

REVIEW ARTICLE

Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. (xii +196 pp). [ISBN: 978-0-664-23090-6]¹

Southgate is a Research Fellow in Theology at the University of Exeter and editor and principal author of an influential textbook, *God, Humanity and the Cosmos*, now in its third edition. In *The Groaning of Creation*² Southgate explores what it means to take the evolutionary development of nature seriously as a Christian, specifically addressing the questions: If God as Creator has allowed so much suffering through extinction and natural selection, can he ever be justified or rightly worshipped? And if so, how? His reply constitutes what he calls a 'compound evolutionary theodicy' which he bases upon his own 'Trinitarian theology of creation and redemption.' According to the publisher's website:

Southgate argues that pain, suffering and extinction are intrinsic to the evolutionary process. The world that is 'very good' is also 'groaning in travail' and subjected by God to that travail. Southgate evaluates several attempts at evolutionary theodicy and then argues for his own approach, an approach that takes full account of God's self-emptying and human beings special responsibilities as created co-creators.

More particularly, Southgate wants to rationalize for believers how an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, sovereign, and fully responsible God who is worthy of our worship could ordain evolution with all its

¹ Parts of this review essay were read as a formal response to Dr Christopher Southgate, The Theological Meaning of Evolution Conference, Laidlaw College, Auckland, June 2009.

² Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

disvalues as the means of creating and sustaining animal life. In his own words:

I am trying to see how the two propositions (a) God is creator of this ambiguous world, which is 'good' but also 'groaning in labor pains,' and (b) God is 'worthy of worship' can be held together within the community of faith.

As a summary of the work we may explicate the basic contours of Southgate's argument in the following seven points.

1. The goodness of creation engenders many sorts of values.
2. Pain, suffering, death, and extinction are intrinsic to a creation evolving according to Darwinian principles.
3. An evolving creation was the only way God could engender all the beauty, diversity, sentience, and sophistication we see around us in the biosphere. (The 'only way' argument.)
4. God co-suffers with every sentient being in creation.
5. The Cross of Christ is the epitome of divine compassion, God's assuming of ultimate responsibility for creation's pain. Along with the Resurrection, the Cross inaugurates the transformation of creation, making possible the redemption of even the nonhuman creation, the eschatological doing-away with creation's groaning.
6. The need to give an account of how a loving God of loving relationship must provide an eschatological fulfilment for creatures that have no flourishing in this life. Such a God could never regard such a creature as a mere evolutionary expedient. This leads Southgate to posit an eschatological afterlife for individual animals.
7. Humans are of particular concern to God, if divine fellowship with creatures such as us is in any sense a goal of evolutionary creation. This makes human beings 'co-redeemers' or 'created co-creators' with God, or perhaps 'stewards or priests or contemplatives of creation,' with respect to the nonhuman creation and the healing of the evolutionary process. This leads Southgate to vegetarianism and a project to end biological extinction.³

³ This summary is adapted from the one provided by Tim Deibler, Review of *The Groaning of Creation*, American Scientific Affiliation (2009),

Points 1 and 2 above present a dualistic view of creation wherein its glories ('values') as well as its horrors ('disvalues') are constitutive. Southgate calls this the 'ambiguity' of creation. Points 1 and 2, when coupled with point 3, lead to the proposition that the 'values' of point 1 are not achievable except by the awful 'disvalues' of point 2. God himself is fully responsible, then, for the horrific disvalues within creation, since he is the one who chose to use evolution to accomplish his ends. Southgate contends that any adequate theodicy will emphasize not only that suffering and extinction occurs as necessary concomitants of the evolutionary process, but also:

1. that God suffers alongside God's creatures (the 'fellow sufferer who understands' in Whitehead's terms) and;
2. that there will be some form of eschatological redemption for creation, possibly including those individual creatures who lived frustrated lives of pointless suffering.

Southgate's evolutionary theodicy for non-human suffering affirms that a world of evolving life, with all its attendant pain and suffering, was the only way, or at least the best way, for God to bring into existence a diversity of life-forms to realize complex values in a law-governed universe. However, the suffering of individual creatures that never get the chance to flourish cries out for Divine compassion and solidarity as well as the possibility for redemption in the next life.

In Chapter 4, 'An Adventure in the Theology of Creation,' Southgate develops a trinitarian 'theology of creation,' an admittedly speculative enterprise that seeks to illuminate the relationship between the triune God and an evolutionary process that operates according to Darwinian principles. Taking up the theme of kenosis, Southgate suggests that God's self-emptying love is foundational both to intra-trinitarian relationships and to the relationship between God and the world. God the Father pours out his love, the essence of his being, giving rise to (begetting) God the Son, who, in turn, returns all that he is to the Father. And this intra-divine relationship of self-emptying love constitutes God the Holy Spirit. Southgate suggests that this inherently self-emptying, or kenotic, character of the divine love is the ground of God's desire to create the genuinely 'other'. This desire is realized in the creation of the world and in the evolutionary process where God 'lets be' a great variety of creatures.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7049/is_1_61/ai_n31375133/pg_2/?tag=content;col1 (accessed 15.6.2009). Southgate provides his own summary at *The Groaning of Creation*, 16.

