

A CRITIQUE OF EMERGENT THEOLOGIES

by Joanna Leidenhag

Abstract. This article is an analysis and critique of emergent theologies, focusing on areas of Christology and pneumatology. An increasing number of Christian theologians are integrating (strong) emergence theory into their work. I argue that, despite the range of theological commitments and methodological approaches represented by these scholars, each faces similar problematic tendencies when their Christian doctrines are combined with (strong) emergence theory. It is concluded that the basic logic of emergence theory, whereby matter is seen to precede mind, makes it difficult for emergent theologies to offer an account of salvation, avoid significant issues regarding God's involvement with evil, and maintain divine transcendence. It is concluded, therefore, that Christian theology should look elsewhere for a complementary metaphysical framework with which to bridge scientific and theological discourse.

Keywords: Christology; emergence; emergent theology; pneumatology; theistic evolution

Emergence theory is a philosophical and scientific framework that is being increasingly embraced in Christian theology. The popularity of emergence theory among theologians is largely due to emergence theory's role as an alternative to supernatural interventionism and reductionism. Emergent theology depicts God as involved in the evolutionary process not only in giving existence and purpose to the universe, but also in bestowing humanity with mental and spiritual capacities through natural processes. Thus, for many contemporary theologians the philosophical framework of emergence theory is seen as the middle ground or a bridge between the natural and theological sciences. It is increasingly acknowledged that it is not enough for theologians to simply accept the theory of evolution, but we must also rethink some of the central doctrines of the Christian faith. Emergent theologies are an attempt to do just that.

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Emergent theology is represented in this article by a range of Christian scholars who come from different theological and denominational traditions, and so each scholar approaches emergence theory with varying theological commitments. The scholars focused on in this article are Arthur Peacocke, Ilia Delio, Philip Clayton, F. LeRon Shults, and Denis Edwards. The descriptive element of this article, as well as the normative part, seeks to make an original contribution to the dialogue between emergence theory and theology by drawing together and comparing the Christological and pneumatological proposals of these different theologians. For some theologians, such as Arthur Peacocke and Philip Clayton, “the new emergent picture of the world is used as the organizing principle for systematic theology” (Clayton 2008, 88). Others, such as Denis Edwards, have been more conservative in their approach by letting their theological commitments moderate the depth of integration with emergence theory. To use Philip Clayton’s words, “there is in fact a wide variety of ways in which a theology can be emergent” (Clayton 2008, 103). However, the goal of this article is to show that, despite these different starting points and methodological approaches, emergent theologies exhibit the same theologically problematic tendencies when they integrate emergence theory into their theology.

This emergence-based theological trend locates God’s nature within the emergent process and so identifies some elements of the divine as an emergent phenomenon. In order to show this tendency and its cost for Christian theology, this article examines the effect of emergentist theology on two central areas of Christian beliefs, namely depictions of Jesus Christ (Christology) and understandings of the Spirit of God (pneumatology). It is worth noting that this article only seeks to critique Christian appropriations of emergence theory, and offers no comments about the ability of other religions to incorporate emergence theory into their worldview, or the ability for emergence theory to generate an altogether new religious perspective. First, it is necessary to explicate a basic account of emergence theory.

EMERGENCE THEORY: THE BASICS

Emergence theory states that reality is fundamentally layered and seen as “hierarchical divisions of stuff . . . organized by part–whole relations, in which wholes at one level function as parts at the next (and at all higher) levels” (Wimsatt 1994, 222). Physically simple objects or phenomena, such as protons, electrons, and possibly quarks, can arrange themselves in increasingly complex ways to produce a whole, a particular type of atom with particular properties. Atoms might organize into molecules or a cell, which again have very different properties from protons, electrons, or atoms. These new properties are said to emerge and are, therefore, new

emergent phenomena. The emergence of new properties shows that the new whole is more than the sum of its parts. This is a picture of the world that is continuously becoming.

