

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Faith and Evolution: A Grace-Filled Naturalism. By Roger Haight, SJ. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019. xiii + 264 pages. \$30.00 (paper).

FOUR PERSPECTIVES

I. God of the Glaciers: Grace-Filled Naturalism and Divine Agency in the Anthropocene

In *Faith and Evolution: A Grace-Filled Naturalism*, Roger Haight, SJ, offers an essential analysis with which all students of theology must wrestle. The need for this book is clearly stated: science, not faith, is the presumed authority in a postmodern, secular culture, leaving Christian faith compartmentalized, compromised, or irrelevant. Under the challenge of scientific dominance, core doctrines underlying piety and spirituality can lose their robustness or even any basic validity, posing a real threat to faith. How can we continue to speak of God as creator, sustaining the cosmos, acting in the world? What is the premise of providence and the promise of prayer? *Faith and Evolution* explores the intersection of evolution's complexity and theological thorniness, where notions of emergence and randomness collide with ideas of God's purpose. What becomes of teleology, theodicy, and our conceptions of Jesus? The church as a whole does well to engage these questions seriously as Haight asserts that science is the boundary for "plausible answers to spiritual questions" (28). He thus summons the church to confront directly the risk of irrelevance. His honesty about the depth of the crisis of faith enables hope for re-evangelization and reaffirms the conviction that has driven contemporary systematic theology to face the successive challenges of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Selma, Stonewall, Katrina, and more: the tradition has the resources to renew the expression of faith for every age, including our evolutionary age.

With profound scholarship, lightly leveraged, Haight reviews centuries of theology in single paragraphs of accessible prose that encapsulate the enculturation of Christianity in successive worldviews: Hellenism, Aristotelianism, Protestant evangelicalism, and modernity's turn to experience and the empirical, now offering space for a new embrace by the evolutionary worldview.

338 This worldview emerges in Haight's smooth account of the revolutions

wrought by Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein, which exploded human conceptions of self, world, and God. The clarity of the language lends itself to master's degree candidates, yet the density of the technical subject matter presumes significant familiarity with this subfield. For example, the anthropic principle is mentioned without definition or explanation. Such thematic depth renders the book particularly challenging but would also reward the diligent student.

Haight underscores the fact that there is no pure and abstract content of faith, but a proportional relationship of an experience of Jesus within first-century culture that is critically correlated to the scientific culture of today. In this mutually critical correlation, there are "dynamics of appropriation" for both partners in the dialogue. Science must avoid reductionism as counter to its own empirical methodology—there being no evidence for the "nonexistence of the spiritual" (46). Such is merely a tenet of dogmatic naturalism. Conversely, values must function as a norm constraining the use of technology that results from scientific reason; a truth that reverberates today in the clanging of oil rigs pumping destruction into the atmosphere. Responding to the corollary of compartmentalized faith, Haight proposes the integration of knowledge within the knowing person, who encounters transcendence mediated by the reality of the world imbued with God's presence (54).

Presence is the central metaphor for God's being within the process of evolution. Presence resounds with the experience of faith and coheres with a personal sense of the divine. Presence also embraces expressions of God's action in the world ranging from Aquinas' "Being itself" to Tillich's "ground of Being" in ways that do not "compete with natural forces, especially not human freedom, but subsists within them as an entirely constructive impulse toward a positive future" (70). This is an essential notion to which I will return.

After laying this groundwork for a metaphysical integration of science and faith, Haight turns to themes of systematic theology proper. The chapter on sin, "Ambiguity in the Heart of the Human," curates insights on instinct, emergence, and morality from many sources, classical and modern, as evolution carries life forward into true human freedom. Central to Haight's concern for the disengaged, sophisticated, scientifically informed Christian is a bold confrontation with the doctrine of original sin. In an evolutionary view, there can be no pristine past betrayed by a fall. This line of questioning is critical as the nonrealist nature of the doctrine does undermine faith among those who have accepted the scientific narrative of human development. Instead, the evolutionary view traces a path from nonmoral aggressive instincts to the gradual enlightenment of moral consciousness and the newly real possibility of sin under the awakening of freedom.

