

Essays in honor of Christopher Southgate: Introduction

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Abstract: This article is an introduction to the special issue of *Zygon* in honor of Christopher Southgate. Over the years he has made many significant contributions to the field of science and religion, and contributors have gathered to celebrate him on his 65th birthday. [This introduction includes some biographical background and an outline of the issue's contents.](#)

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The articles in this special issue of *Zygon* have been written in honor of Christopher Southgate for the occasion of his 65th birthday. As editors of this festschrift we warmly thank the contributors for the quality and variety of their essays (and, in one case, poetry). It is testament to the high regard in which Southgate is held within the science-and-religion community, and beyond, that so many distinguished scholars proved willing take up our invitation to reflect on and respond to his work.

Christopher Southgate was born in September 1953. He read Natural Sciences at Cambridge, and went on to do a PhD there on phosphonomethyl analogues of biological acyl phosphates under Hal Dixon, a pioneer in protein chemistry. Southgate's postdoctoral work with R.V. Wolfenden at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill included studies of the correlation between the hydrophobicity of amino acids and the genetic code. After further postdoctoral work on analgesics at Bath University he was for nine years a house-husband.

During this time he began to publish his poetry in magazines and books, and undertook three years' theological training on the South West Ministry Training Course.

Following this theological and pastoral training Southgate became a lay chaplain at the University of Exeter and it was during this period that he was invited to teach the science-religion debate for the Department of Theology at Exeter. He continued this teaching on an adjunct basis for many years, during which he published poetry and also contributed academic articles on evolutionary theodicy and ecotheology. In the late 1990s Southgate brought together a team of British scholars to edit the textbook *God, Humanity and the Cosmos* (1999; 2005; 2011).

Southgate's *The Groaning of Creation* (WJK 2008) continues to be seminal in the discussion of the problem of suffering in non-human creation. Indeed, many of the essays in this festschrift reflect the continuing influence of his work on suffering in an evolutionary context. Southgate was also part of the Exeter project in environmental hermeneutics, leading to the monograph *Greening Paul* (Baylor 2010) and the edited volume *Ecological Hermeneutics* (2010). Another project he led was a program of interdisciplinary research as part of the STARS (Science and Transcendence Advanced Research Series) initiative of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley. That work continues in the project 'Cooperation and Interpretation in the Emergence of Life', a scientific project with one of us (Robinson) and colleagues at Portland State and Arizona State Universities, funded by the John Templeton Foundation. Hence Southgate's scientific research has come full-circle from his early career in research biochemistry, which he originally hoped might lead to work in the origin-of-life field, through his theological reflections on Darwinian evolution, back to a philosophically-informed scientific project on life's emergence.

In recent years Southgate has moved his focus of theological interest from theodicy to the study of divine glory, leading to the 2014 Sarum Lectures and the monograph *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing* (2018). Southgate's current projects include 'How Can Congregations be Helped in Times of Tragedy', a collaborative exercise in the practical theology of trauma funded by the Templeton World Charities Foundation Inc. From 2001 to 2017 Southgate taught for the South West Ministry Training Course, becoming Principal in 2013. He is a Fellow of the International Society for Science and Religion, and serves on the Advisory Board of *Zygon*, the Committee of the UK Science and Religion Forum, and the Advisory Group for the Science, Technology and Religion Program at the American Academy of Religion.

Alongside his theological and scientific work, Southgate continues to publish and teach workshops and retreats on poetry, leading most recently to the collection *Rain Falling by the River: New and Selected Poems of the Spirit* (2017). Previous volumes of his poetry include *A Love and its Sounding* (1997, a verse biography of T.S. Eliot), *Beyond the Bitter Wind* (2000), *Easing the Gravity Field: Poems of Science and Love* (2006), and *A Gash in the Darkness* (2012). These titles alone speak something of the remarkable combination of deep humanity and scientific perspicacity that characterize Southgate's work, appreciation of which is repeatedly expressed in the essays in this collection.

The articles in this issue primarily address two themes: evolutionary theodicy and pedagogy in science and religion. The first eleven contributions, from Denis Edwards through to Ernst Conradie, are all attempts to respond to or expand upon Southgate's seminal work in theological explorations of the goodness of God in a world filled with natural disvalues. The articles fall into two major theological categories: those who, like Southgate, see the evolutionary process as part of the work of a benevolent God, albeit with many

ambiguous outcomes, and those who see the violence and suffering in the evolutionary process as evidence that the entire evolutionary process is fallen. The first eight contributions, from Denis Edwards, Ted Peters, Robert Russell, Bethany Sollereeder, Holmes Rolston III, Ernst Conradie, Steven Knapp and Philip Clayton, and John Haught all take the former position. The contributions from Celia Deane-Drummond, Nicola Hoggard Creegan, and Neil Messer all critique Southgate's underlying assumption and embrace positions that Southgate terms "mysterious fallenness".

The final four articles, from Tim Gibson through to Louise Hickman, are papers on Southgate's pedagogical activity. Tim Gibson and Louise Hickman reflect on what it was like to sit in Southgate's classes at the University of Exeter. Willem Drees evaluates the contribution of the Southgate's edited textbook for science and religion, *God, Humanity and the Cosmos* (1999, 2011) which has run into a third edition. Christopher Corbally and Margaret Rappaport explore Southgate's pedagogical strategies in publishing, in class, and in collaboration.

In between these two longer sections are three papers that deal with other aspects of Southgate's work. John Hedley Brooke analyzes the use of myth and the activity of myth-busting in historical work. Andrew Robinson writes of his collaborative work with Southgate on the Creative Mutual Interaction between the science of the origin of life and the theology of the Trinity. Margaret Rappaport and Christopher Corbally use Southgate's poetry as a source of theological reflection, showing its importance to interpreting the wider themes of his work. Cutting through the middle of all these prose pieces, offering a break in the middle of the issue, we are very glad to include a poetic caesura in the form of a sonnet by Richard Skinner dedicated to Southgate.

The final contribution is a response from Christopher Southgate himself to the gathered articles. We are extremely grateful for his typically insightful and generous

response. It demonstrates, in both style and content, the quality of mind and heart that have been so widely recognized in the community of science and religion scholars; a recognition that made so many colleagues and students eager to contribute to this special issue. So we, as an editorial team and on behalf of the contributors, wish you, Chris, a very Happy 65th Birthday.

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