Emergence theorists fall into two main camps—those who support only weak emergence theory and those who defend the idea of strong emergence. Emergent properties can certainly be physical properties (i.e., liquidity), constituting weak emergence. Some further claim that they can also be nonphysical or irreducible to the physical (i.e., mentality), constituting strong emergence. The difference between weak and strong emergence boils down to the degree of power given to the process of emergence itself. Weak emergence entails a limited level of novelty, so that there is something about the lower level physical base which corresponds to the higher level properties. Thus, the irreducibility of the higher level is mainly epistemological. Strong emergence, however, entails a more radical level of novelty, most notably the sort of novelty, which allows for downward causation from emergent properties onto their material substrate. Not only has a new property emerged, but a new process, which downwardly affects and coevolves with its physical base, is also said to have emerged (Gregersen 2006b, 314). Philip Clayton describes the difference between weak and strong emergence as follows: “Strong emergentists maintain that genuinely new causal agents or causal processes come into existence over the course of evolutionary history. By contrast, weak emergentists insist, as new patterns emerge, the fundamental causal processes remain, ultimately, physical” (Clayton 2006, 7). Weak emergence is a fairly undisputed natural phenomenon and is largely (though not entirely) uninteresting to theology. Strong emergence, if true, might be of great theological significance. As Clayton writes, “for theists who maintain that God as a spiritual being exercises some causal influence in the natural world, defending strong emergence may be a *sine qua non* for their position” (2006, 27). Before discussing the incorporation of emergence theory into specific Christian beliefs, it is worth considering the range of ways one can combine emergence and religion more generally.

Niels Henrik Gregersen has outlined “five distinct models for appropriating the idea of emergence from a religious perspective” (Gregersen 2006a, 281). First, Gregersen considers “flat religious naturalism,” such as that proposed by Ursula Goodenough and Gordon D. Kaufman, which sees the natural processes of Nature or Creativity as divine (Goodenough 1998; Kaufman 2004). This is not a position many Christian theologians seem to wish to imitate, as it would be hard to justify what is distinctly Christian about this worldview. The second approach is “evolving theistic naturalism,” which also holds the view that “nature is prior to God and the divine is a quality of nature, not its source” (Gregersen 2006b, 287). This view, represented by Samuel Alexander ([1927] 2010) and contemporary scholar Anthony Freeman (2001), posits deity as an emergent property of the

universe. Alexander writes, “as being the whole universe God is creative, but his distinctive character of deity is not creative but created” (Alexander [1927] 2010, 397). Although this is a counterintuitive position for Christian theology, it is shown below to have had a surprisingly strong influence on many emergent theologies, particularly with regard to Christology and pneumatology. Gregersen writes that, despite its undesirability for religion at face level, “the general outcome is inevitable if emergentist thinking is written large, metaphysically speaking” (Gregersen 2006b, 290). Philip Clayton, for example, claims to avoid Alexander’s “radical emergent theism,” as he calls it, but does admit that it is a logical conclusion of a religious system built upon emergence theory (Clayton 2008, 87, 102).

The third and fourth models on Gregersen’s typology are “atemporal theism” and “temporal theism,” which differ on whether or not God is affected and influenced by the emerging world (cf. Davies 1998, 158; Davies 2004, 104; Gregersen 2006b, 287). “Atemporal theism” tends toward deism, whereas “temporal theism” allows for God’s experience and identity to grow and change with the emergent complexity of the world. Ilia Delio writes, “The emergent Christ in evolution is not only the process of divine-created unfolding life but the evolution of God as well” (Delio 2011, 3). This creates a pull toward the previously outlined position of “evolving theistic naturalism,” which we shall see is a reoccurring problem for emergent “temporal theism.” This approach is popular among emergence theologians such as Arthur Peacocke, Philip Clayton, Keith Ward, Catherine Keller, and Niels Henrik Gregersen himself.

The final perspective in Gregersen’s typology is “eschatological theism,” and is exemplified by thinkers such as John Haught (2003) and Denis Edwards (2004a). Gregersen notes that the central difference between “temporal theism” and “eschatological theism” is that “the latter claims that one will never be able to offer a sufficient explanation of emergence only by referring to the causal powers of nature, as in model four” (Gregersen 2006b, 299). The dividing line, therefore, comes down to accounts of divine action and the possibility of final causation, which unfortunately lie beyond the scope of this article.

