

Review of David Bartholomew

God of Chance

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Bartholomew presents the Christian God of power and might as a risk taker allowing his creation to unfold freely, albeit ever within his overall providential loving care at all stages of emergence and development. He first deals with Monod's classic work *Chance and Necessity* by exposing his underlying fallacy as if chance were inherently antithetical to theism. Then Bartholomew systematically challenges most traditional *theistic* forms of determinism and neo-determinism which, despite standard theological accounts, do not accurately represent the essentials of Christianity regarding God's action in the world. Although marginalized today, St. Thomas Aquinas maintained that "it would be inconsistent with divine providence if all things happened of necessity [or]... if there were no luck or chance in the world". [1] According to Bartholomew, then, unless chance is a **real** and essential ingredient of the cosmos, rather than (*contra* Einstein et al) an illusory expression of human ignorance, God's creation would be akin to a sterile charade; so too human free will. In stark contrast with Monod's atheistic expectation that life would be extremely improbable, even virtually impossible, for a randomly emergent and open-ended universe, Bartholomew concurs with Eigen that the evolution of life is inevitable if chance is *appropriately* guided (p.36). Even if God *could* directly control every single event in the universe, Bartholomew's "God of Chance" elects to steer and guide its progress using looser reins exemplified by genetic mutations and far-from equilibrium states (Prigogine) which occasionally activate latent potentialities embedded all throughout creation. In contrast with *individual* activity (distribution of atomic electrons, gas molecules, spermatozoa, iron filings etc.) it is **populations cum aggregates** that behave in accordance with the descriptive laws of divine providence whether on the micro or the macro scale. Thus, while individual sub-atomic events, for example, may "act" quite randomly, the resulting aggregates evidently behave in a highly predictable fashion in conformity with a **range** prescribed by Providence. Similar limiting principles

manifesting **order out of chaos** are seen to be operative on the macro level as well, including the domain of social behavior.

In search of "causal roots" for freedom with respect to human action, Bartholomew analyzes traditional positions of determinism as well as neo-determinism associated with Pollard, MacKay, Geach et al finding that all these fail to provide adequate grounds for **genuine** freedom concerning human activity. In general, "bottom up" approaches based upon lower-level randomness would be quite insufficient to account for human free will. For this, Bartholomew prefers a "top down" approach (p. 135), like Peacocke, whereby God could exert providential steering by means of his spirit in subtle communion with his creation. Indeed, such influence might be extended to include *non-locality*, once considered too spooky for Einstein. Bartholomew then develops his argument further for "using" chance to facilitate genuine freedom within our real and emergent universe by discussing theological issues. He argues that to be ultimately meaningful and authentic, the incarnation, redemption, and eschatology in general must entail risk as exhibited by a real *vulnerability to failure*. Overall, then, Bartholomew has identified room for a variety of stochastic activity available at several different levels functioning effectively as special "protected" domains where pure chance reigns, albeit ever subject to supervening providential guidance akin to an engaging force field of "love" eschewing direct control.

Absent *direct* causal linkages, then, within these free-range domains, Bartholomew nevertheless elects not to entertain *a-causal* accounts for random activity taken as chance behavior operating within these free-range domains. While such events may nevertheless be *described* as **a-causal** activity, he is quite aware of the human tendency to erroneously ascribe **agency** thereto. For example, it would be incorrect to ascribe **purpose** to chance if chance were construed as a *quasi-personified causal* agent akin to Tyche or Fortuna (p. 114). Apart from expressing caution against possibly committing a similar category error with respect to *a-causality*, Bartholomew's evident reluctance (p. 115) to construe these events as "a-causal" might reflect his deeper concern that alleged *a-causality*, if deemed *unrestricted*, could conceivably elude providential guidance

altogether; perhaps reverting to an intolerable state of utter chaos. Nevertheless, in accordance with his own theology of chance, it should quite suffice to "leave things to chance" without requiring God to "bother with a host of details" (p. 128). So, for Bartholomew, all restricted domains of pure chance remain incorporated and interconnected, if somewhat paradoxically, within the general scope of divine providence albeit each exempted from direct or immediate control concerning particulars. While randomness is real and necessary, as Monod also maintained, in and of itself randomness remains insufficient to account for the emergent outcome.

Bartholomew identifies Providence as the missing link.

In essence then Bartholomew has systematically prepared a case why, absent proper guidance, determinism in all its guises would be inappropriate and inadequate to account for the results of activity occurring within free-range domains. His God of Chance is a risk taker allowing the universe to unfold rather as it will, albeit within a network of carefully prescribed bounds. What is proposed as true for the sub-atomic "bottom up" realm would apply in spades in the "top down" realm of human freedom. However, providence continually guides events generally without exerting **direct** control or by constraining the particulars. Thus, detectible and highly predictable law-like regularities that express aggregate behavior would in no wise delimit the freedom of individual action whether of particles or persons. On the contrary, this very **real** uncertainty and indeterminism embedded throughout the universe is actually intended by God (p.36). This state of affairs would more richly and truly reflect the subtle stochastic character of this universe just as actually provided and endowed by the God of Chance. Of course we can barely glimpse this risk-taking eternal Spirit who, despite what is often *experienced* as evil and suffering, is ever eager to "respond to the consequences of human initiative" (Schilling, p. 10) in order to achieve his ultimate, if hidden, purposes for the infinite benefit of all concerned. In contrast then with traditional notions of rigid control, Bartholomew offers us a "God of Chance" who creates, sustains and guides the unfolding universe with omniscient loving kindness. This God who moves mysteriously and generously by using the art of persuasion laced

with the hidden force of love is entirely consistent with the truth expressed by enlightened Christianity. While unfathomable to unaided human reason, deeper understanding may commence with an abiding belief that this "God of Chance" is truly in charge and is continually working out his purposes in subtle communion with his creation.

[1] p. 124, citing *Summa Contra Gentiles* III chapter 74.

David J. **Bartholomew**, *God of Chance*, (London, SCM Press, 1984).

Manfred **Eigen** and Ruthild Winkler, *Laws of the Game*, (Penguin 1982); *Das Spiel: Naturgesetze steuern den Zufall* (Piper, Munich, 1975).

A. R. **Peacocke**, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1979).

Ilya **Prigogine**, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York, Free Press, 1997). "What is now emerging is an *intermediate* description that lies somewhere between the two alienating images of a deterministic world and an arbitrary world of pure chance (p.189); G. Nicolis and I. Prigogine, *Self Organization in a Non-equilibrium Systems*, (New York, Wiley-Interscience, 1977).

S. Paul **Schilling**, "Chance and Order in Science and Theology" *Theology Today*, vol 47, No 4, January 1991.

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