

## Communication

*The Untidiness of Integration: John Stapylton Habgood*

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Kevin S. Seybold



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**D**uring the Middle Ages, it was not unusual for theologians to study the physical world. In fact, there was an amazing lack of strife between theology and science at this time. One reason for this cooperation was the large number of individuals trained in both theology and medieval science. It was the medieval theologian who tried to relate theology to science and science to theology.<sup>1</sup> Today, it is uncommon to have a theologian also easily conversant in the scientific literature. John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke, and Alister McGrath are well-known contemporary examples of scientists who later have been trained in theology and turned their attention to the integration of the two. A less familiar example is John Stapylton Habgood, who studied natural science at Cambridge and later lectured in physiology and pharmacology there for several years. In 1954, Habgood took orders in the Anglican Church and rose through the ecclesiastical hierarchy to eventually become Archbishop of York in 1983 until his retirement in 1995.

This paper will review some of John Habgood's (now Lord Habgood) writings, particularly those that refer to his vision of how Christianity and science are related. In doing so, I hope to bring Habgood's works to a wider audience (particularly in North America) and to argue that his approach constitutes a viable model for the integration of science and religion.

Born in 1927, John Habgood was educated at King's College, Cambridge, where he read natural sciences specializing in physiology. After earning a Ph.D., he became a demonstrator in pharmacology and a fellow of his college at Cambridge. In response to a mission effort in Cambridge, Habgood converted to Christianity in 1946 and began the life-long process of wrestling with his new faith, a process that is central to his understanding of what it means to be a Christian.<sup>2</sup> Habgood eventually served in a number of church roles, but maintained a dedication to his family and the people of his parish (regardless of how large that parish became). He also wrote several books during his years in the church, many of which deal with the relationship of Christian belief to science.

## Faith and Uncertainty

The foundation for any kind of dialogue between theology and science, according to Habgood in *Faith and Uncertainty*, is trust in each other's basic integrity and a willingness to work together.<sup>3</sup> There is, of course, a long history of just that kind of trust. It is in this tradition that his approach to science and religion is to be found. The "conflict" and "warfare" language used by John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White in the nineteenth century and too often heard in evangelical circles during the twentieth century is anathema to Habgood. Both science and religion are searching for truth, and both use similar forms of language in their attempts to describe that truth. For example, metaphor and analogy are used extensively in theology (e.g., lamb of God) and in scientific theorizing (e.g., billiard ball model of interacting particles). This metaphorical language is inadequate in both disciplines; yet the use of these figures of speech serve the

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vital purpose of making something that is difficult to describe and understand more intelligible.

Language also has its limitations. The natural sciences as well as the behavioral sciences and theology suffer from the limitation that all knowledge is interpretation, and the language in which the interpretation is given helps to determine the results.<sup>4</sup> So, scientific data, no less than theological statements, are not removed from theory and the assumptions upon which those theories are based. Postpositivism refers to this as the theory-laden nature of data. I think Habgood would concur with the belief of many Christians that the Bible must be interpreted in light of societal and cultural factors present during Old Testament or New Testament times. He also, I believe, would agree with the less commonly held position that empirical data are also subject to interpretation based on some level of social construction. Indeed, Habgood sees the very concept of nature itself as a social construction.<sup>5</sup> In this, he is in agreement with Alister McGrath in his recent book on nature.<sup>6</sup>

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The findings and theories of science can assist theology as it develops its doctrines. For example, Habgood sees in Darwin's theory of evolution an opportunity to clarify certain themes expressed in Christian theology. In addressing the question why there are intelligent beings on Earth, for instance, Habgood sees evolution as support for a Christian position that God desired intelligent beings with which he could have relationships. He writes:

Multiple connectedness, and the complexity which goes with it, are evolutionary winners. So it is not religious prejudice which makes one say that complex systems tend to ramify in the direction of ever greater complexity, and that self-conscious intelligence is not an accident.<sup>7</sup>

Concerning the issue of apparent waste within creation, Habgood again sees evolutionary theory as offering an understanding of the necessity of "dead ends" and suf-

