

SECTION 4 – THE APPLICATION

Chapter 11 – What difference does it make, anyway?

*Glad that I live am I;
That the sky is blue;
Glad for the country lanes,
And the fall of dew.*

*After the sun the rain,
After the rain the sun;
This is the way of life,
Till the work be done.*

*All that we need to do,
Be we low or high,
Is to see that we grow
Nearer the sky.*

Lizette Woodworth Reese¹

Beliefs have consequences

Beliefs, of course, do not exist in a vacuum but inevitably have consequences. They make up the mind-sets that inform worldviews. Worldviews, as is now pretty widely known, are the narratives that more or less unconsciously shape our lives. That, of course, was why Deuteronomy enjoined that Israelites should become *immersed* in their *torah* in a world whose prevailing value system was very different to God's:

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the Lord swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.²

The faithful Israelite was, then, essentially someone whose worldview was moulded by *torah*. In the same way, when Luke lays out the priorities of the members of the new Church in Acts, the formation of a thoroughly Christian worldview (in the face of unconverted Judaism in the first place and Gentile paganism and philosophy later) was central:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.³

¹ Woodworth Reese, Lizette, *A Little Song of Life* (in *A Handful of Lavender*, Boston and New York, 1891).

² Deut. 11.18-21

³ Acts 2.42.

When beliefs involve such a core doctrine of Christianity as creation, they cannot fail to affect the life of the believer – and on the larger scale, of the Church – profoundly. It makes a huge difference whether one believes the “traditional view” that the natural Creation is fallen and corrupted or whether, as I have argued in this book, it retains the same “goodness” that was accorded it by God in the beginning. It makes far less difference if that beginning was just a few thousand years ago, or back in deep time long before there were humans to lapse into sin, than whether it is “very good” now.

What you do not love, you will not value, and if God values not only “Nature”, as an abstract concept, but each creature, to the extent that “*not one sparrow is forgotten by God*”⁴, there is a mismatch of values if we love them any less.

*How many are your works, O Lord!
In wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.*⁵

In practice, the goodness of the natural Creation has seldom been denied outright within orthodox Christianity, but instead has been relativized by the stultifying assumption that it isn't really as it should be. This leads to a kind of dampening of the natural human sense of the beauty and glory of the world, an unspoken conditional upon every experience we may have of it.

We saw this earlier in the book in such quotes as that of Spurgeon: “*Creation glows with a thousand beauties... yet...;* or of Wesley: “[H]ow little shadow of good, of gratitude, of benevolence, of any right temper, is now to be found in any part of the brute creation!” Have you ever been told, “I love you, but...”? That conditional “but” makes all the difference between ecstasy and misery.

In contrast, there sometimes has been a recognition that we should see more goodness, not less, in the world the closer we come to God's way of seeing. For 150 years Evangelicals have sung the words of the Irish Congregational minister, George Wade Robinson:

*Heaven above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green;
Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen:
Birds with gladder songs o'erflow,
Flow'rs with deeper beauties shine,
Since I know, as now I know,
I am His, and He is mine.*⁶

This seems to be, for many people, one of those risky hymns to sing, since the secular nature-lover is often taught to doubt the goodness of Creation, not exult in it, after coming to Christ. But surely Robinson's words must be taken as a true expression of spiritual insight, rather than as a Christian version of the hyperbolic sentimentalism of secular songs about falling in love:

⁴ Lk. 12.6.

⁵ Ps. 104.24.

⁶ Robinson, George Wade (1838-1877), *Loved with everlasting love*.

*There were angels dancing at the Ritz
And a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square⁷*

However true the true love may be, there are no nightingales in Berkeley Square, and any angels at the Ritz keep a pretty low profile. But it is no hyperbole to say that *“the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”*⁸ It should be affirmed more often, and unreservedly, than it is.

Joy in Creation

The sheer sense of *joy* in natural things is, perhaps, the first thing to be restored when the idea of their fallenness is seen as the unbiblical fiction it is. To be able to look, at one extreme, at the Milky Way arching across a winter sky and, at the other, at any small creature poking its head out from under a log and to say, without conscious or unconscious reservation, “My Father made that!” is restorative of the human spirit. We are beginning once again to see things as God does.