EMERGENT CHRISTOLOGIES

Christology, as well as being perhaps the most central doctrine of the Christian faith, has been a particularly significant area of innovation for emergent theologies. Gregersen writes that a central theological question for Christian emergent theologians is: “Is there a connection between the chemistry of emergence and the emergence of Jesus Christ?” (Gregersen 2006b, 310). An example of an affirmative response comes from Arthur Peacocke. As one of the leading and most prolific figures of emergent theology, Peacocke describes the incarnation as follows: “[a] new emergent,

a new reality, had appeared within created humanity” (Peacocke 2009a, 34). Put another way, “the significance and potentiality of all levels of creation may be said to have been unfolded in Jesus the Christ” (Peacocke 2009a, 40). For Peacocke, the incarnation is incorporated into an emergentist doctrine of creation, and is in many ways a subsidiary of it. Christ is seen as the highest point of creation’s ongoing evolution and emergence. Peacocke argues that the emergent level of “Christ” is the result of a long natural process in which “God has all along been instantiating, ‘incarnating’ God’s own ‘personalness’ in that world” (Peacocke 1993, 305).

For Peacocke, the miracle of the incarnation is not articulated as a preexistent member of the Trinity entering *into* the created order at a specific moment in history, but as a new kind of divine-human reality arising *out of* creation through natural processes. This proposal contains interesting echoes of Eutychianism, which is a Christological position from the fourth and fifth centuries attributed to Eutyches of Constantinople (c. 380–456). The idea is that the mixture of divine and human natures in the incarnation generated a third type of being. This third type of being, “Christ,” was believed to have one mixed nature (monophysitism) so that the divine nature overpowered the human nature (Harnack [1900] 1997, 190–227; Chadwick 2001, 551–56). Peacocke too seems to be suggesting that God has mingled or “incarnated” his own “personalness” within the evolution of humanity, and so produced a new emergent being, the Christ. Eutychianism was rejected by the Council of Chalcedon (c. 451), because it was seen that if Jesus was not fully human *as we are* then he could not save humanity (Plested 2007). As is discussed below, salvation is a difficult area for emergent Christologies.

One result of this emergent incarnation is that it is repeatable. Thus, for Peacocke, Christ becomes an ontological exemplar, the newest level of the emergent process to which we can aspire (Peacocke 1986, 132; 2009a, 38). Refashioning the thoughts of Teilhard de Chardin, Ilia Delio also democratizes the incarnation to equate it with emergent evolution: “Incarnation does not take place *in* evolution; Christ does not intervene in creation and then become its goal. Rather, the whole evolutionary process is incarnational” (Delio 2011, 53). For Delio, the principle “[t]o be in Christ is to be in evolution” is volitional and has ethical implications (Delio 2011, 9). The idea is that the incarnation is an ongoing process that is identical to the natural processes of evolution and which is available for all humanity to imitate, although it is not made clear how we consciously convert to Jesus/to evolution and choose to imitate or participate more fully in our own evolution/incarnation.

F. LeRon Shults, in his *Christology and Science*, writes that “[t]he doctrine of incarnation is an attempt to clarify this question about the coming-to-be of *Homo sapiens*,” through the evolutionary process of emergence (Shults 2008, 23). Shults also reinterprets the incarnation through emergence

theory, so that incarnation is a process that began with the capacity for symbolic thinking. Incarnation is understood in terms of a long historical process, a process which is tied to (if not identical with) the process of evolution (Shults 2008, 60). For Shults, this process is then fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth's way of knowing and being known, as this is the way of knowing and being known that the persons of the Trinity share (Shults 2008, 60).

