

## DAWKINS' WAR ON EVERYTHING

**R**ICHARD DAWKINS is Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. When this issue of *Compass* was planned, he was only a distant rumble over the horizon somewhere. I had just purchased a copy of his latest book, *The God Delusion* (2006) and was appalled that a man of his acknowledged brilliance in science communication could be so ignorant and ignorantly dogmatic about faith and theology. As we go to print the Dawkins rumble has come upon us as a storm. Millions have read about his ideas or seen his two-part television presentations, *The Root of all Evil*, and many have been reading his book. It seems like a good time to revisit the science and faith/theology theme.

It is difficult not to sound totally negative about Dawkins' views. I must not be influenced by the fact that he considers me to be a 'dyed-in-the-wool faith-head... immune to argument'. According to Dawkins I believe in God because I am deluded, deranged, a victim of years of childhood indoctrination during which I contracted a virus of the mind which I am now spreading in the population. I am a menace to civilisation.

I will forget about that and try to sound positive by saying that I agree with Dawkins on some things. For instance, I too condemn religious extremism and terrorism in the name of religion. But Dawkins should acknowledge that it is not doctrine that ultimately motivates these extremists, but politics, nationalism, ethnic causes, oppression or a desire to drive out foreign invaders. The extremists might do things in the name of religion, but not with the sanction of religious teaching.

Dawkins states that the God of the Old Testament is 'a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential,

megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully' (Dawkins 2006, p.31), 'a psychotic delinquent' (*idem* p. 38). He is not trying to make a bad joke: he is serious! Clearly he needs to learn how to read the Bible. That kind of statement is just a sample indication of the primitive level of Dawkins' discussion of things theological.

Every scientist and academic knows that one must listen to the experts of other disciplines. Everyone except Dawkins. He operates as though he is the expert in all disciplines, human and divine. He is indeed an expert in biology and zoology, but he has expanded the field of biology to encompass and dismiss anthropology, culture and religion. He is a biologist-imperialist.

A passage which a number of commentators have quoted with relish is from Terry Eagleton's review of *The God Delusion* in the *London Review of Books* (19 October, 2006): 'Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology'.

Educationalists are concerned that students are less attracted to the sciences these days and that is not a good thing for the future of the nation. Assaults on human values and beliefs in the name of science such as the Dawkins crusade are hardly going to encourage more young people to study natural science. This is an age in which spirituality is considered a good thing, and many will not be attracted to scientific atheism with its narrow horizons, lack of vision and no 'rumour of angels'. Like any fundamentalism, Dawkins' dogmatic atheist fundamentalism cramps the human spirit.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor.

**Recommended reading:** Alister McGrath (2007), *The Dawkins Delusion, Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*. SPCK, London.

# THEOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE

## *Riding the Boundaries*

BARRY BRUNDELL MSC

SOME YEARS AGO I spent a few months in Paris. One day, when I was wandering through the streets on my own taking in the sights I came into the Place Denfert-Rochereau at the end of the Boulevard Raspail. To my delight I discovered there a monument erected by François-Vincent Raspail bearing the inscription:

To science, apart from which all is stupidity.  
To science, the only religion of the future.  
Her most fervent and unprejudiced believer  
—F-V Raspail

Raspail was a 19<sup>th</sup> Century chemist and revolutionary. I had read plenty about these people, the out-of-control scientific rationalists—those who claim that what is not ‘scientific’ is meaningless—but to come face-to-face with the traces of one of them gave me a sensation akin to what paleontologists must experience when they stumble on the fossils of some prehistoric organism. In the 1970s I naïvely believed that rationalism of this kind was truly a thing of the distant past, apart from its revival for a while in the middle years of the twentieth century in the various forms of positivism. I am quite astonished to witness its return in our own day, vigorously promoted at the present moment by Richard Dawkins, described in a recent article as a ‘crusading atheist’ (Luxmore 2007).

The energies of rationalists are mostly directed against religion, faith and theology. Normally theologians are not much interested in responding to this sort of attack, for a variety

of reasons, including distaste for nonsense and a desire not to dignify it by treating it seriously. But now, it seems, some reply is called for. Dawkins is selling millions of copies of his books, so he is making an impact.

I had evidence of this recently. Often of a Saturday I walk down to King Street, Newtown, in Sydney, to stock up on vegetables and groceries. My excursion also provides an opportunity for me to read a few T-shirts as a way of informing myself on the street wisdom that week-end. One particular Saturday around Easter time (no less!) a young fellow came striding towards me wearing a T-shirt that read: ‘Christianity is stupid’. ‘Ah-ha!’ I thought, ‘he’s been reading Dawkins!’

I will try not to have my reflections in this article narrowed by an urge to respond to Richard Dawkins, but we may take it that whenever I criticise an example of rationalism, I could routinely add, ‘And all the more so in the case of Richard Dawkins’. He rejects Christian faith as superstition, a mental illness, a cancer that threatens the human race. Religion is ‘the root of all evil’, according to the title of his two-part television program. Dawkins has no understanding of the nature and bases of Christian faith and of theology as a discipline, but at least we can try to remind him of the limits of science, which he does not seem to understand and certainly does not recognise.

I want to offer suggestions, therefore, about the true relationship, insofar as there is one, between theology and natural science. There

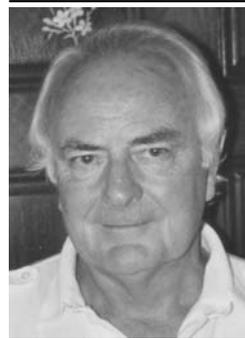
are a few things I want to take up. They mostly come under the heading of the blindingly obvious, but they appear not to be so to some otherwise seemingly intelligent people, from both the theological and scientific communities.

### *Let Theology be Theology*

My first suggestion is that everyone should leave theology alone. We get demands that theology and religion be scientific in the way that natural science is scientific. Dawkins' central criticism of theology is that it is 'not scientific'. Let me outline some comparisons and contrasts between Christian theology and natural science, which will clarify why theology should not be asked to operate on the same principles as the natural sciences.

Theological methods are many, but they have one common goal: that of giving a rational account of Christian faith. The classical definition of theology provided by St Anselm of the eleventh century is 'faith seeking understanding'. The theologian is a listener to the word of God who interprets it in the light of the articulations of its meaning in the testimonies of tradition and in the lived experience of the Christian community past and present. The theologian reflects the findings of many sub-disciplines, chiefly biblical studies, church history, theological ethics and practical theology. Rationalists think all this is nonsense; they have a right to their opinion and we will fight to the death to preserve that right for them, but we, along with many centuries of theologians, disagree with them.

Scientific methods in the natural sciences, also, are many, because there are many subjects of scientific enquiry. But all natural scientific methods seek explanations that are in specific ways related to evidence obtained by observations, and prescind from—that is, do not accept as scientific—explanations that are not in any way, not even indirectly, empirically verifiable. In natural science obtaining predicted observable results (even if indirectly



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observable) normally determines the credibility of a theory or hypothesis.

Theology is a systematic exploration of something not seen, nor empirically verifiable, nor logically inferred from observable phenomena, but believed. The believer needs to be able to be assured that his/her belief is reasonable, but he/she cannot prove the truth of the belief. Once something is proved, it is no longer faith, but something established as certain. Therefore it is worth noting that when Dawkins attacks Thomas Aquinas' five ways, mistakenly calling them 'proofs', he shows his ignorance of what Thomas was doing. Thomas Aquinas was offering five typical rational arguments for the existence of God that the believer might find persuasive. They will at least help to assure the believer that it is not against reason to him/her to believe. It would do violence to our human nature to believe something that offends our reason.

Theology and natural science are thus two very different disciplines with very different subject matters or fields of enquiry and very different criteria for the validity of their explanations.

### *Other Differences*

There are other contrasts that we might emphasise between theology and natural science.

- Theology is contemplative; natural science is experimental.
- Theology does not aim at creating new knowledge but at deepening our understanding of what is already known. Theology ex-

plores a wisdom entrusted to be conserved. Natural science aims at discovery of hitherto unknown things.

- Theology explores narratives heard and believed, a big story that has been from the beginning. Natural science creates new narratives composed by human agents and tested for validity—if they fail the test they are discarded in favour of other brand new narratives.

- Theological discourse is characterised by poetry, metaphor, symbol, legend, story and myth, as well as history of specific kinds. Natural science discourse is technical, making sparse use of metaphor and other rhetorical devices.

- Theology explains the observed invoking explanations that are independent of observations. In the natural sciences observations determine explanations—the observations determine what scientific theories are permissible.

- For theology old is usually good; for natural science old is usually discarded.

- For theology events are not predictable; for natural science events are to be explained by prior conditions.

Clearly, then, theological explanations are not scientific explanations and are not measured by the same criteria. The methods for doing theology correctly are very different from the methods for doing science correctly. We must not demand that theologians justify their explanations scientifically.

### *Let Natural Science be Natural*

My second suggestion is that everyone should leave natural science alone. There are several ways in which people try to turn natural science into something that it is not.

Some people attempt to create what we may call ‘mystical science’. They try to graft theology onto science. There are a multitude of publications in this category written by people who are impressed by particular scientific explanations and who want to recommend their theology or spirituality by piggy-backing it on

those explanations. Or, on the other hand, they are people who want to present some area of scientific explanation as religious or spiritual.

Fritjof Capra is one popular author who did just that. His *The Tao of Physics* (1975) is a book about finding links between physics and Eastern religions. As I have written elsewhere (*Compass* 1987/4, 20-21), from talk of ‘comparisons’ between concepts and world-views of physicists and eastern mystics he moves gratuitously to write of ‘parallels’, ‘profound similarities’, ‘profound harmonies’ and ultimately to ‘extremely important connections’. Relying on totally inadequate evidence he claims that physics and Eastern religion are in a deep way one and the same.

Diarmud O’Murchu in *Quantum Theology* (1996) is one Christian counterpart to Capra. Jean Guitton and the Bogdonov brothers in *Dieu et la science* (1991) also relied heavily on marginal speculations inspired by science. Kevin O’Shea dabbled in this kind of writing in his *Person in Cosmos. Metaphors of Meaning from Physics, Philosophy and Theology* (1995), even though he affirmed (p.201) that it is perhaps best that physics remains physics, philosophy remains philosophy and theology remains theology.

There are several reasons why this kind of speculation is out of order.

First, they are no more than very personal intuitions, even flights of fancy. They do not sufficiently honour the distinctions between natural scientific findings in the strict and only proper sense, and non-scientific speculations that have become attached to them.

Second, they confuse discourses. Concepts, terms and theories belong in contexts. We must not transfer discourses from one domain to another. We cannot helicopter terminology from the natural sciences into theological discourse as though the terms mean the same thing in each discourse.

Science and mysticism are two distinct ways of knowing. The mysticism or religious awe of the scientist begins where his/her scientific activity leaves off. Forcing science and

religion to coalesce in any way with claims that they are intimately linked in a common quest, should not be welcomed by scientists who are concerned to uphold freedom of research. The least damage that these ideas could do is to release a cloud of mystic unknowing and imprecision into the laboratories. Nor should anyone who values Eastern mystical traditions or any religious tradition welcome the prospect of such close links with science because scientists have a habit of reassessing their views from the bottom up every so often, making it quite unwise to hitch one's religious, mystical or theological wagon to any scientific star.

Theologians should state their case with sensitivity for the influential ideas of contemporary Western culture, influenced in many and varied ways as they are by rumours emanating from serious science, but should not get any closer than that.

There is much to be gained by theologians if the strict use of the term 'natural science' is insisted upon and if it is clearly recognised that what are not scientific conclusions are not what science tells us; non-scientific assertions need to be argued for on other grounds. This goes for non-scientific conclusions that we might wish to adopt ourselves as theologians, such as the anthropic principle and theories of cosmic evolutionism, as well as for theories which do not meet with our approval, such as the rationalistic and materialistic conclusions drawn from biology by people such as Richard Dawkins.

More radical than the science mystics are the theological imperialists. These try to substitute theology for science. The Creation Scientists are the prime offenders. They claim that the account of creation in the book of Genesis literally understood is science taught by God and therefore to be accepted in place of evolution science. Others seek to impose theology onto science as an attempt to remedy the perceived insufficiency of natural science. The advocates of intelligent design try to do this. Both the Creation Scientists and the advocates

of Intelligent Design are demanding that 'theology' (I use the term very loosely) be introduced into the science curriculum as science. They want to substitute theological doctrine for the explanations of empirical science.

And finally, there are the scientific imperialists. They believe that scientific explanations and theological explanations are in competition. True, there have been many instances down the centuries when scientific explanations have been found for phenomena that had been previously given religious explanations. This has been and still often is interpreted as a retreat by religion before the triumphal march of scientific progress. A whole school of historiography flourished at the turn of the twentieth century based on that interpretation of the history of the relations between religion and science. The interpretation has been rejected by scholars (Lindberg and Numbers 1986, Introduction; Brooke 1991). It seriously distorts the picture of the actual relations between science and religion down the ages.

Paul Davies (1990 and 1995) is one scientist who believes theology and science are in competition. Religious truth is for him a series of facts about the universe on the same cognitive level as scientific conclusions. Hence his claim that science offers a surer path to God than religion. He claimed that if one really wants to understand what is going on in the universe, including the 'fundamental things' which for centuries remained the province of religion, especially the coming into being of the universe, it is to sciences like physics that one must turn to get the answers (Davies 1990, ix). The famous statement of Stephen Hawking at the conclusion of *A Brief History of Time* (1988) that we will soon be able to 'know the mind of God' is a statement along the same lines. But an earlier passage in the same book shows that someone as intelligent as he finds it difficult to appreciate the difference between the language of science and the language of theology. Hawking tells of a conference on cosmology at the Vatican. He writes:

At the end of the conference the participants were granted an audience with the pope. He told us that it was all right to study the evolution of the universe after the big bang, but we should not enquire into the big bang itself because that was the moment of Creation and therefore the work of God. I was glad that he did not know the subject of the talk I had just given at the conference—the possibility that space-time was finite but had no boundary, which means that it had no beginning, no moment of Creation. I had no desire to share the fate of Galileo... (p.116)

But when we read the address of Pope John Paul that Hawking was alluding to, we see that he has entirely missed the pope's point. John Paul simply said that the question of the universe's beginning is not answered by physics alone, it is a metaphysical and theological question too. (Cf. John Paul II to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. October 3, 1981.)

Catholic theologians are optimistic about science. And so is the Catholic Church, as was made clear in the Second Vatican Council, e.g.:

...methodical research in all branches of knowledge, provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws, can never conflict with the faith, because the things of the world and the things of faith derive from the same God. The humble and persevering investigator of the secrets of nature is being led, as it were, by the hand of God in spite of himself, for it is God, the conservator of all things, who made them what they are. We cannot but deplore certain attitudes (not unknown among Christians) deriving from a short-sighted view of the rightful autonomy of science; they have occasioned conflict and controversy and have misled many into opposing faith and science. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 36.)

The final sentence of this quotation was a reference to the Galileo affair as is made clear by a footnote.