The Spirit, meanwhile, both provides creatures with their 'thisness,' or particularity as unique individuals, and lures them onward toward new possibilities of fulfilment and self-transcendence. At any given time living creatures are in one of four possible states:

1. *Fulfilled* (flourishing as the kind of creature they are), a state in which the creature is utterly itself, in an environment in which it flourishes.
2. *Growing toward fulfilment*, not yet mature, but still with the possibility of attaining the 'fulfilled' state.
3. *Frustrated* (prevented from flourishing), held back in some way from fulfilment for a variety of reasons.
4. *Transcending itself* (either by chance mutation or some new learned capability).⁴

The first state is that a true 'selving', a 'gift of existence from the Father, form and pattern from the Son, particularity from the Holy Spirit, and that the creature's praise, in being itself, is offered by the Son to the Father, in the delight of the Spirit.'⁵ The second state involves the pain of survival 'because of the need to learn an aversion to negative stimuli.'⁶ This is not due to some supposed 'fall' or 'sin' but is a necessary and God ordained process such that "The Godhead that is so committed to the creation as ultimately to experience birth and infancy as a human may be imagined to take an especial delight in the growth of young organisms."⁷ It would then seem that what Southgate is affirming is the Creator's delight in the pain of his creatures! The third state of frustration is consistent and explainable by Darwin's model of natural selection, and this to is not an 'evil' or frustration of the Creator's will but is also a natural part of the good but groaning creation. In Trinitarian terms the pain and frustration of the creature is explained as being 'received by the Son through the brooding immanence of the Spirit, and uttered in that Spirit as a song of lament to the Father. All that the frustrated creature suffers, and all it might have been but for frustration, is retained in the memory of the Trinity.'⁸ The final state is the 'especial gift of the Holy Spirit in creation', the invitation for creatures to explore new possibilities of being. "The Spirit longs for creatures to transcend

⁴ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

themselves, to find new ways of relating,' writes Southgate, and illustrates with the examples of the symbiosis that gave rise to the first eukaryotic cells or the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic 'Transition' to *H. Sapiens*.⁹ In short, self-transcendence occurs whenever cooperation between organisms results in producing new types of 'selves'.¹⁰

In the final three chapters of the book Southgate makes suggestions on the eschatological implications of his position – that there must be a 'heaven for pelicans' – and makes certain ethical considerations based around ways in which the human is to relate to the rest of creation, where he utilises such notions as 'ethical kenosis', and human priesthood of creation. Finally Southgate makes various proposals in environmental ethics, including a case for vegetarianism and a critical commentary on global warming and the issue of species extinction.

Christopher Southgate has provided a fascinating discussion of an evolutionary theodicy, opening up many helpful avenues of investigation, travelling down some of these avenues himself, and leaving others to be explored by those who follow. Evolutionary thought has long been accepted by many in the theological world and it has received a good deal of examination, and yet much of the literature is tangential to the strictly *theological* issues involved. Southgate's work exemplifies an approach to theology and evolutionary theory that knows what questions to ask and is able to address many of these questions in a lucid and helpful fashion. For this the work is to be recommended for all those interested in the interface between theology and science. The doctrines of creation, anthropology, God, Trinity, and eschatology are examined and constructive proposals are provided that begin to explore in some detail what a reconceived Christian theology may look like in light of an uncritical acceptance of Darwinian evolution. There is no doubt that further work from Southgate and further works in response to Southgate will be generated by this courageous publication.

This, however, does not mean the work is without its problems. A number of critical questions emerge from reading Southgate's book and paper. In the following I will simply raise a number of questions and provide reasons for raising them.

The first series of critical questions are general ones and concern hermeneutics – both as it applies to the science-theology discourse in general, and specifically to the text of Scripture. In relation to the former: How does Southgate's theology of creation relate to a scientific

⁹ Ibid., 65-66.

¹⁰ Ibid., 66.

explanation of the evolutionary process? Are there ‘gaps’ in the process that require divine intervention to move it forward? Or does it operate according to purely naturalistic laws? And, if so, what explanatory power does the theological description add? To the latter: What hermeneutic is actually at play in the interpretation and application of Biblical texts such as Genesis 3, Psalm 8, and Romans 8? At key points throughout the work biblical texts are appealed to but in each instance the actual hermeneutic is ambiguous, leaving the impression that Southgate uses biblical texts to illustrate his own points (*eisegesis*) rather than working *a posteriori* from the biblical texts themselves (*exegesis*). A more general but related issue that deserves to be addressed in this regard is the notion of natural theology as opposed to a theology of nature. Southgate shows little awareness of the difference between these two notions and thus his work does not explicate his theological method, an issue of central importance, one would think, to the science-theology dialogue.

