

ALISTER E. McGRATH Old Theology and the New Biology

*The philosophical and theological aspects of Arthur Peacocke's **God and the New Biology** are briefly examined. It is suggested that its more significant conclusions rest upon a questionable merging of two different understandings of the term 'incarnation', neither of which appears capable of justification within the framework which Peacocke proposes. Many of Peacocke's conclusions it is argued lie on **Hegelian**, rather than biblical, foundations.*

Arthur Peacocke here presents us with a useful piece of scientific journalism, before moving on to consider some of its theological implications. Roughly two-thirds of the book deals with a number of debated points within contemporary biology, particularly molecular biology. By providing extensive quotations from significant papers at judicious points in his discussion, Peacocke allows us to catch some of the flavour of the debate within modern biology. Like Dante's Virgil, he serves as a guide and resource when material which may be unfamiliar to many of the book's readers is encountered. Particular emphasis is placed upon the notion of 'reductionism', reflecting Peacocke's perception—surely correct—that this aspect of scientific explanation is laden with considerable theological significance. (His earlier work *Creation and the World of Science* includes an appendix, which helpfully outlines the arguments against reductionist theories of human nature, and attempts to find a point of entry for theological insights). After a brief survey of the Darwinian and post-Darwinian debates, the first group of chapters, which set up the real substance of the book, draw to a close. Readers wishing for a brief introduction to the 'New Biology' will probably feel well satisfied, with some justification.

The title of the book, however, clearly promises something more. What are the theological implications of these new insights? How, if at all, do they cause us to modify our understanding of the world as Christians? Readers of the *Divine Comedy* will recall that Dante's Virgil eventually leaves him: from this point on, Virgil declares, Dante must travel alone. He does not know enough to take him further. It was with a sense of growing unease that I read the

remainder of this book; unease concerning the direction in which I was being led, and also (and I may add that I make this statement with enormous reluctance) unease concerning the *theological* discernment of my guide. Peacocke's method appears to be eclectic, drawing upon insights and ideas which are conducive to his purposes. He appeals at points to 'a long tradition of Christian thought' (e.g., p. 102) which upheld ideas amenable to incorporation within an evolutionist understanding of nature (at least, as Peacocke understands it). Yet implicit within this eclecticism is an unacknowledged criteriology: the tradition is to be *evaluated* in the light of Peacocke's needs.

The Incarnation

For example, consider the concept of the Incarnation, of which Peacocke makes considerable use throughout the later chapters of his work. At points (e.g., p. 101), Peacocke works with a notion of incarnation similar to that expounded in David Jenkins' work *The Glory of Man* (1967)—that of God 'expressing himself directly, personally and concretely in and through a particular person who, humanly speaking, was completely open to him'. It is, however, open to doubt whether this reductionist concept of incarnation is capable of bearing the weight which Peacocke subsequently comes to place upon it. For the idea of Incarnation to be able to bear the considerable interpretative weight which it is obliged to assume in Peacocke's view, it needs to be correlated with a philosophy of the relation of the transcendent and immanent. Perhaps for this reason, we find at other points that the notion of incarnation is interpreted by Peacocke in a Hegelian manner (although Hegel is not mentioned in this work). Incarnation here concerns the bringing together (or 'reconciliation' to use a Hegelian term) of the transcendent and immanent. For Hegel, Jesus Christ manifests the integration of 'immanence and transcendence' (to use Peacocke's term: pp. 96–7; 99), the coinhering of material and spiritual. The notion of 'panentheism', to which Peacocke makes approving reference, has an excellent Hegelian pedigree (p. 99).

The move from the idea that Jesus echoes, embodies and incarnates God, to the much more sophisticated notion that he represents or instantiates the 'integration of immanence and transcendence' is theologically vulnerable, and requires the assumption of a substantial network of philosophical precommitments. Peacocke seems to assume that the move is straightforward. In the first place, I wonder

how Peacocke feels able to make this move, without adopting at least some of the Hegelian presuppositions which underlie it. I confess that I found myself unable to discern engagement with such questions. It is quite possible that Peacocke has given careful consideration to the philosophical issues raised by this model of incarnation, and could refute the standard (in my view, fatal) objections raised against it; equally, he may well have immersed himself in the theological debate concerning the manner in which this model of incarnation is anchored in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; if so, I can only record my pervasive impression of absence of such engagement. There is a hidden metaphysic (and, in my view, a highly controverted and vulnerable one at that) underlying Peacocke's approach.

