

# **THEOLOGY ENGAGING EVOLUTIONARY THEORY: FRESH INSIGHTS INTO THE NATURE OF GOD**

Submitted by

Peter Michael Foord B.Sc. Dip.Ed. Grad.Dip.R.E. M.A. (Theological Studies)

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School of Theology Victoria  
Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Australian Catholic University  
Research Services  
Locked Bag 4115  
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065  
Australia

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the work of three theologians, Arthur Peacocke, John Haught and Denis Edwards, each of whom has made a significant contribution to the dialogue between contemporary evolutionary biology and the Christian understanding of God. The thesis explores and analyses how evolutionary theory throws light on key theological themes such as the nature of God's providence, especially in relation to pain, suffering and evil, and the meaning of Jesus Christ. The thesis involves a critical reading of the selected theologians' works, with their respective emphases on classical, process and kenotic types of theological thinking, and also draws on resources from the classical theological tradition, primarily St. Thomas Aquinas.

The study gives a positive assessment of the contributions of the three chosen authors. It highlights the critical importance that theological methodology plays in formulating insights into the relationship of God to evolutionary processes. Peacocke emphasises the use of critical realism as the most credible methodology for theology, consistent with its use by science. Haught agrees with this approach stressing, however, that the data of theology is not the same as that for science. Consequently, he argues that theology ought to constitute the deepest layer of explanation for understanding reality and for understanding God as the *ultimate* explanation for evolution. Edwards argues that we must find a way of talking about God that is consonant with the reality of the world but that this God always remains ultimately Mystery.

Peacocke, Haught and Edwards explore the usefulness of kenotic theology for explaining how belief in an omnipotent and supremely loving God can be reconciled with the existence of

pain, suffering and evil in the creation. Although a kenotic approach can account for the scientific evidence of a “self-creative” and emergent cosmos along with the presence of suffering and evil, a more comprehensive theological viewpoint must include an understanding of how God is active in creation, sustaining it in existence and drawing it towards its divinely ordained end.

Haught's argument for the presence of genuine contingency in the cosmos as evidence of God's on-going creativity is critically examined. Genuinely new possibilities, in evolutionary terms, new species, cannot be explained by material causation alone. In his “metaphysics of the future”, Haught argues that, despite the enormity of pain and suffering evidenced in evolution, God continues to lovingly draw the creation towards a hopeful and promised future in God.

This thesis appreciates the value of Edwards’ trinitarian “God of evolution” for it combines a more classical theological approach with evolutionary theory. For Edwards, biological evolution is seen as a process within an ontologically relational creation that reflects the divine relations of the Trinity. The creation of being-in-relation flows out of, and reflects, the divine trinitarian relations of mutual love. Edwards’ insights into the nature of original sin and grace within an evolutionary context are also positively assessed. Both Peacocke and Edwards propose a Wisdom Christology as the most fruitful link between the biblical Sophia tradition and a creation theology, holding together insights on the divine Being, Wisdom and the Christ-event itself.

Aspects of process and kenotic theologies can be usefully combined with Aquinas' expansive notion of God as ultimate Being. Through this synthesis, the drama of evolution is more intimately related with the ultimate reality, the Mystery of God.

Throughout this thesis, gender-neutral language has been maintained except in some quotations of St. Thomas Aquinas.

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