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# IMAGE OF GOD FOR AN EVOLUTIONARY UNIVERSE

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(Received 4 March 2006)

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## Abstract

Our modern world is under the effect of the biological revolution; therefore, the epistemology of Biology refers us to a new rationality based on the emergency of novelty (evolution) and the teleonomy.

If we intend to be logic in our statements about the biological evolutionary rationality, we must establish that the model of an evolutionary world, in which life appeared as a continuous process from the bacteria to man, determines our concepts and images of the universe, humankind and consequently the concept and image of the divinity. Human being needs constantly look for a new face of God according to the spiritual dimensions of the prevailing culture, which supports the necessary symbols and metaphors to express his most deep convictions.

From a universe understood under the order paradigm, God was described as first Principle, first Cause, *primus Motor*, the called Aristotelian cosmological God, studied by the Thomist scholars. The modern Physics states an evolving process of whole universe, in which order and organization emerge according the irreversible Thermodynamics from the disorder and chaos.

Thus, a new image of God is arising as Initiator, Sustaining and Giving meaning to the evolutionary process; it is not more acceptable to describe God as the Unmoved, Eternal, Impassive; image of God that does not well match with the biblical image: Merciful, and able to sympathize with people troubles and joys. This new image of God is nearer to the living God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this way, if we affirm that God lives, we must speak about Him analogically using the biological categories.

Classical Metaphysics was established from a determined mechanistic cosmos explanation; the new Metaphysics must be constructed from a new vision: the evolutionary universe.

*Keywords:* image of God, evolutionary world, living God, suffering God

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## 1. Image of God for a biological age

Man needs continuously recreate the face of God. We pray in the Psalm:  
“I hear my voice, Lord, when I call; have mercy on me and answer me.  
‘Come’, says my heart, ‘seek God's face’; your face, Lord, do I seek!

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Do not hide your face from me; do not repel your servant in anger.” (Psalms 27.7-8)

In our *homo viator* condition, we require a theology attempted to articulate the concepts of world, human being and God, in such a way that natural sciences offer us new images and models. The starting point for our knowledge of God has always been the natural world, according to the Wisdom of Salomon book: “For by the greatness and beauty of the creatures proportionally the maker of them is seen.” (Wisdom 13.5) This does not mean that we can obtain our knowledge of God as a direct deductibility from the cosmos empirical knowledge, but that our understanding of the universe could provide up-to-date and powerful evocative images or models of God by means of the analogy. Sallie McFague emphasizes this called heuristic theology: “This essay, she says, therefore, will be a ‘case study’ with a theological model for re-envisioning the relationship between God and the universe. (...) Many of the major models for the relationship between God and the universe in the Judeo-Christian tradition are ones that emphasize the transcendence of God and the distance between God and the world: God as a king with the world as his realm, God as potter who creates the cosmos by molding it, God as speaker who with a word brings the world to be out nothing. One has to ask whether these models are adequate ones for our time, our ecological nuclear age, in which the radical interdependence and interrelationship of all forms of life must be underscored.” [1]

Therefore, we need to construct a theology according with the spiritual dimensions of our time, as suggested by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in his widespread writings. Our modern world is under the effect of the biological revolution; the epistemology of Biology refers us to a new rationality based on the emergency of novelty, *id est*, evolution and teleonomy. On the contrary, from a physical view of the cosmos, essentially based on the order paradigm, was derived the classical mechanistic rationality, by which we interpret the universe. From the conception of this universe, explained under order paradigm, God’s nature was explained, in agreement with the cosmological traditional ways, as a first Principle, a first cause, *primus motor*: the called Aristotelian cosmological God. The image or model derived from this physical rationality, later re-elaborated by Saint Thomas, and sometimes recovered with certain biblical symbols and attributes, appears as the Unmoved, Absolute, Eternal, Impassive. Nevertheless, this image does not well match with the personal God of the Bible: Merciful, able to sympathize with the people troubles and joys, who is involved with the history of humankind.