Philip Clayton's proposal is similar to this, except it focuses on Jesus's attitude and action by arguing that Jesus's way of acting is God's way of acting (Clayton 2008, 111). Shults's and Clayton's proposals suggest a psychological or behavioral ascendance of humanity to participate in God, which transforms at least one man into a revelation of God (Shults 2008, 56, 58; Clayton 2008, 111). These proposals are original in that they emphasize that Jesus's own individual moral and cognitive development is of significance not only for his humanity but also for his divinity. This seems to be a more promising and modest proposal than Peacocke's or Delio's models, given that Shults and Clayton do not claim that Christ constitutes an absolute new ontology but instead a new existential way of being produced by the emergence process. At first glance, this existential approach is easier to combine with Jesus's role in the history of salvation, as Jesus's humanity is identical to our own, and so we are not cut off from him as we might be were he to constitute a new ontological level.

These four proposals represent a variety of emergent Christologies. It might be noted that these Christologies are coherent and compelling proposals when considered in isolation. However, significant theological problems arise when they are incorporated into a broader Christian worldview and this does not seem to have been explicitly discussed in debates around emergence theory and religion. Here, I will mention one potential scientific weakness as well as some significant theological problems with these Christologies.

As noted above, all of these emergent Christologies locate Jesus's divinity in the process of evolution. Thus, Jesus represents a new emergent level of humanity either ontologically (Peacocke), psychologically (Shults), or behaviorally (Clayton). Jesus appears as both a revelation of God and as an exemplar to be imitated. These are both important theological functions of any Christology, but the latter idea is hard to justify scientifically. If Jesus's novelty is an emergent phenomenon that we are meant to generate within ourselves, this becomes scientifically problematic. On the one hand, it is not obvious how I can consciously change my biological makeup and organizational complexity, certainly without the help of more recent or future technologies. It is not clear how one accelerates one's own evolution/incarnation, especially to the point to generating an evolutionary "jump forward." On the other hand, if all that is being endorsed is a purely spiritual form of progress, then it is not obvious why evolutionary theory

and emergence are being invoked here and in what sense this qualifies as incarnation. This evolutionary understanding of the incarnation and the importance of Jesus Christ for humanity at large seems, therefore, to be in tension with the scientific theories which they build upon.

There are also some theological areas of tension within these emergent Christologies. First, by positing Jesus's divinity as a developmental and naturalistic emergent property, God has no clear way of overcoming death, which is an essential part of the evolutionary process. God, on these emergent Christological models, does not interrupt the biological processes of the world with something like an immaculate conception, but incarnates divinity throughout the long history of evolution. Thus, God's revelation and presence in the world depend, in some sense, upon the process of evolution. It would seem, especially given the general position of "temporal theism," that divinity would then be affected by the evolutionary process. Although Christianity, which has the death of Jesus on the cross at its core, maintains that God reveals himself through and despite death and suffering, this is for the purpose of overcoming such evil. This leaves us with the question: If God cannot overcome death and sin through the incarnation, due to God's reliance on these negative aspects of our universe for the emergence of Christ, then what purpose is given to the incarnation in these models? Why does Jesus become incarnate for emergent theologies? This corresponds to the question of how humanity is seen to benefit from this emergent incarnation. As noted above, there is no naturalistic way for us to push forward our biological emergence to become "Christs" as well, and so improve our situation.

There is a clear pull in these Christologies toward "evolving theistic naturalism," whereby deity is not merely affected by but constituted by the arrangement of matter into sufficient complexity. The humanity of Jesus will indeed have to be a product of evolution, as all humans are, but these emergent Christologies take this a step further so that Christ's divinity also becomes an emergent phenomenon. It might be noted that Clayton claims that "emergent thinking links most naturally with kenotic Christology" (Clayton 2008, 111). However, kenoticism is about divine emptying, self-limitation, and, essentially, divine descent. Emergent thinking has the opposite trajectory—emergence is the story of ascent through the emergence of higher levels. Rather than God becoming human, emergent Christologies tell the story of an ordinary human revealing God as a result of God's action through the process of evolution, which is a creaturely ascent.