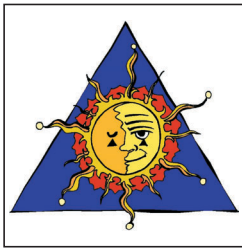


John Stapylton Habgood

fering. These problems for theology are due to the freedom inherent within the world to be itself. He explains:

Natural selection provided a rationale for waste. Intolerable problems confront a theology which ascribes all that happens in the world to the direct, unmediated intention of God. But a world which is allowed to make itself, in order to develop the freedom to be itself, at least contains some explanation of why fragility and vulnerability are an essential component of it. A complex mixture of competition and co-operation are the conditions for free creativity—and free creativity is the basis of life ... There can be no freedom without clash of interests. There can be no creation without destruction. There can be no life without death.<sup>8</sup>

Integrating faith and practice, whether as a scientist, teacher, clergyman, or member of some other profession, is a struggle. Referring to the use of the Bible in discussions of contemporary issues, Habgood agrees that the Bible is relevant and "at the center of the tradition in which all Christians live." Nevertheless, he tries to make what he says on these contemporary issues accessible to everyone, even those (or perhaps, particularly those) who do not start from a Christian world view. Habgood says that he seldom quotes the Bible in such discussions or arguments because, while Christians will hopefully see the biblical basis for his arguments, non-Christians will find the quoting "off-putting." Using biblical texts for "proving arguments about contemporary problems" can give "the quite misleading impression that there is some quick way of short-circuiting the struggle to bring faith to bear on them. Christians are not in the privileged position of being able to look up the answer in the back of the book."<sup>9</sup>



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### A Working Faith

"To make statements about God is potentially to say something about everything."<sup>10</sup> This statement, found in the introduction of *A Working Faith*, suggests the unity that Habgood sees in creation and the importance he places on keeping the worlds of science and theology together. Dialogue and cross-fertilization between science and religion work both ways; integration occurs along a two-way street. As an example of this two-way communication, Habgood considers the role theology should play in helping shape social, personal, and ethical issues. While scientists are appropriately careful about opening their domain to theology, they live in the real world, and when scientists are asked to make comments about or are asked to help shape the important issues of the day (e.g., human cloning), theological (as well as philosophical, ethical, and moral) issues also need to be considered.

Another example of the two-way street of integration considers Einstein's query of whether God throws dice. Habgood answers the question with a strong "yes," God does throw dice. To accept this, however, does not mean that there is no rationality to creation. It does not take God out of the creative process. Habgood sees the combination of chance and selection as mechanisms whereby biological creativity is possible. Chance does not imply an unstructured, unplanned, blind universe with no God in control. It is not merely chance or just selection or only lawful relationships that drive creation. It is all of these processes operating under the will of God producing the kind of world we have today. Habgood states:

It is not, therefore, empty talk, to say that this is God's world in which God's purposes are fulfilled ... Chance [provides] the possibility of freedom and creativity; chance [is] a component in God's design.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that Habgood places a high value on the natural sciences as an *ancilla* to theology. Nevertheless, God cannot solely be revealed by or understood through nature. No amount of argument from science can substitute for revelation of God through our direct experience of him. This direct awareness of God is, in part, culturally conditioned so there are times when our accessibility to God is blunted by the context in

which we live. However, Habgood believes that humans cannot fail to search for the transcendent. There is, Habgood might say, a kind of lure of the divine, a concept consistent with Alister Hardy's notion of the divine flame.<sup>12</sup> According to Hardy, the awareness of this divine flame is an element of the fundamental nature of human beings and derives, in part, from the evolutionary process.

The more recent work of David Hay<sup>13</sup> in the United Kingdom, supports the idea that children's spirituality is not merely a cultural construction, but emerges from biological predispositions. Also consistent with this view is the empirical evidence for a biological basis for God beliefs suggested by the research of Andrew Newberg.<sup>14</sup> Newberg's findings coincide with the recent report from the Commission on Children at Risk which suggests that the human brain is organized to ask questions and seek ultimate answers.<sup>15</sup> This characteristic of the brain reinforces the idea that one aspect of human uniqueness is this drive to draw meaning and purpose from experience and to make a connection with the transcendent. Human beings, Habgood argues, cannot permanently forsake this search for the transcendent or the search for meaning in life without giving up a part of us that is distinctively human.

