

An unfolding creation

by [Greg Peterson](#) in the [October 11, 2000](#) issue

*God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, by John Haught

Though many people believe that evolution is established fact, it is rarely considered a suitable topic for theological reflection. While conservatives are locked in a constant battle over the age of the earth and the historicity of Noah's flood, liberals are often wary of evolution's purported implications. Slogans such as the "survival of the fittest" and images of nature as "red in tooth and claw" seem far distant from the lessons of humility and community found in church and synagogue.

John Haught's latest work seeks to change this perception. Haught, professor of theology at Georgetown University and director of the Georgetown Center for the Study of Science and Religion, brings considerable theological acumen and scientific awareness to this difficult topic. He provides a thoughtful and insightful theological framework that not only finds room for evolution, but also sees it as integral to a fuller understanding of divine purpose.

As the title indicates, Haught seeks not simply to provide a theology in dialogue with evolutionary theory, but a theology of evolution. He takes a middle path in the dialogue between science and religion. On one end of the spectrum, fundamentalists and atheists claim that Christianity and evolutionary science are mutually contradictory; the truth of one entails the falsity of the other. On the other end, liberal theologians and some science writers advocate a separate-worlds model. As Stephen Jay Gould has recently emphasized, religion tells about the Rock of Ages; science tells about the age of rocks. Since science and religion deal with different domains, no conflict can occur.

Haught will have none of this. Darwin's theory of evolution, he insists, radically affects theological claims. It challenges the theological hierarchy of being that places humankind above and separate from the rest of creation. Not only does it make us reconsider the task of natural theology, it influences such topics as creation, eschatology and the problem of evil. Haught therefore encourages neither opposition nor separation, but engagement. More specifically, he encourages

readers to consider a theology that is significantly informed by the broadly accepted claims of modern Darwinian theory. But Haught is careful to distinguish between science and the claims often made on behalf of science. Accepting evolutionary biology neither confirms Christianity nor denies it. Rather, it alters the way we think about many basic issues.

While Haught's treatment of the relationship between science and theology is interesting, it is the theological work that stands out. By placing the dialogue between religion and science within a framework that strongly engages many of the most important currents of contemporary theology, Haught accomplishes what few others have. Throughout, he emphasizes the historical and eschatological character of Christian thought. While we must still retain a hierarchy of being, Haught asserts that it is not a vertical but a horizontal hierarchy. Humankind is significant because of its role in the unfolding of creation, an unfolding that is not yet complete and which is directed toward a yet unfulfilled promise.

From the perspective of process theology, Haught also addresses the problem of evil as amplified by evolutionary thought, with its eons of struggle and extinction. Nature reveals to us a God who persuades but does not command, a God who expresses love through self-emptying, incarnation and shared suffering. Taoist metaphors and contemporary Muslim and Jewish thought help Haught to amplify his position.

Haught also tries to relieve tensions between theology and Darwinian evolution, particularly in regard to issues of purpose and ultimacy. Here we encounter the differing natures of scientific and theological discourse, for while science is limited to what is observable, theology seeks to understand the whole. Thus, Haught rejects sociobiologists' claims to be able to explain morality. For him morality comes out of a sense of meaning that cannot come from science alone but that must appeal to religion. But while evolutionary science may not be able to indicate an unambiguous direction to life, it reveals enough of a pattern to be consistent with theological claims of an ultimate purpose or promise.

Most readers should find considerable food for thought in this book, though it leaves some questions unanswered. Haught frequently criticizes the intelligent-design movement championed by Michael Behe and Philip Johnson, but does not engage with the movement through extended argument. His discussion of the doctrine of the resurrection in terms of a deeper (pancosmic) relationship with the universe, while pregnant with possibility, is brief and somewhat vague.

These, however, are minor quibbles. Few theologians have struggled with Darwin's theory as eloquently as Haught has. His book should establish that much can be gained from the kinds of insight that a dialogue with evolutionary biology has to offer.