



Science and Soul

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Charles Birch

U.N.S.W Press.

Charles Birch is an 89 year Australian biologist and theologian with established credentials who has lectured and written widely and whose broad aim is to bring together a deeper understanding of both religion and science.

The first part of the book contains brief pen-portraits of those who have shaped his thinking over the years, including those theological giants Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr (do students, does anyone, read them now?)

The second part outlines Birch's philosophy of life under the twin headings of pansubjectivism and panentheism which, when teased out, offer a more gentle and ecological way of looking at the world.

The author describes how our world and universe is made up of entities from humans right down to elementary particles (quarks, atoms etc.) which are not 'bits of stuff like billiardballs' cannoning off one another but moments of experience which rapidly succeed one another. These entities, even tiny particles like atoms, have a 'mentality', or at least a potentiality for mentality; they are not mere objects but are 'mind stuff' which fills the whole universe. This 'mind stuff' also has the potential to become something different as its environment changes and as it relates to other entities — hydrogen atoms relate to oxygen atoms forming water (H₂O). The world is not a giant machine with God the chief mechanic adjusting the nuts and bolts from somewhere outside the machine. God is in the world but is not to be identified with it (Pantheism). Birch is making the point that we need to see and experience the world from a more subjective, 'feeling' position, to give it value for what it is and not just for what it can give to us. In Shakespeare's King Lear the King asks the Duke of Gloucester who is blind how he sees the world. Gloucester replies, "I see it feelingly". Or as Julie Andrews expressed it, "The World is Alive with the Sound of Music".

In the final section of the book Birch suggests how this view of the world contributes to our understanding of God and how God acts in the world.

God is persuasive, not coercive.

Everything in the world from the smallest particle right through to humans has a degree of freedom and autonomy. Nothing is programmed nor is it robotic. So it is with God. God is not responsible for tragic events like floods or earthquakes. Intelligent or Divine design is misleading because it eliminates freedom.

God acts from within creation and is not external to it. God is not an external force imposing a divine will on the world.

As a fisherman entices a fish with a lure, so God 'lures' us to add value to the world in both our public and private lives. God is the gentle persuader who gives the freedom to choose. Conflict is therefore inevitable — it is part of creation.

God 'feels' with the world and thereby saves it.

Our feelings — of joy, suffering, serenity and pain — are like tributaries which flow into one great river of feeling, the divine life. God reacts to the world, suffering or rejoicing with it, as it is created moment to moment.

God's nature is not fixed for all time but is changed from day to day by new events and experiences.

God today is different from the God of all our yesterdays, e.g. the Big Bang, and shares with all his creatures the whole process of creativity.

Whether God's presence in the world as set out by Birch refers to an actual reality, or whether God is a myth or metaphor or symbol for the total ongoing creative process — "God making the world make itself" (Chas Kingsley) — is a matter for each person to decide. Either way, panentheistic views have had a long and illustrious following and Birch's case deserves a hearing.

A question remains. If God is everywhere and fills the world do we now need institutional religion and an institutional church? And we certainly don't need an official religion, in both cases they tend to stifle the freedom to think for ourselves. The centre of gravity for religion is changing, it is slowly but inevitably 'going global', looking for a common set of values which are centred on the future welfare of the earth. That is the arena where people live their lives and where they participate in the life of God. That is where we all share the mystery and wonder of life and where we can all celebrate that life with one united voice — "Yes!"



The future religious quest will therefore locate itself in smaller, open, more diverse groupings concerned to re-evaluate all areas of human and natural life. **A reconstructed religious platform from which to do this is slowly but surely being laid.**

Alan Goss, Napier

“While *pantheism* asserts that God and the universe are coextensive, *panentheism* claims that God is greater than the universe and that the universe is contained within God. Panentheism holds that God is the ‘supreme affect and effect’ of the universe.”
Wikipedia