This search for the transcendent and meaning in life implies to Habgood that we can never become comfortable in our established theological positions. While there are important differences between scientific and religious truth claims, they are similar in that they both rely, in part, on the consensus of those "who have taken the trouble to master their subject matter."<sup>16</sup> As a result, Habgood is concerned about Christianity that purports to know too much; of Christians who seem to know with too much certainty. While knowledge of one's direct experience with God is valuable, Christians, Habgood argues, must avoid having an arrogant knowledge that sees "no actual need to listen to what is going on in the rest of the world of thought and experience."<sup>17</sup> At the same time, however, there are problems and dangers in knowing too little. The difficult quest for the Christian is in finding the proper balance, a balance that is reflected in any attempt to integrate science and religion.



Whether bringing one's Christian faith to bear on contemporary social issues (e.g., cloning and global warming), integrating evolutionary theory into a theology of creation, or using scientific findings to support the human tendency to seek a reality beyond ourselves, the correct decision or position is often not obvious, and the consequences and implications of a particular decision are frequently unknown. Despite this uncertainty and untidiness, we must, Habgood argues, proceed the best we, especially as scientists, can in connecting our faith with our everyday lives.

## Being a Person

In his book *Being a Person*,<sup>18</sup> Habgood discusses, among other things, what it means to be a person. Personhood clearly has implications for a number of current controversies including abortion and euthanasia. As a clergyman, Habgood has had abundant experience dealing with the realities of illness and death, and the questions that surround those realities. Indeed, there is for Habgood a close connection between our knowledge of God (our theology) and our knowledge of ourselves as persons. Theology is irreducible and personal; it is, like personal knowledge, ultimately unfathomable.<sup>19</sup> So, to Habgood, knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves as persons develop together. The two forms of knowledge are intimately intertwined.

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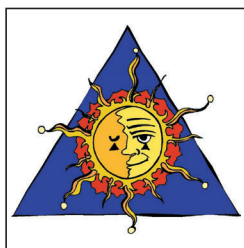
Being a person is defined by our relationships with others and, most importantly, by our relationship with God. These relationships are made possible through the workings of the brain. Language, theory of mind, episodic memory, and a future orientation are just some of the mental abilities that emerge out of a person's brain that make relationships possible.<sup>20</sup> The close relationship between the brain and mind requires, according to Habgood, two kinds of language to describe them: a scientific and analytical third-person account and a more personal first-person account. This difference brings to mind the distinction C. S. Lewis made between looking at a beam of light (third-person, analytical account) and looking along the beam (first-person, experiential account).<sup>21</sup>

Because personhood is so closely connected with our physiological being, it develops gradually as does our mental abilities which are based upon the physical brain. The gradual emergence of personhood has, according to Habgood, implications regarding how we understand and treat individuals whose identity or personhood might be gradually diminishing. Changes in personality and memory, growing or diminishing capacities, or changing relationships with others over the course of a lifetime do not ultimately affect our identity because we are fundamentally who we are because we are held in the mind of God. Despite the apparent diminishment of identity that often comes with decreases in the mental capacities that facilitate our relationship with others, our relationship with God is unchangeable and secure, and it is that relationship, according to Habgood, which is the Christian answer to the problem of identity.<sup>22</sup>

As indicated in the subtitle of *Being a Person*, our approach to and understanding of personhood is a good example of where faith and science meet and how our integration of the two can become untidy and messy. If there is such a close connection between personhood and our physical being, what implications does that have for our understanding of soul and spirit? If personhood is defined by our relationships with others and with God, how is a person changed as a result of neurological diseases such as Alzheimer's and Huntington's which affect so dramatically the ability to relate to others (and to God)? Finally, what are the implications for a Christian understanding of life after death (survival of the soul) if who we are as persons is so closely linked with our physical body? These questions, and many more, emerge from a critical yet honest reading of much of the scientific literature, particularly in the neurosciences and psychology. It is this kind of honest attempt at integration that Habgood has pursued during the course of his career.

