

## **THEOLOGY AND HONESTY**

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**By James A. Haught**

**My far-flung family is quite diverse. Dr. John F. Haught is a renowned Catholic theologian who has produced a flood of erudite books. A Haught woman in the Southwest wrote several lurid sex novels. And I've churned out a string of skeptic-agnostic books and magazine essays. I once sent both of my relatives a joint note saying our collective writing "shows there are holy Haughts, heathen Haughts and horny Haughts." Neither answered.**

**Well, Dr. Haught is highly esteemed as a pinnacle of "sophisticated" theology, a penetrating thinker who probes the divine through abstruse logic beyond the grasp of average folks. His writings carry weight in the most prestigious journals. But when I try to follow his messages, they seem goofy.**

**Lately, he has attempted to prove that survival-of-the-fittest evolution presents a "grand drama" orchestrated by God. All the ruthless slaughter of prey by predators, all the mass starvation of desperate victims who lose their food supply, even the extinction of 99 percent of all species that ever lived - are part of "an evolutionary drama that has been aroused, though not coercively driven, by a God of infinite love," he wrote in The Washington Post. (1)**

**He added: "Darwin's ragged portrait of life is not so distressing after all. Theologically understood, biological evolution is part of an immense cosmic journey into the incomprehensible mystery of God."**

**Got that? God is incomprehensible - yet theology is sure his "infinite love" spawned nature's slaughterhouse of foxes ripping rabbits apart, sharks gashing seals, pythons crushing pigs and the rest of the "grand drama of life."**

**What evidence supports this peculiar conclusion? None - just trust theology.**

**More recently, Dr. Haught asserted that "critical intelligence" is woven into the universe, not merely in humans. (2) Again, no evidence is offered.**

**I've decided that there is no such thing as sophisticated theology. Abstruse concepts - for example, "process theology," which declares that God is evolving, nurtured by human responses to him - are just mental houses of cards built by over-thinkers.**

**At bottom, the issue is simple: Either supernatural spirits exist, or they don't. Either heavens, hells, gods, devils, saviors, miracles and the rest are real, or they're concoctions of the human imagination.**

**It boils down to honesty: A truthful person shouldn't claim to know things he or she doesn't know. Theologians are in the business of declaring "truths" that**

nobody possibly could prove. They do so without evidence. In contrast, an honest individual admits: I don't know.

Years ago, as a young newspaper reporter, I encountered theology when I covered the heresy trial of Episcopal Bishop James Pike of California. Actually, it was a pre-trial. Heresy charges had been lodged against him because he doubted the miraculous Virgin Birth, the miraculous Incarnation of God into Jesus, the mystical Trinity, etc. The National House of Bishops met at Wheeling, West Virginia, in 1966 to weigh the charges. During the session, Pike mostly hung out with us newshounds, making wisecracks - not debating holy gobbledygook with fellow bishops. In the end, the church waffled. Pike was censured and charges were sidelined without a heresy inquisition. I guess the bishops didn't want to be laughingstocks in a replay of something akin to the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial.

Around America, lofty universities pay handsome salaries to theologians who publish grand treatises on the nature of God - although they have no more proof than did the Aztec priests who said the sun would vanish if they stopped sacrificing human victims to an invisible feathered serpent.

One big-time university theologian came from my city, Charleston, West Virginia. Dr. Thomas Jonathan Jackson Altizer - named for his ancestor, General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, who fought for slavery in the Civil War - caused a ruckus when he spawned "God is dead" theology.

Dr. Altizer wrote some things that seemed logical to me: "Every man today who is open to experience knows that God is absent," he said in "The Gospel of Christian Atheism." That's true enough. God seems absent, as far as any rational observer can tell.

However, Altizer concocted a bizarre scenario: God formerly existed and created the universe, he said - but God decided to terminate himself by entering into Jesus, then dying on a cross and ceasing to exist. Hence, God is dead.

This peculiar theology caused a storm in the 1960s. Fundamentalists raged. Time magazine wrote cover stories. Dr. Altizer received Christian hate mail and death threats. Today, he's retired in Pennsylvania, occasionally giving theology lectures.

Well, his theology is interesting - like that of the Aztecs and their invisible feathered serpent. But I figure they both have little to do with reality.

Thomas Jefferson refused to let theology be taught at his new University of Virginia. He considered theological assertions to be "unintelligible abstractions... absolutely beyond the comprehension of the human mind." (3) He ridiculed the Trinity concept "that three are one, and one is three; and yet that the one is not three, and the three are not one." (4)

Edgar Allan Poe wrote: "After reading all that has been written, and after thinking all that can be thought, on the topics of God and the soul, the man who has a right to say that he thinks at all will find himself face to face with the conclusion that, on these topics, the most profound thought is that which can be the least easily distinguished from the most superficial sentiment." (5)

**Ambrose Bierce wrote: "Theology is a thing of unreason altogether, an edifice of assumption and dreams, a superstructure without a substructure." (6)**

**Legendary newspaperman H.L. Mencken wrote: "There is no possibility whatsoever of reconciling science and theology, at least in Christendom. Either Jesus rose from the dead or he didn't. If he did, then Christianity becomes plausible; if he did not, then it is sheer nonsense." (7)**

**Of course, like every human phenomenon, religion should be studied by sociologists and psychologists. But theology itself consists of assertions about spirits. I can't imagine why universities consider it a worthy field of scholarship.**

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- 1. John Haught: Washington Post, On Faith, Dec. 2, 2009**
- 2. John Haught: "Death" essay posted on Paying Attention to the Sky, March 10, 2011**
- 3. Jefferson: Letter to Archibald Cary, 1816**
- 4. Jefferson: Letter to John Adams, Aug. 22, 1813**
- 5. Poe: Marginalia, 1844-49**
- 6. Bierce: Collected Works, 1912**
- 7. Mencken: Minority Report, 1956**