The most aggressive scientific imperialists of our time are biologists and zoologists—Daniel Dennett, for example, and—of course—Richard Dawkins. Basically, these biological materialists claim that evolution theory has made God superfluous. Meaning and morality and all things specifically human

are solely products of evolution.

Theologians naturally object that evolution theory does not explain everything. There is more to a human person than matter; there is a spiritual aspect as well. For many centuries the model body-soul was used to express this belief, with the notion that God immediately created and infused the soul into the material body to create a human being. The Aristotelian theory ofhylomorphism underpinned the doctrine. This model is not very helpful in an evolutionary perspective. The biblical language is much more flexible, speaking of body and spirit and soul (1Thess. 5:23). The human person for the theologian lives at various levels, material and spiritual. Created in the image of God, the person lives between heaven and earth and is called to communion with God. After death the personal conscious and willing self lives on: if we want to call this self the 'soul' we need to understand the word in a way that it is closer to biblical terminology than to any dualistic understanding of body-soul.

Theologising in a way that is sensitive to evolutionary categories, one might say that a human being is born material and is loved into an active spiritual existence by the divine action that envelopes it. This does not entail that the creative action of God takes the form of divine interventions into or changes of direction of the natural evolutionary processes. On the contrary, it corresponds to the top-down causality that is attributed to God the Creator through the rest of the evolutionary process that has produced the marvels of the natural world and the emergence of human beings. On this top-down causality Arthur Peacocke has written at length (Peacocke 1993). But these are theological discussions and hypotheses, and we do not ask that they be incorporated into science. We theologians know our place.

However, since we believe that there is so much more to the human being than matter, even in its most highly evolved states, we reject the incursions of evolutionary materialists into areas that are properly philosophical

and theological, for instance into Christian moral theory or into questions of the meaning and value and purpose of life. Science is neutral on such questions.

So, my finger-wagging response to those from either theological or natural science backgrounds who do not respect the boundaries of their disciplines and those of other disciplines is, in brief: theologians and scientists should not trespass on each other's territory; theologians and scientists must recognise the boundaries of their own domain and show proper deference to the authority of those who work in another domain. This does not mean that theologians are prohibited from speaking about things scientific, nor scientists about things theological, but it does mean that they each do not invoke their authority in their own fields for claiming authority in the other. There is no transfer of authority across the boundaries and there must be no blurring of the boundaries.

In the normal course these days working

theologians and working scientists are not tempted to claim more authority than they have. Some lessons at least have been learned over the past three or four centuries since the Galileo bungle. But not all have resisted the temptation. There are instances of people claiming to be theologians who are guilty of an unwise mingling of divinity with the study of the natural world, a foolishness that Francis Bacon complained of in his *Magna Instauratio* (1620).

The most significant thing about the resurrection of scientific rationalism is that, arguably, it is not ultimately about science or theology, but a reaction to the resurgence of religion in secular fields like politics and government. Abuses of religion lead to abuses of science, putting scientists and theologians in conflict. Theologians deplore the abuses, probably more than anyone does. We just wish that people would put the blame where it is deserved—on the extremists of all faiths—and not take it out on us.

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# MIRACLES AND THE LAWS OF NATURE

DENIS EDWARDS

EVOLUTIONARY biology points to the way competition, predation, death and extinction are built into the 3.8 billion year history of life. This intensifies the old problem of how we think about God and God's action in the context of suffering and loss. One aspect of this discussion is that of miracles. Does God sometimes overturn or bypass the laws of nature? If so, then why not more often? The Christian tradition of miracles can seem to suggest that God occasionally and arbitrarily intervenes to save people while allowing others to perish.

In this article, I will ask how the Christian tradition of miracles is to be understood: Does it mean that God is to be thought of as miraculously intervening in the natural world to preserve some from tsunamis while allowing others to suffer them? Or are we to think of God, even the God who works miracles, as respecting and working consistently in and through the processes of the natural world? Much of the pastoral practice of the church reinforces the idea of a God who can and does intervene in an occasional way to overturn nature. I believe that an alternative theology is needed, and will suggest an approach to a theology of miracles that does not involve an interventionist view of God.

With Johann Baptist Metz I believe that the miracles that are crucial to the Christian tradition are those connected with the coming of revelation in Jesus Christ (Metz 1975, 962). I will begin with a brief exploration of miracles in the life of Jesus, using the historical work of John Meier. Then I will turn to the classical treatment of miracles in the work of Aquinas. This will lead into a discussion of

the meaning of the laws of nature, taking up ideas developed by William Stoeger. Finally, in dialogue with the thought of Karl Rahner, I will suggest a view of divine action that makes room for the miraculous but without the idea of occasional intervention.

## *The Miracles of Jesus*

It is obvious from any kind of reading of the Gospels that the evangelists see Jesus as a wonder worker. Alan Richardson has pointed out that in Mark's Gospel, for example, 209 verses out of a total of 666 deal directly or indirectly with miracles (Richardson 1941, 36). This fact has not deterred some of those involved in the various quests for the historical Jesus from avoiding or minimalizing the miracles. A counter to this is offered in the work of John P. Meier. He devotes 529 closely argued pages of his second volume of *A Marginal View to Jesus' miracles* (Meier 1994). I find Meier a helpful guide to the historicity of the miracles, and will focus on key insights that are helpful for my purposes on the general question of Jesus as a miracle worker, followed by brief comments on the healing of Bartimaeus, the raising of Lazarus and the walking on the water.

Before considering particular miracle stories, Meier addresses the global question: Did Jesus perform extraordinary deeds that were considered by himself and others as miracles? His response is governed by the criteria he uses throughout his work on the historical Jesus. First, he finds that the criteria of multiple attestation of sources comes into play, because every Gospel source (Mark, Q, M, L and John),

every evangelist in redactional summaries, and Josephus, all attest to Jesus as a miracle worker. In considering multiple attestation of literary forms, he finds that miracles are attested to in exorcism stories, healing stories, nature miracles, summary statements, parables, dispute stories and in Jesus' mandate to the disciples. The criterion of coherence also plays an important role. Meier finds coherence between Jesus' exorcisms and his sayings, between his healings and sayings, and between the signs and discourses in the Gospel of John. In general, Jesus' miracles are coherent with the picture of one who gained a large number of disciples and aroused much interest.

The criterion of discontinuity (between Jesus and both Judaism and early Christianity) is of limited value, since there are accounts of both Jewish and early Christian miracle workers. What is distinctive of Jesus, however, is the combination of preacher, parabler, proclaimer of the kingdom, plus miracle worker actualizing his own proclamation. Meier finds the criterion of embarrassment (where the Christian community preserves material it finds awkward) has a limited but significant use in the Beelzebul incident, where Jesus' exorcisms lead to the charge of him being in league with the devil (Mark 3:20-30; Matt 12:22-32). Finally Meier turns to the criterion of consistency with Jesus' rejection and death: he finds that the miracles fit well with his execution, in that they would have stirred up excitement and thus been an aggravating circumstance contributing to his death.

The application of these criteria to the general question of Jesus as a miracle worker leads Meier to an unambiguous conclusion: 'Viewed globally, the tradition of Jesus' miracles is more firmly supported by the criteria of historicity than are a number of other well known and readily accepted traditions about his life and ministry... If the miracle tradition from Jesus' public ministry were to be rejected *in toto* as unhistorical, so should every other Gospel tradition about him' (Meier 1994, 630). According to Meier, then, Jesus did see him-



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self and was seen by others as a wonder worker in the cause of the Reign of God.

In his detailed discussion of the healing of Bartimaeus, Meier finds that the application of criteria suggests that the Bartimaeus story is one of the strongest candidates for the report of a specific miracle going back to the historical Jesus' (Meier 1994, 690). In his analysis of the Lazarus story, he finds it impossible to say exactly what happened, but he does think it reflects early material, and that it is likely that this story 'goes back ultimately to some event involving Lazarus, a disciple of Jesus, and that this event was believed by Jesus' disciples even during his lifetime to be a miracle of raising the dead.' (Meier 1994, 831). Meier's treatment of the walking on the water leads him to the conclusion that 'the walking on the water is most likely from start to finish a creation of the early church, a christological confession in narrative form' (Meier 1994, 921). He sees it as a narrative comment on the feeding of the five thousand, which would have symbolized and expressed the eucharistic experience of the early Christians: 'What I am suggesting is that, to a small church struggling in the night of a hostile world and feeling bereft of Christ's presence, the walking on the water likewise symbolized the experience of Christ in the eucharist' (Meier 1994, 923).

This sample of some of Meier's insights and results leads me to conclude that we do need to think of Jesus as a miracle worker, whose healing ministry proclaims and anticipates the coming Reign of God. We do need

to think of him as bringing healing to individuals like Bartimaeus. It seems he was thought of as restoring Lazarus to life, although we cannot know whether Lazarus was clinically dead in today's terms. We need not think of him as walking on the water during his lifetime, but can see this as expressing the action of the risen Christ, perhaps in and through the eucharistic experience of the early church. I will take this as a reasonable assessment of the data that a theology of miracles needs to address and begin this work with insights from Thomas Aquinas.

### *Aquinas on the Dignity of Secondary Causes*

For Aquinas, God's nature is to exist, and God's proper effect is to cause existence (*esse*) in all other things. God causes this effect in creatures not just when they begin to exist, but at every moment in which they are maintained in existence. Because nothing is more deeply interior to an entity than its existence, God must exist in all things and be present to them at their most interior level (*Summa theologiae* 1a.8.1). All things exist only as created by God *ex nihilo*. All things depend on God entirely for their existence at every point. They find in God not only the cause of their being (efficient cause), but their end (final cause). God's providence governs all creatures towards their end which is participation in the goodness of God.

According to Aquinas, God commonly works through creatures that are themselves truly causal. He calls these secondary causes. God is the primary cause who is always providentially at work in all created causes. It is by God's power that every other power acts (*De potentia* 3.7). While God enables creaturely causes to exist and to have effect, Aquinas sees secondary causes as genuinely causal in their own right. It is through these secondary causes that God cares for creation: 'Divine Providence works through intermediaries. For God governs the lower though the higher, not from any impotence on his part, but from the abun-

dance of his goodness imparting to creatures the dignity of causing.' (*Summa theologiae* 1a.22.3). God respects the dignity of secondary causes, and bestows on them their own integrity.

Aquinas thus opposes the view, sometimes called Occasionalism, which sees God as the only real cause at work in the universe. He is also opposed what will come to be called Deism, the idea that God is involved in creating things at the beginning, but takes no further part in the functioning of the universe. For him God's providence and God's government are always and everywhere at work, taking effect through the range of secondary causes. He challenges those who would say that God acts alone without intermediaries:

But this is impossible, and first because it would deprive creation of its pattern of cause and effect, which in turn would imply lack of power in the creator, since an agent's power is the source of its giving an effect a causative capability. It is impossible, secondly, because if the active powers that are observed in creatures accomplished nothing, there would be no point to their have received such powers. Indeed if all creatures are utterly devoid of any activity of their own, then they themselves would seem to have a pointless existence, since everything exists for the sake of its operation (*Summa theologiae* 1a.105.6).

To the argument that God works through secondary causes because God wants creatures to have the dignity of genuine causes, Aquinas adds two further arguments. First, God's creative power would be diminished if God did not enable creatures to participate in causing. Second, if created causative powers do not genuinely accomplish their operations they would seem to have a pointless existence. They would lack meaning and integrity.

These arguments can be brought to bear on contemporary controversies. The proponents of 'intelligent design,' for example, seek to show that there are instances of 'irreducible complexity' in the natural world that cannot be accounted for by Darwinian evolution, and that require the intervention of a designer

(Behe 1996). It seems to me that one who thinks like Aquinas would not be inclined to support this line of thought. Aquinas would find no need to search for a place where God intervenes as designer because God is found in every dimension of creation: God 'acts interiorly in all things,' because 'God is the cause of *esse*, which is innermost in all things' (*Summa theologiae* 1a.105.6). In today's context, it would be consistent with Aquinas to see God's creativity finding its most profound expression in evolutionary history, by enabling creaturely processes to have their own dignity and integrity as genuine causes of novelty in the world. It is worth noting that this is not necessarily the position of all contemporary followers of Aquinas. W. Norris Clarke, a well-regarded Thomist philosopher, is remarkably sympathetic to 'irreducible complexity' (Clarke 2001, 255). My reading of Aquinas suggests, by contrast, that it reflects all the more glory to God if God enables life to evolve through natural processes, which have their own integrity, and which are to be accounted for empirically by the natural sciences, including Darwinian evolutionary theory.

How does Aquinas think about miracles? He tells us that miracles have as their purpose the manifestation of God's grace (*Summa theologiae* 1a.104.3). They are signs of grace and manifestations of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:7). Like most people of faith of the thirteenth century, Aquinas takes it for granted that miracles occur. He notes that the word miracle comes from the word *admiratio*, suggesting the wonder that accompanies the experience of something whose cause is hidden from us (*Summa theologiae* 1a.105.7).

A real miracle, he tells us, has its cause absolutely hidden, because its cause is God. He sees miracles as involving the action of God replacing secondary causes. They are 'exceptions to the pattern in nature' (*Summa theologiae* 1a.105.7 ad1). They occur in a manner that 'surpasses the capabilities of nature' (*Summa theologiae* 1a.105.7 ad 2). A miracle can exceed the capability of nature in

three ways: in the kind of thing done; in the person who does it; and in the manner and order in which it is done (*Summa Theologiae* 1a.105. 8). In every case, a miracle is an event that occurs *only* through God's action, and without a secondary cause:

Thus if we look to the world's order as it depends on the first cause, God cannot act against it, because then he would be doing something contrary to his foreknowledge, his will or his goodness. But if we take the order in things as it depends upon any of the secondary causes, then God can act apart from it; he is not subject to that order but rather it is subject to him, as issuing from him not out of necessity of nature, but by decision of his will. He could in fact have established another sort of pattern in the world; hence when he so wills, he can act apart from the given order, producing, for example, the effects of secondary causes without them or some effects that surpass the powers of these causes (*Summa theologiae* 1a.105.6).

As Brian Davies puts it, for Aquinas, a miracle occurs because of what is *not* present, a secondary cause (Davies 1992, 174). He sees two theses flowing from Aquinas's view of miracles. First, no one but God can work a miracle. In so far as holy people are involved, it is not that they work miracles, but that God brings about miracles at their request (*Summa theologiae* 1a.110.4 ad 10). Second, in working miracles God does not do violence to the natural order. All the events that occur in the universe are the effect of God's will. If God brings about something miraculous in the natural order this is no more a violation of the natural order than the fact that the order exists in the first place (Davies 1992, 173).

I think Davies is right to insist that for Aquinas, God's miracles surpass the natural order but do not do violence to it. What is not explored by Aquinas, however, is the possibility that God may so respect the unfolding of the processes of the natural order that even in miracles God works in and through the laws of nature. What if God, out of loving fidelity to creatures, always waits patiently on the un-

folding of creaturely processes as God waits upon human freedom? What if God works *consistently* through secondary causes? I find Aquinas's concept of primary and secondary causality indispensable and foundational in the current dialogue between science and theology, and the same is true of his view of God's respect for the integrity of secondary causes. I also embrace his view of miracles as wonderful manifestations of the Spirit. But I will depart from his view that in miracles God replaces secondary causes, to explore the idea that miracles might be seen as wonderful manifestations of the Spirit that occur through secondary causes. God's respect for the integrity of secondary causes, so clearly defended by Aquinas, may mean that even in miracles God acts in and through the law of nature. Taking this proposal further will mean attempting to clarify what is meant by these laws of nature.