A second and more important issue concerns the constituent features of a genuinely *theological* account of creation. Southgate correctly stresses the triadic relations between God, the world, and humanity, as opposed to simply God and man, as the old language had it. However, is his work a genuinely *theological* account of creation? In her 1988 work *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, Kathryn Tanner outlines what is required in a theological account of creation in terms of theological language pertaining to God and creation in order to establish, what she calls, ‘rules for forming first order statements.’¹¹ Her argument, in quite orthodox fashion, first argues that basic to Christian discourse on creation one must recognize the transcendence of God as a central presupposition.¹² The second conviction is that God is active as a creative agent in the world. These two convictions are to govern Christian discourse on creation and thus also theological accounts of creation.

On both accounts Southgate’s work is rather ambiguous. While Whiteheadian process philosophy is ruled out as an option by Southgate, it is not clear that a panentheism, similar to Moltmann’s, is not actually what is being espoused. From the perspective of panentheism, God and the world are distinct and yet they mutually constitute the other so that what happens to, with, or in one; radically and ontologically affects the other. I make the suggestion of panentheism in regard to Southgate for a number of reasons: first, the language by which he speaks of the triune God’s *kenosis* into the world and in himself, the so-called ‘deep

¹¹Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 11, 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38.

intratrinitarian *kenosis*’, second, the way in which he regards human suffering to affect the intratrinitarian relations, and finally the appreciative way in which he draws upon the panentheism of such figures as Jürgen Moltmann. In such ways as these, and others, Southgate seems to threaten a Christian commitment to these first-order claims about God and the world that Tanner correctly identifies as properly basic to Christian discourse.

The basis for these first-order claims about God and the world is to be found in the doctrines of God the Trinity and Christology, and this raises a third but related point of criticism. As Kimlyn Bender has recently written, “To speak of creation is therefore implicitly yet intentionally to speak not first of a cosmology but of a relation between God and the world.”¹³ This too is properly basic to a genuinely *theological* account of creation. In the words of Thomas Torrance: ‘it is distinctive of Christian theology that it treats of God in his relation to the world and of God in his relation to himself, not of one without the other.’¹⁴ Torrance makes it clear that Creator and creation must be thought of in vital relation to each other. More specifically, ‘Our evangelical commitment to Jesus Christ “through whom and for whom the whole universe has been created,” as Paul expressed it, will not allow us to divorce redemption from creation, but compels us to give the empirical reality of the created order its full and proper place in theological interpretation of divine revelation, especially in the incarnate form and reality in Jesus Christ.’¹⁵ It is for this reason that Torrance correctly appropriates the Patristic axiom that ‘creation is proleptically conditioned by redemption.’¹⁶

The economic activity of God the Son proceeds in tandem with that of God the Father and the God the Spirit, albeit in a distinctive way. The Son incarnate in Jesus Christ is the Word and Wisdom of God, the one through whom all that is has come to be and who sustains the creation itself, the one who has imparted to the universe its rational order and has come to restore it to the law of his divine love. Scripture paints a grand picture of the re-ordering of a fallen world in or through the incarnate Son as *omnipotent grace* (cf. Col 1.16-17). In the identity and

¹³ Kimlyn, J. Bender, ‘Christ, Creation and the Drama of Redemption’ “The Plays the Thing...” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 no.2 (2009), 150 (149-174).

¹⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶ For more on this see Myk Habets, ‘How “Creation is Proleptically Conditioned by Redemption”?’ *Colloquium* 41 (2009), 3-21.

mission of Jesus Christ the purposes of God for all of creation are realised.

It is this linking of creation with redemption that appears to be missing, or at least downplayed, in Southgate's work. While Southgate is willing to assert that creation is *through* Christ there does not seem to be any emphasis, as there is in Scripture, on creation being *for* Christ (cf. Eph 1.10; Col 1.16-17). As an example we may turn to the end of *The Groaning of Creation* where we read: 'What God alone could do, has done, once and for all, was to suffer death for the transformation of the world, to bear in the Christ the pain of the creation and of human sin.'¹⁷ This is linked, throughout Southgate's work, to the notion of the *kenosis* of the triune God into the world and into himself. But this is *not* all that God could do or has done in the world! In Christ God has reconciled the world to himself, summed up all things, conquered death and evil, and established, in proleptic fashion, the *imago Dei* in humans and their eschatological *telos*. It is precisely on this basis that Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, our *arche* and *telos*, our Great High Priest, Saviour, and ever-ruling King. An articulation of this cosmic Christology appears to be absent in Southgate's work.

In the Incarnation, redemption intersects and overlaps with creation in such a way that all of history is encompassed by Christ and his Kingdom. Purpose is deliberately built into creation from the beginning and, as with human beings so with creation itself, perfection is anticipated from the very beginning of creation, yet this perfection will not come about mechanistically or 'naturally,' but rather through divine grace – through Christ. Southgate's work appears to present a somewhat Christologically-anaemic account of creation given the dislocation of Christ from the centre of the story to its periphery, or by turning Christ into a symbol of some prior commitment to a form of general divine love and *kenosis* rather than the Christ of Gospel revelation.

Having addressed only one or two issues briefly here it is clear that Southgate's work is as ambiguous and problematic as it is compelling and courageous. In the year of Darwin (2009) this work makes a welcome contribution to the ongoing discussion over science and religion within a Christian context.

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¹⁷ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 114.