## The Concept of Nature

In his most recent book, Habgood provides an extended discussion of nature, that thing which scientists (natural, social, behavioral) study. What do we mean by nature? Is it a purely objective entity or is it a socially constructed concept? Habgood begins by providing three classical definitions of nature.<sup>23</sup> First is nature as the character or quality of something. Second is a more abstract and generalized view that sees nature as a directive or unifying force. Third is the meaning of nature which includes the entire physical world, the whole of physical reality. Given the variety of meanings of the concept of nature, it is perhaps unsurprising that different disciplines have developed each claiming, to various extents, to be scientific. The familiar hierarchy of sciences—with physics, chemistry, and biology making up the lower levels and psychology, sociology, and anthropology comprising the higher levels—reflects this multiple conceptualization of



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nature. It also invites interrelationships and crossovers between the different disciplines. Theology's role here is to remind the sciences of the broader context in which science is conducted and to provide, according to Habgood, "a rationale for the unity and intelligibility of the natural world."<sup>24</sup>

The different levels of scientific disciplines also suggest different levels of complexity. Habgood argues that at the higher levels of complexity, different kinds of explanations might be required because of the emergence of new properties at these higher levels. Levels of explanation appropriate for the sciences at the lower part of the hierarchy may or may not be appropriate for the disciplines at the higher portions of the hierarchy. Reductionistic explanations that are useful and accurate for physics might not work for psychology. We need to be respectful of the uncertainty embedded in the various levels and recognize that there are limitations to what we can know.

Habgood clearly brings a postpositivist view of science to his integration of science and religion. Science, like theology, is a social enterprise; it works, in part, because there is agreement among scientists that the procedures and results of experiments are correct. Another of theology's contributions to the science-religion dialogue, therefore, is to remind scientists that we are not gods and so we will not have a God-like understanding of nature, however one conceptualizes it.

Nature has, according to Habgood, both givenness and potential. There is a sense in which nature is what it is, it cannot be changed. This givenness of nature is reflected in the laws of nature (e.g., the fact that if you jump off the roof of your house, you will drop to the ground). Nature, however, also has potential for change, a potential whose modern form is represented by Darwin and the theory of evolution. There is, to Habgood, an unfolding of creation that is reflected in the biblical understanding of history. There is both hope and promise in biblical history as there is in creation.<sup>25</sup>

The potential found in nature is a reflection of the freedom God gives creation. God lets the world be itself, according to Habgood. He allows it to be free to change, just as he allows humans freedom. Without contingency, there would be no moral signif-

icance because creation would be just the working out of some preordained plan. With contingency, with "God's letting it be," there is the interaction of givenness and potentiality "which makes the world the fascinating, glorious, and tragic place it is."<sup>26</sup>

In a similar manner, our identity as individuals has an element of "God's letting it be," and contingency. Our identity is not given to us in advance, it develops as our relationships to others and to God mature. As part of creation, we share freedom and potentiality with the rest of nature. Nature is a process, not a finished product; it is dynamic and full of potential. Part of that process is freedom to make itself, and the outcome of that freedom can be disorder and suffering. That, however, is the price of the potentiality and freedom God has put into creation.

Seeing the world as God's creation suggests that the Creator can be known by studying his work. Indeed, as Habgood states in *The Concept of Nature*:

There is one reality, but it is a created reality and is therefore capable of disclosing its creator ... all existence is grounded in the reality of God ... All existing things can witness to this ground by the givenness of their existence, in that they are what they are by virtue of their relationship with God."<sup>27</sup>

God, however, cannot ultimately be known through the study of nature. Natural theology, suggests Habgood, will not lead us, on its own, to God. God must be known via some other pathway (e.g., personal experience) before the evidence of nature can point to God. God does, however, express his love through creation. In that respect, the Incarnation, God's entry into time, shows us how God relates to his creation, from the beginning and even now.