### *The Laws of Nature*

In a series of articles, cosmologist and philosopher William Stoeger has explored the meaning and ontological status of the laws of nature (Stoeger 1993, 1999, 2001). I will focus on three questions addressed in his work. The first asks: To what extent do well-confirmed scientific theories, and the laws of nature they embody, describe what occurs in reality? Stoeger accepts that some theories, which because of their success have the status of laws, offer a detailed model of fundamental patterns of order and causal influence observed in the physical and chemical world. These theories have been molded, modified and refined through continual observation and experiment. Such theories and their laws have a 'very strong basis' in observed reality (Stoeger 1993, 223).

But Stoeger insists that our observations do not reveal the whole of the reality under scrutiny. Some aspects, even some of the most fundamental, remain hidden. Science focuses on stable and characteristic features that are

accessible to it. It seeks what is universalizable and what is relevant to the questions of the scientist. It isolates and simplifies aspects of reality and models them with concepts such as mass and velocity. The design of a research programme and the interpretation of its results are limited by the heuristic anticipation of the researcher. Much of the reality of the matter under observation is missed.

Even with physical levels that seem well modeled in laws and theories, there is much that escapes comprehension, including aspects of the quantum level of reality. In the physics of complex systems, 'order and chaos nourish one another with a strange reciprocity' (Stoeger 1993, 224). The turbulence of flowing fluids is difficult to model in detail or to compress algorithmically. These problems only increase in biology, neurophysiology, psychology, economics, politics and sociology, where reality escapes all attempts to describe it in the law-like and rigidly predictable ways of physics and mathematics. Stoeger concludes that there is an enormous difference between using the language of laws of nature to speak of *scientific theories*, which are always partial and limited, and using this same language to point to the relationships, processes and causal interconnections of the *natural world itself*.

A second, related question concerns the function of the laws of nature: Do they *prescribe* the way reality behaves or merely *describe* it? They certainly describe the behaviour of the natural world in certain circumstances and attribute this behaviour to particular causes and influences. But do the laws force or constrain the behaviour? While it is common to assume that they do, Stoeger argues that the laws cannot be said to be the source of the behaviour. They simply model or describe it. Of course, one reason why the laws of nature have been assumed to be prescriptive is that they were originally thought of as God's laws, governing the physical world as God's commandments govern human conduct.

Stoeger sees the laws of nature as human

descriptions of observed regularities: ‘In a way, saying that something is a ‘law of nature’ is simply a way of indicating that it is so fundamental to the description of the detailed workings of physical, chemical or biological systems that it never is observed not to hold when those systems are properly isolated and simplified and certain conditions are fulfilled’ (Stoeger 1993, 225). There is no reason to assume that the law is the *cause* of the regularity that is observed. It is a description of the regularity and of its fundamental character.

There are times when a source of behaviour is found to be grounded in the next level of physical process and structure, as when the laws of chemical reactions are explained at the level of atomic structure. These deeper explanatory connections can provide intermediate, detailed descriptions that causally link phenomena that had seemed unconnected, but they never explain completely why reality is the way it is: ‘Rather, they explain that, since it is this way, it has to have these relationships with what appear to be more fundamental realities’ (Stoeger 1993, 225). The models give the appearance of imparting necessity, but this apparent necessity does not come from the models, but is hidden in the observed entities and their regularities. The ultimate source of the regularity we observe is not the model we articulate. The model itself does not tell us why this model holds and not some other. While the theories and laws of nature can describe reality well and point to intermediate causal connections between different levels of reality, they do not prescribe reality. They do not cause it to be the way it is.

The third question concerns the independent existence of our models and laws: Do they have an existence outside our minds? Are they more than our approximations of what is manifest in the physical phenomena being observed? Stoeger is opposed to the Platonic view that would give these laws an independent and pre-existing reality. He finds no scientific or philosophical reason to see the laws of nature as constituting an underlying plan or

pattern of physical reality: ‘The most we can say is that there are regularities and interrelationships in reality as it is in itself—a fundamental order—which are imperfectly reflected in our models and laws’ (Stoeger 1993, 221). These models are in some cases highly successful, but they remain imperfect and limited. The models represent in an idealized way the structures and relationships between the phenomena under study, but they always leave a great deal out:

It is an illusion to believe that these incredibly rich representations of the phenomena are unconstructed isomorphisms we merely *discover* in the real world. Instead they are *constructed*—painstakingly so—and there is no evidence that they are isomorphic with structures in the real world as it is in itself (Stoeger 1993, 216).

Our scientific models are the result of imaginative and conceptual abstraction guided by continued observation and experiment. There is no justification for the idea that they correspond in a direct way to the entities, structures and relationships of physical reality as it is in itself.

This whole line of argument means that there is a need to distinguish between two possible meanings of the laws of nature: ‘We may mean the regularities, relationships, processes and structures in nature: (1) *as we know, understand and model them*; or (2) *as they actually function in reality*, which is much, much more than we know, understand or have adequately modeled’ (Stoeger 1999, 130). The laws of nature as we know them are provisional, imperfect and limited, and not well equipped to deal with important areas of life, including not only the metaphysical, but also the mental, the interpersonal, the aesthetic and the religious. The existence of parts of reality that defy scientific analysis, such as personal relationships or deeply held values, is an indication, not that these phenomena are illusory, but that the laws of nature, meaning the natural sciences as we know them, do not model or describe central aspects of reality (Stoeger 1999, 134-5).

This clarification has important consequences for a theology of miracles. It means that a marvelous manifestation of the Spirit, such as an act of healing, may take us beyond the laws of nature understood in the first sense—as our limited models of reality. But it may not be beyond the laws of nature understood in the second sense, as the relationships and processes that function in reality, which are more than we have fully understood or adequately modeled. And, of course, all of these patterns of relationship and causality that escape our present models are, theologically, secondary causes. This opens us the possibility that miracles may occur through a whole range of secondary causes that our current science cannot model or cannot model well.

#### *A Theological Approach*

Johann Baptist Metz offers a further insight into miracles by insisting that they function symbolically. They are not only signs but also mediations of the coming Reign of God. They display the Reign of God as ‘actually and effectively present’ (Metz 1975, 963). Metz approaches miracles from the perspective of human intersubjectivity. The miracles of the Gospels are not the reports of detached observers, but the testimony of believers. They are of their very nature signs, signs that bear on salvation. It is of the essence of miracles that they are attested to by those who are subjectively affected by them. Within the dynamics of faith, they contain a promise and a call. A miracle does not compel assent. It is not experienced in the way of the methodical observation of the natural sciences. It is a sign that summons a person to commitment to the way of the Reign of God.

Rahner’s approach is similar. He sees a miracle as a sign and manifestation of God’s salvific activity in revelation and grace. It is a manifestation in historical tangibility of grace that is addressed to specific persons. Miracles are specific, directed towards particular addressees: ‘They are not *facta bruta* but an ad-

dress to a knowing subject in a quite definitive historical situation’ (Rahner 1978, 258). A miracle occurs in a theological sense when someone experiences God’s self-communication in a particular configuration of events, in such a way that God’s self-communication participates immediately in the event. In such a miraculous event, God’s self-communication comes to appearance and witnesses to itself (Rahner 1978, 261). It is a wonderful call of God in and through specific events.

What is needed to experience the miraculous, Rahner says, is ‘a person who is willing to allow himself to be called in the depths of his existence, who is free and open to the singularly wonderful in his life’ (Rahner 1978, 263). The recipient needs a willingness to believe, to have eyes to see and ears to hear. Such a person keeps alive a humble and receptive wonder in the concrete events of her existence. She can find in historical events a call from God and be empowered and obligated by them to a historical dialogue with God. This is, after all, the Gospel presupposition for a miracle: ‘Your faith has made you whole.’

Rahner suggests the idea proposed here, that we can do without the notion of miracles violating the laws of nature. He points to the multi-layered nature of our experience of the world. The more fundamental levels of reality are subsumed into the higher without violating what is proper to the lower but becoming something new. So the physical is subsumed into the chemical and the biological, and in us the material, chemical and biological is subsumed into human freedom, without losing the integrity of the lower levels. Rahner sees something analogous happening with regard to God’s action in the world. The natural world, with its processes and laws, is created by God as part of the process of God’s self-bestowal to the world. It is not that God creates a world that is other from God so that, in order to communicate, God needs to intervene in the world from time to time. Rather the natural world, with its processes and laws, exists within God’s one act of self-bestowal. The laws of nature are part of God’s own self-

giving. They are an element within grace (Rahner 1978, 261). God does not need to break these laws or overturn them in order to communicate to human persons in specific circumstances. The natural world with its laws is the means of God's self-revelation. God can give marvelous signs of grace to God's people without violating natural laws.

Rahner's thought here can be further developed by the distinction Stoeger makes between the two meanings of the laws of nature. It is not simply the natural world as our theories model it that is the vehicle for God's self-communication. It is the far more mysterious world of nature itself, much of which is beyond our understanding and modeling, which is the vehicle of God's self-manifestations. And, in terms of Aquinas's theology, this is all the world of secondary causes. If a miracle is a wonderful manifestation and sign of God's grace, there is every reason to think it can take effect in the natural world, some of which is beyond our modeling, but which has its own God-given integrity as a world of interacting secondary causes. God's grace takes effect in a way that fully respects the integrity of nature at the physical and biological level as well as at the level of human freedom.

This line of thought suggests that miracles are marvels of God's gracious self-communication that occur in different ways. Some may occur at levels beyond the laws we know at present governing physics, chemistry and biology. A person suffering from cancer might pray with her community for healing from a cancer and find herself miraculously restored to health. This need not be taken as God act-

ing in an interventionist way without secondary causes. It may well be God acting in and through secondary causes that we do not fully understand. It may be that science will one day understand more clearly how common prayer, or human solidarity and love, can sometimes contribute to biological healing. Other miracles may occur in ways that are consistent with contemporary science. A person cured from illness, in a way that science can explain, who finds God providentially at work in this cure, so that it becomes for her a call and address by God, might well see this as a miracle, a wonderful manifestation and sign of the Spirit of God. A person might receive, as a gift, the capacity to make peace in a damaged relationship and experience this as a miracle of grace. Such events do not impact on any known law of nature, but they are marvelous manifestation of the Spirit.

The proposal I have made is to extend Aquinas's view of God's respect for secondary causes to suggest that we might be able to think of God working consistently through secondary causes, even when God works miracles in our lives. This puts me in the company of Pope John XXII. When Aquinas's canonization was being discussed, the paucity of miracles was raised as an objection, and the pope is said to have replied that every question Thomas Aquinas answered was a miracle (Tugwell 1988, 259). Certainly, Aquinas's body of work, the Spirit-led expression of his faith, hope and love and the integrity of his commitment to truth, constitutes a miracle in the sense proposed here, as a marvelous manifestation of the Spirit.

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It seems to me that many educated people in the Western world view religious belief with a certain wistful wariness. They would like some sort of faith, but feel that it is only to be had on terms which amount to intellectual suicide. They can neither accept the idea of God nor quite leave it alone. I want to try to show that although faith goes beyond what is logically demonstrable—and what worthwhile view of reality does not?—yet it is capable of rational motivation. Christians do not have to close their minds, nor are they faced with the dilemma of having to choose between ancient faith and modern knowledge. They can hold both together. Revelation is not the presentation of unchallengeable dogmas for reception by the unquestioning faithful. Rather it is the record of those transparent events or persons in which the divine will and presence have been most clearly discernible. [...] The laws of chemistry are always operative, but their nature may most clearly be perceived in those well-chosen and contrived events we call experiments. God is always present and active in our world, but it may well be that he is most clearly to be seen in the particularities of what the Judaeo-Christian tradition calls salvation history. That history is exceptional in the clarity with which the divine can be recognised through it, not in an implied absence of God from other times and places. The need to seek God where he can most clearly be seen has the consequence that the unique is not to be excluded from our consideration.

—John Polkinghorne (1994), *Science and Christian Belief. Theological Reflections of a Bottom-up Thinker*, London SPCK, pp.5-6.

# GENETIC SCIENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF FREE WILL

DIANA CARRIGAN

**T**HIS PAPER WILL consider the implications of genetic science for the Christian understanding of free will. The notion of humans as created in the image of God, with freedom to cooperate with or reject God's vision for the world, is essential to Christian spirituality, ethics and mission. Genetic determinism would challenge the very reality of such free will. Consider for example the following dilemmas:

- Is a religious vocation (which requires voluntary surrender of many freedoms) a genuine choice, or just the result of genetic predisposition to religious interpretations of experience, combined with familial and cultural factors?
- Would the presence of a gene predisposing one to a homosexual orientation negate the understanding within some Christian traditions of homosexual acts as intrinsically morally disordered?
- Does a genetic basis for behaviours imply that attempts to reform societal structures which contribute to poverty and crime be abandoned in favour of genetic manipulation either directly in the germline of those in affected groups, or through selective breeding initiatives?

It is the contention of this paper that whilst genetic science may help illuminate human nature; it does not undermine the Christian understanding of free will. Human freedom can be defended, because our nature is more than the sum of our genes. Our actions, whilst sometimes culturally or biologically driven, can still result from conscious volition rather than habit or passion. Hence we are moral agents, capa-

ble of responding in love and to love without seeking advantage in doing so.

The belief that genetic science precludes a Christian understanding of free will can arise on two grounds. One is the inaccurate extrapolation of the science of genetics to posit complete biological determinism in human action. The second is inaccurate understandings of free will, which assume either that freedom is complete, rather than within creaturely restraints; or else freedom is illusory within the inexorable workings of divine providence. Drawing on science, philosophy and theology, this paper will describe and dispute these inaccuracies; and argue that the exercise of free will in the construction of a moral, responsible and cooperative world is the fulfillment of our genetic capabilities, not an achievement in spite of them. It will conclude with some positive implications of genetic science for the Christian who wishes to transcend selfish, vengeful or aggressive impulses so as to better imitate Christ and promote the Kingdom he preached.

## *Genetic Determinism: Scientific Claims*

The rhetoric of genetic scientists regarding free will covers a philosophical spectrum. At one end, humans are seen as robotic slaves to our 'selfish genes'<sup>1</sup>, that is the product of unconscious genetic mechanisms over which we have no control or the unknowing hosts of parasitic memes that manipulate human behaviours to serve only their own interests. At the other end, humans can 'consciously deflect the processes of natural and cultural selection in

order to develop and practice public virtues<sup>2</sup>. Scientists labeled variously as sociobiologists, evolutionary psychologists, or population geneticists routinely consider the existence of free will by looking at evidence such as behavioural traits in animal populations (particularly primates), twin studies, or the results of medical neurobiological intervention on behaviour, as for example in use of artificial neurotransmitters to manage mental illness. In formulating conclusions they may speculatively apply evolutionary logic, and posit the existence of genes or gene clusters to explain correlations between familial identity and patterns of behaviour<sup>3</sup>.