Whether ones fear of doing so stems from a theological teaching that nature fell with Adam and Eve, or from one of the more modern notions that God made matter and evolution autonomous so that its corruption derives from the very business of creation, is immaterial. The witness of Scripture and traditional Christian theology, and the instinctive and natural appeal of our hearts, is that it is suffused with God’s wisdom and goodness.

*Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*You have set your glory
in the heavens.
Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.*

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?⁹*

One of those who seems most to have apprehended the importance of this sense of joy is the Anglican clergyman and metaphysical poet Thomas Traherne (1636-1674), whom I mentioned in Chapter 6. He specifically set out to discover the joy promised in Christian faith, and found it by remembering and devotionally refocusing his (natural) childhood delight in the created order.

He saw that the Creation stemmed (paradoxically, it may seem) from God’s insatiable *desire* to spread his love beyond himself into everything he made. In particular Traherne perceived that, in making Adam the focus and culmination of his work, the whole cosmos was a gift for one man, and

⁷ Maschwitz, Eric, *A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square* (1939).

⁸ Ps 19.1.

⁹ Ps. 8.1-4.

was intended to stir up the same sense of joyful desire. This burning desire was not *for* what was created (which would be idolatry), but *through* its rich variety, its goodness, and its being freely *given*, to desire the God who made it and gave it.

Traherne reasoned that the gift of Creation was not in any way diminished or divided by the subsequent increase in the human race, but that God has given the whole of Creation to each one of us. The sense of joy and desire for God that Creation can give us is therefore no less than it could be for Adam. From this primary, and overwhelming, sense of natural joy stems a due sense of all the other truths of Christianity, whether that be love for our fellow men – each of whom shares the creational privileges of Adam – or even central theological matters like sin:

*Till you see that the world is yours, you cannot weigh the greatness of sin, nor the misery of your fall, nor prize your redeemer's love. One would think these should be motives sufficient to stir us up to the contemplation of God's works, wherein all the riches of His Kingdom will appear. For the greatness of sin proceedeth from the greatness of His love whom we have offended, from the greatness of those obligations which were laid upon us, from the great blessedness and glory of the estate wherein we were placed, none of which can be seen, till Truth is seen, a great part of which is, that the World is ours. So that indeed the knowledge of this is the very real light, wherein all mysteries are evidenced to us.*¹⁰

A high view of Creation, then, is the key to a fuller appreciation of salvation teaching. This is thrown into relief when one considers the effect of its opposite. The reverse of joy is misery or despair, and if that is the settled state of the world around me, then I am not much to be blamed for taking on its faults and griefs *before* conversion (so much for original sin) but even afterwards. If God himself is miserable about his world, what right have I to rejoice in it? What is more, if God cared so little about our existence that he left the world to evolve autonomously, contingently and even viciously, there is little motive for contrition on my part, and rather more for the questioning of his goodness that appears so prevalent today.

If I have any hope of relief from the deplorable state of things, it must be in some other world, at some other time on the other side of the evil of death. The love of God is not to be seen in the “softer blues and sweeter greens” of the hymn, which are likely rather to be dangerous snares of Satan to “worldliness”, but only in what filters down, through the fog of earthly corruption, from heaven.

If in this way I give up on the present Creation (to whatever extent I buy into the idea), I will see my relationship with God not as a deepening of my bond with his cosmos, but as a divorce from it. Several things follow from this, and the first is in the sphere of *thanksgiving*.

Thanksgiving for Creation

Giving thanks to God is, self-evidently, directly proportional both to the degree to which you believe things come from him, and the degree to which you believe them to be good. Scripture is unequivocal in affirming the universality of both:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

¹⁰ Traherne, Thomas, *Centuries of Meditations*, New York: Cosimo Classics 2007 2/3, p.80.

*How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
'Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?'
'Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?'
For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory for ever! Amen.¹¹*

Now Paul's doxology is in the context of the mysterious, even disturbing, outworking of God's providence in salvation history. All, though, is from God. But it is virtually axiomatic of the material things in the world:

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.¹²

Paul is either referring to Jewish food laws (superseded in Christ) or to abstention from food which may have been offered to idols (points of conscience for Jews and ex-pagans alike), but the basis of his open attitude is the fundamental doctrine of Creation: everything God created is (not *was once*) good, and is to be accepted as such with thanksgiving. Abstention from what God has made, on the grounds of some kind of intrinsic evil associated with it, would appear to be taught not by God, but by demons.

