

Chaos, Complexity and Theology

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What are some of the thoughts that occur to a theologian who reads about the new sciences of chaos and complexity? The formal scientific study of chaos and complexity has arrived so recently that very little attention has been devoted so far to their possible theological implications. In this essay, however, I shall propose that the picture of nature now taking shape as a result of reflection on the phenomena of chaos and complexity may be of considerable significance for the theological enterprise.

There is always the question, of course, whether any new scientific developments have lasting theological relevance. A large number of theologians, in fact, find conversations with scientists quite immaterial. The natural world is still not a central theme in most contemporary religious thought, and our departments and schools of theology have not often made knowledge of ecology or cosmology an essential ingredient of their curricula.

In the modern period, after a disastrous flirtation with Newtonian thought, theology all too willingly handed over to science the task of understanding the natural world and left to itself the job of interpreting the more elusive realms of human existence, freedom and history. By compartmentalizing things in this fashion, however, theology made itself largely irrelevant to our understanding of the cosmos—which is, after all, the encompassing context of our existence, our freedom and our history.¹

At the same time, this divorce impoverished theology. For new developments in science and cosmology can always bring a fresh perspective to our understanding of biblical faith. This has already proven to be the case with evolutionary science, general relativity and big bang cosmology. Today, however, theology also has much to learn from the so-called sciences of chaos and complexity. Although the studies surrounding these notions are still in the process of formation, there is nevertheless sufficient reason for theology to begin inquiring about their significance for our interpretation of the whole of reality.