

## ARTHUR PEACOCKE (1924-2006)

A Memorial and Appreciation, Clare College Chapel, 5 May 2007

Given by John Hedley Brooke

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In one of many tributes paid to Arthur since his death, one of his former students has referred to his luminous spirit, to his being a model of the scholar-leader pursuing a vision against the stream of the conventional, the ordinary and the safe. To inhabit a world of discourse that brings the cultures of science and theology into communion requires a degree of courage that Arthur displayed to the end. During the final weeks of his life he was still responding to his critics and making emendations to his last book, *All That Is*. As an energetic and highly respected scholar, Arthur published a dozen or more books and more than 200 papers. Referring to that prodigious energy, another former student, Denis Alexander, has recalled the biochemical tutorials he had with Arthur in St Peter's College Oxford during the 1960s: "My grasp of irreversible thermodynamics was never strong, and discussing the topic with a world expert must have been tedious for the expert on occasion. But Arthur was very focused, arriving in a whirl of papers and departing in a cloud of dust for the next appointment". Many of his friends and colleagues who have achieved eminence in their field have recalled that Arthur played a crucial role in their lives, not only as a loyal friend but also as one whose theological reflections had helped them to retain a meaningful faith at testing times. In this respect his major publications will continue to have lasting impact and relevance: They include *Science and the Christian Experiment* (1973); his Bampton Lectures *Creation and the World of Science* (1979, 2004); *Intimations of Reality: Critical Realism in Science and Religion* (1984); his Gifford Lectures *Theology for a Scientific Age* (1990, 1993); and *Evolution the Disguised Friend of Faith?* (2004).

The description "scholar-leader" is apt because Arthur played an inspirational and foundational role in the establishment of several institutions, all of which continue to flourish: the Society of Ordained Scientists; the British Forum for Science and Religion (of which he was Chairman from 1972-78 and President from 1995-2000); the Ian Ramsey Centre at Oxford, of which he was twice Director and which he successfully steered into the University's Theology Faculty. He was a much-loved figure within the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology and a sterling friend to other international bodies such as the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences at Berkeley. Earlier this year the Zygon Centre for Science and Theology in Chicago held a memorial symposium in his honour, an indication of the esteem in which he was held by yet another international body. In Oxford Arthur was not only a Prime Mover but also a diplomatic recurrent Mover in ensuring that the University would have its own Chair in Science & Religion. As the first holder of that Andreas Idreos Professorship, I have a very special reason for gratitude.

My first acquaintance with Arthur long precedes these more recent events. As a young graduate student in Cambridge, I was invited by Arthur to give a paper at a conference he had organised on the subject of natural theology. I remember speaking on Adam Sedgwick, friend and mentor of Charles Darwin. Having the name Adam, it is not surprising that Sedgwick was known by his scientific friends as the "first of men". It is a description which, for other reasons, might be applied to Arthur, such was his initiative wherever he found himself. I remember that conference of forty years ago because it was held in the cathedral close in Norwich. It was April and the magnolias were in full bloom, gloriously set against the mellow stone of the old buildings. I vowed then that if ever I was lucky enough to own an old stone house it would have to have a magnolia in front of it. Eventually I did, and for many years the return of the Spring bloom reminded me of the kindness and encouragement Arthur had given to a young postgrad at the very beginning of his career. I have been a student of natural theology ever since. Arthur was attracted to a characterisation of 'religion' suggested by

Gerd Theissen - that it is a “cultural sign language which promises a gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality”. I am one of many who would say that they have experienced a gain in life through Arthur’s unremitting leadership. He is already greatly missed.

His autobiography *From DNA to Dean* (1996) touchingly records his undergraduate agnosticism and how he emerged from it to embrace a robust faith. His story provides a telling counter-example to those who deny there can be trajectory from an understanding of nature to a faith in God. One of his endearing features was the tenacity with which he would pursue a question or an argument until all its implications were unfolded. His friends will know that he would sometimes resume a conversation months after it had begun, remembering exactly the point where, for whatever reason, it had been curtailed. It was almost as if time could not deflect his purposes. A mutual friend, the Danish theologian Niels Gregersen writes “Every time you met with Arthur, you would immediately be brought back to previous conversations. ‘Niels, last time you raised some questions about my use of panentheism. Tell me again, precisely, what’s the problem’”. Gregersen continues “You may have had a free lunch with Arthur; but you will not have had a lunch without [his] taking issue and expanding your viewpoints. That is consistency and that is mentorship”.