This brings us to the second theological concern, which regards the level of transcendence attributed to Jesus's divinity. The type of transcendence that Jesus is understood to have on these models seems to be a creaturely transcendence. That is, Jesus transcends the expectations and historical limits of humanity thus far in the evolutionary process, but he

does not transcend the process itself. This is, therefore, not a divine transcendence as normally understood, which stands above and beyond the limits of all created being throughout all time and all potential future development. Again, this raises concerns regarding both Jesus's ability to overcome death and the real divinity of Jesus. If Jesus does not transcend death, suffering, or finitude, what then does he transcend and what hope can he give us who believe in him? If the transcendence attributed to Jesus is merely a transcendence of human potential, can Jesus still be described as the complete self-revelation of God, who has attributes associated with divine transcendence? This also raises the question of Jesus's role in the creation of the universe, which is biblically and traditionally affirmed, but which is difficult to hold together with this emergent picture of Jesus's divinity.

The third and final theological problem regarding emergent Christologies is the question of how we know, or why we should believe, that Jesus represents a new emergent level or revelation of God. Emergent theologies seek to replace supernatural religious claims with naturalistic understandings, and this excludes any notion of Jesus's earthly miracles, immaculate conception, or physical resurrection (Peacocke 1993, 279–88, 332; Edwards 2004b; Clayton 2006, 185). Accordingly, it seems difficult to understand why we should suppose that this man who had no unprecedented abilities and who was murdered for heretical teaching is a new form of humanity akin to divinity. One of the reasons the miracles of Jesus are important to the Christian faith is that they signify Jesus's divinity as Creator who transcends the order and limitations of nature and who overcomes the power of death. What justification can emergent theologians offer for attributing divine status to Jesus of Nazareth? Moreover, even if divine action in the being and life of Jesus is affirmed, given that this is confined to ongoing evolutionary processes, any divine revelation can easily be regarded as epiphenomenal. That is, we are free to question the reality of Jesus's divinity, given that it makes no causal difference. This constitutes a serious epistemological problem for emergent Christologies.

EMERGENT PNEUMATOLOGIES

For many theologians, there seems to be a natural coherence between pneumatology and emergence theory. Christian theology often articulates the Spirit as the Giver of Life who is strongly immanent and omnipresent within creation. In particular, many of the emergent Christologies presented above also mention the Spirit as a causal factor in the emergence of Jesus Christ. Leading emergence theorist and biophysicist Harold Morowitz notes this connection when he writes, “the transition from mystery to complexity would be, in theological terms, the divine spirit”

(Morowitz 2003, 185). Or again, “the rule of emergence associates more closely with what theologians call the Holy Spirit” (Morowitz 2004, 132).

Philip Clayton articulates the importance and shape of pneumatology for emergent theology:

The understanding of the Spirit is central to emergent theology. . . . The divine spirit . . . must also be temporal, *the emergent result of a long-term process of intimate relationship with beings in the world. In this view, then, Spirit is not a fundamental ontological category but an emergent form of complexity that living things within the world begin to manifest at a certain stage in their development.* A theological corrective must be made to the “straight emergence” view, however. The Spirit that emerges corresponds to the Spirit who was present from the beginning. (Clayton 2008, 110. Italics added)

For Clayton, the Holy Spirit is *both* emergent from the earth and so supervenes (remains ontologically dependent) on its material substrate, *and* is preexistent with it. Although it seems acceptable to claim that created spirits (human souls, angelic, demonic, or ancestral spirits) are emergent phenomena, as Amos Yong suggests, it does not seem acceptable to place the Divine Spirit as a created result of the emergent process (Yong 2011, 204–19). Clayton himself asks the perplexing question, which he admits will *always* be a challenge to pantheistic emergent theologians: “How can God be source of all things and yet at the same time *a* thing or agent that arises in the course of the history of the cosmos?” (Clayton 2004b, 90). Neither Jesus nor the Spirit can be considered creators of the universe, as Christian theology claims, if they are also considered products of the process of emergence. One cannot create one’s own process of origination.