Importantly, Haight acknowledges the potential of his anthropological narrative to substitute an overly optimistic portrait of human nature for a darker view. Haight acknowledges the sinful world and its social structures, naming racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. Yet here, as in his brief mention of the enormity of humanity's ecological violence, concrete examples and images are lacking. The gasps, *I can't breathe*, from those trapped under the knee of the oppressor for centuries, the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor, are not directly witnessed. Haight insists that "sin is real, prevalent, and often scandalous and has massive effects"—he neither overlooks nor minimizes sin—the reader is simply left to supply that telling. Other questions then arise for which Haight's powerful gift for searching across scholarly fields and synthesizing perspectives would be welcome. Does the context of evolution have more to say about how the concrete structures and systems of sin break out in specific violent acts or about ways to struggle toward reconciliation and healing? Can academic theology maintain its moral integrity in a scientific age without fixing its attention upon ecological debt, environmental racism, and the demands of intergenerational justice?¹ Do other social sciences contribute to a fuller picture of the dynamics of failure and renewal?

In itself, this is a matter of a restrained and brilliantly integrative style that draws together countless complex threads without excessive detours into details. That style and scholarship is an extraordinary strength of a work that rethinks the entire question of God's creating, indwelling, and sustaining of the cosmos as Presence. Certainly, part of the answer to the question of sin for Christians is the witness of Jesus' compassion, to which Haight turns next, examining how that Presence subsists within Jesus.

The "Jesus of Nazareth" chapter paints a refreshing portrait of Jesus oriented by a dialogue with history as much as with science. Structured by six gospel stories, the chapter shows how Jesus' preaching of the rule of God transcends his culture and calls to us in our own. An evolutionary view calls into question a descent Christology and also has implications for revelation. Haight reads revelation as the gift of Jesus' new consciousness that brings salvation by actualizing a new relationship to the ultimate. In

¹ For example, Elizabeth A. Johnson issued an early call to heed the cry of the Earth and asked how natural law can still function as a moral guide if the laws of nature themselves are "shot through with chance and indeterminacy"; see "Presidential Address: Turn to the Heavens and the Earth: Retrieval of the Cosmos in Theology," *CTSA Proceedings* 51 (1996): 8, 12. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki's work on evolutionary development and sin contributes a creative spirituality of reconciliation through memory, creativity, and imagination; see *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

assessing Jesus of Nazareth historically, a compelling emphasis on “story” characterizes this discussion. By drawing on Amy-Jill Levine’s work, he lifts up the Jewishness of Jesus as a teacher who calls his community to justice and inclusion based on Jewish tradition.² “In the end the revelatory moment occurs in the convergence of narratives; the story of Jesus must fuse with my personal story within the present story of the world” (154).

In the following chapter on Jesus Christ, Haight remains focused on the problematic of the supernatural and miraculous lest God’s intervention in the world appear as a secondary cause. A renewed creation theology resolves both interventionalism and the dualist impasse of two natures by eschewing traditional essentialist categories. Instead, God is the nondual presence, ground, creativity, or mystery that can yet become more intensified in Jesus. This intensity of an enhanced Presence in Christ, Haight affirms, is reasonable as a postulate of faith. Then, “God’s enhanced presence to Jesus also means that Jesus is both saved and savior, the receiver of revelation and the revealer, not on the basis of his own power, but through the power of God as Presence within him and us” (197).

In the final chapter, “What Can We Hope For?,” Haight addresses the threat that randomness poses to any hope for purpose in the universe. Respecting the integrity of natural systems leaves no space for divine intervention; yet what then becomes of God’s “special acts” in history? Haight’s conception holds that “every act of every creature is special because of God’s noninterventionist Presence sustaining the existence of each single being and action” (207). Here is where the tangle of theodicy and its alternatives grows thorny. If an interventionalist view leaves God open to the charge of failing to intervene to stop evil in discrete cases, can we say that God’s benign universal sustaining Presence attains to the level of decisive action, arguably a tenet of scriptural faith and a descriptor of the Incarnation?

My reflections as an ecological theologian insert at this point. I find myself at once grateful for the measured integration of faith with contemporary scientific complexity but also yearning for God’s decisive intervention in creation’s current unfolding. Creation is actually not unfolding but hemorrhaging, the symphony of evolution crashing into discordance. When the course of evolution is hijacked by humanity’s geological agency, wresting time into the Anthropocene, the notion of evolutionary progress seems perverse.