Typical conclusions regarding whether humans genuinely possess self-control find there *may be partial* determination by genetic factors. For example, twin-studies:

...compared correlations on locus of control between monozygotic and dizygotic twins raised together or apart. Their results suggest that genetic factors explain more than 30% of the variance in both life direction... and responsibility (beliefs about how responsible people are for misfortunes in their lives).<sup>4</sup>

Similar conclusions are found for particular behaviours assumed to involve personal control, such as smoking and alcohol use. For example, a literature review in this area reveals:

When grouped together, genetic factors account for between 36% and 56% of the variance of 'polysubstance' use (Swan, Cardon, & Carmelli, 1994)...[However] the precise degree of genetic-environmental contribution to personal control and health behaviors remains unclear (Rose, 1995). Finally, the phenomenon of social dominance observed in a number of animal species (e.g., Koolhaas & Bohus, 1989) may be a genetic link to the human desire to exert control and socially dominate others (Fiske, 1993).<sup>5</sup>

Sociobiologists such as E.O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins and Robert Wright present both altruism and immorality as manifestations of genetic selection, whilst the philosopher Michael Ruse posits objective values as a col-



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lective illusion fostered by our genes<sup>6</sup>. Consider recent headlines such as 'Cheating husband: Blame It on His Genes?'; 'Is There a Gene for Compassion?'; 'Is Prejudice Hereditary?'; 'A Scientist Weighs the Evidence That the X-Chromosome May Carry a Gene for Gayness.'<sup>7</sup> Problems arise when such speculations are reported as scientific fact, either by scientists themselves or by the media.

#### ***Genetic Determinism: Scientific Critique***

Strong criticism of genetic determinism comes first from science itself. If the question is, 'Does the available scientific evidence actually tell us that our genes determine our behavioural, emotional, and cognitive characteristics?' the prevailing scientific opinion is no; because of the methodological drawbacks and interpretative biases in linkage and twin studies, and the evidence of complexity found in neurobiological studies of gene regulation.<sup>8</sup> There is also no support for the common misinterpretation which takes a claimed linkage between gene and behaviour to mean the behaviour is unalterable—as in studies for alcoholism and homosexuality like those cited above—such that neither 'personal choice or societal conditions contribute to the characteristic.'<sup>9</sup> There is insufficient unambiguous evidence to support genetic evolution of behaviour, as this is based on:

1. Evolutionary logic supported by casual observations or statistical data.
2. Behavioural analogies and comparisons with animals.

3. Statistical analyses of data generated by non-experimental research methods.<sup>10</sup>

Physical traits whose genetic origin is uncontested, such as eye colour or ear shape are impervious to environmental change outside their intrinsic genetic range. However the experimentally well-established ability to dramatically and permanently alter behaviours such as psychotic behaviour, cooperation, aggression and mutism via operant conditioning<sup>11</sup> or cognitive intervention<sup>12</sup> argues against their having a purely genetic origin.

Indeed, freedom to choose behaviour is arguably a predictable consequence of evolution. Some are 'strangely determined to take genetic and social explanations as alternatives instead of using them to complete each other'<sup>13</sup>. However, proponents of cultural evolution claim that it is not particular moral judgements, but rather the capacity for morality which is the product of natural selection; and through communication of cultural information with language, tradition, education, and social institutions it is possible to arrive at the altruism of the Good Samaritan or the life of Mother Theresa, for which 'covert self-interest or the expectation of future reciprocation or social approval' (the standard explanations of group selection by sociobiologists) are simply unconvincing.<sup>14</sup> To suggest biology is destiny or identity neglects the polygenic and interactive nature of phenotype, neglects the role of the wider environment in gene expression, is reductionistic and ignores top-down causality in our 'distinctively human whole which is more than the sum of our parts'<sup>15</sup>, and ignores the emergence of behaviour and self-concept via language, culture and interpersonal interactions.

The biologist Shaw goes further in making a case for human choice beyond biological imperatives. From a basis of the evolution of brain function, he argues, no clear biological explanation exists for:

1. a motivation to avoid limbic system rewards of behaviour without ultimate selfish purpose;

2. the existence of true unselfish religious altruism observed in many people of faith, in spite of the obvious reduction in genetic fitness which should result from this type of behaviour;
3. the sense of guilt and need of redemption or divine approval felt among many humans;
4. the energy spent by many in the relentless pursuit of a supernatural God.'

He concludes that no current better explanation than a supernatural one exists for these phenomena.<sup>16</sup>

The language of sociobiology can contribute to the false impression of genetic determinism. On hearing Dawkins' highly influential 'selfish-gene' terminology, one can forget it is only a metaphor, since genes have neither a self nor emotions. It is taken out of context to become a paradigm reflective of competitive social values, more than of science. Sociobiological arguments frequently ignore the distinction between evolutionary and vernacular egoism, the conscious individual self-interest that overrides natural or cultural selection, by using language which personifies genes as independent active agents capable of personal selfishness.<sup>17</sup> Whitehead's 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' is commonplace: that is 'the tendency to organize knowledge in terms of abstractions and then to reach conclusions and apply them to the real world as if abstractions and reality were the same thing.'

<sup>18</sup> No animal computes itself only from its DNA, but is the unique consequence of its developmental history. 'Not only theologians and philosophers, but also practicing geneticists, reject the notion of the selfish-gene metaphor as nonsense...attempting to interpret all the glorious complexity of the natural world as the unconscious product of natural selection operating at the level of the gene, is widely and severely criticized.'<sup>19</sup>

Another broad strand of criticism of genetic determinism from within the scientific community comes from those who challenge the ideological lens through which evidence

is interpreted. For example Wilson, the father of modern sociobiology, presumes genetic coding for aggression, allegiance, altruism, conformity, ethics, genocide, indoctrinability, love, male dominance, the mother-child bond, military discipline, parent-child conflict, the sexual division of labour, spite, territoriality, and xenophobia. Fellow-scientists challenge the scientific content and rigour underlying these presumptions, particularly that these constitute a universal human nature, that conclusions can be extrapolated from animal to human societies, and that social traits are the expression of specific genetic structures, when 'there is no direct evidence for the existence of such structures'<sup>20</sup>; however they also condemn the social Darwinism which is Wilson's philosophical lineage. According to this deterministic view, 'people of different races, genders and sexual orientation are born different, and there is nothing to be done about the inevitable disparities in wealth and status between them.'<sup>21</sup> Such determinism reduces culpability but at a price of lessening human dignity.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, many feminist scientists suspect the validity of sociobiology 'despite its pseudoscientific trappings', and scrutinise its interpretation of observations for ideological bias, as in Hrdy's refutation of the axiomatic assumption of female coyness and male promiscuity.<sup>23</sup>

Some argue that those who espouse in the name of science, for example, the existence of genetically based intellectual inferiority and increased criminal tendencies for dark-skinned people; have a political bias exposed in the source of their funding and ideological roots. The financial sponsor of the major neo-hereditarian theorists has been The Pioneer Fund, which dates from the 1930s when it was founded by members and supporters of the American Eugenics Society. The resurgence of such notions favours those who wish to avoid expensive government activism to address the problems of poverty, given that the overwhelming majority of the poor are non-white.<sup>24</sup>

### *Christian Understanding of Free Will*

While all Christians might assert that people have free will by the grace of God, the nature of this freedom is by no means uniformly understood. Theology of free will starts with the Genesis reference to humans as 'imago Dei', taken to refer to 'particular traits such as rationality, moral agency, or the capacity for love'.<sup>25</sup> Free will flows necessarily from this, as humans are 'created beings capable of understanding (to some degree) their own nature and their place in the scheme of things entire; creatures moreover that were fit to be loved by God and to love Him in return and to love another. But love implies freedom... For God to create beings capable of loving Him, therefore, it was necessary...to risk the possibility that the beings He created would freely choose to withhold their love from Him.'<sup>26</sup> However, Genesis does not imply humans possess the same degree of freedom as God does. God's activity described in Christian scripture requires no more than will, but no amount of willing on a human's part can change chaos to an ordered universe, nor a tempest to a calm sea. The freedom of creatures is within the limits of this cosmos' natural order in a way fundamentally different to their creator. Genetic influences on behaviour do not disprove this freedom any more than all the other physical forces limiting or obstructing the human will.

A different conflict with Christian understanding is predestinarianism<sup>27</sup>, which holds that free will is an illusion, as human fates are already known and hence determined by God. The classic Catholic understanding of divine Providence rejects this equation of God's governance or knowledge with determination<sup>28</sup>, and asserts the possibility of refusing to cooperate with God's will for the world as a human freedom, not a damnable fate God would ever predestine<sup>29</sup>. Such traditional or orthodox Christian theology, as well as the newer open or process theologies, assumes that love determines the essential form God's power takes in the universe. Process and open theists re-

ject 'the notion of God as all-controlling, as the sole determiner of everything that takes place in the universe', and further, the idea God *can* foreknow the free, contingent future<sup>30</sup>. They assume 'God relates to the creatures in ways that respect and preserve their integrity. Consequently, God cannot prevent, negate, or undo their decisions and actions. In a world of genuine freedom, then, actions have consequences, and not even God can cancel or reverse the decisions others make'<sup>31</sup>. Traditional theology would agree with God's respect for human freedom, though declare this a matter of God's will, not a consequence of an inability to act.

Christians who believe all eventualities including their own impulses are the will of a benign Providence, may indeed have their faith challenged by findings of genetic science that underline the radical inequality of human nature. This picture of the operation of the world, however, does not include genuine free will on the part of humans as described above: a free will which is implicit in creatures with the capacity to love. Another, more reconcilable picture, is of the 'natural indeterminism' of the universe; where a given state of affairs can have more than one outcome and result neither from divine nor human willing. Providence may indeed be held to sustain all things by continuously holding 'the elementary particles in existence' and supplying them 'with their causal powers'; but does not necessarily decree the outcomes of their 'swerves in the void'<sup>32</sup>. Every particular evil need not have a purpose nor result from a choice: rather God allows 'His creatures to live in a world in which many of the evils that happen to them happen to them for no reason at all.'<sup>33</sup>

***Reconciling Free Will with Genetic Influence: Philosophical, Scientific and Theological Insights***

Arguments can be found from philosophy, science and theology which support the idea of free will within creaturely limits, even allow-

ing for genetic influences on behaviour. Philosophers argue free will is irreconcilable with any 'determinism' discovered by science only if such determinism is construed as 'necessitation'<sup>34</sup>, which is a metaphysical belief rather than a scientific postulate, as long as agents retain 'the power to refrain from acting..on will'<sup>35</sup>. This does not deny the possibility of mitigation of responsibility by forms of unfreedom (eg addiction, compulsion, impotence) or social conditioning of the character or will; however 'no sum of influences amounts to a cause.'<sup>36</sup> Humans are not passive stimulus-response mechanisms but able to envisage novel possibilities and decide deliberately and responsibly amongst alternatives, even to well-established habits where 'changes are not easily made, but they can occur if a person seeks a supportive context, as twelve-step programs for alcoholism have shown.'<sup>37</sup> Case-studies of adoption amongst other examples suggest 'the autonomy of choice is not a delusion, since in situations of extreme conflict between biological impulses ...we can transfer innate behaviour patterns from their biologically defined objects to individually chosen ones': for good as in adoption, or for ill, as in the case of the woman in war who survived by cannibalizing her own baby.<sup>38</sup> Humans 'are not alone in having desires and motives, or in making choices...It seems to be peculiarly characteristic of humans, however, that they are...capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are.'<sup>39</sup> Note that the freedom of will implied by the existence of such desires does not necessarily translate to freedom of action: just because one is unable to do as one wills does not mean one's will is not free. Hence the unwilling addict who keeps using drugs possesses free will, and is conscious of the struggle between her will to be drug-free, and her desire for a 'hit'.

Even were some explanations of a genetic basis for human behaviour to be valid, this in no way justifies the behaviour, or makes it inevitable. The common but unfounded assump-

tion that ‘*the mechanistic displaces the purposive*, and any mechanistic (or causal) explanation of human motions takes priority over, indeed renders false, any explanation in terms of desires, beliefs, intentions’<sup>40</sup>, means that knowing causal factors leading to people’s behaviours, we tend too readily to exempt them from responsibility. An example of this ‘naturalistic fallacy’<sup>41</sup> is presuming double standards are morally acceptable where a biological explanation exists, such as for ‘the greater proclivity towards sexual promiscuity among males and towards restraint among females’<sup>42</sup> or for mothers contributing ‘more than fathers to child care, hypothetically because maternity is more certain’<sup>43</sup>. Sociobiology seeks to understand morality in terms of gene-based selective advantage. But this does not mean that any moral behaviour which advantages the group must work by self-deception: such a view falls into the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, and confuses evolved, impersonal and unconscious biological altruism with cultural, personal, conscious morality. Sociobiology is in error where it describes humans as potentially but not naturally moral, for ‘basic human kindness may be as animal as human nastiness...Functioning societies may require reciprocal altruism. But these acts need not be coded into our consciousness by genes; they may be inculcated equally well by learning’.<sup>44</sup> Christian biologists point out that true human ethics might well be a later development of religion. Morality becomes the fulfillment of nature, not a rebellion against it.<sup>45</sup>

The ideas of sociobiology may be compared with theology of original sin. Both assert that humans have innate conflicting tendencies, among which we have only limited freedom to choose. But neither deny the capacity to ‘make moral judgements and establish social rules that channel our innate dispositions in constructive rather than destructive directions.’<sup>46</sup> What the resources of a religious tradition can lead to is a personal transformation that extends our genetic heritage. For ex-

ample, Christ teaches to ‘love your neighbours as yourself’ and even to ‘love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ (Mtt 22:39 and 5:44). This seems an impossible ideal if sociobiologists are correct that we have been programmed by our genes to favour our genetic kin and in-group, but to be aggressive toward others. The Christian tradition has recognized this ideal of love is not easily achieved; however, if love is ‘an extension rather than a denial of capacities present in our pre-human ancestors (such as empathy and parental care)’<sup>47</sup>, Christianity simply seeks to widen the circle of concern from kin to all people, by seeing them as brothers and sisters in the family of God. Nor does the presence of genetic influences on behaviour rule out the possibility of divine grace perfecting our nature, drawing it on to another stage unattainable via biological or cultural selection. For Christians morality ‘is indispensable: but the Divine Life, which gives itself to us...intends for us something in which morality will be swallowed up. We are to be remade. Morality is a mountain which we cannot climb by our own efforts... [but] it is *from* there that the real ascent begins.’<sup>48</sup>

#### ***Positive Contributions from Behavioural Genetics to the Exercising of Free Will***

Determination of our innate tendencies has positive implications for Christian understanding of free will, as it allows behaviour which may have been the product of evolutionary chance to be reassessed in a deliberate fashion.<sup>49</sup> Some insights from sociobiology include:

- Understanding human nature is easier if we understand biology.
- Free will must be exercised within biological restraints.
- Moral systems have a biological component.
- Our security and even our happiness depend on living consistently within our biological natures.