In his book *Paths From Science Towards God* (2001), Arthur recalled that he had been reflecting on the relation of the scientific worldview to Christian belief for more than fifty years, ever since his school days in the 1940s. It was in 1973 that he came to Clare College as Dean, following his distinguished career as a biochemist who had come to know DNA rather well before it acquired its legendary structure with the work of Crick and Watson. During his time in Cambridge he launched another of his initiatives when he set up the Triangle Club a dining club where matters of science and faith were on the table. He had already become convinced that the survival of Christian theology required the re-shaping and re-formulation of traditional doctrines in line with scientific knowledge. This was not to eviscerate Christian faith but to fortify it against the popular creed that science and religious belief are necessarily antagonistic. Among the many honours bestowed upon him were the award of both DSc and DD degrees, and invitations to deliver the Bampton Lectures in Oxford (1978) and the Gifford Lectures at St Andrews (1993). He received an MBE in 1993 and was made honorary Canon of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, in 1995. In recognition of his outstanding contributions to the field of science and religion, he was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 2001.

In his fearless exploration of the adjustments necessary in both theology and in the rhetoric of science to achieve a relation of mutual respect and support, Arthur’s personal modesty was combined with distaste for dogmatism, whether in theological appeals to authority or in the dogmas of scientific reductionism. Two examples immediately spring to mind. In the early 1970s the French biologist Jacques Monod argued in his book *Chance and Necessity* that elements of chance and contingency were so pervasive in evolutionary processes that inferences to direction or to purpose were inadmissible. Arthur’s reply was all the more forceful because of his scientific expertise:

Instead of being daunted by the role of chance in genetic mutations as being the manifestation of irrationality in the universe, it would be more consistent with the observations to assert that the full gamut of the potentialities of living matter could be explored only through the agency of the rapid and frequent randomization which is possible at the molecular level of the DNA.

It was precisely the interplay between chance and necessity that was creative in a universe that Arthur fervently believed points towards, even if it cannot demonstrate, its Creator.

A second example would be Arthur’s resolute defiance of reductionism wherever it appeared. In 1985, he published a collection of essays by distinguished scholars, each of whom exposed

the reductionist tendencies in their disciplines. This was a timely warning about the threat to the very idea of a university, if each discipline arrogantly sought to subjugate others to itself. The threat does still surface. From popular discourse about genetics one might even suspect there is a gene for reductionism! By contrast, Arthur was prominent among those who have insisted on a holistic understanding of living systems:

... real features of the total system-as-a-whole are frequently an influence upon what happens to the units (which may themselves be complex) at lower levels. The units behave as they do because they are part of these particular systems. ... New realities having causal efficacy can be said to have emerged at the higher levels.

In speaking of top-down as well as bottom-up causality, Arthur helped to create the space for models of divine activity in the world in which there may be causal efficacy without 'intervention' in the traditional sense - without, in other words, violating the systems within systems that constitute this universe. It was his unswerving belief that insights from the life sciences can illuminate what it means to speak of God's immanence in the world. In this context he would often refer approvingly to the judgment of Aubrey Moore, an Oxford theologian of the late nineteenth century, who claimed that under the guise of a foe Darwin had actually done the work of a friend. Moore could say this because he believed Darwin had helped Christian theology to liberate itself from inappropriate deistic models in which God was inactive except when occasionally intervening. For Moore, and for Arthur later, God had to be seen as constantly creating in and through natural processes, not behaving like a magician.

"There is", he wrote in his last book, "a need to reaffirm more strongly than at any other time in the Christian (and Jewish and Islamic) traditions that in a very strong sense God is the immanent Creator creating in and through the processes of the natural order". An Incarnational theology, in which Christ makes explicit the sacramental character of the world, was fundamental to Arthur's vision of an evolutionary process replete with potentiality and the possibility that humans might develop into more Christ-like persons. Against those such as Jacques Monod and Stephen Jay Gould who were denying any sense of direction in the history of life on earth, Arthur celebrated those propensities and trends in evolutionary processes which enabled him to say that "the emergence of self-conscious persons capable of relating personally to God can still be regarded as an intention of God continuously creating..." An evolutionary paradigm was a gift to theology because, instead of having God directly and immediately responsible for what Darwin himself called a train of "vile molluscous animals", one could argue for a theodicy in which the emergence of the more devilish features of nature had been a possibility in a universe constituted such that the emergence of humans was also possible. True to the aesthetics Arthur had absorbed through scientific practice, he insisted that such a model did not require a non-natural agent pushing, pulling, luring or manipulating events such as mutations at the quantum level. As he resonantly put it, "I have no need of that hypothesis".