This surely applies to more than just what we eat and drink – though it's hard to see how we can give very sincere thanks even for that, if we believe it either to be corrupted by sin or the product of a mindless (and flawed) evolution.

What's your favourite food? How can I truly give thanks to God for, say, fresh salmon if I believe the diet of herring and krill that imparts its flavour (and colour) is the result of its disobedience to a creation ordinance to eat only vegetables? Or if I believe that its spawning activity is a test-case for the wastefulness and cruelty of an evolution that it would be blasphemous to attribute to God? In that case is it not really blasphemy to say grace before meals?

Or who is the love of your life? Can you *really* give thanks to the Lord for the line of his manly chin or the graceful curve of her neck if both alike are signs of the poor design of the jaw and the human spine respectively? Are you going to thank God for the fruit of the womb when, according to some calling themselves believers, the whole human reproductive tract is a botched design?

How can you be grateful for any beautiful countryside scene you love and remember, when you can be quite certain that it would not exist but for the interplay of predation, parasitism and sheer misfortune that (you believe) wouldn't exist but for the sin of Adam? Or else that God did not plan

¹¹ Rom. 11.33-36.

¹² 1 Tim. 4.1-5.

those exquisite details at all, but just made them possible. Are you going to thank God for the weather if he does not control it? Or for the beauty of clouds if it is fortuitous?

Evolutionary ingratitude is, as far as I can see, even more pernicious than Fundamentalist belief in natural evil from the Fall. For God is, both by the preferred science of undirected Darwinian processes and on the principle of distancing him from all that suffering, almost infinitely removed from the actual things for which we want to thank him.

In my house we have a standing joke (the result of our strange sense of humour, I'm afraid) that whichever of us is thanked for cooking the meal replies, "No – thank Tesco!"¹³ Behind the quip are some garbled ideas about how big business seems to replace the Lord of the harvest in most people's minds nowadays as the source of food, and also about the absurdity of displacing ones thanksgiving away from the particular to some distant entity with no knowledge of our existence, let alone any real interest in or care for the details of our cuisine.

One can give intellectual assent to the Deist God as First Cause, but one cannot thank him as a Father for the individual gifts that life affords. The man with an *iPhone* app for ordering birthday gift vouchers from *Amazon.com* automatically is not in any way comparable to the one who makes your present himself in his workshop. Yet James teaches:

*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*¹⁴

If belief in natural evil makes us hesitant in our thanksgiving for natural gifts that bless us, we will certainly not see adversity as part of his good provision for us. And yet this kind of thanksgiving was instilled into new believers in the early Church, based, of course, on the Creation doctrine that God remains sovereign over all things for our good, including even the "powers and principalities" that might threaten our wellbeing.

The *Didache*, possibly dating from the mid first century, says:

*Accept as good whatever experience comes your way, in the knowledge that nothing can happen without God.*¹⁵

A significant part of their experience, at that period, would be persecution by the authorities – let alone the common hazards of poverty and early death from infectious disease. It's quite impossible to follow that advice to "give thanks in all circumstances"¹⁶ if one believes that natural events "just happen" beyond the providential hand of God, or else that they are signs of nature in revolt against God. In the same way Paul's words become nonsensical:

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*¹⁷

¹³ For non-Brits, Tesco is the largest Supermarket chain over here.

¹⁴ Jas. 1.17.

¹⁵ *Didache*, 3.

¹⁶ I Thess. 5.18.

¹⁷ Rom. 8.28.

God cannot work *for good* in all things unless he *works* in all things (“all things” in the passage being specifically applied to everything in all creation). And if he is, indeed, working in all things created, they are his servants for our good, and worthy of thanksgiving. The basic Christian prayer of thanksgiving, then, depends on belief in the goodness of God’s Creation, or suffers the death of a thousand qualifications.