Peacocke, in other words, is working with two quite different ideas of 'incarnation'. One is concerned with making statements concerning Jesus' relation to God; the second (upon which Peacocke ultimately bases his more important assertions) concerns the correlation of the transcendent and immanent. The former is biblical and an authentic component of the Christian tradition; the latter is Hegelian, and ultimately rests upon a series of precommitments to certain cultural, historical and metaphysical ideas. As has often been stressed, Hegel's notion of 'incarnation' (which Peacocke here broadly reproduces, apparently unaware that he is doing so) has no necessary connection with, nor foundation in, the history of Jesus Christ. The move from the first notion of incarnation to the second is not totally indefensible (as Hans Küng shows in his masterly study of Hegel's Christology, *The Incarnation of God* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1987); Peacocke, however, seems unaware that he is making such a move, which requires very careful analysis. The theologically more significant aspects of this book might perhaps better have been titled 'The Hegelian Tradition and the New Biology'.

The Work of Jesus

Moving on, we have to grapple with the question of the function of Jesus of Nazareth within the evolutionary scheme which Peacocke proposes. Here I found myself drawing parallels with the earlier writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in which Jesus is understood primarily as disclosing patterns, or indicating possibilities. He is a paradigm for illuminating reality. Thus Peacocke suggests that 'the life and death—in conjunction with the teaching—of Jesus provide a profounder revelation than that afforded by the evolutionary process

of the truth that God as creator suffers in and with his creations' (p. 107). Jesus, although 'unique', is 'expressive of an open possibility for and potentiality of all mankind' (p. 106). However, there is a pervasive strand within Christian theology (and one which is surely well-grounded in the New Testament) which insists that Jesus does more than illuminate the human situation—he transforms it. Whereas the Enlightenment suggested that illumination of the situation was tantamount to its transformation, there has been a clear trend within more recent theology to reappropriate the insight that Jesus *does* something which alters our situation, and not merely our perceptions of it. Peacocke, like de Chardin before him, echoes the reduced Christology of the Enlightenment. For example, Jesus is a historically contingent means of interpreting natural patterns. Therefore he stresses that creation itself is perfectly capable of 'expressing and revealing the mind of God' (p. 117).

Peacocke is clearly unhappy about being called a 'Deist' (p. 98); if Deism is defined historically, however, there is clearly a substantial deist element to his understanding of the function and identity of Jesus. Peacocke is aware of the pervasive witness of the Christian tradition, deriving from scripture, to speak of Christ as 'redeemer'. In affirming that we need redemption (p. 130), however, he argues for a reworking of the idea, as fulfilling human potential and attaining harmony with the creator. A criticism often directed against de Chardin would thus seem to be appropriate in this case: what concept of sin can Peacocke conceivably present, other than some deobjectified existentialism (p. 93), or notion of unfulfillment, deriving from process theology?

The Basis of the Incarnation

But how is an incarnational Christology to be grounded? How can the highly developed notion of Jesus as God incarnate be justified? Earlier, we pointed out that Peacocke had failed to justify the transition (a quantum leap, in terms of the ideas involved) from a biblical to a Hegelian idea of incarnation; now it is appropriate to ask whether even the biblical idea of incarnation is a genuine possibility, given Peacocke's presuppositions. The new interest in the resurrection as the precipitating factor in the development of the doctrine of the incarnation is evident from the writings of modern theologians such as Pannenberg, Moltmann and Jüngel. Equally, a persistent criticism directed against the authors of the *Myth of God Incarnate* (1977) is their obstinate tendency to criticise the idea of

the incarnation, without considering its historical and theological foundations—the resurrection. But how, I found myself wondering, does the notion of the resurrection of Jesus fit in with Peacocke's emphasis upon continuity within the natural order? Peacocke does not discuss the question (a serious omission which it is difficult to understand), so it is virtually impossible to give an informed answer to this particular question. But the impression which I gained was that whatever Peacocke understands by the 'resurrection' must have been an event within the natural order, appropriate to Jesus' position within it. I do not think that the notion of incarnation—when the term is given its full weight and power—could ever be legitimately inferred from such an event. It is, in any case, significant that Peacocke's references to Jesus make scant reference to his resurrection—although his life, death, incarnation and teaching are all mentioned frequently. Peacocke should surely have noted that the 'incarnation' is not a historical fact about Jesus (on the same level as his death), but an interpretation of his history, grounded particularly in his resurrection. Inevitably, therefore, we are obliged to ask whether Peacocke can be allowed to make such heavy use of the notion of incarnation, when he appears to have eroded the foundations upon which it is laid. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Hegelian notion of incarnation (which ultimately rests upon philosophical and cultural foundations) seems to dominate Peacocke's discussion.

The overall impression gained of Peacocke's work is that it is a useful and stimulating introduction to serious theological reflection upon the implications of the 'New Biology' for Christian theology. However, it is a matter for sincere regret that it serves this purpose in part by both its theological and philosophical deficiency. Let us hope that there will, in due course, arise more writers who are both scientifically and philosophically informed and steeped in contemporary theological debates: otherwise, works of this kind will continue to be written, which are deficient *either* in their scientific or in their theological persuasiveness.

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