SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY: A COHERENT APPROACH

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

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Over the past six years I've tried here to provide information and ideas that would be helpful for church leaders in dealing with issues raised by science and technology in ministry. The environment, genetics, evolution, cosmology, sexuality, and ways to address such matters in congregations are a few of the topics that I have discussed.

I know that I've run the risk of making the theology-science discipline look like a collection of isolated topics that don't have much connection with one another. Is there a coherent theological approach to these issues?

There are a number of attempts to provide an overall framework for theology-science dialogue on the market. Without trying to be comprehensive, the approaches of Ian Barbour, John Haught, Alister McGrath, John Polkinghorne, and Thomas Torrance deserve mention. An adequate description of any of these would take a whole column. So instead I'm going to sketch what seems to me the best way of looking at issues of science and technology, one that is clearly rooted in the Lutheran tradition. I believe that such issues should be placed in the context of a theology of the cross.

This idea may seem surprising at first, because Luther's *theologia crucis* was developed in connection with the basic Reformation concerns of sin, law, and justification. But if "true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ," as Luther said in the proof of the 20th Heidelberg thesis (*Luther's Works* 31:53), the cross is where the Creator and Sustainer of the universe is most fully revealed. The crucified Savior is present and active in the world that science studies.

Hidden Activity

The concealment of God even in the supreme work of the cross leads us to expect that God's activity in the world in general will be hidden (see Isaiah 45:15). Such is the case if God acts through natural processes but limits divine action to what is within the capacities of created agents. This has been referred to by recent writers as a kenotic theology of divine action, with reference to the kenosis, the "emptying," of Philippians 2:7. Reference to that text shows the connection of such a view with the theology of the cross.

This does not mean that God is imprisoned by a network of deterministic physical causes, for quantum and chaos

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theories have shown that there are not rigid one-to-one relationships between events. God still has some freedom of action even when divine action is limited to what is possible with natural processes.

We should then be able to understand the world in terms of lawful natural processes, without reference to God acting through them. This helps to make sense of a fact that is often troubling to religious people, that science can understand the world "though God were not given" — a phrase to which Bonhoeffer called attention in his prison writings. "God, "he said, "lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edition [Macmillan, 1972], 360–61).

Because the processes through which God works today were in operation in the past, it makes sense to think that God was active through them then as well. The God revealed in Christ is the creator of elementary particles, atoms, galaxies, stars, and planets but has remained hidden while doing that, just as God does in providing our daily bread. The fundamental forces of the universe, gravitation, and the electroweak and nuclear forces, are, in Luther's words, "the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things" (*Luther's Works* 14:114).

Even the hope of some cosmologists to explain the origin of space-time and matter in terms of the laws of physics is not too audacious theologically. Science cannot answer the metaquestion "Why is there any universe at all?" But, given the reality of laws of physics and basic fields that obey them, science may be able to fulfill that hope. God's own creatures upstage God (which God allows) even in cosmic creation, so that the sign of the cross is placed on the universe from the beginning.

The same God has created life on Earth, past and present, through evolution. This is "just"an application of what we've said, that God acts in the world by means of natural processes. But the nature of evolution and its implications are disturbing for common-sense theologies. Evolution through natural selection means that competition, privation, death, and extinction have key roles in the development of new species, and it's hard to reconcile this with the idea of a God of love. And if human beings are related to nonhuman species, Christ himself would have to share that relationship.

Suffering Creation and God

Natural selection means that the development of life involves suffering, and not only creatures bear evolution's burden. A theology centered on Christ crucified insists that God became a participant in evolution, experiencing the death of the losers in the struggle for survival. And his resurrection means that even the losers of the world have hope.

The idea that God incarnate shares a common ancestry with apes shocks some Christians and has been used as an argument against human evolution. But it is a powerful example of the condescension of which the Christ hymn of Philippians speaks. It is scandalous as part of the scandal of the cross.

And the idea that Christ shares our common evolutionary history can help us see how "all things" can be reconciled to God through the cross (Colossians 1:20).

When technology comes into consideration, we need an adequate ethic of the cross. If the concept of "dominion" over nature in Genesis 1:26–28 is invoked in connection with environmental problems, remember that the model of dominion given us is the *Dominus* crowned with thorns. As he came to serve rather than be served, our commission to "have dominion" means that we are to represent God in caring for creation. This does not mean to pretend that we're no smarter than other species or to renounce technology but to use our gifts for justice among humans and the welfare of the earth and of other species.

Developments in biomedical technology confront us with difficult choices from the beginning of life to its end. An ethic of the cross will remind us that those who may be considered "defective" are not to be despised or simply terminated and that avoidance of suffering is not the highest value. But it also tells us that maintenance of physical life is not the ultimate value; an adequate theology of the cross includes the resurrection of the Crucified.

With that I end this brief sketch.

Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1997),and Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Eerdmans, 1983), provide helpful background. My own treatment is George L. Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (Trinity Press International, 2003). Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* (Fortress, 1996), which emphasizes kenosis, is also valuable.

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