- Our social structures—government, education, economic institutions, and religion—work best when they take account of our evolved social natures.<sup>50</sup>

Sociobiology's insistence on the genetic components (not determinants) of human behaviour has been 'a needed if overstated corrective to the excesses of emotivism and pluralism that abound in ethics today...It is not that we are somehow 'free' of our genetic inheritance, not that we are completely 'controlled' by it; rather, we respond to it.'<sup>51</sup> Scientific knowledge of that inheritance helps formulate that response. For example, anti-drug vaccines in development<sup>52</sup> may respond to the genetically determined craving for a particular drug. However new drugs for which vaccines do not yet exist may still be sought out by those who have no ethical basis for their objection to drug abuse, founded on notions of what constitutes a worthwhile life. For this, the exercise of free choice on the basis of reasoned belief is still essential.

### Conclusion

Genetic science does not preclude free will, because proper interpretation of the evidence reveals only genetic influences on behaviour, not genetic determinants. This fits with the

Christian understanding of free will as real, but limited by our created nature; an interpretation supported by philosophy and science. Genetic science helps to understand this nature, but is not sufficient to encompass both questions of mechanism and meaning. It can give insight to failures of human cooperation such as child abuse, sexual harassment and intergenerational conflict<sup>53</sup>; not to legitimate these realities, but to better resist them. It can assist us evaluate better our moral feelings, impulses and actions, to critique whether their moral authority is not derived solely from emotional intensity or social custom.

Contemplative religion reaches the same conclusions: much of what passes as normal human love is ultimately carnal and selfish, or as Jesus tells us, even the evil give good things to their children and even the wicked respond to reciprocity, but *his* followers must love their *enemies*. However when genetic science debunks self-interest hypocritically disguised as love, it often also resists the idea of the genuine article existing. A Christian understanding in asserting free will points out that beyond 'the false comfort of sentimentality, or the false safety of cynicism'<sup>54</sup>, there is an alternative vision of what it means to do away 'with childish things... Still, now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greater of these is love'.<sup>55</sup>

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In the search for truth it is most important to guard against using words that we have poorly understood. Nearly all of the philosophers warn about it, but few take heed. Yet it does not seem so difficult when one is dealing with mainly physical subjects which are in the domain of the senses, of experience and of geometrical reasoning.

—Bishop Berkeley, *De Motu*, 1.

God our Father,  
 you endowed St Albert with the talent  
 of combining human wisdom with divine faith.  
 Keep us true to his teachings  
 that the advance of human knowledge  
 may deepen our knowledge and love of you.  
 —Opening prayer of the Mass of St Albert the Great.

# YOUTH MINISTRY IN A WORLD OF DIVERSITY

## *The International Research Project on Youth Spirituality*

PAUL McQUILLAN

This article is the text of a keynote address to the biennial conference of the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry (IASYM) held at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, UK in January 2007.

The research project came about at the suggestion of IASYM President, Nick Shepherd and was intended to source articles from IASYM members from around the world to outline the issues surrounding youth spirituality today. The articles presented for publication included two each from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom and a very valuable contribution from an African perspective.

An integrated analysis of this range of papers is a complex exercise. An overwhelming conclusion that can be reached from the articles is that the Christian message is in some danger of becoming extinct in the U.K. and Australia. Whilst there remains a more overt religious expression among United States youth, contributors also recognise the need to change the way we minister to the young in that country if we are to pass on the message of Christ. Similar problems are echoed in a different way, and in a different cultural context, in the contribution on African youth.

This paper utilises Inayatullah's causal layered analysis (CLA) framework to examine the way in which the world view of the young people impacts on how we present the reality of the Christian message. It will take the view that the metaphors and myths of Christianity, while essentially unchangeable, need to be reinterpreted and represented in a context appropriate to each of the youth cultures presented by the writers. It will examine briefly and comment upon the challenges this poses for youth ministry in each of the contexts presented.

The International Research Project on Youth Spirituality was intended to bring together the research of youth ministers of differing faith groups from around the world. In one way it has achieved this aim, with significant contributions from Australia, the United States and the U.K., with the backgrounds of contributors ranging from evangelical protestant to anglo-Catholic and mainstream Catholic. However, the lack of a voice, of whatever faith background, from the developing world is significant. Only Saneta Maiko<sup>1</sup> wrote from this background, albeit from his position as a student in the United States. He tried to bring to our attention the particular issues of African youth with regard to their Christian faith. His paper, unfortunately not able to be published, was in stark contrast to the others. He was not lamenting a lack of faith among the young but in fact counselling youth ministers how to work effectively in further developing an already strong foundation in faith.

Perhaps this highlights Berger's<sup>2</sup> suggestion that secularism and an overwhelming deference to individual choice are a peculiarly western phenomenon. Berger sees the majority of the world's population as quite different to the west. He perceives a clear reaction against religious belief being challenged and derided by our western society and our moral pluralism. Something as fundamental to humanity as religious belief, the myths and stories that explain life's origins and meanings and give a purpose to daily life provokes a reactionary response in many parts of the world when challenged by western secularism. In the very significant populations outside of Europe and the English speaking developed countries, religion, Berger believes, is at least resurgent if indeed it has ever been in decline. So in the majority of the world the challenge for youth ministry is surely still to provide spiritual support and guidance, but to a vastly different audience. Whether this difference will remain is another issue and I will address that to some extent towards the end of the paper.

Australia contributed two research



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projects. Tyson<sup>3</sup>, whose work I will expand upon later, challenges his evangelical church to examine what youth ministry targets and what it rejects or avoids. In his opinion, his evangelical church may be in danger of welcoming only certain types of young people. He questions his church and asks whether this is the result of a particular theological or cultural approach. Perhaps we all run the risk of being ossified in a particular tradition and unable to adapt to a changing world and a changing youth.

My own contribution with Eric Marx<sup>4</sup> took a more quantitative view of youth spirituality by means of a survey of Catholic high school students. While not a true longitudinal study, the two samples were taken four years apart in very similar types of Catholic high schools. While the samples are small and hence any conclusions must be nuanced, the potential conclusions are somewhat alarming. We wonder if the capacity to recognise and express spirituality by way of interpreting the experience of life in a spiritual way, is slowly being lost. Hay<sup>5</sup>, to whom I will refer later in the paper, believes that the capacity to relate to the spiritual, what he terms 'relational consciousness', is being steadily eroded in today's world. Our results seem to indicate that this could be so amongst today's young people.

The two papers from the U.K. are really one piece of research. Baxter-Brown<sup>6</sup> takes one interview of an extensive piece of research by Rankin<sup>7</sup> and expands upon it by reflecting on the complex social world to which his respondent, Suzi, relates. The story itself is not

in the Rankin paper but is taken from the more extensive book<sup>8</sup> he wrote about his work.

Rankin in turn attempts to summarise three years of work interviewing young people and a short book on the results into a conference paper. I will refer to his work and its significance later in the paper. It was always an impossible task, but one well worth both his effort as author and others as youth ministers in reading the result. It is an important work but the book itself and its conclusions are probably a more important resource for those in the field of youth ministry.

Wilkinson's<sup>9</sup> paper from the U.S. is again a quantitative piece sourced from a survey of young people on the streets in Ocean City, New Jersey. His conclusion, that few young people identify a 'spiritual experience' in their lives, is both at odds with but in some ways consistent with, the results of Marx and I in Australia. We found a much higher incidence of reporting but expressed a concern about a significant decrease in its level. Perhaps Wilkinson's most telling insight is his identification of the role of parents in transmitting faith and the negative image of Jesus that this may have helped to create in the young people he surveyed.

Myers<sup>10</sup> picks up on this crisis of faith in adolescence. While he recognises its existence he has a more optimistic approach, believing in a God who 'enters the lives of teens in order to suffer with them through the struggle of identity formation'. However, he challenges the Christian churches about the images of God they present. He believes these are simply not relating to young people and have the potential to turn them towards unbelief.

So in expanding upon the project I believe we can only start from where we are. In summary, the task is to draw together the strands of the significant contributions of youth ministers in a secular western society as they attempt to work with young people who are mostly alienated from the various churches they represent.

This paper will first highlight some of the

common and recurring themes among youth ministers working in our western society. Secondly, it will drill a little beneath the presenting issues, aiming to augment some of the quite deep analysis already in the papers. Finally, in what could be its most controversial section, it will suggest some future directions that might be taken up by those challenged to minister to youth.

### *The God Who Won't Go Away*

The very existence of the international project on youth spirituality implies that surely at least those working in youth ministry believe that young people are spiritual. Otherwise, if our writers were not researching and writing about something they believe exists, then they would have been exploring the uncharted depths of whether there really is such a thing as 'youth spirituality'. None chose to do this. All began, as I see it, from a clear belief in the fundamentally spiritual nature of humanity, and hence of youth.

Tyson writes of his broad experience of young people while chaplain at a large Australian high school. He suggests that there is no single youth spirituality but indeed a complicated spectrum of spiritualities. However, Tyson admits that the mainstream, the vast majority of young people with whom he worked, can be characterised as being comfortable within a consumer society based on individualism. He labels this group the 'hyper modern' and admits that their spirituality is largely unexpressed, and where it is expressed, it is certainly not expressed in formal religion.

From this large and somewhat diverse group at the centre he sees the far right as being a very small minority of fundamentalist church-goers comfortable with the church as it is. Wilkinson's work in the U.S. suggests that this is probably due to parental influence as does the extensive work of Flynn<sup>11</sup> and more recently Mason, Weber, Singleton and Hughes<sup>12</sup> in Australia. While the existence of a fundamentalist and loyal group may give

some youth ministers comfort, the longevity of their unquestioning commitment could be an issue if parental influence is indeed the driving force. Hughes<sup>13</sup> supports this view, suggesting that churches must work with whole family units in faith development rather than with individuals otherwise their work may not have longevity. At any rate, those working with this group of young people are not working with large numbers, so such work may not provide a 'solution' for churches if 'solutions' are defined by increased numbers.

To the far left of centre, according to Tyson, are the radical post secular groups. He suggests that these groups have the capacity to re-invent or dramatically change Christian spirituality. However, the changes may not be attractive to all of us since this group do not accept the starting points of an older generation. They demand that the church live what it preaches and they don't see that it is doing so. Until that happens churches will struggle to reach out to this group.

All of this poses the question, what is the starting point for youth ministers? Why do we do what we do? Before addressing that question specifically, I will suggest that, whatever our underlying purpose, we are addressing an area of basic human need by working in the field of spirituality. However, the definition of spirituality itself proves elusive, since there is no universally accepted definition of 'spirituality', and many of the writers in the research project assumed its existence without attempting to define the reality.

Myers and Wilkinson assume it has a great deal to do with God and a belief in Jesus, which at least in the public forum in the U.S. would appear to be the case. The U.S. is one of few countries, apart from perhaps fundamentalist Islamic regimes, where the President can publicly invoke God in support of his country. America publicly trusts in the Almighty. The fact that various countries may have differing interpretations of what this almighty allegiance might mean they prefer not to explore.

Philip Rankin interviewed hundreds of

young people over a period of three years in the U.K. He approached groups, and only approached those who had some 'ownership' of their space. That is they had been sitting in a park, or in a pub, and had settled down there. He asked them if they were prepared to answer a very simple first question, 'Would you perceive yourself to be spiritual?' then invited further conversation by asking 'What do you think the word spiritual means?'

Over many groups in places all over northern England, his request never met with refusal. They were certainly willing to talk, often at length, once given the opportunity. Yet, in the context of seeking to define this elusive concept, spirituality, Rankin's<sup>14</sup> work appears to search for the spirituality of youth by allowing his respondents to define it.

My own preference, and one I will follow in this paper, is to use Rolheiser's<sup>15</sup> approach, namely that our spirituality is our response to life. In other words, every human being on this earth has a spirituality, like it or not and recognise it or not. O'Murchu<sup>16</sup> is clear that human beings are spiritual people and have always expressed this through a worship that recognised a power or force beyond their every day existence. They did this, in the well documented case of Australian Aborigines for instance, for tens of thousands of years before the Christian era. Christianity, with a little over two thousand years of history, is a relative latecomer in presenting a set of myths and metaphors, woven within the life and reality of Jesus, that provide a way to understand the reality of our existence. Rolheiser defines our spirituality as providing for each individual a sense of who we are, our story or personal history and our hopes for the future. I will use that definition for the remainder of this paper.

Understanding spirituality in this way will, I hope, go some way towards addressing Myer's question in his excellent paper: 'Is the God we present big enough?' Both Rankin and Hughes, among others, would answer 'No', not if we are going to touch most young people. As O'Murchu says, mapping the real-

ity of the human condition through Jesus and his teaching is only one of many lenses through which human beings might look. We, those who work with young people, may be followers of Jesus, so of course we should use that lens, both in our own search and in helping that of others, but we have got to recognise that others may not choose to do so. We could then be challenged by the alternative spiritualities that young people and others embrace in their search.

Rankin's very significant work with young people in the U.K. highlights this dilemma. He concludes, as many in youth ministry have no doubt experienced, that young people are happy to mix Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, yoga, tree-hugging, candles, and new age ideas together and switch from one to the other quite readily. They seem ready to explore while less ready to use only one framework or indeed to be constrained by framework at all. Certainly, the message of Jesus and the traditions of Christianity could provide a coherent language that can draw all of this together. But Rankin is cautious about approaching this spiritual hunger via a religious framework. Many young people associate the term 'spirituality' strongly with religion and religion has negative connotations for them. Rankin suggests that this negative connection may eventually lead to difficulty in the future with even introducing a conversation about spirituality. He suggests it may in time produce a negative response. If we can't readily discuss 'spirituality' then we would be forced to begin our youth contact even one step further back from the Christian message.

#### ***Relational Consciousness—a Foundational Condition***

Religion has survived throughout human existence precisely because there is something about it that has survival value for our species. The capacity to be religious, or perhaps better, to express our understanding that we are only a small part of a large reality *and that*

*this reality has meaning*, is hard-wired into human consciousness. So runs Hardy's<sup>17</sup> hypothesis which, in more recent times appears to have been confirmed from a number of perspectives. Not least of these are the studies of the brain scientists, Ramachandran<sup>18</sup>, Newberg and D'Aquili<sup>19</sup> and Albright and Ashbrook<sup>20</sup> for instance, who confirm that human consciousness has a profound capacity for what we might term 'religious experience'. Hay would say this is better expressed as our capacity for experiences that some might interpret as being 'religious'. The functioning of the human brain confirms that these experiences are a natural reality within human consciousness. Ramachandran notes that the existence of this capacity is neither an argument for nor against the existence of God. It is simply recognition of the human capacity for experiences that transcend the everyday.

Such experiences were a reality for the early Christians. Johnson<sup>21</sup> believes strongly that much of the New Testament reflects a profound encounter of the writers with something real and powerful that imposes itself on them. They refer to both the spirit and to evil spirits in this way. For Johnson a religious experience is a 'response to that which is perceived as ultimate, involving the whole person, characterised by a peculiar intensity, and issuing in action.' (p. 60) So the path to evangelisation of the young could sound relatively straightforward. Could we not help them to understand Jesus by helping them recognise their own first hand experiences?