Prayer within Creation

Since thanksgiving, when considered, requires the Creation to be fully obedient to God’s purpose for it, then the very same applies to prayer, on similar grounds. If nature is in revolt against God, is it going to be any more submissive to him because we pray to him? If we pray for the bane of disease to be turned to the blessing of health, are we (in fact) asking God to pit his strength to *oppose* his own creature (the bacteria or whatever), or are we asking him to command his servants to spare us? If we cry out in distress from a ship foundering in a storm, are we whistling in the wind because storms are “just a natural phenomenon”?

Some theistic evolutionists object to God’s “interventions” on the grounds that God could not pit himself against his own works without being self-contradictory (though more often they’re thinking about evolution, and are sketchy on whether the same strictures apply to prayer). They have a valid point, but if they imply that, therefore, God does not act in his world, then they are denying the massive weight of biblical testimony to the contrary and, effectively, denying prayer to have any more than psychological effects. In the sinking ship, or in my hospital bed, I am not asking to accept that nature will continue as normal and for me to realise that my demise is in line with God’s eternal will (though a good number of Christians nowadays would deny even that), but to be saved. One does not need prayer in order to be fatalistic – a Deistic conception of God will do the same job with less effort.

Philosophical theologians, such as the Jesuit Luis de Molina (1535-1600)¹⁸, have reasoned in detail about how God may co-operate, or decide not to co-operate, with secondary causes in the world (the weather, wild beasts, fire, *etc*) and so govern the outcomes of “natural” events. As a philosophical position, this “concurrency” has, historically, been the preferred option for orthodox theologians over the alternatives.¹⁹ But whilst philosophy can support and explain Christian truth, having a fully worked through theory of divine action is secondary to the core biblical truth – God is

¹⁸ “If God did not cooperate with secondary causes, He clearly would not have been able to bring it about that the Babylonian fire did not burn the three young men except by opposing it, as it were, and impeding its action either (i) through some contrary action or (ii) by placing something around the young men or conferring on them some resistant quality which would prevent the fire’s impressing its action upon them. Therefore, since this derogates both the divine power and also the total subjection by which all things submit to and obey that power, one should claim without doubt that God cooperates with secondary causes, and that it was only because God did not concur with the fire in its action that the young men were not incinerated by it.” (Molina, *Concordia*, pt. II, *disp.* 25, §15).

¹⁹ The alternatives are *occasionalism*, in which no real powers exist in nature, and God acts directly in everything; and *conservationism*, in which they act independently, but only exist by his power – unfortunately, since the Enlightenment this last view has often been simply assumed, and still in practice underpins much theistic evolution, nature being seen as a closed system of cause and effect in which prayer makes little sense. This denies the all-important aspect of God’s *governance* of the world, and not merely its maintenance.

sovereign over all he has made, and especially the “non-rational” realm. It is not in rebellion against him, and it is not autonomous of him.

So is climate change part of our individual prayer life, or that of our churches? Do we pray only that people will act more wisely, or do we pray that God will change the weather? Why would he be less sovereign over his servants the elements than over sinful mankind's wisdom? Likewise for the other events of nature which may affect us for good or ill. It is only the truth of God's continued sovereignty within his universe that makes the discipline (and joy) of prayer that Jesus practised and taught, for our daily bread and for all else, worthwhile.

Worship on behalf of Creation

One sign of the continuing goodness of Creation is its own participation in the worship of God:

*The Lord has established his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.
Praise the Lord, you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
who obey his word.
Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts,
you his servants who do his will.
Praise the Lord, all his works
everywhere in his dominion.
Praise the Lord, my soul.²⁰*

In itself the Creation is, metaphor apart, only capable of giving God praise by being what it is. That in itself, given that Scripture in many places says it *does* praise him, is firm evidence against its fallenness. The sea and everything in it resounds, the rivers clap their hands, and the mountains sing together for joy.²¹ But do the hyena, the shark or the flea keep surly silence whilst the rest of Creation worships?

Yet one major creation role of mankind, coming under the command to rule and care for the earth as those formed in the image of God, is to express its worship in rational form. I am always a little wary of claims by philosophers that, with the arrival of mankind, the universe became self-aware. We are not the universe. But in a sense it is true, in that (extra-terrestrials aside) we are the only race to be able to *comprehend*, rather than simply experiencing, physical reality. We are, at least, self-aware on *behalf* of the universe, by being rationally aware of its wonders.