Friendly critics would sometimes worry that a conventional Christology could appear incongruous when located within such a naturalism. The importance Arthur gave to insights and inferences from the sciences also worried those whose theology was shaped by Barthian principles. One should not underestimate the genuine radicalism of his position. In his vision of theology's future he was adamant that "the only defensible theology is one that consists of 'understanding seeking faith' ... in which 'understanding' must include that of the natural and human worlds which the sciences have ... unveiled." He himself was clear that he was not proposing either a disguised pantheism or a Whiteheadian approach to the processes underlying evolutionary change. Rather, he saw value in panentheism - the doctrine that all exists in God, without that being an exhaustive description of the deity. This is the God in whom we live, move and have our being - a biblical reference that supplied the title for a valuable collection of essays he co-edited with Philip Clayton. The independence of mind so characteristic of Arthur's work was here manifested in his reluctance to accept what some

have seen as the central analogy of panentheism – that the universe might be conceived as the body of God. As with Leibniz, in his famous debate with Samuel Clarke, Arthur felt this ran the risk of turning God into a corporeal being. His own analysis of what it means to have our being *in* God was not a piece of abstract philosophy, but deeply devotional and pastoral in spirit.

One of Arthur's great loves was music and in his book *The Music of Creation*, co-authored with Ann Pederson, he imaginatively explored a series of parallels between music-making and contemporary aspects of Christian life and thought. His special sensitivity to the place of music in the liturgy was already highly developed during his time here as Dean when he took enormous pride in the conduct of chapel worship. Tim Brown has told me of Arthur's love for the 'theatre' of liturgy. Apparently this was only compromised during one candlelit Advent service when, in a momentarily darkened chapel, Arthur interrupted the otherwise seamless transition from organ voluntary to choral introit by announcing that "fire extinguishers" could be found at certain strategic places around the chapel. As Tim recalls, it was a little hard to make the Matin Responsary work after that. Arthur is remembered as the Dean who greeted the arrival of choral scholars at Clare with great enthusiasm, who thirty years ago, provided exactly the support needed to establish the mixed voice choir, setting it on its way to becoming one of the leading university choirs with the international reputation it enjoys today.

In *The Music of Creation* Arthur shows how, in its forms and in its relation to humanly experienced time, music can provide models for explicating the continuous creative activity of God. The argument is not simply that certain compositions, such as Wagner's Prelude to *Das Rheingold*, can evoke the Creation of a world, but that music helps us to understand Creation through understanding time and its potentialities. Encountering Beethoven in one of his late quartets provides a model of God's self-communication in and through that which is being created. It was typical of Arthur that he should have planned his deeply moving funeral service down to the last detail and those who were present then in Christ Church Cathedral will remember that the closing music was the serene Cavatina from Beethoven's Opus 130.

Throughout his illustrious career and during his final illness Arthur was blessed with wonderful support from Rosemary, his wife. The warmth of their hospitality and the complementarity of their talents has impressed all who have been privileged to know them. It was during Arthur's time at Clare that Rosemary's own career in education took an exciting new turn when she was appointed Staff Inspector. This necessitated her living in London during the week. I know that she regards the support Arthur gave her at that time and throughout her career as generous beyond measure and truly exceptional. Apparently Arthur himself said of his time at Clare that he was remembered for having introducing dessert into the Combination Room. In his displacement of the simple apple that had previously sufficed, there is perhaps a small symbol of the greater enrichment that he brought to the life of this college to its Fellows, as well as to his many dear friends.

Just before he died he wrote a moving *Nunc Dimittis* that was circulated among friends. With characteristic openness he declared:

I have long been one of those who have been unsure about the role and efficacy of intercessory prayer. My view of it was that the intercessor by placing him or herself in the presence of God, with the person prayed for very much in mind, enabled that person to experience the enfolding presence of God. I felt that the person prayed for was being taken up in the loving arms of God enhancing the divine presence.

He poignantly added: "I can honestly say that this is what I have experienced".

Arthur should have the last, and *his* last, word: "I know that God is waiting for me to be enfolded in love". Amen