The simple answer is 'yes' but unfortunately there is more to it than that. As a researcher in religious experiences of young people and religious educator, I would appreciate very much if it were that simple. However, the human capacity for transcendent experience does not mean such experiences happen often nor that they are recognised.

The international researchers are a little contradictory on this point. Rankin does identify some level of 'experience' among young people but does not elaborate. Baxter-Brown<sup>22</sup> does so

and outlines one very profound experience for Suzi<sup>23</sup> that follows Johnson's definition almost to the letter. Wilkinson, however, finds quite a low level of religious experience among his respondents and my own research among small groups indicates a falling level of recognition of these experiences. Wilkinson associates his survey very strongly with 'religion' and I suspect negativity towards formal church has influenced his respondents, since the questions about formal religion were asked before those on experience. I record a much higher positive response rate than Wilkinson, albeit significantly lower than my own work four years previously, but there could also have been a religious bias in my own work<sup>24</sup>. Although I avoid questions on formal religion as much as possible, all of my respondents were in church schools, so the context of religion was all pervasive and indeed may have biased the results, given an increasing negativity towards 'religion'.

The pathway to religion via experience does seem fraught with some difficulty, given that researchers do not seem to agree on its intensity or even reality among many young people. It is even more so when we take into account Hay's<sup>25</sup> suggestion that the very foundation of human beings' capacity for such experiences, a capacity Hay and Nye<sup>26</sup> call 'relational consciousness' is being increasingly muted by a secular society based on the cult of individual choice.

'Relational Consciousness' is the capacity to relate to our day to day experiences in a meaningful way. First, to be aware of who I am. To experience the reality of my own unique being, my feelings, fears and the wonderful complexity that is me. Second to be able to relate to people. The capacity to be aware of the needs of other individuals, to recognise and appreciate their understandings, perhaps different to my own, but at least never identical. Beginning from my own personal awareness the consciousness keeps widening.

The third strand of relational consciousness is to rejoice in and appreciate the world which gives me life. The beauty of nature, the wonder of the myriad of creatures that inhabit

our spaceship earth. It was beautifully expressed by one of Nye's subjects. Looking at an ants' nest the child marvels at the different sense of reality there must be for a human observer and an ant, possibly unaware of this human presence. 'I wonder if they know I'm here,' she thinks. The capacity to marvel at our human presence in this vast universe is part of this third strand of relational consciousness.

Finally our capacity for relational consciousness allows us to appreciate 'the mystery' or our God, if that is how we wish to name the source of life. It is the realisation that we are part of a vast cosmos and an underlying belief that our part in it, small and insignificant though it may be, has meaning. We are part of a larger and meaning centred reality. This has been humanity's understanding through the ages. O'Murchu outlines how it is expressed for primitive peoples and time and again sees it expressed in symbol, worship and community. Different peoples but a similar need to find ways to express their relationship to 'the mystery' and to find meaning. Perhaps in some ways they were more enlightened than we are. Frankl<sup>27</sup> refers to this phenomenon as the 'will to meaning', the common search of all human beings.

Hay and Nye believe this capacity for relational consciousness is an essential pre-requisite that allows recognition of the types of experience that some would define as 'religious'. The types of experience that Johnson believes fired the apostles and the early church.

My own research is based broadly on both the work of Hay as well as Ahern's<sup>28</sup> extensive analysis of written accounts held at the Religious Experience Research Centre in Lampeter. Johnson and William James<sup>29</sup> before him, believe that the recognition of a power of force beyond the self that is in turn life-changing is fundamental to 'religious' experience. However, Ahern suggests there are probably a range of such experiences set on a continuum of varying intensity. At one end is our day to day existence, within which we may hardly stop to reflect at all. At the other are those once or twice in a life time encounters, like Suzi's, that change

reality for us. In between are a range of 'aha' moments where we stop, perhaps only for an instant, to realise and reflect on some of the deeper questions of existence.

Hay<sup>30</sup> believes that, due to what he terms a 'learned embarrassment' within our western society, our capacity for these intermediary moments is being systematically eroded. We are simply losing our capacity for relational consciousness.

### *Children of the Deaf*

The best comparison I can make with young people in the west is with the CODA, the children of deaf adults. These children are born into a home where their natural ability to speak is never able to be either modelled or shared by their parents. Unless there is some outside intervention, these children will never learn to speak any language. Even with external intervention, their natural language, spoken at home, will always be signing, not speaking. Often they feel more at home with others in the deaf community rather than with the hearing community.

In public places they can seem uncontrollable, naughty children. Having never been corrected at home for making noise, screaming loudly, thumping the table, whatever extreme form they choose, they are simply unaware of how to behave. The hearing community finds them challenging to say the least.

The comparisons with unchurched families in the western world are obvious. Not quite as obvious is the inability many families have to foster the development of relational consciousness. The capacity to relate to God and to understand myself as God's creation is perhaps rarely spoken of at home. In a busy society where the thirty-second bed-time story is now a reality is there any time for parents to stop, wonder, marvel and share all of this with their children? If not, the children will probably follow their families in developing a mechanistic interpretation of the world. As Frankl<sup>31</sup> says, as soon as man began to see himself as creator, rather than as a creature of God,

he began to interpret himself in the image of his own creation—the machine. Hence the relationship with self and God is distorted. The capacity for relational consciousness is stunted and indeed, while surely not dead, since this is a natural human capacity, may atrophy through lack of development. By analogy, we have possibly all met someone capable of moving their ears, but for most it is a capacity lost generations ago through lack of use. Hay believes the same may be happening to relational consciousness.

Of even more importance for the children of the West is the consequent lack of capacity to understand the world around them and its people. Perhaps an example of their parents lack of development in this area is the current debate within the European Union on immigration, values and religious education. With increasing immigration from the third world, including Islamic countries, the people of 'old' Europe, including the U.K., are experiencing the strain of having strong believers in their midst whom they quite simply find difficult to understand.

Lanser<sup>32</sup> quotes a figure of only 2000 mainstream Christians attending Church in Amsterdam on any weekend against over 24,000 who attend what she refers to as 'immigrant churches'. It seems to be a shock to the sensitivities of modern Europe that those coming into the E.U. are believers. They really do believe there is a God, their Creator, and they live accordingly.

E.U. governments, frankly, are worried. Robert Jackson<sup>33</sup> outlines the urgency felt by educational leaders within the E.U. to have some form of civics education along with multi-faith religious education so that it can build appreciation of difference and tolerance of diversity. Of course, governments are also worried by what they see as fundamentalism. They fail to see that the suppression of relational consciousness by the enlightenment in the West has led to its own form of fundamentalism in which it is frowned on to speak about God publicly or to live and witness, at least in the public forum that people do believe in the underlying mean-

ing of their lives as part of God’s creation.

This is the challenge for youth ministry. We in the West largely minister to the children of the deaf. Unlike the real CODA, however, they are the majority, not simply a small minority group. We have to assist them past the fundamentalism of the enlightenment<sup>34</sup> to a genuine appreciation of the diversity of religious understanding and religious practice. This is vital for the future of our world.

***The Task of Youth Ministry***

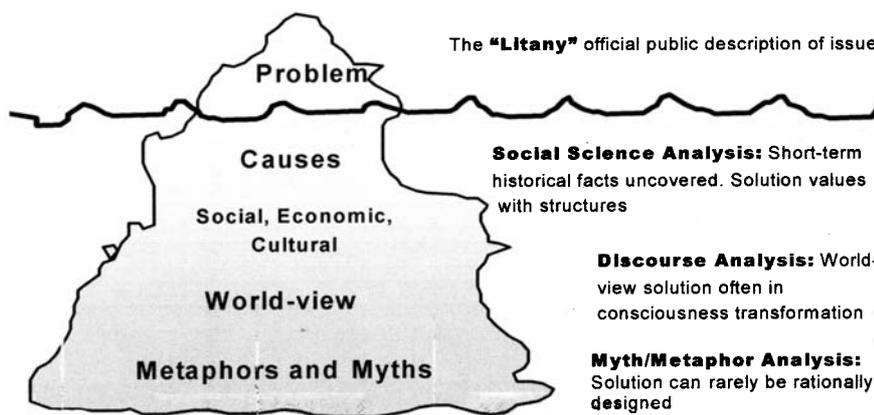
To summarise so far, I have looked briefly at some of the work of the writers in the International Research Project and suggested that the project is really writing about young people in a secular western society. Next I suggest that this western world is largely alienated from institutional church, regarding it as at best irrelevant. More importantly I have highlighted the increasing tendency to mute the individual’s capacity for that form of consciousness, ‘relational consciousness’, that allows us to experience the spiritual, transcendent dimension of our lives.

But, if Hardy and others are correct, this is impossible. Despite the pressure applied by a secular society, human beings *must* believe there is meaning. In Frankl’s terms we have a ‘will to meaning’. In the words of David Hay we know in our hearts there is ‘something there’.<sup>35</sup>

The research writers differ in their interpretations of these issues and their suggestions on how youth ministers might address them. Baxter-Brown<sup>36</sup> confirms the secularising influence of the enlightenment and finds that Suzi accepts a reality of life beyond this framework because of her profound experience of a power beyond herself. He makes specific suggestions on how youth ministers might adapt their approach in the light of this. However, as has been explained, an appeal to experience alone is fraught with difficulty. It also seems to me to imply that the ‘problem’ of youth ministry, if we define it as a problem, is about allegiance or conversion.

Wilkinson<sup>37</sup> highlights the significance of parent and family influence on the spirituality of young people and concludes that many of his sample appear to be influenced by the negative perceptions of their parents about God and grace. Certainly almost 60% of his sample believed any personal encounter with Jesus would be negative. He asked his respondents ‘what would Jesus say to you if you were to meet him today?’ Most replied that Jesus would tell them to ‘stop’ or ‘straighten up’ and would be disappointed with them. This in turn caused me to ask myself what could be attractive to young people in such a negative view of Christianity.

Inayatullah’s<sup>38</sup> causal layered analysis framework (below) can be a useful framework in further analysing our situation.



It would place both Baxter-Brown and Wilkinson's analysis at the level of social causes. That is, we know there is a lack of allegiance to institutional church (the 'litany level' of the issue) and that this stems from the secular, mechanistic approach to reality of the enlightenment, (the social cause). Although Wilkinson suggests that the world view of youth is largely determined by their families he does not suggest how we might examine this with youth. For me, engaging in dialogue around what Jesus might say were he to be with them betrays a latent desire to impose a particular world view on the discussion rather than to be open to having the discussion.

The Wilkinson response to what could be seen as a depressing picture for mainstream church wants to address this by evangelising more strongly. Hughes<sup>39</sup> sees this type of response as being driven by a particular theological perspective. The approach is to redouble our efforts to explain Jesus to young people so they will be clear what they must believe and why.

Despite what at first appears to be a different approach, I would place Tyson's<sup>40</sup> recommended way forward in a similar category. He is critical of the mass marketing approach, typical of evangelical youth ministry. For him, this may produce only temporary allegiance, one that makes churches feel good for a short time only. It targets the large middle ground of 'hypermodern' spirituality that forms the centre of the Tyson spectrum across which he identifies a wide range of youth spiritualities.

Tyson's recommendation is that ministry aim at the spiritually hungry margin, the left or red end of the spectrum dominated by a radical post-secular youth. He sees that imposing a stereotypical, Evangelical view of Christianity may not address the need for mystical encounter, relational richness and holistic integration for these spiritual searchers. At first glance this could be seen as addressing the need for a different world-view and even an openness to explore different ways to express the myths and metaphors of the Christian re-

sponse.

In many ways this is the case, and hence I need to nuance my earlier comment that the approach does not address the full depth of the issue. However, my sense is that he is driven by his own belief in the value of the non-conformist tradition of his particular approach to Protestantism. The underlying myth/metaphor driving the approach seems to be that this 'brand' of Christianity needs to be preserved, although in a different form and with a group many would not have identified in the first instance.

As a Catholic educator I can empathise with this. My own approach would struggle not to be the same. I want to pass on the myths and metaphors of my own tradition but I believe the only way to do so is to be open to their re-interpretation and re-expression in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Both Radcliffe<sup>41</sup> and O'Murchu<sup>42</sup> see a need to re-define our language, our very expression of the mystery of Jesus in the light of what we now know about our world and our cosmos.

It is a huge task. As but one example, Mantovani<sup>43</sup> asks what it means to talk of our 'first parents', still part of the Catholic tradition, when we have scientific knowledge that would make such a reference a nonsense? O'Murchu asks how we can go beyond a theology that Jesus came to redeem us from the sin of Adam and Eve, a theology that he believes diminishes the tens of thousands of years of aboriginal history and spirituality, to name but one group. Does the expression of a 'necessary sin of Adam to merit Christ's redemptive act' need to be re-thought? Do young people make any sense of a father who is prepared to send his own son to his death? There may be no simple answers, since addressing myth and metaphor in this way is radical and a task to be undertaken by theologians, not researchers.

So, theologically, the task may be to re-define and re-express the myths and metaphors of our Christian spirituality. Experientially it may be to lead youth beyond frameworks to

being able to meet their god and grapple with their own spirituality. To facilitate an awareness of themselves, the world and the 'mystery'.

Rohr<sup>44</sup> laments the paucity of churches in 'leading people into alternative transcendence experience'. He believes that when religion does not move to what he terms the 'mystical level' then the tendency of the churches is to focus on morality or doctrine. Rohr believes that such a focus serves to give 'ego a sense of bound aridness, of superiority, of control, of earning God's love'. For him, 'when you haven't really experienced mercy, or forgiveness, the generosity of God, you have to bolster it up with all kinds of heroic affirmations about the nature of God, and you can tell it doesn't mean very much'.

The challenge for the Christian churches and youth ministers is to get out of old paradigms and limiting faith proclamations and begin to speak to a new generation that yearns for spiritual experience and connectedness.

Myers<sup>45</sup> also pinpoints the paucity of a relevant language among young people in which they can speak about God. His theological perspective is insightful in taking us beyond a guided redefinition of world view and myth/metaphor to a conversation open to direction by the Holy Spirit. Myers reflects that while from a sociological perspective we may wonder what the need for this conversation says about the young, perhaps we need to ask what it should say to a theologian about God. Hughes<sup>46</sup> expresses it succinctly:

If God is at work in the world, then embedded in that (sociological) description should be some hints about how God is working.

Hughes believes that 'part of the task is to identify the activity of the Transcendent'. He believes that this activity has often surprised us and hints that it may well do so again. Yet, neither theologically nor sociologically is the question 'How?' easy to answer at the moment. If youth ministers and theologians cannot readily address the issue, there is still hope. It may be addressed by the young themselves.