The mediaeval thinkers had a profound (if dangerous) insight when they conceived of man as a *microcosmos*. Through our reason, they said, we can encompass the universe in our minds, as it were bringing everything we perceive within ourselves – or perhaps extending our souls out to enfold all things. It's a deep idea – and not even that metaphorical, either, according to some interpretations of scientific quantum theory. Thomas Traherne, again, gives us a sense of this mystery:

²⁰ Ps. 103.19-23.

²¹ Ps. 98.7-8.

Alas the WORLD is but a little centre in comparison of you. Suppose it millions of miles from the Earth to the Heavens, and millions of millions above the stars, both here and over the heads of our Antipodes: it is surrounded with infinite and eternal space... The Omnipresence and Eternity of God are your fellows and companions. And all that is in them ought to be made your familiar Treasures. Your understanding comprehends the World like the dust of a balance, measures Heaven with a span, and esteems a thousand years but as one day. So that Great, Endless, Eternal Delights are only fit to be its enjoyments.²²

We alone of all material creatures, seeing even the trees of the field that “clap their hands”²³ in worship, can appreciate their strength, beauty, and utility, their age and mystery, and offer thanksgiving and rational praise to God. And so on for all of creation. In that way mankind was created to be a priesthood to Creation – in God’s cosmic temple to be those who bring sacrifices of praise worthy of the God who has made all things.

This priestly work is the calling of every human being, for everyone can admire the grandeur of the heavens, feel the warmth of the sun, taste the flavour of fruits, appreciate the devotion of a dog or any of the billions of other blessings built into our daily, created, world.

Yet it is also the work of everyone who develops particular crafts and skills – the farmer who knows the particular ways of livestock or crops, the woodworker who understands which woods may benefit which tasks, the glider pilot who learns the secret ways of thermals and winds, the musician who knows how to create beauty out of wood or metal or electronics.

This too is the primary *theological* role of the scientist. The scientist can study anything from quarks to the whole vast cosmos, and from the Planck time to the duration of all things. Apart from the utility of knowledge of the natural world to man, there is a sacerdotal function in uncovering truths hidden in nature and offering the very specialised form of worship that only they can. That may involve appreciating the beauty of a mathematical equation that most of us can’t understand, or the detailed classification of a thousand closely related species of mosquito that most of us wouldn’t *want* to understand. The scientist who is able to *share* the thrill of knowledge is a double blessing to the world – as is the layman who cares enough about God’s world to find out what the scientist has been up to.

One of the objections to deep time made by a certain sort of Creationist is that God would be wasting his time to create all those extinct plants and animals that nobody has ever seen. But of course, we *have* seen them, or at least many of them, through their study and reconstruction by palaeontologists. And the more science progresses, the more we can understand of their departed world, both in the beauty and wonders of the individual forms, and in their ecological interactions. We can give praise to God for those things, and for continental drift, and for the taxonomic relationships between the different forms, and for the molecular glories of DNA.

But what you don’t love, you don’t value. And what you don’t value does not become part of your priestly concern. If we are ambivalent in our thanksgiving for the food on our plate or the weather

²² Traherne, *op. cit.*, 1/19, pp.12-13.

²³ Isa. 55.12.

outside, how likely are we to engage in worship on behalf of Permian *Pelycosaurs* or distant quasars? I wonder how many believing scientists nowadays see their job as glorifying God as Creator through their discoveries simply *as* discoveries, quite apart from any practical application they may have? I wonder how many non-scientists see science as that kind of spiritual pursuit, or even see that of their own particular vocation – or their daily commute into work through the glories of God's world?

Relating science to Creation

Whilst we are thinking of science, the biblical belief that Creation is both good, and subject to God, dethrones the still-common Enlightenment principle that the universe is a closed causal system, in which God cannot act and, by implication, on which only science has the final say concerning physical truth. In Christian circles linked to science, that prohibition on God's power has often been theologised into an idea that it would be *wrong* of God to act within the space-time world, and for a number of reasons.

