The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology
Denis Edwards
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As the 'of' in the book's title indicates, The God of Evolution does not hold that science and faith speak separate and untranslatable languages. Quite the contrary. The scientific theory of evolution provides actual knowledge about the way in which God works in nature to achieve divine purposes.

There is every reason for a Christian of today to embrace both the theological teachings of Genesis and the theory of evolution. But holding together the Christian view of God and the insights of evolutionary science does demand a rethinking of our theology of the trinitarian God at work in creation (p. 13).

The God of evolution for Denis Edwards—who teaches systematic theology at the Adelaide College of Divinity in Australia—is a trinitarian God interpreted panenthesistically. Following Richard of St Victor, Edwards says 'the foundation for a theology that takes evolution seriously can be found in the trinitarian vision of God as a God of mutual relations, a God who is communion in love, a God who is friendship beyond all comprehension' (p. 15; cf p. 126).

A problem to be faced by any theologian who wants to integrate evolutionary biology is theodicy. Evolutionary theory requires a long history of pain and suffering as sentient animals and entire species are ground up and spit out by the ruthless and feelingless law of natural selection. How could a God of love and friendship and mutual relations design a creation so replete with cruelty, misery, and death?

Edwards tries to solve the problem of theodicy by making two moves. The first is a verbal finesse. Natural selection is not cruel and animals do not suffer, he says. To say natural selection is 'cruel' is to anthropomorphise nature, to impart personalised values to an impersonal natural process. Nature, both scientifically and theologically understood, says Edwards, is impersonal and resistant to anthropomorphising. And, by distinguishing 'suffering' from 'pain', Edwards acknowledges that animals have pain but not the long-term suffering reserved for self-conscious human persons. In other words, natural selection is not as cruel as we might first think (p.38).

Edwards' second move is to affirm self-limitation on the part of God. By self-limiting the divine self, God makes creation possible. Further, as numerous contemporary theologians argue, God makes contingency and freedom and pain and suffering possible; and this in turn makes the self-creativity of creation possible. Edwards grounds this self-limitation in the divine kenosis in the cross; then he applies kenosis to creation so as to affirm God's
self-shedding of omnipotence. 'Omnipotence, understood in the light of the cross, is the supreme power to freely give one's self in love. In light of this, the divine act of creation can be understood as an act of love, by which the trinitarian Persons freely make space for creation and freely accept the limits of the process' (pp. 4142).

Edwards recognises that Christian theologians have long wrestled with the knotty question about human freedom and divine power. Now this slides over and is applied to natural processes that include random mutations, natural selection, and evolutionary development. By distancing the divine self from creation, humans can be free and nature can begoverned by randomness and chance. 'God, in creating, accepts the limits of physical processes and of human freedom' (p. 44).

The logic goes like this: if God would exert omnipotence, then nature would be determined and human freedom would not exist. So, if God limits divine power, a space is opened up to permit random chance in nature and free will in humanity. The divine withdrawal from involvement makes God absent so that creation can be contingent and free. 'Creation can be understood as the self-expression of the Trinity, whereby the divine Persons-in-Relation make space for what is not God within the divine life' (p. 31).

Yet, Edwards does not stop here. He wants to add that God's purpose is achieved through nature. 'I would want to argue that God is not to be understood as another factor operating alongside natural selection, or in addition to it, but is rather to be understood as acting through it' (p. 52; cf. p. 121). Is this consistent? It would seem that either God is present or absent. Can Edwards have it both ways?

The difficulty here is not unique to Edwards. I find it emerging frequently in contemporary discussions of the relation of God to the world. Many theists whom I respect and revere—Langdon Gilkey, Jurgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, John Polkinghorne—are making the argument that impersonal contingency in nature and personal freedom in humanity require divine self-limitation, ie, the absence of God rather than the presence of God. I tend to disagree, although I disagree respectfully.

The fallacy in the divine self-limitation argument is that it presupposes a conflict between divine power and creature power; whereas the Christian view, I think, emphasises that God's power empowers and thereby liberates God's creatures. The fallacy presupposes a fixed pie of power. According to the fixed pie image, if God gets a big slice then creation gets a proportionately smaller slice. If God would be all-powerful, then creation would be totally powerless. Now, the fixed pie image may apply to human affairs such as the class struggle, wherein economic or political power concentrated in the upper class correspondingly denies power to the working class or to the marginalised populace.

But, I ask, does this apply to God? No, I don't think so. At least, not when God is acting graciously. When the God of Israel acted with a 'mighty hand' and an 'outstretched arm' to rescue the Hebrew slaves from Egyptian dominance, the Hebrews experienced God's power as liberating, as making freedom possible. When God raised Jesus from the dead on the first Easter, Christians began to put trust in God's power to raise us into a new and
transformed creation. The exertion of God's power is redemptive, salvific, liberating, empowering. When we cry out to God for redemption and liberation, the last thing we want to hear from heaven is that God has decided to be self-limiting.

Natural selection, according to evolutionary theory, favours the strong over the weak. It favours those members of a species genetically equipped to bring their own progeny to reproductive age and to exploit if not dominate others. What could a doctrine of the self-limitation of God in favour of natural selection mean other than to give theological blessing to the strong to dominate if not destroy the weak? How could such a theological blessing avoid social Darwinism? How could it avoid reinforcing the power of the powerful classes over against the working classes and the marginalised? The doctrine of God's self-limitation on behalf of evolution would leave us with a Christian faith without hope. Does Denis Edwards want to draw out the implications of his commitment to the 'God of Evolution' in this manner? By no means. The trinitarian God Edwards reveres is a God of love and friendship. Yet, I must ask: by designating this God as the God 'of' evolution, are we not risking invoking divine blessing upon the strong to exploit if not destroy the weak?

This is a difficult nut to crack. On the one hand, we want to give evolutionary biology the respect due to it. On the other hand, the philosophical commitment of evolutionary biology to purposeless evolution and to amoral natural selection creates severe difficulties for the theologian. I applaud Denis Edwards for facing these difficulties head on. His proposal to meet these difficulties by applying the otherwise christological concept of kenosis to the doctrine of creation is a noble effort. Yet, I still need to be persuaded that this will finally support the bridge between evolution and theology.