Modern Physics states a new paradigm for an evolving process of whole universe in which order, organization and living beings emerge from the disorder and chaos. Ian Barbour has recently reported: “Future understanding of evolution may be enhanced by recent work on *chaos* and *complexity* in the physical sciences. Whereas the linear systems of classical thermodynamics are insensitive to small initial differences and attain predictable equilibrium states, nonlinear thermodynamics systems far from equilibrium are extremely sensitive

to very small initial differences and are therefore unpredictable.” [2] Thus, a new image of God is arising as Initiator, Sustainer and Giving meaning to the evolutionary process of the universe and life on the Earth. This new image or model of God is certainly nearer to the living God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Of course, we are convinced that all our statements about God must be analogous; in this way, if we affirm that God lives, we must speak about Him analogically using the biological categories. Arthur Peacocke has published the book: *Theology for a scientific age. Being and becoming. Natural and divine*. In the Chapter entitled, ‘The concept of God: implications of scientific perspectives’, he writes: “We come now to the crucial stage of this enterprise, to inquire into the extent to which these concepts, models and images of God that have been winnowed and refined in religious experience, in particular the Christian, and have been supported by philosophical reflections, might need to be modified and enriched by the impressive perspectives on the world that the natural sciences now give us.” [3]

## **2. The Living God**

We are aware that any natural wood is worthy to be carved in it the image of God; we must always realize the biblical command in the Deuteronomy: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness of anything that in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath.” (Deuteronomy 5.8) In spite of this command when God reveals Himself with human words, God prefers for Himself the name of Living God. If we conceive life as process, change, metabolism, evolution and emergency of novelty, the question is: how we can speak of the Absolute, Unmoved and Impassive in the terms with which we speak about living beings? Since metabolism, which means change, is of necessity an essential part for our perception and understanding of life, we wonder if it is possible to speak about changes in God? Christopher Rowland, in the monthly review edited by English Dominicans, *New Blackfriars*, in the issue dedicated to *God and Change*, assesses that “it is impossible to deny that the biblical narrative is full of accounts of God’s mind changing in specific circumstances, often as the result of the earnest intercession of the righteous” [4]. Thus, Abraham and Moses manage to persuade God to change his will and mind. In other Bible passages, we find the changelessness of God. In any case, God always appears as the God of compassion, although we can find some tension between the attributes of justice and mercy in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In spite of the Israelites confessed God as Almighty, they experienced Yahweh as the Living God. The term Living God appears about thirty times in the Bible. “The Old Testament, therefore, believes in a God who was utterly other, but who despite this status listened, talked, wept, walked, judged and loved.” [5] Indeed, He is a Living God. Christopher Rowland continues: “If we take the Incarnation seriously, we would have to say that the incarnate God cannot but be affected by the consequences of Incarnation” [4]. In the New

Testament, we also find passages, which suggest that divine will and mind could be affected by the prayer of intercession.

In this context, the most important issue is to understand the relationship of God and a continuously developing world; consequently, this assessment implies a new concept of creation. It is necessary to rediscover a new theology of creation, in which we take into accounts the Living God who has created us [6]. In the classical scholastic theology, the creatures do not touch God Creator. If we assess that Living God is the Creator, this means that the creation somehow qualifies God. In the free creation act God accepts to be limited by creatures; this is the foundation of the new kenotic theology [7, 8]. When God freely decides to create a developing universe, in which the intelligent life has appeared, He also decides to rise up the ability of giving and receiving, and consequently of engaging in a dialogue with this universe, which becomes intelligent in human persons. The Living God lives in the universe communicating with it. The eternal Wisdom was present when God makes the world (Wisdom 9.9), rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men (Proverbs 8.31). God lives in the universe as self-communication. Arthur Peacocke has affirmed: “We can only conclude that, if there is a personal Creator, then that Creator intended this rich multiformity of entities, structures, and processes in the natural world and, if so, that such Creator God takes what, in the personal world of human experience, could only be called ‘delight’ in this multiformity of what he has created” [3, p. 114]. Peacocke continues: “Creator, it now seems, is unfolding the potentialities of the universe, which he himself has given it, and through a process in which these creative possibilities and propensities, inherent by his own intention within the fundamental entities of that universe and their inter-relations, become actualised within a created temporal development shaped and determined by those selfsame God-given potentialities” [3, p. 119].

### **3. Transcendence and immanence of God**

Therefore, we must rediscovered the biblical genuine idea of God not only Transcendent but also Immanent into the universe and the historical processes of humankind. Arthur Peacocke distinguishes the God attributes which belong to Divine Being as the unite, the unfathomable richness, the supremely rationality, to be Sustainer and faithful Preserver, continuous Creator, predicate somehow static, from the dynamic attributes more appropriate to the model of Personal God, *id est*, the Divine Becoming. “It is distinctive of free persons that they possess intentions and purpose, and act so as to implement them.” [3, p. 113] Interestingly, an up-to-date- study of the model of God proposed by A. Peacocke can be seen in the work of Simone Morandini [9]. The author reports a number of theological models elaborated by authors in the English speaking sphere, who making use of the non-deterministic dimension of contemporary Physics rethink divine action in reality attempting to inculturate Christian thought in age of science.

