tradition. As clearly articulated in her lecture this evening, and further elaborated elsewhere, especially in *Christ and Evolution: Wonder and Wisdom*, Deane-Drummond (2009) takes the difficult middle way between the twin temptations of ignoring and idolizing science. It takes great courage and commitment, not to mention an enormous amount of energy, to take this middle way.

There is indeed much wisdom in her approach—materially, as well as methodologically. Deane-Drummond’s material hypothesis is quite complex, but the central claim on which I focus here can be summarized quite succinctly: Christians may interpret Jesus Christ as the *dramatic* expression of the *Wisdom* of God in a way that is compatible with contemporary *evolutionary* theory. The warrants and argumentation for this apparently simple claim are quite sophisticated. Her work is characterized

by rigorous attempts to fulfill all four of what we might call the desiderata of constructive Christian theology: a faithful interpretation of the biblical witness, a critical appropriation of the theological tradition, a conceptual resolution of relevant philosophical issues, and a plausible elucidation of contemporary human experience.

Although it does not play a large role in the current lecture, Deane-Drummond has argued elsewhere, in careful dialogue with current critical biblical scholarship, that early Christians already interpreted Jesus in light of the Wisdom tradition of Hebrew literature. For example, in the Wisdom of Solomon, wisdom is portrayed as a feminine figure who fills all things and holds them together (1:6–7), who, more mobile than any motion, is creatively pervading and upholding all things (7:24–27). This language is applied to the risen Christ in the famous hymn of Colossians 1:15–20: “. . . for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created . . . all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Deane-Drummond also appropriates a vast array of resources from different streams within the Christian theological tradition, relying most heavily on Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican theologians. She is committed to maintaining the intuitions behind the Chalcedonian creed while still squarely facing the shift in what “fully human” means for us today in light of evolutionary theory.

She also exhibits a commitment to the last two desiderata: doing theology in a way that is intellectually and existentially responsible. Professor Deane-Drummond offers real arguments for her position, engaging relevant philosophical debates on issues such as causality, and links them to real concerns facing humanity as a whole such as the environmental crisis. Deane-Drummond’s integration of the sophianic and the dramatic, especially as developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, provides a way of attending more carefully to the element of tragedy within the human longing for wisdom that characterizes *Homo sapiens*. Elsewhere I too have argued (Shults, 2008), although not nearly so extensively, that utilizing the dynamic and relational language of the sophianic tradition appears to be the wisest strategy to adopt if one’s goal is reconstructing the classical doctrines of Christology in dialogue with contemporary science.

There are certainly objections internal to the Christian tradition that could be and ought to be raised. Some might worry that her proposal is a form of adoptionism. Others might regret her lack of attention to resources within other Protestant traditions. Some would be concerned that her emphasis on contingency easily lends itself to a rejection of divine omnipotence or inadequately protects the distinction between God and the world. What about the problem of evil? Her sophianic theo-drama hypothesis deals respectfully with the tragedy of creaturely suffering but does not ultimately explain why an omnibenevolent being allows it.

Of course, such concerns are not unique to Deane-Drummond's proposal; these are the kinds of problems with which all Christian theologians must wrestle. In my judgment, the general adaptive strategy she has developed is one of the best options available for contemporary theologians within the Christian tradition. Rather than focus on these internal questions, however, in the second part of my response, I want to look at the adaptive task with a wider lens. What is happening to the niche within which theology, especially "natural" theology, is attempting to adapt? Exactly why—and how—is it attempting to adapt within this niche?

#### IS THE "NATURAL" NICHE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY SHRINKING?

As I indicated in the first part of my response, theological hypotheses are a kind of *religious* adaptation. In other words, they are (whatever else they may be) strategies developed within religious coalitions to survive and thrive. The term *religious* is contentious in almost every environment, but for the sake of these brief comments, I will use it in a way that is increasingly common among scientists in fields such as paleoarchaeology, cognitive science, moral psychology, and cultural anthropology: shared imaginative engagement with supernatural agents. Here "supernatural" simply means not necessarily embodied in the natural causal nexus, and "agent" refers to any entity or force that is attributed intentionality. This constellation of disciplines, which I will call "the biocultural sciences of religion," offers compelling evidence that this feature (widespread interaction with discarnate intentional entities) has been exhibited in all known societies, past and present (cf. Shults forthcoming).

In the sense we use the term today, *theology* emerged relatively late in human history, within complex literate states where *unity* of belief, ritual, and social identity was problematized by pluralistic encounters. During the axial age, the idea of *an* ultimate Supernatural Agency emerged in different ways across east, south, and west Asia. The *mono*-theistic construal of this Agency as *a* personal God is typical of the Abrahamic (west Asian) religions that trace their roots to this period. In Christian theology the transcendent intentionality of the *one* God is generally considered to be the basis for inclusion within (or exclusion from) *one* great Supernatural Coalition. In this sense, we could say that theology was an adaptive strategy that helped religious organizations *unify*, police, and transmit their preferred modes of imaginative supernatural engagement on a larger societal scale. Axial age religions provided the original and "natural" social niche within which theology evolved.

In another sense, however, theology—like science—is not "natural." Thinking scientifically—and theologically—is hard work and requires extensive training; these intellectual engagement strategies must be

cultivated. Thinking (as well as acting and feeling) religiously, however, *is* natural; that is, shared imaginative engagement with supernatural agents (or “gods”) comes naturally to human beings today because of the phylogenetic inheritance of cognitive and coalitional mechanisms that helped our early ancestors survive. We might call these theogonic (or god-bearing) mechanisms.