In the first place, it is said, it would deny the importance of faith by "showing God's hand" and so "forcing" people to believe in him. This supposes that belief in God is a kind of hide and seek game – which has only ever been true because of the very Enlightenment principles I am calling into question. Outside that localised (in both geography and history) movement, the existence of God has never been in doubt – it is fundamental human knowledge²⁴. "Faith" has actually *never* been about believing in God, but about committing oneself in covenant relationship to the God of Israel, and of the Lord Jesus Christ, on the very *basis* of his historical actions in the space-time world, most notably the Exodus and the Resurrection – and of course, his Creation.

Secondly it is claimed that God would be cheating the freedom and dignity of his own Creation by "breaking its laws". Support is sometimes sought from selective use of Thomas Aquinas's teaching on secondary causes in this (though in most other discussions he is viewed as an Aristotelian muddying the waters of true science). Space forbids a full rebuttal of this, but the short reply is that, post-Enlightenment interpretations of Aquinas notwithstanding, the biblical God is one who delights to be *involved* with his world, and not merely to set it a-going, as the deist Leibniz wrote in criticism of Newton's theistic science, in "*a perpetual motion*"²⁵.

The Deist, and semi-Deist, complaint that a God who acts within nature is showing the incompetence of a model-maker who has to keep pushing his engine to get it going is missing the point entirely. When God told Moses at the burning bush "*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*" ("I will be what I will be") he was not making a statement about eternal Being, but about immanence and action, perhaps with the implication, "I am there (for you)." He was going to do dirty business with Pharaoh on behalf of his people. A skilled mechanic can make a player-piano that will execute piano-rolls unattended, but the man who both builds a violin and performs great music on it in real time is

²⁴ Philosopher Alvin Plantinga has been a leader in arguing that belief in God is as "properly basic" a belief as belief in other minds, or the past, or an external world. See his *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, Cornell, 1967), *Part III*.

²⁵ "Sir Isaac Newton and his followers have also a very odd opinion concerning the work of God. According to their doctrine, God Almighty wants to wind up his watch from time to time: otherwise it would cease to move. He had not, it seems, sufficient foresight to make it a perpetual motion." Clarke, Samuel, *A Collection of Papers, Which passed between the late Learned Mr. Leibnitz, and Dr. Clarke, In the Years 1715 and 1716* (London: 1717), <http://www.newtonproject.sussex.ac.uk/view/texts/normalized/THEM00226> (accessed 06/01/2016).

scarcely to be considered less great – especially if in his playing he interacts with other musicians and an audience to transform their souls. That is more like the Christian picture of God.

Thirdly, some people complain that were God to be actively involved, he would be deceiving scientists in their pursuit of predictable natural causes and laws. One has to be astonished by the self-serving arrogance of thinking that way. It was a small number of humans, not God, who set themselves the task of exploring his ways through science. It was they, not God, who determined that his ways were to be found in constant patterns which they, on their own initiative, likened to his laws. And finally it was they, not God, who declared that *only* such lawlike processes were worthy of God, and therefore that the whole of Creation could and must be understood through them.

God is no man's debtor – so he certainly owes nothing in particular to scientists. The most amusing example of such a mentality of God as "cheat" is the kind of double-bluff implied in too much theistic evolution. The original cover of Richard Dawkins's *Blind Watchmaker* read:

*Natural selection is the blind watchmaker, blind because it does not see ahead, does not plan consequences, has no purpose in view. Yet the living results of natural selection overwhelmingly impress us with the appearance of design as if by a master watchmaker, impress us with the illusion of design and planning.*²⁶

He proceeds to show that this overwhelming impression of design is an illusion because of the powers of the blind process of Neodarwinian evolution. Theistic evolutionists frequently endorse the blindness of that process, and thus the illusion of design, and *then* say that behind it all stands the inscrutable creative power of God. The illusion of design itself is therefore an illusion.

One could draw an analogy with someone who insists that a book, whilst it appears full of meaning, is in reality just a physical artifact produced by printing machines – and then declares that, hidden behind that mechanical process is an author. In truth, of course, the design of the author is obvious in the meaning of the words, and is inherent in the very physical form of the book: there is one continuous process of creation at work between authorial intent and the reader's comprehension, not three independent processes.