Clayton, here, is using the dipolar theory of God from process thought, but I find it confusing and damaging to his pneumatology. Process and Catholic theologian Joseph Bracken also describes Spirit as the motivating force within the process of emergence. He writes, “Since the Spirit sustains the unity of the divine life, the Spirit quite properly can be said to be the divine force at work within creation to create and sustain ever higher unities of created entities en route to full union with the Son as incarnate in the cosmic Christ” (Bracken 2004, 218). For Bracken, the Spirit is identified with the process of emergence, rather than an emergent entity. Whether one refers to the Spirit as an “emergent resultant,” as Clayton does, or exhaustively confines the activity of the Spirit within the natural process of emergence, the problem of evil becomes a serious challenge. As with Christology, both these moves are detrimental to any notion of the salvific efficacy and freedom of the Spirit to overcome, and in this sense work against evil in the world.

Similar ideas are articulated by Catholic theologian Denis Edwards, who describes the Spirit as “the interior divine presence empowering the evolution of the universe from within, enabling the universe of creation to

exist and to become” (Edwards 2004b, 200). For Edwards, God is acting through natural processes, rather than being identified with the natural process or as the result of natural processes. Edwards’s proposal can be summarized by the following statement:

As the universe expands and evolves in an emergent process, it is the Breath of God that empowers and enables the whole process from within. The Spirit enables the emergence of the new at every stage from the first nuclei of hydrogen and helium, to atoms, galaxies, the Sun, bacterial forms of life, complex cells, the wonderfully diverse forms of life on Earth, and human beings who can think and love and praise. (Edwards 2004a, 43–44)

Edwards depicts the Spirit as the enabler and motivator behind and within the process of emergence. Edwards is building on Karl Rahner’s non-interventionist understanding of divine action, whereby the “self-bestowal of God [is] ‘the most immanent factor in the creature’” (Edwards 2006, 824). As such, there is no Divine intervention, but the self-transcendence of the creature, captured in the theory of strong emergence, is the divine self-bestowal: “The universe emerges in the process of God’s self-bestowal” (Edwards 2006, 824). This self-bestowal of God, which is equated by Edwards with the process of emergence and creaturely self-transcendence, is the Creator Spirit (Edwards 2006, 826).

This combination, or rather equation, of naturalistic phenomena with supernatural self-giving leads, I argue, to confusion. The essentially different properties that creation and God are believed to have (such as omnipotence, eternity, omniscience, and ontological necessity as opposed to contingency and finitude) remain inadequately dealt with by these proposals. By identifying God’s self-bestowal with the natural process of emergence, God and creation are equated. However, God and creation are essentially different types of things, due to their different essential properties. This creates at best a level of confusion, and at worst a level of incoherence within these proposals. One option is to negate some of God’s traditional attributes, which makes it difficult to see how this God is the same God as the God of Christianity. A second option suggests that God shares the divine attributes with creation, which is the option Edwards seems to favor. However, the problem then becomes how to understand this claim in reference to God’s ontological necessity and divine transcendence.

As argued above, although emergent theologians claim to maintain a level of divine transcendence in balance with divine immanence, the type of transcendence attributed to God within these proposals can only be the self-transcendence of creatures rather than the universe-transcendence of God. This becomes most explicit in Edwards’s appropriation of Karl Rahner’s theology into his own emergent theology. I argue that, despite the use of natural language and scientific theories, these pneumatologies maintain a belief in a *supernatural* force, whose internal presence alters the

course of the universe. Thus, it is hard to see how Clayton's and Edwards's pneumatologies fit into the naturalistic and monist worldview which they claim to uphold. Immanent divine action is still the action of a being who is not natural and not created, but Creator. If, alternatively, these discussions of the divine Spirit as empowering creation to emerge are not seen as supernaturalistic intervention and causation, then this pneumatology is simply epiphenomenal. References to the divine Spirit simply become a linguistic device to make sacred what is otherwise a completely natural phenomenon.

As with the emergent Christologies, emergent pneumatologies have one problem regarding their commitment to the science of emergence and three theological difficulties. Scientifically, this use of pneumatology could be interpreted as a kind of vitalism. Vitalists "believe in a non-physical drive which brings the emergent form into existence" (Copestake 1995, 28). Or put another way, vitalism posits "the existence of a life force that somehow bestowed order on the material contents of living systems" (Davies 2003, 75). Vitalism is a theory that is largely considered obsolete today (Greco 2005, 15). Fran Wuketits, for example, concludes that the variety of types of vitalism is "untenable in the light of modern biological research" (Wuketits 1989, 10). Clayton himself writes that "vitalism clashes with core assumptions of contemporary biology" (Clayton 2006, 18).