Social researcher and commentator Hugh Mackay in speaking of Australian youth writes:

[Today's youth] are members of a generation who spend all day together at school, then get on the bus to go home and ring each other up on the mobile phone, or send a stream of text messages to each other. 'Where are you now? Who are you with?' they inquire solicitously, while their parents pay the bill for this flow of continuous contact. Then, when they arrive home, they hop on the internet to link up again in a chat room, or via email ... 'They are a generation that beeps and hums,' one of their fathers recently remarked, and so they are. They are the generation who, having grown up in an era of unprecedentedly rapid change, have intuitively understood that they are each other's most precious resource for coping with the inherent uncertainties of life. Their desire to connect, and to stay connected, *will reshape this society*. They are the harbingers of a new sense of community, a new tribalism, that will change everything from our old-fashioned respect for privacy to the way we conduct our relationships and build our homes. The era of individualism is not dead yet, but the intimations of its mortality are clear.<sup>47</sup>

Rankin also concludes that young people are crying out for relationships. Myers supports this, abhorring both what he terms a 'ministry of performance', aimed at keeping the young entertained, and a 'ministry of purpose', aimed at engaging them in meaningful activity. Both recommend a ministry prepared to walk beside the young, engaging in the search and journey together but not targeted at conversion, evangelisation or any other intrusion into their lives. Was this the way of Jesus? Did he try to measure success, other than by engagement together? Jesus surely engaged at the myth and metaphor level, hence the parables, hence the over one hundred and eighty questions put to him of which, according to Rohr, he answers only three.

### *Summary*

In a short paper I have attempted to place the papers of the International Research Project

in their context. They are sourced from a western secular society influenced by the enlightenment. This is not universal, and we do well to recognise that.

I have also suggested that those who work with youth must measure their success today by means other than numbers evangelised or even by how strongly the message of Jesus is presented. It should be measured by the depth of spirituality and the extent of openness of the minister who searches together with young people for new expressions of spirituality that will transform the world.

It is vital work. Given the capacity for young people to interact and communicate across the globe, this next generation, if Hugh Mackay is right, can change the world. Our task as youth ministers is to walk beside them with trust in the Holy Spirit that they can change it for the better. Environmentally, for the peace of all nations and the harmony of this global village, space-ship earth, we must hope they can.

Hughes sums it up in saying: 'Churches need to respond...by offering resources, rather than attempting to pass on a heritage.'

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## *Suzi's Story: The Transcript*

*The transcript that follows consists of eighty lines from an original transcript of 538 lines. People respond to what follows in different ways—some with a certain scepticism, some emotionally. It concerns a suicide attempt by a young girl. Text in italics is the researcher's words.*

S: When I was in my teens, and even younger, I had a very tough time. My mum died when I was nine. I was alright about that as far as I remember. I assumed she was in heaven and never gave anything else much thought. My dad married again when I was about eleven and things weren't great after that. My stepmother was awful to me, though my dad never seemed to notice. She hit me a few times but that was the good bit. She used to verbally abuse me all the time. I didn't have that great a confidence after my mum died but it got terrible cause of my stepmother. She was forever telling me how useless I was, how I was no good to anyone. I would have cried myself to sleep almost every night...anyway, when I was fourteen I started to think about suicide. It had got too much. I had no one to talk to, no one to help me so in the end I decided to put a stop to it. I felt so low, so useless, mainly because I had been told that I was so many times.

*Are you sure that you feel o.k. to talk about this?*

S: It is hard in a way, I still get emotional about it, but it's fine. Carrie's heard about this before anyway. I've been told quite a few times that it helps to talk about it and it usually does. I've talked about it so much sometimes I forget that it's even me that this happened to. It feels so unreal. I thought about it so much...at fourteen dying isn't something that most people give much thought to. And even less people think about what ways they can kill themselves! I have absolutely no idea why I decided it but I thought that hanging would be the best way. It would be instant and I wouldn't have to cut myself or anything like that. I set the whole thing up in the basement of the house on an evening when my family was out, rope and all. I didn't write a note or anything cause I figured they would know why, especially my stepmother. Anyway...there I was in my basement with everything arranged, standing on the chair and everything. I tried to put my head through the rope and I couldn't. Now you're probably thinking that I backed down, that I didn't really want to do it but that's not it. I was actually standing on this chair, trying to put my head through the loop and it literally wouldn't go through. I kept trying and honestly, I couldn't put my head through. I felt as though someone's hand was on the front of my head pushing against me so that I couldn't do it. It made no sense of course. I remember getting down and sitting on the seat for a while. I sat there thinking if I was doing something wrong, if I'd set the whole thing up. There was no space in my head for thoughts about what I was doing, was I doing the right thing or whatever. All I wanted was for this to work. Up I got and tried again and the same thing happened. I was just sitting on that seat looking across the room and this light appeared. I thought nothing of it but it got brighter and brighter until I was sure this wasn't anything to do with the electricity. I sat there a bit frightened really looking at this thing, not knowing to think, and in the middle of it I appeared. It was like watching myself on T.V. or something...

C:...this sounds weird every time I hear it you know!

S: It feels weird explaining it too!! It was weird being there...I was literally sitting watching myself stand up on the chair, trying to put my head through the rope and not being able to. The whole picture was getting clearer and next I could see this hand resting on my forehead, not allowing my head to go through. It was so scary but...I don't know...amazing at the same time. I didn't know what to think...kind of still don't...

L: Did you get up and try again?

S: I did actually. That was how much I wanted it to work. I knew I wouldn't be able to this time though, I just knew inside it wouldn't work.

L: What happened to the light and your cinema screen?

S: Once I realised that there was a hand there stopping me, it just started to fade away. The basement didn't get darker or anything...I don't know how to explain it...it wasn't a light that brightened everything up, it was something that was there

L: Are you making this up?

S: No way...I'd need to have some imagination to make this up! It really is what happened. It sounds crazy I know but honestly, I believe that God didn't want me to die, that there was a purpose for my life and this was the only way to stop me. That picture I saw, that was God's way of showing me that I wasn't going to be allowed to it...maybe the hand on my head was actually happening, maybe an angel or something was stopping me, I don't know. The picture might have been a metaphor or something...God's way of explaining what was happening in a way that I could understand.

L: How do you know it wasn't invisible aliens or something?

S: Are you serious?!! (Laughter!)

L: No not really but...I don't know...if what you say actually did happen, how do you know it was God?

S: I can't explain it...I don't know...I know...that's all I can say. After that I never felt unloved or useless again. No matter what happened to me I knew I was alive for a reason, even if I didn't know what it was I knew that I was valued by something out there. The only way I can explain it is when you are in love with someone...it might seem completely mad to everyone else, he could be the worst guy in the world but you love him, you just know inside that you love him. I'm just certain that it was God, that God was saved my life.

C: The question I have always asked is why God might come and save Suzi, but lots of other people commit suicide and God doesn't stop them?

L: I know, I don't understand either

S: The truth is that I don't either...I really don't...I can't know God's mind...all I know is that God came to me. Perhaps he does come to everyone but other people don't see it or don't listen, I don't know. I can't answer those things. I know it was God who came to me, stopped me ending my life, that's all I can say.

—Transcribed from Rankin, P. (2006) *Buried Spirituality*. Wiltshire, U.K., Sarum College Press.

# GOING TO GOD

CHARLES HILL

*Charles was a distinguished scholar, and long-time supporter of Compass. He sent these 'musings' as he called them about six weeks before he died 'in case we thought they had merit', but not to be included in Compass until after he had left us. Sadly, he died on Wednesday, April 11th, and we are missing him. We offer our deep sympathy to Charles' family. May he rest in peace.*

THE PHRASE is not mine, though the experience is (if one is not being presumptuous). Abbot Brian kindly wrote, 'I would like to spend some time with you before you go to God.' I had thought I should tell him of the prognosis, and request the prayers of the monks on the basis of our work together. I appreciated his readiness to 'cross the Ditch,' as he said, though urging him not to neglect the prior claims of his community.

Support like that, particularly at the early stage, meant a lot. I suppose I was still feeling singled out; proofing of Chrysostom's commentaries on Job and Ecclesiastes exactly at that time hit home—though, to be honest, I didn't fall to the former's anguished appeals, Why me? After all, I had left the biblical age a few years in my wake, and buried my parents and sister; it was my turn.

But I admit to being taken aback when the GP looked grave on receipt of the scan, and (without much warning) spoke of 'months, not years.' It was not that I regretted his directness—just had to get my mind around it. As I left the surgery that day, and ran into a parishioner eager to discuss adult education, I felt light-headed, and couldn't bring my brain to bear. Fortunately, when I got home, my wife didn't go to water; Marie is made of sterner stuff, as has been confirmed in the meantime.

So support was much appreciated, especially from family (even across The Ditch) and

friends. There was just the odd person who, when somehow acquainted with the facts (we preferred not to broadcast them), began looking at me askance as though now 'one of them,' no longer 'one of us.' I could concede that the difficulty lay with them, not me.

Acceptance, I found, eventually came fairly easily, especially to one without children. We had been reared on Grandma's Irish *obiter dicta*, such as, 'Two things you can count on: death and disappointment.' It took no great insight on my part to draw the comparison between my situation and that of a young mother or father presented with the same prognosis—and I found some such each time in the cancer centre. To theirs could properly be applied the word 'tragedy,' not to mine.

A sense of humour, mine and others', also helped. A catechist whom I had been teaching earlier in the year sent me a cartoon by Michael Leunig with the verse,

Use-by dates—they come and go,  
when it's yours, you're bound to know;  
life and love return anew  
as everyone stops using you.

I think I even began to enjoy being at the centre of attention, and even formed a picture of a blessed departure, propped up at home on pillows, with loved ones around, a peaceful and blessed demise. A'Kempis had said, remember, 'Few are improved by sickness,' and again, 'Sickness doesn't change a man: it

only shows what he is.’

‘Going to God,’ in fact, soon proved to be anything but peaceful and blessed. There was too much to be done. And not just an endless round of medical consultations, tests, procedures, ‘medical imaging’ of various kinds. There was all the tidying up to do, clearing the decks, trying to leave everything ship-shape and free of mess for others, updating a will, putting in last year’s tax return, disposing of one’s books to appropriate libraries, getting rid of a mountain of paper, casting off pre-loved clothing, ... This wasn’t what Job and Qoheleth regretted.

And, of course, this trimming the sails could be tiring and wearing, especially when one is ill. Support, again, was needed, and appreciated, as friends rallied around. There were ups and downs, hope and Grandma’s disappointment, times when things looked bright and times when bleak, times when one felt OK and times when flat on the back was the way to go. Fortunately, in my case chemotherapy was not a great trial; it had its rhythms, and one looked forward to getting good marks (if not release) periodically from the oncologist.

And then there’s the wear and tear on the carer. Even if a patient is mobile, there is a constant sense of the inevitable, where fun and hilarity are pretty rare. There are consultations and tests and clinics to attend most weeks. There are phone calls to take and visitors to entertain; the house has never been so busy. There are chores no longer within the capacity of the patient, and thus left to the carer. Though it has been said of some people that ‘they enjoyed poor health,’ there’s not much enjoyment in it for the carer; and fatigue can easily set in.

Where is God in ‘Going to God’? There is the temptation to read the face of God, if not do a querulous Job—the real one, not the plaster-cast Job of chapters 1 and 2. Is that closeness to God, or resentment? Perhaps a prayer of thanks would be in order for knowing ahead of time, when many people do not. Daily prayer in this condition profits from tighter



*Charles Hill was a teacher and author of books and articles on the bible, theology, the Fathers and spirituality. His articles were published in the journals Augustinianum and Orientalia Christiana Periodica, as well as in Compass.*

focus; ‘Thy will be done’ can be said with deeper commitment. The many offers of prayer from others are gratefully accepted. A Greek Orthodox priest friend sent me a lovely prayer for daily recital,

Holy Father, physician of the body and soul,  
heal us of all suffering, and restore us to health,  
by the grace of your divine Son,  
through the prayers of the Theotokos (Mary) and all saints.  
Amen.

How widely to spread the word of one’s condition, and appeal for prayer? We thought it better to lie low, avoid an early entry into the parish bulletin, and thus keep well-meaning enquiries to a minimum; things were busy enough. The parish priest twigged to it, and offered the rite of anointing, accepted at a later stage with gratitude; it is a lovely and consoling ritual.

‘There are now these three: faith, hope and love.’ An ex-student, on being given a direct answer to a direct question, chided me for being ‘matter-of-fact’ in relaying the details. But there’s no point in falling about, wringing one’s hands; if through life you’ve been living and writing and teaching the faith, this is not the time to go wobbly. Paul also laments those who ‘have no hope and without God in the world’—an awful condition at a time like this; I hope mourners at my requiem won’t reflect that desperation. We have such wonderful things to look forward to, if not able (like Chesterton)

to feel 'like a schoolboy going home for the holidays.' And then there's love, *agapê* (and hopefully *philia*, friends' love and loyalty), in place of Job's anger; and isn't that 'an everlasting love' from the one who has first loved us?

I'm obviously writing this before the end of the journey to God, while I have a clear head. I guess the time will come ('months, not years') when clarity will go missing. And yet it is then that 'going to God' will be at its critical stage, when one can only accept, not articulate. As a friend who cares for people like me observed, 'It's not death that's the challenge; it's dying.' How long to hang on, if one has a choice? Michael Leunig has a little prayer, 'God, give us strength. Strength to hold on and strength to let go. Amen.' Another friend, in a similar position to me, questioned the readiness of a family close to her to give permission to withdraw life-support when consulted by the doctors, insisting that she wanted

all the life there was to be had. Of course, she could have recited to me Dylan Thomas's verses to his father,

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at the  
close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the  
light.

I'm not so sure; I think I prefer Chesterton's serenity and detachment. I'm thinking also of Paul to his beloved Philippians, 'My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.' I suppose it depends on a lot of things—and Paul did hang on till the Vatican Hill, when he had no option. Chrysostom had no option, left to die on the pitiless Black Sea shore in exile just 1600 year ago this year. Jesus had no option; we won't all have an option.

Please God, whenever the passage, it will be (as once imagined) peaceful and blessed. Say a prayer for us all, if you would.

*Charles had academic qualifications in language, the classics, theology and scripture, including a doctorate in Biblical Theology. He taught at the Australian Catholic University. He worked on writings of the Fathers of the Church. He also assisted the National Catholic Education Commission and the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. He is mourned by many.*

## NEW RELIGIOUS BOOKS BY AUSTRALASIAN AUTHORS

### KEVIN MARK

**Connecting: Teenage boys, spirituality and religious education; Kath Engebretson; St Pauls; PB \$29.95 [9781921032271]; 218pp; 215x140mm; 2007**

Presentation of the findings of a four-year project examining the spirituality of Australian teenage boys, based on interviews with 1254 boys aged 15 to 18 years. Author identifies seven characteristics of the teenage boys' spirituality: A spirituality of hope; that is inspired by others; that may challenge narrow definitions of masculinity; that is found and developed in friendships; that exists in tension between individualism and social concern; that seeks reflection and is open to prayer; that has the capacity to know and experience God. Final chapter addresses the specific issue of the boys' understanding of and relationship with Catholic beliefs. Each chapter concludes with a summary and practical suggestions for religious educators. Foreword by Neil Ormerod. Tables; endnotes; references. Author is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the School of Religious Education, Australian Catholic University, St. Patrick's Campus, Melbourne.