Research in cognitive psychology suggests that gods are “born” naturally in the human mind as a result of a hypersensitive cognitive device that detects agency in the natural environment when confronted with ambiguous phenomena. This first sort of mechanism helped (some of) our ancestors find (or avoid) important agents like predators, prey, protectors, or partners. However, the hypersensitivity of the cognitive tendency to detect intentionality led to many false positives; faces are detected in clouds, ghosts in the shifting of shadows or smoke, divine blessing or punishment in unpredictable weather patterns. But of course not all of these detected supernatural agents stick around.

Although gods may easily appear in the mental space of human life, it takes a village to nurture and care for them. In other words, supernatural agents must be born in a special way within the social space of human life. The gods that stick around are those that are interpreted as having some social interest in and power over what happens within and to the in-group. Once detected, shared engagement with such gods—who are always watching and able to punish or reward—can lead to a decrease in cheating and defection to outgroups. This second sort of mechanism helps to explain (inter alia) the emergence of altruistic behavior in a way that is consistent with natural selection. The cohesion of a group is protected when its members do not hurt one another and are even willing to signal costly commitment to the coalition by hurting themselves (e.g., participating in painful rituals or other forms of self-sacrifice) or hurting members of outgroups (e.g., promoting exclusive or violent practices).

Empirical findings within the biocultural sciences of religion suggest that these detection/protection mechanisms come naturally to most people. So where does theology come in? Part of the “tragedy of the theologian” (to use Pascal Boyer’s phrase) is that the vast majority of regular religious believers do not really *need* abstract doctrinal arguments about the incarnation of ultimate Supernatural Agents, for example, to hold together their everyday mental and social lives. Even if they can articulate the orthodox doctrine of God authorized by the church universal at Chalcedon, psychological studies (and a moment’s reflection on our own experience as—or of—religious believers) show that under stress people’s actual cognitive and coalitional engagement quickly and automatically collapses back into the natural default: the detection of supernatural agents (such as angels, saints or even the risen Jesus) who are interested in the protection of their own

smaller ingroup. Those of us who have labored long in both academic and ecclesial environments know how difficult it is to get many believers to understand, or even to see the importance of, complicated doctrines like the incarnation.

What does any of this have to do with the evolution of natural theology? *Theology* in general may have emerged in the axial age, but the environmental niche in which *natural* theology evolved was the competition of ideas within early modern science and philosophy, in which only the empirically sustainable and explanatorily powerful survived. Natural theology has traditionally been distinguished from *revealed* or confessional theology, which appeals explicitly to the detection of divine intentions (e.g., in a holy text), codifying and to some extent managing the coalition's shared engagement with its Supernatural Agent. This latter kind of theology serves an adaptive purpose, holding together the coalition in a more or less hostile social environment.

Now Celia Deane-Drummond's project seems to blur the lines, appropriately I think, between revealed and natural theology; in my view, this distinction itself is a remnant of other ancient and modernist dualisms. However, we can still ask the question: In what niche and for what purpose does her sophianic theo-drama hypothesis operate? Her description of the task she has selected makes clear that her proposal is meant to function as a way of protecting the cohesion of (some parts of) the Christian tradition as it adapts to a changing conceptual environment. But we might wonder about the viability of that other task—namely, the development of theological hypotheses that *could* function in the broader context of the academy or the public sphere as “defenses of Christianity in the wake of pressures from natural science.” It seems to me that the latter would require argumentation that does not appeal directly to controversial interpretations of the revelation of—or shared engagement with—the supernatural agents of one's own religious coalition.

In other words, it would require something like classical natural theology. This may have been part of Robert Boyle's intention when he indicated his desire that the original lectures series should not deal with controversies between Christians—that is, with issues that might highlight, or even widen, fractures within the coalition. But it also seems to me that the conceptual environment within which such argumentation could be productive or even possible is shrinking rapidly. Theologians who are concerned about the psychological and political health of Christian (and other) coalitions need to “wise up” to the fact that this niche may even be in danger of disappearing as the territory is taken over by naturalist and secularist intuitions. Debates across the sciences and within the public sphere increasingly reject appeals to supernatural agency or coalitional authority in arguments about the causal nexus of the physical world or the normative organization of the social world.

Deane-Drummond describes her task as a demonstration of the possibility of a compatibility between a reconstructed articulation of the doctrine of the incarnation and a scientifically responsible acknowledgment of the explanatory power of cutting-edge evolutionary theory. She explicitly notes that science itself has no *need* for such demonstrations of compatibility. What, then, is the environmental niche within which such proposals can serve a (re)productive function? Are they necessarily limited to the Church—or a church? Can they only survive within the guilds of confessional theologians and religious professionals? Deane-Drummond's (2011) work has consistently called our attention to the ecological crises of our world and urged theologians to contribute. If theology is to survive or even (I dare to hope) thrive intellectually and pragmatically in such a global context, it may (I dare to suggest) also have to develop new adaptive strategies that do not include arguments based on the detection and protection of one's favored Supernatural Agent Coalition, but instead explore radically new options for a robustly natural(ist) theology. Let us hope that the niche created by the revival of the Boyle lectures continues to provide an environment within which such efforts can thrive.

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