Emergence is often seen as a more scientific alternative to vitalism. In these emergent pneumatologies, however, the Spirit is described as the motivating force, opening field, and generator of all emergent phenomena, including life. Many emergent theologians adopt emergentism because they seek to take seriously the discoveries of contemporary science. However, this use of pneumatology to reintroduce vitalism seems to be in tension with a commitment to contemporary science. It is important to note that the threat of vitalism need not be troubling to all those engaged in a realist account of the Spirit's activity, whereby God is a *real* factor in the causal nexus. For example, vitalism is a natural consequence of "eschatological theism," which, as Gregersen saw, posits extra (and supernatural) teleological causation as instrumental in the evolutionary process. It is only a problem for emergent theologians because they commit themselves to the causal closure of the natural realm, monism, and adopt metaphysical (nonreductive) naturalism.

Theologically, emergent pneumatology is problematic for three reasons. First, in each of these proposals the presence and work of the Holy Spirit is identified with (or within) a natural process, and so this process becomes determinative for our understandings of the Spirit's identity. However, it is hard on this view to give a personal account of the Spirit, given that the natural process of emergence, which gives rise to Jesus (and gives rise to personhood), is not in itself personal (contrary to Clayton 2008, 96–97). Arthur Peacocke writes that divine action through the whole-part

relation of emergence “is, however, clearly too impersonal to do justice to the *personal* character of many (but not all) of the profoundest human experiences of God” (Peacocke 2006, 276).

In addition, with regard to the Catholic theologians influenced by Karl Rahner, such as Edwards, this identification of the Spirit’s activity as entirely defined through the evolutionary and emergent process is particularly concerning. This is due to Rahner’s famous axiom that “the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity” (Rahner [1970] 2003, 21–24, 80–103). Accordingly, the actions of God in the universe are exactly God as God is in God’s internal essence. Thus, if God motivates the process of emergence then this process, which entails life and death, abundance and waste, joy and suffering, is an exact representation of God’s inner-life character. As Edwards himself writes, “The costs of evolution are built into an emergent universe” (Edwards 2006, 816). Yet he goes on in the same article to equate God’s *one* act, God’s self-bestowal, with this costly process of emergence. This depiction of God would seem to entail moral ambiguity and balance between good and evil, which might correspond to the view of the Divine in other faith traditions, but is in direct conflict with the Christian conception of God as the absolute highest Good.

Even if one rejects Rahner’s axiom, however, and does not equate God in eternity with God’s actions in the universe, the evil in the process of emergence still presents a serious problem for these pneumatological proposals. Although emergent theologians celebrate the tie between the Spirit and the novelty and increasing complexity within creation, they also tie the Spirit to the suffering, death, and waste of natural selection (Edwards 1997, 157–75; 2006, 816–17). If the Spirit motivates or enables the emergent process, the Spirit is not only seen to utilize death and suffering to bring about new forms of life, but also in some sense perpetuates and endorses the waste and injustice of this process. If the Spirit is in any way complicit with the death and suffering in the process of evolution, then it would seem to follow that God is directly to blame for the continual suffering in our world. Emergent theologians are often very concerned with the problem of evil, and for many it is a driving factor in their search for new articulations of a noninterventionist God (Clayton 2004a, 201–02; Edwards 2006; Clayton 2008, 218). However, embedding the Spirit in the death-ridden process of our world and removing any distinction between divine action and natural causes does not seem to alleviate but instead worsen this problem, at least with regard to natural evil. The concern here is not the claim that God might suffer with creation, but that God in some way causes the suffering of creation or is limited by the structures of creation, which cause suffering (cf. Peacocke 2009b, 200). Moreover, this clashes with the narrative and promise of redemption, which is the beating heart of Christian theology. If God is working to bring about suffering in any way, then it would seem incoherent for this God to promise us salvation

from all suffering. I am not claiming that non-emergent theologies can solve such questions of natural suffering sufficiently. Nor am I criticizing emergent theologians for failing to solve this problem. However, I am arguing that emergent theologians, who are often particularly critical of traditional responses to suffering in such a way that these criticisms are a motivation for proposing emergent theologies, worsen rather than lessen this persistent concern for all theologians.