**Ecology at the Heart of Faith; Denis Edwards; Orbis, USA, dist. by Rainbow Book Agencies; PB \$39.95 [9781570756658]; 158pp; 235x155mm; 2006**

Author has published numerous books and articles on the relationship between science and religion. His new book draws and builds on these to produce a 'user-friendly' account of the key ideas and themes of Christian ecological theology. Argues for a deeper exploration of central Christian traditions, interpreting them in the light of contemporary ecological understanding. Christian doctrines considered from this perspective include Creation, the Holy Spirit as Creator Spirit, the Incarnation, the Trinity, and Resurrection and the final transformation of all things. A further chapter considers Christian worship, spirituality and practice. Conclusion summarising the book; endnotes; index. Author is a priest of the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide, and teaches theology at the School of Theology of Flinders University, Adelaide. Previous books include *Jesus and the Cosmos* (1991) and *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (1999).

**Research Project on Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass: Final Report February 2007; Robert Dixon & others; Pastoral Projects Office, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference; Spiral Bound [no ISBN]; 87pp; 295x210mm; 2007**

Final report on a research project to discover the major reasons why some adult Catholics have stopped regularly attending Mass within the last five or so years. Following an introduction to the research and report, subsequent chapters present what is already known from previous research, the research method, the participants, results, and research findings. There are also commentaries by Professor Dean Hoge, Fr Richard Lennan, Dr Sandra Carroll, Fr Peter Williams and Bishop Gerard Holohan. Authors are Bob Dixon, Sharon Bond, Kath Engebretson, Richard Rymarz, Bryan Cussen, and Katherine Wright. Executive summary; notes on authors; tables; references; appendices. A printed version of the report can be purchased via <http://www.ppo.catholic.org.au>, or a pdf of the report can be downloaded free at <http://www.ppo.catholic.org.au/pdf/DCReport.pdf>

***Kevin Mark manages the Australasian information in the Global Books in Print database and is former religious publisher for HarperCollins Publishers.***

# PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

JULY—OCTOBER

*From the Fourteenth to the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year C*

Prepared by Michael Trainor

## PART ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE READINGS

The following is a brief overview of the readings of the Liturgy of the Word for major celebrations proclaimed while this issue of *Compass* is current. It focuses on the readings for Sundays between mid-July and late October, from the Fourteenth to the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year C. Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

**1. The First readings** have been collated with the theme of the Gospel in mind. While this might lock these readings into a particular interpretation, the power of these important readings should not be forgotten, especially as the Christian community and its homilist draws on their unique, ancient insights always needing to be celebrated. Two themes from these readings over this period concern wisdom and wealth.

- During this time of the year (August—October), several readings are drawn from that body of Old Testament literature called ‘Wisdom.’ These are found in our readings from Ecclesiastes, the Book of Wisdom, and Sirach—also called ‘Ecclesiasticus’. Wisdom was a central gift for the Israelite people, and reflected God’s wisdom and presence among them. These readings focus on several features of God’s wisdom reflected in creation and among human beings: The gift of wisdom itself (OT 18), communion with God (OT 19), the need for discernment (OT 22), interiority (OT 23), God’s concern for the poor (OT 30),

and the all-pervading nature of God’s Spirit (OT 31).

- A second insight comes from the prophetic literature (beginning in the 8<sup>th</sup> cent BCE with Amos, OT 19 & 26) and invites us to consider the use of wealth and the exploitation of the poor. This theme dovetails with appropriate passages from Luke’s Gospel.

**2. The Second Reading** is drawn from the letters of the New (or Second) Testament. Only two are from Paul himself. *Philemon* (OT 23) was written by Paul in the mid 50s to a Christian slave owner to welcome back his runaway slave, Onesimus. Though Paul presumes the institution of slavery, his letter invites a way of relating based on the Gospel and spirit of Jesus than social convention. Several other selections for the second reading give us a feast of passages drawn from letters written after Paul’s death and called ‘post-Pauline.’ These early Christian letters, though conventionally attributed to Paul, were written by one of his disciples: *Colossians* dated in the late 60s or early 70s (OT 18), reflects on the nature of Jesus and what he offers the Christian community. There are selections from two other post-Pauline letters. These are more explicitly about pastoral issues concerning Christian leaders and their communities: *1 Timothy* (OT 25-26) and *2 Timothy* (OT 27-30) are written to address concerns about correct teaching, fidelity to the tradition about Jesus and ministry stability. These letters written towards the

end of the first century CE indicate that the Christian community was entering a new era in its development.

**3. The Gospel readings** during August-October are taken from Luke's Gospel, and the section of the gospel dealing with Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Lk 9-19). Luke's gospel presumes an urban audience of c. 85 CE. The writer is keen that Greco-Roman Christians are able to live authentically in their world with a sense of authenticity in their union with Jesus. The journey narrative of the gospel (Lk 9-19) provides the evangelist with an oppor-

tunity to explore the main attitudes which disciples need in their following of Jesus in the journey of daily living. These attitudes are about possessions and wealth (OT 18, 23, 25, 26, 30) sensitivity to God's presence (OT 19), membership in Jesus' community (OT 20, 28), hospitality (OT 22, 31), mercy and forgiveness (OT 24), faith (OT 27), and confident prayerfulness (OT 29). All these discipleship themes provide a contemporary Christian community with ways of reflecting on the vitality of its own life, and celebrating various local expressions of discipleship.

## PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

**July 8—Ordinary Time 14.** *Is 66:10-14.* God's desire to comfort the disconsolate is tangibly and powerfully expressed in this beautiful hymn. *Gal 6:14-18.* Paul's desire of his total union with Jesus, even in suffering. *Lk 10:1-12.17-20.* Jesus sends his disciples on a difficult and, at times, unappreciated mission. *Theme—Union with Jesus.* Paul exemplifies the meaning of Christian living—union with Jesus that permeates his whole life to the point that it becomes a reflection of Jesus' own life. There are many examples of those who live this kind of life today. These might be celebrated.

**July 15—Ordinary Time 15:** *Dt 30:10-14.* Moses reminds the people that God's Word ('Law'), is accessible, personal and interior. *Col 1:15-20.* A powerful hymn to the Sophia-Jesus, celebrating his cosmic authority to reconcile all. *Lk 10:25-37.* A parable that subverts the traditional and expected patterns of preferential behaviour *Theme—Our World:* From *Colossians*, Jesus' presence imbues the whole universe. Therefore the world is good. This challenges the conventional commercial and industrial treatment of our world. It also invites into a spirit of reconciliation.

**July 22—Ordinary Time 16:** *Gen 18:1-10.* Abraham offers hospitality to unexpected and unrecognised angelic visitors, and is blessed.

*Col 1:24-28.* The writer encourages a disposition to make God's Word fully known, to teach through Jesus in all wisdom and bring others to genuine maturity. *Lk 10:38-42.* Luke offers us a snapshot of ministerial tension, to get all the work done or focus on Jesus. The encouragement is to focus on Jesus in the midst of life's concerns. *Theme—Hospitality.* A life of busyness and time of upheaval can leave us diving for self-survival. The readings (1<sup>st</sup> and Gospel) encourage a disposition of hospitality practically open to others and essentially focussed on God.

**July 29—Ordinary Time 17:** *Gen 18:20-32.* God is revealed as compassionate, forgiving and conversational. *Col 2:6-14.* The writer celebrates the communion that the baptised Christian shares with Jesus. *Lk 11:1-13.* This is Luke's insight into Jesus' teaching on prayer. *Theme—Communion with God.* Two readings (1<sup>st</sup> and Gospel) invite reflection on the centrality of prayer in our lives, as conversation with a God who is open. In a NT highpoint, *Colossians* presents Jesus as God's tangible expression in bodily form. Both themes are important and not mutually exclusive. They invite us into communion with God through Jesus.

**August 5—Ordinary Time 18:** *Eccl 1:2; 2:21-23.* The ancient wisdom-poet asks: What

is true Wisdom after all our labouring?. *Col 3:1-5,9-11*. The writer encourages our focus to be on Jesus. This brings about renewal. *Lk 12:13-21*. Jesus warns against a greed that forgets about what is most important, true life. *Theme—Wisdom*: We celebrate the gift of wisdom which God offers us, through this community and our union with Jesus. Wisdom is a gift necessary at a time when we seem concerned with other issues of justice, peace and well-being. What is the wisdom that this community needs today?

**August 12—Ordinary Time 19:** *Wisdom 18:6-9*. God invites the holy people of God to be blessed by divine wisdom. *Heb 11:1-2,8-19*. A beautiful and powerful narrative of the faith as lived by Israel's ancestors. *Lk 12:32-48*. Disciples are encouraged to be alert to God's coming. *Theme—Being Blessed*. We are blessed by God, who walks with us in faith as we journey through life. We are alert to God's presence around us which is revealed in this community and its elders.

**August 19—Ordinary Time 20:** *Jer 38:4-6,8-10*. The prophet suffers for his commitment to God and is imprisoned in a sewer. *Heb 12:1-4*. We are encouraged in life by those faithful witnesses of faith who have gone before us; we are encouraged to focus on Jesus the 'pioneer' of what it means to believe. *Lk 12:49-53*. Commitment to Jesus comes at a cost, which sometimes is difficult. *Theme—The cost of Fidelity*: Jer and Lk offer us two insights into commitment: Jeremiah finds himself in the local city sewer and Jesus teaches how commitment will even cause tension within families. The gospel does not predict what will happen, but is happening in Lk's households in the Greco-Roman world where commitment to the one God is costly that expects total allegiance to the god-king Caesar. Many examples abound in our local community of lived faithful commitment the give heart and strengthen us.

**August 26—Ordinary Time 21:** *Is 66:18-21*. God's vision for community. *Heb 12:5-7,11-13*. The writer's encouragement and reassur-

ance to those who suffer. *Lk 13:22-30*. The unexpected and unpredictable membership in Jesus' community of disciples *Theme—Community*: An important moment to reflect on the meaning of true religious community, to encourage inclusion and to identify those who might be excluded from our parish or community life.

**September 2—Ordinary Time 22:** *Sirach 3:17-20, 28-29*. An encouragement towards living humbly with our focus on God and others, rather than from arrogance. *Heb 12:18-19,22-24*. Acclamation of God's nature and ourselves as 'citizens' of the 'city of the living God. *Lk 14:1.7-14*. An story about honour and inclusive hospitality set in Lk's Greco-Roman world of social etiquette and status. *Theme—Eucharistic hospitality*. The Gospel offers an opportunity to celebrate the way the local community is inclusive, and expresses this liturgically. Who are those touched by this Eucharist? How does this Eucharist touch the local community, the nation, the world and cosmos?

**September 9—Ordinary Time 23:** *Wis 9:13-18*. This song celebrates Wisdom, God's gift is revealed in the world and known by human beings. *Philemon 9-10.12-17*. Paul encourages Philemon to welcome back his runaway slave, Onesimus, as 'a beloved brother.' *Lk 14:25-33*. The disciple is focussed on Jesus and nothing compromises this relationship. *Theme—Riches and poverty*. Luke challenges a world that sees possessions as a sign of divine blessing or favour. The gospel invites us to know a deeper wisdom celebrated in the first reading. Can we celebrate those local heroes, perhaps unnamed or unrecognised, who live by wisdom and from a sense of total commitment to God and God's community?

**September 16—Ordinary Time 24:** *Ex 32:7-11,13-14* Moses intercedes to God on behalf of the people. *1Tim 1:12-17*. Jesus reveals God's mercy; we live out of and reflect this same mercy to others. *Lk 15:1-32*. Luke's central parables about mercy and forgiveness. This is the heart of Luke's Gospel. Though tempted, don't shorten the reading. The elder

brother's conduct needs reflection. *Theme—Mercy.* Every Eucharist is a celebration of forgiveness and mercy. This gift, from God, is needed in our world today. Mercy and forgiveness rather than vindictiveness and enmity is encouraged.

**September 23—Ordinary Time 25:** *Amos 8:4-7.* The prophet names unjust practices that target the poor. *1Tim 2:1-8.* The writer urges prayers for civic leaders and the centrality of Jesus in the act of intercession with God. *Lk 16:1-13.* The steward acts to ensure that he will always be welcomed into village life. Acting judiciously brings acclaim to his master and a new appraisal. *Theme—Acting Justly.* The weak, poor and marginalised are victims of exploitation in our nation. We are invited to name those victimised and be advocates of the exploited. This Eucharist joins us to Jesus and the wider community of the just; we are in communion with all who suffer.

**September 30—Ordinary Time 26:** *Amos 6:1a,4-7* The prophet targets those who benefit from the exploitation of the poor. *1Tim 6:11-16.* A late first century NT summary about Jesus' ministry and exaltation. *Lk 16:19-31.* Jesus' challenging parable about how wealth must be used to alleviate the needs of the poor. *Theme—Use of Wealth.* In Luke's day, a wealthy person was a greedy person. The readings encourage us not to be possessed by our possessions but to use them for others.

**October 7—Ordinary Time 27:** *Hab 1:2-3; 2:2-4.* The prophet cries to God for deliverance from violence. God offers a vision of the possible. *2 Tim 1:6-8, 13-14.* The leader is encouraged to be a person of integrity, reflection and trust. *Lk 17:5-10* The disciple is encouraged to be a person of faith who acts authentically. *Theme—Acting in Faith.* In a world of violence, the disciple is encouraged to retain a perspective and trust centred on God.

Local communities abound with living examples of such contemporary disciples.

**October 14—Ordinary Time 28:** *2 Kings 5:14-17.* A Syrian (and foreign) army-officer obeys God's prophet from Israel and is healed of leprosy. He seeks to offer the prophet a gift for his healing. *2 Tim 2:8-13.* A revered early Christian hymn about Jesus that encourages closeness to him. *Lk 17:11-19.* Jesus heals those who are excluded from community life because of their disease. *Theme—Exclusion:* The first reading and the Gospel invite a reflection on the power of exclusion which suffering and illness brings. How does the local Christian community seek to include those who are excluded into its life? Who are the true healers in our community?

**October 21—Ordinary Time 29.** *Ex 17:8-13.* Moses' prayer for victory is effective. *2 Tim 3:14-4:2.* The minister is encouraged to be faithful to what has been taught, to Scripture, and to the task of courageous proclamation. *Lk 18:1-8.* An unnamed widow's persistence gains justice and response from an elite judge. *Theme—Prayer:* The Eucharist is the local church's moment of prayer for and union with all humanity and creation. What are the current situations and events that could be the focus of our Eucharist celebration and intercession today?

**October 28—Ordinary Time 30** *Sirach 35:15-17,20-22.* According to the wisdom writer, God shows deference to the poor whose prayer 'pierces' the clouds. *2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18.* The writer affirms God's fidelity in a time of suffering and trial. *Lk 18:9-14.* Jesus' God subverts the socially expectation of favour and privilege. *Theme—God listens.* God responds to our cries in times of difficulty, loneliness and distress. God seeks to be with all who struggle. What makes us sad? What is difficult?