In summary, to recognise that science is just one useful source of provisional truth, rather than the arbiter of truth, even in the physical and material realm is a necessary corrective for our scientific age, and this is greatly encouraged by the knowledge that Creation is not only good, but God's servant for governing the world. This in no way denies any scientific evidence, though it may involve being sceptical about certain scientific theories in their metaphysical aspect – for one of the achievements of Philosophy of Science is the understanding that all theories are the products of cultures and their largely un-evidenced worldviews.

Care over Creation

Long before Creation was widely viewed as "fallen" a certain "gnosticizing", or perhaps more charitably a "platonising" tendency was widespread in the Church, which viewed the Christian hope as the escape of the soul from the physical world to the "spiritual" realm of heaven. The theological error of this view has, thankfully, been fully explored in recent conservative theology, for example by

²⁶ Dawkins, Richard, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence Reveals a Universe Without Design* (New York, Norton, 1987).

N T Wright²⁷ and J Richard Middleton.²⁸ Such a tendency is only exacerbated once it is seriously considered that the physical creation has been ruined by sin, and I will return to the effect of this on spiritual matters later. But the direct effect on our God-given role to rule and care for the Creation is even more obvious. Briefly if one believes that the natural world is God's good provision for us, one will care for it. If it is bad, and doomed to be swept away altogether at the return of Christ, one may as well give up on it: who starts repainting their house if they believe the world is ending (or even if they believe it has dry rot)?

It has been one of the scandals of recent decades (akin to the former Evangelical retreat from social and political action in reaction to the liberal social gospel) that Christians are widely seen as not only unconcerned about conservation, but a hindrance to it through the false allegation that the Bible teaches domination over nature. False though that representation of the Bible is, it gains credence from what has been a general lack of concern, particularly amongst Evangelicals, to rejoice in Creation by caring for it.

There are notable exceptions to this, one being an organization started a number of years ago by a university friend of mine, Peter Harris, and now operating worldwide: the conservation group *A Rocha*. In the abstract of a paper first presented to the Lausanne Movement's Theology Working Party under the chairmanship of Dr Christopher J Wright, Harris wrote:

*Evangelical theology has already made great progress in re-discovering the doctrine of creation. A similar effort is urgently needed in order to mainstream the care of creation within our missiology, but this must be rapidly followed by concerted global action. Nothing less can do justice to the biblical proclamation that Jesus is Lord, and so address the human and biodiversity crises we face.*²⁹

Care for Creation, then, is part of Christian mission – given the truth of Gen. 1.28, it is actually the original part of that mission. Fortunately this work has attracted the support of leading scientists as well as theologians and church leaders, which at the very least is a testimony to society that this is God's world and that his people recognise it. It goes without saying that one is much more likely to wish to preserve what one loves because it is God's good handiwork, than if one views it as irretrievably corrupted by evil.

But there is more to it than that, because the Christian hope engendered by the resurrection of Christ is the *renewal* of all things in heaven and earth, not their complete replacement and, still less, a mass evacuation from earth to heaven prior to its annihilation. Instead, the Bible teaches a coming together of heaven and earth in imperishability, which is why we read that

²⁷ See Wright, N T, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London, SPCK, 2003) and *Surprised by Hope* (London, SPCK, 2007).

²⁸ Middleton, J Richard, *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2014).

²⁹ Prepared for The Lausanne Movement's Theology Working Party in Beirut, Lebanon (February 2010) and published in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* (Vol. 34 No 3, July 2010).

*...in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*³⁰

There is the same kind of continuity, as well as discontinuity, in Creation as there is between our present body and the resurrection body (the archetype being, of course, the raised body of Jesus). It is similar, come to that, to the fact that all the work we do for God's kingdom here will, in some strange way, continue to bear fruit in the age to come³¹. It is no less a part of Christian living to cherish this present natural realm than it is to cherish our bodies, and to live by Kingdom values.