Third, even if one somehow protects the Spirit from the systemic suffering and waste of the emergent process, the idea of the Spirit as the motivator of emergence still implies that the Holy Spirit generates hierarchies, and arguably also generates hierarchies of inequality and relations of power within nature and even within human culture (cf. Jackelén 2006, 623–32). I make this point more modestly than my earlier concerns, but there is the clear possibility that as we move up the emergent levels we continue this essentialist view of hierarchy into the realm of human society and particularly churches, where the Spirit's presence is often understood to be more intense and perhaps palpable. This move, which follows logically, though not explicitly proposed in any of the literature I have read, would risk endorsing exploitative relations of power and dependence between humans, races, or classes. This is, therefore, an issue of how we translate scientific language into the more normative sphere of theological discourse. Within theology there has been a recent trend to use the Trinity, and social trinitarianism in particular, to formulate a theological politics or normative view of society. When mixed with emergence theory, which we do find in the work of prominent figures such as Jürgen Moltmann, this could have very dangerous consequences (Moltmann 1993, 194, 203–04; 2012, 126). As with the prior objections concerning natural evils, tying the activity of the Spirit to moral and social wrongdoings without maintaining a level of divine transcendence and the possibility for intervention leads to a view of the Spirit as endorsing and generating the world as we know it, with all the inequality and injustice it currently has (Leidenhag and Leidenhag 2015, 433–34).

CONCLUSION

This article has outlined how contemporary and influential Christian theologians have adapted their Christologies and pneumatologies in accordance with strong emergence theory. It has been argued that this has led to significant problems, both with regard to maintaining strict adherence to emergence theory and, in particular, with regard to maintaining the Christian ideas of salvation and divine goodness.

An even more central problem to these projects results from the fact that the logic of strong emergence entails the idea that the material precedes the immaterial. The promise of strong emergence theory is that it provides a

realist account of irreducible immaterial properties or entities in the world, in accordance with the naturalism and monism of scientific methodologies. However, it becomes difficult to maintain a belief in a nonphysical being as prior to and independent from physical reality. The idea that the universe, which is purely material for most of time, is contingent upon an immaterial being runs contrary to the logic of emergentism. From the standpoint of Christian theology, this tension is greatly heightened as God and creation are seen to be continuously interacting for the sake of salvation through the incarnation of the Son and the indwelling of the Spirit. As seen above, emergent theologies tend to articulate this interaction by inadvertently lowering the Son and the Spirit to the level of created beings or processes. This subordinates God to emergent processes, so that God's interaction with and within creation becomes confined to the structural limitations of the evolutionary process. I have suggested that such a move greatly diminishes our ability to claim that God seeks to save creation from evil and suffering, as such features of the natural (and human) world implicitly become constitutive of God's nature.

Emergence theologians almost always introduce their position by outlining it as the only viable option between the two alternatives of substance dualism and reductive physicalism (Clayton 1997, 7; 2004a, 32). These positions are unacceptable for both scientific and theological reasons. I have argued that, rather than providing a third way, emergent theology also fails on both accounts, for scientific and theological reasons. Although the scientific and philosophical challenges facing strong emergence theory are dealt with elsewhere, the theological challenges facing emergent theologies are often underplayed, which is the oversight this article has sought to correct (Kim 2010, 1–104; see also the range of perspectives in Bedau and Humphreys 2008). Emergent theologies are not without their advantages, such as a strong sense of divine immanence and an emphasis on evolutionary biology. However, it is important to recognize the significant adjustments which they propose to Christian thought. For those, such as myself, who find emergence theory too costly a metaphysical framework on which to build one's theology, it is perhaps time to look elsewhere.

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