The Australian theologian Denis Edwards has emphasized the personal interplay of God with creation, in his book entitled: *The God of evolution*. According to the German theologian Walter Kasper, who following Richard of Saint Victor, describes God as a ‘communion in love’; God’s being is to be in relationship to us. The essence of God is relational and consequently, all created reality would be understood as a being-in-relation. “In this attempt at a theology that makes sense in the light of Christian revelation and biological evolution, I have suggested –says Denis Edwards- so far that a central foundation concept is that God is a relational of equal and mutual friendship, and that all created reality is to be understood as relational. To be is to be in communion.” [10]. Consistently, “the universe can be understood as unfolding ‘within’ the Trinitarian relations of mutual God” [10, p.30]. Creation is the self-expression of the Trinity. Saint Bonaventure describes the Father, the First Person of the Trinity as Fountain Fullness and origin of all fecundity; the eternal Word is the Exemplar cause for all creatures, which are created through the Holy Spirit [11].

In this way, we must conceive God as being radically Transcendent and Immanent to universe, enabling it to be and to become. In agreement with Arthur Peacocke in his book, *God and the new Biology*, the integration in the natural processes of both transcendence and immanence leads no to deism, but to pan-en-theism. The pan-en-theism is defined as: “the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in Him, but (...) that his Being is more than, and is not exhausted by the universe” [12]. This assessment ought to be taken in the sense that both nature and man are in God, “but God is profoundly and ultimately more than nature and man. God in his being transcends, goes beyond, both man and nature, yet God is either in every thing created” [12, p. 96] at all times and in all places, according to the Psalm: “O Lord, if I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!” (Psalms 139.8). [13]

This pan-en-theist vision of the God’s relationship to every thing has foundation in the traditional Christian mysticism. Saint Francis of Asisi claims for the universal fraternity in *The Canticle of the Creatures*, when he prayed: “Teach us to see Your design in all of creation” and Ignatius of Loyola in *The spiritual Exercises* in the “Contemplation to attain Love of God” says: “Second point. This is to reflect how God dwells in creatures: in elements giving them existence, in the plants giving them life, in the animals conferring upon them sensation, in man bestowing understanding. So He dwells in me and gives me being, life, sensation, intelligence, and makes a temple of me, besides having created me in the likeness and image of the Divine Majesty.” [14]

#### **4. The suffering God**

It is impossible to conceive life without suffering. The modern sensibility is unable to understand the *apatheia* as the perfect condition of God’s being as describe by Plato in his dialogue on *The Republic*. “If he change at all can only change for the worse, for we cannot suppose him to be deficient either in virtue

or beauty. (...) Then it is impossible that god should ever be willing to change.” [Plato, *Republic*, 381 c]. In the platonic metaphysics there is not place for the God’s suffering and compassion. With the exception of Tertulian, the ancient tradition of the Church Fathers was the opposition to the notion that God could suffer pain, *id est*, the divine being is impassive [15]. The Spanish theologian Josep Vives [16] has emphasized the hard mortgage the western thinking had to pay off, conceiving the Absolute unable to communicate with the sorrowful men. Unfortunately, the Church Fathers in searching for the inculturation in Greek philosophy corrupted the biblical face of Living God, who speaks with the man and walked in the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3.8).

Robert Duncan Calver discussing the work of W. Waite Willis on impassibility of God writes: “The trinitarian God of the Bible has no problem of unexplained suffering. He’s against it and suffers it along with us and will continue to do so until in the consummation, God, we may suppose, becomes completely God” [17]. In the same way, for Jürgen Moltmann the crucified Christ calls for a revolution in the concept of God. For Moltmann in his book *The Crucified God*, says: “God and suffering are no longer contradictions”, but “God’s being is in suffering and suffering in God’s being itself, because God is love” [18].

## 5. Conclusion

In the search for a dialogue between contemporary science and Theology, we find that Biology can supply us evocative images of both: the God’s being and nature, and the God’s action into an evolving universe. This model of living, suffering and loving God in *sympatheia* with the humankind is nearer to the biblical revelation than those of *apatheia* of God in a transcendent solitude.

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