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014). Aside from Levine, women theologians seem to be underrepresented in the dialogue, though many women are leading voices in the field of faith and science; witness other reviewers in this colloquium. Women do appear in the footnotes in greater density.

Ecocide contradicts evolution. Antilife cannot be part of the within of the divine presence.

To be clear, ecocide results from human sinfulness, not evolution, nor God's will. It is both a product of the "most evolved" species' dominance and an episode in geological time that will likely bypass forgotten humanity as evolution progresses through the records of the ages. But what can we hope for regarding our present common home, now "an immense pile of filth," where extinction silences life itself and its song of praise?³ Is there an intelligible way to see God's active providence within history to stem the tide of loss? As noted, Haight proposes divine action as the "constructive impulse toward a positive future," and I have elsewhere postulated a similar awakening within human self-consciousness as the mode of the Spirit's renewal of the Earth.⁴ There can be no abandoning our responsibility for creation and its scars. Like Job, however, one can dare to question how God remains creator of a desecrated Earth.

With Denis Edwards, one might ask how there is salvation for the sparrows in a cruciform creation. The deep incarnation of eco-Christology promises deep redemption as "liberation from injustice, suffering and death for all of God's creatures."⁵ If, as Edwards argues, *creatio continua* means God's loving sustenance of each creature and its ecosystems, may we hope for the sustenance of the glaciers, whose waters are the condition of possibility for future life after the individual creature passes away into God's future? Though any eschatological claims lie beyond the shadow of negative theology, can we imagine that God's memory may function also in the present to preserve creatures and cosmos, sparrow and glacier? In the eternal, timeless, active memory of God, can we hope for a proleptic redemption to assure future sparrows their living water?

Slightly different, but not contradictory, language may enrich this point, given that the language of paradox is our only recourse in discourse on the divine. For example, John Polkinghorne proposes that for *creatio continua* to be more than "just a pious gloss on a wholly natural process, then God's providential guiding power must surely also be part of the unfolding of

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (May 24, 2015), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁴ Erin Lothes Biviano, "Elizabeth A. Johnson and Cantors of the Universe: The Indwelling, Renewing, and Moving Creator Spirit and a Pneumatology from Below," in *Turning to the Heavens and the Earth: Theological Reflections on a Cosmological Conversion: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth A. Johnson* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

⁵ Denis Edwards, "Every Sparrow that Falls to the Ground: The Cost of Evolution and the Christ-Event," *Ecotheology* 11, no. 1 (2006): 108, 114, 118.

evolutionary history . . . kenotic *creation* and divine *action* are opposite sides of the same coin.”⁶ That is, God acts in history—not through intervention, a language he similarly rejects, but through “special providence exercised in a kenotic mode” through informational input.⁷ In fact, Polkinghorne proposes the “kenosis of causal status,” that the “*Creator’s kenotic love includes allowing divine special providence to act as a cause among causes*” (emphasis in the original).⁸ Would this special providence allow us to hope for renewal of creation in the land of the living, a little more *already*, and a little less *not yet*? Can metaphysics be judged by the criteria of consolation, a proviso borrowed from Pascal’s language of the heart? What is the difference between Polkinghorne’s “input of information and energy” and Haight’s “constructive impulse” or “intensity of presence” such as is manifest in Jesus?

The question of redemption recalls how Haight construes the divine Presence in Jesus: God is known within Jesus as a Presence that reveals salvation, and Jesus’ historical revelation does not rule out other ways that God is present to history. Might other salvific modalities open up for the Earth?⁹ Are these moments for which we may hope, moments that may redeem the tragically evolving Earth? There are energy transformations already underway; there is an awakening of ecological conversion to which *Laudato Si’* so powerfully witnesses, yet for too many crucified peoples it comes too late.

The colloquium in these pages offers much for additional reflection on God’s action in the world. In past works Ilia Delio has meditated on suffering and love in Christ crucified, as well as cosmic and spiritual evolution.¹⁰ Gloria Schaab’s work on creative suffering and evolutionary theology explores purpose and relationality.¹¹ Matthew Ashley recalls the dangerous memories

⁶ John Polkinghorne, “Kenotic Creation and Divine Action,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 96.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁹ In this regard Polkinghorne rejects the kenosis of novelty, hoping that God may act in new ways unconstrained by divine action of the past; see Polkinghorne, “Kenotic Creation and Divine Action,” 105.

