Making Sense of Evolution:
Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life

by John F Haught

reviewed by George L Murphy

It is an article of faith for many Americans that biological evolution and belief in God are fundamentally incompatible. Some Christians think that acceptance of Darwin's theory would destroy the basics of their religion. At the spectrum's other end are those who claim that really understanding Darwin's theory forces one to see that belief in a God involved with the world is impossible. Like many articles of faith, this one is held in the teeth of the evidence: There are a lot of religious believers who understand and accept evolution, and some of them have provided expositions of such a position.

Prominent among theologians who have made the case for accepting evolution has been the Roman Catholic John F Haught, Professor Emeritus of Theology at Georgetown University. His previous books include God after Darwin (2007) and Deeper than Darwin (2004). Making Sense of Evolution seems more aimed at a general audience and provides a clear treatment of the issues that assumes no technical expertise in science or theology. The subtitle is significant. Plenty of books claim to make sense of evolution. Haught's wants to make sense of Darwinian evolution and belief in God together and to show that only in that way can the drama of life be fully appreciated.

Haught has previously shown a fondness for alliterative listing and here organizes his eleven chapters with “D” titles: Darwin, Design, Diversity, Descent, Drama, Direction, Depth, Death, Duty, Devotion and Deity. The topics of the earlier chapters are standard fare in scientific presentations of evolution, though the present book goes beyond the science in discussing them. Later chapters set out the depth and drama that result from considering Darwin's theory in the context of deity.

In the first chapter, Darwin's scientific views and his movement from traditional Christianity to what Haught calls “scientific naturalism” are considered. Throughout the book Haught points out ways in which the ideas that underlay that move continue to appear in today's debates. But he also emphasizes Darwin's courtesy and desire to avoid offense, in contrast to the “in your face” attitude of some contemporary Darwinists.

“Design” is a controversial word today. Haught points out that with natural selection Darwin was offering a scientific answer to what had previously been considered a theological question. But the critical error of both “intelligent design” proponents and scientific naturalists is to think that one has to choose between a scientific description and a theological one. In contrast, the important idea of “layered explanation” (p 23), which goes back to
Greek philosophers and theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas, emphasizes that there can be multiple answers to the question of why something happens. This is hardly an abstruse concept, as Haught illustrates with answers to the question of why the page you are reading exists. That can be explained in terms of the mechanics of the printing process, but also in terms of the author's intent and in other ways.

A failure to appreciate layered explanation is one example of the lack of “Depth” of scientific naturalism that Haught considers in the chapter with that title. While he has no problem with natural selection and other aspects of scientific explanation on their own terms, he sees the insistence that they are the only explanation of life as superficial. The God who creates is seen, following Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, as the depth of the world rather than a cause within the world.

Unwarranted assumptions about characteristics that God must have also skew many arguments about the diversity of living (and extinct) things. Why, the question is asked, would God use a wasteful process like natural selection to create species? But there is no reason to think that God must be primarily an efficiency expert, as Haught suggests by pointing to Tillich’s sermon “Holy Waste.” His citation of Aquinas shows that theologians long before Darwin were aware of the diversity of living things and gave reasons why God would maximize it. It would be wise for critics of theology to learn something about it.

At the heart of Haught’s connection between Darwin and deity is drama. The *Origin of Species*, he observes, “tells the story of a long struggle accompanied by risk, adventure, tragedy, and by what Darwin called ‘grandeur.’ A Christian theology of evolution locates this drama within the very heart of God” (p 53). But while theology brings out the depth and significance of evolution, it does not simply replace the scientific account. It is primarily from evolutionary science that theology has learned to see creation as dynamic rather than static, “a narrative unfolding in time” (p 54). A genuine dialogue between science and theology enriches both.

It is hardly surprising that Haught chose Darwin to speak for evolution. Equally unsurprising for those familiar with his other work is his choice of Teilhard de Chardin to speak for deity. Teilhard, a Jesuit paleontologist, was one of the first to attempt a full-fledged theology of evolution. His understanding of Christian faith was in the category of process theology that sees God involved along with the world in development. Such a theology does not just accept but demands some kind of evolution. Teilhard’s views did not sit well with conservative church leaders and he was not allowed to publish them during his life.

Therein lies the reason why Haught’s case for compatibility of evolution and Christianity will probably not convince many of those belonging to one of the groups to which I referred initially. Theologians like Tillich and Teilhard are seen by most conservative Christians as having abandoned too many of what they consider religious fundamentals. (At the risk of being numbered among “timid theological minds” [p 141], I confess that I think that while Teilhard made important contributions to Christian thought, there are problematic aspects of his theology.) On the other hand, it can be hoped that open-minded scientific naturalists, while perhaps not convinced of the truth of Haught’s construction, will recognize that there are coherent ways to understand Darwin and deity together.
REFERENCES

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