Creation and resurrection

The valuing of the material creation as "good" also affects our understanding of eschatology, as I have already hinted. The gnostic dualism of corrupt matter versus pure spirit, which began to infect Christianity in the second century as it lost touch with its Jewish root, leads to the idea (held rather vaguely nowadays, in the absence of much substantial pulpit teaching) that the Christian hope is that our "souls" leave our bodies at death to "go to heaven". By implication the world we leave, like the hopelessly damaged *Titanic*, sinks into the abyss of oblivion. But for us the state of disembodiment after death is no more than a waiting time for our true hope, which is resurrection to eternal life.

The unique Jewish concept of resurrection arose in the context of the equally distinctive biblical belief in the goodness of God's material creation. Because there was no idea in Judaism that the immaterial was superior to the material, the hope of second temple Jews was that there would a resurrection of the righteous to life *on earth* at the end of the age. Cleared of evil people, it would be the land of promise for which Abraham had hoped, where God would dwell with his people in prosperity and blessing.

Jesus's resurrection endorsed this view, though it modified it by actually delivering on the resurrection in the person of Jesus as a deposit (or "firstfruits"), and by clarifying that the final resurrection would be part of a complete renewing of the original physical Creation, rendering it imperishable. That which had been "naturally-empowered" (*psuchikos*) would at the coming of Christ be swallowed up by the "spiritually-empowered" (*pneumatikos*).³²

But the very promise of that transformation affirmed that it had been "very good" from the beginning. To put it crudely, if there is a significant continuity between the world in which we live, and our physical bodies, and the world which is to come, which we shall also inhabit in the body, then it is important to see eye to eye with God on its status now.

This has much to say, too, to those who picture God's creation of mankind as (effectively) an evolutionary accident to which God has condescended to add his image, or a "soul". This too is inherently dualistic, reducing the true work of God to the "spiritual" realm of the soul. One would hope either for eventual escape from this jerry-built evolutionary body, with its badly designed jaws, spines, eyes, appendices and so on, or at least for God to do a completely new design job to celebrate our resurrection to a life that we will have to live within the same body for ever.

³⁰ 2 Pet. 3.13.

³¹ 1 Cor. 15.58.

³² 1 Cor 15.53-57. The "empowerment" idea is well set out by NT Wright in his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

But that is not possible, for the resurrection of Christ has already set the pattern, and the resurrection pattern is that of mankind as it is, as it was created to be – the biped who walks, talks, and eats (in Jesus's case, at least, fish caught using his own five-fingered vertebrate hands). At the Incarnation, the Son of God became man. As N T Wright says concerning John's gospel:

[T]he Word who was with the one God, who was identified with this God, is now also and forever flesh. There can be no sense that the flesh has been turned back simply into word and spirit. The resurrection matters for John because he is, at his very heart, a theologian of creation. The Word, who was always to be the point at which creator and creation came together in one, is now, in the resurrection, the point at which creator and new creation are likewise one.³³

The resurrection confirms God's love for, and approval of, the human body, and that it is physically, as well as in any other sense, made in the image of Christ – himself the true image of God even now, as a man, as much as before his incarnation. Currently there is a man in heaven, and he will dwell in the same body on earth in the age to come. Perhaps one should, in the light of that, reconsider ones low view of the human body, for it will be around a long time.

But there is, as well as continuity, also a discontinuity between our present bodies and the resurrection body, as both Paul in 1 Cor. 15 and the resurrection appearances of Jesus in the gospels make plain. If, as John writes, "*what we will be has not yet been made known,*"³⁴ then it's even less clear in what ways the physical world to come will resemble ours, and in what ways it will show discontinuity. But the possibilities are a lot more open when we dispense with the notion that it needs to be purged from evil, and will instead be welcomed as it is "into the freedom and glory of the children of God."³⁵

There are no doubt other implications, both for present living and for future hope, in recognising that God's natural cosmos remains his holy temple, for through this understanding we see that the whole message of Scripture becomes more integrated, and makes more sense of the true history of the world.

This understanding will demand, for many of us, some fundamental readjustments of beliefs and attitudes, but we may take comfort in the fact that we are not, by making those changes, moving away from the faith of the Bible and the Church of Christ, but closer back towards both.

And we get to enjoy the world more too – it's a win-win situation.

³³ Wright, *op. cit.*, p.667.

³⁴ 1 Jn. 3.2.

³⁵ Rom. 8.21.