¹⁰ Ilia Delio, OSF, *Crucified Love: Bonaventure’s Mysticism of the Crucified Christ* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998); *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

¹¹ Gloria L. Schaab, *The Creative Suffering of the Triune God: An Evolutionary Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press; 2007); *Trinity in Relation: Creation, Incarnation, and Grace in an Evolving Cosmos* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2012).

of overwhelming and unimaginable suffering.¹² From my perspective, the bleached coral, the extinguished species, and the climate martyrs demand the question not only of the nonbeliever, or even the nonperson, but the *nonexistent*.¹³ There is no consolation in the Creator God suffering this loss alongside all creation as an understanding companion; not that Haight proposes this. Indeed Haight offers a courageous defense of hope in the resurrection as the ultimate preservation of life in the eternal memory of God; an audacious hope unthinkable to science but defended by faith on the basis of “primal creation-consciousness: God loves and does not forget or cease to love what God creates” (231).

As *Faith and Evolution* shows throughout, faith commitments to God’s loving fidelity need not be abandoned for the sake of the dialogue with science. As Haight suggests, science “evokes more than it can affirm,” with a “functional teleology” evident in the patterns of the cosmic journey (208). In short, God’s intimate Presence as the absolute within and the absolute future remains that for which we can hope.

The gift to the reader is an invitation to a renewed spirituality, a narrative and activist spirituality that knows one is held in the embrace of the creating Presence who has accompanied the multi-billion-year evolution of our magnificent cosmos, a cosmos come to consciousness in ourselves. The metaphor of Presence is awe-inspiring and real; the heavens tell the glory of God.

This book will be gratefully taken up by many theological students, brave teachers, and seasoned scholars, seeking both erudite introduction and renewing review. Many will respond by extending Haight’s discussion with insights from political ecology, postcolonial criticism, and environmental ethics, among other defining issues of the Anthropocene, in the hope that we may evolve still further as the conscious masters of our destiny.¹⁴ Toward the hope of a “symbiocene”¹⁵ as evolution’s next chapter, Christians and secular thinkers can join in a spirit of

¹² J. Matthew Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics, and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

¹³ Erin Lothes Biviano, *Inspired Sustainability: Planting Seeds for Action* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016).

¹⁴ For an excellent study, see Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019).

¹⁵ Glenn A. Albrecht, “Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene,” *Psychoterratica*, December 17, 2015, <https://glennaalbrecht.com/2015/12/17/exiting-the-anthropocene-and-entering-the-symbiocene/>.

collaboration and inspiration drawn from Roger Haight's brilliantly accessible accomplishment.

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II. Grace-Filled Nature or a Whole New Paradigm? A Response to *Faith and Evolution*

More than thirty years ago, the Vatican called attention to the relationship between religion and science, indicating the need for openness and genuine dialogue. In his 1988 letter to Fr. George Coyne, SJ, who was then head of the Vatican Observatory, Pope John Paul II described the need to integrate science and religion. Although science and religion are distinct disciplines with their own methods, language, and epistemologies, he said, a unified understanding of reality, one that can inspire faith, requires insights from both areas. Theology has held science at arm's length, but faith cannot adequately achieve understanding apart from science. In the pope's words: "Only a dynamic relationship between theology and science can reveal those limits which support the integrity of either discipline, so that theology does not profess a pseudo-science and science does not become an unconscious theology. Our knowledge of each other can lead us to be more authentically ourselves."¹⁶ The pope's eloquent insights are summed up toward the end of the letter where he states: "Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish."¹⁷

I find a lot of John Paul II's ideas on religion and science expressed in the first few chapters of Roger Haight's new book, *Faith and Evolution*. Haight begins by calling attention to the world disclosed by science, stating that science is "revelatory" (1). He then proceeds to recount the rise of modern science, highlighting key events that liberated science from medieval theology, beginning with Copernicus and Galileo and the Copernican revolution and, on the side of biology, Charles Darwin and the discovery of evolution. He spends a considerable amount of time on Darwin's contribution to

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Reverend George V. Coyne, SJ, Director of the Vatican Observatory (June 1, 1988), http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19880601_padre-coyne.html.

¹⁷ Ibid.