## Conclusion

Life is often untidy. Despite all of the work done in recent years to bring science and religion together as dialogue partners, they are sometimes in conflict. But religion is still useful; it is not obsolete. As Christians in science, we must live with this untidiness, because we do not have complete truth or understanding. There appears to be both

order and freedom in creation. Humans are physical beings, yet something special seems to emerge from the material body that cannot quite be explained using scientific methods alone. Science is a powerful way of understanding the physical world, but religion and belief in God have not gone away, despite repeated predictions to the contrary. Untidiness or even tension between science and religion does not mean that one perspective is right and the other wrong. A person can be both an honest scientist and an honest Christian; science and religion can correct and illuminate each other.<sup>28</sup>

The approach to knowledge (scientific or theological) and the integration of faith and learning practiced by John Habgood can be summarized in the following quote in which he talks about integrity.

The word integrity itself has two meanings. The first is "honesty" ... We have to be honest in facing our limitations, in facing the sheer complexity of the world, honest in facing criticism even of things which are deeply precious to us. But integrity also means wholeness, oneness, the desire for single vision, the refusal to split up our minds into separate compartments where incompatible ideas are not allowed to come into contact ... An undivided mind looks in the end for an undivided truth, a oneness at the heart of things. And this isn't just fantasy. The whole intellectual quest, despite its fragmentation, despite its limitations and uncertainties, seems to presuppose that in the end we are all encountering a single reality, and a single truth.<sup>29</sup>

Science is very important in our society. Religion, on the other hand, is seen by many as being irrelevant. If we as believers want to have an impact on secular society, one of the ways we can do this is to try to engage society on issues and in areas that are important to it. Science is one of those areas. Religion does have something to say to science. That does not mean that a Christian will conduct experiments differently than a non-Christian. It does mean, however, that certain Christian doctrines can provide a framework to understand what a scientist—Christian or non-Christian—is studying (that is, nature). Science also has something to say to religion and faith. Believing scientists cannot ignore the evidence of science; it can help shape theological doctrine and belief. John Habgood understands this and has provided many valuable insights into the integration of science and religion in his books, articles, and sermons. His is an approach from which we all can learn. 

#### Acknowledgment

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 84–5.
- <sup>2</sup>John Munsey Turner, "Profile: John Habgood," *Epworth Review* 23, no. 1 (1996): 18–27.
- <sup>3</sup>John Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), 27.
- <sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.
- <sup>5</sup>John Habgood, *The Concept of Nature* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), 18.
- <sup>6</sup>Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 113.
- <sup>7</sup>John Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, 37.
- <sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 39.
- <sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>10</sup>John Habgood, *A Working Faith* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), ix.
- <sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.
- <sup>12</sup>Alister Hardy, *The Divine Flame* (London: Collins, 1966), 27.
- <sup>13</sup>David Hay, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Fount, 1998).
- <sup>14</sup>Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili, *Why God Won't Go Away* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).
- <sup>15</sup>The Commission on Children at Risk, *Hardwired to Connect: A New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2003), 31–2.
- <sup>16</sup>John Habgood, *A Working Faith*, 190.
- <sup>17</sup>John Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal* (London: SPCK, 1988), 93.
- <sup>18</sup>John Habgood, *Being a Person: Where Faith and Science Meet* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998).
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 218.
- <sup>20</sup>Warren S. Brown, "Cognitive Contributions to Soul," in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 99–125.
- <sup>21</sup>C. S. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed," in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 212–5.
- <sup>22</sup>John Habgood, *Being a Person: Where Faith and Science Meet*, 227.
- <sup>23</sup>John Habgood, *The Concept of Nature*, 3.
- <sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 144.
- <sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 151.
- <sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 163.
- <sup>28</sup>John Habgood, *Religion and Science* (London: Mills & Boon, 1964), 151.
- <sup>29</sup>John Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal*, 95.

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