

A Word From Our Creator: A Communicator's Look At Nature And Nature's God

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The secular world is strangely touchy about the topic of Creation. The greater the achievements of Science, the more Nature reveals a breathtaking 'given-ness' threatening the complacency of the past four centuries. Wonder is not yet worship, and religious answers are officially disbarred. But the perennial questions cannot be. Do such astonishing 'givens' as we daily discover make it more or less credible that there is also a Giver?

Idol or Icon? True Man or manikin? *Theos* or *Theios*? One iota of a difference.¹ Could it possibly matter? It did. It does. To the fevered mobs reeling through the streets of Byzantium, Damascus, Jerusalem, rumbling by torchlight on the back lots of Alexandria and awaiting late reports from the current doctrinal war, nothing could have mattered more. We think it altogether strange, barely credible, untroubled as we usually are about ultimates and absolutes and theological niceties. Except of course when it comes to this business about Creation. Unlike practically any other philosophical or theological topic in our society, Creation has always had a way of making the News. There was the celebrated Monkey Trial. But only recently a highly respected writer was fired from the *Scientific American* when they found out that he accepted Creation: the assumption was that this would make *scientific objectivity* impossible. Fundamentalists and the textbook publishers are always at it. Natural History museums show us in amazing detail the *Artist's Conception* of any and every Missing Link. There is no hint of a Missing Creator.

Much Ado About Something

Maybe the fact that as Teachings of Faith go, Creation does seem to have a certain directness about it. Almost inevitably as presented in the popular Media, it does become confused in a jumble of religious, philosophical and scientific misunderstandings. But there is a certain Either/Or quality about it is refreshing. Exclusivity, as everyone knows, is out. Both/And is in. Bridging the polarities. It made President Truman long for a one-armed economic advisor who could not say "On the one hand, but on the other." Inclusivity is in. But every now and then, out of the penumbral fog, one of the great classic formulas reassuringly will gleam with a with a hard and gemlike radiance.

Hydrogen was recently defined on a Public Television program about the Living Universe "as a colorless, tasteless, odorless gas which, given enough time, becomes people." The definition is certainly tasteless and colorless enough, though hardly odorless.

But even by those standards the Master of the Universe put His own special spin, as they say, on Reality: "It is if I say it is." We're one very lucky bunch of atoms just to be talking about it. Whatever is belongs to a very exclusive club.

Even the least theological of journalists can stretch to see that besides *nihil* and *aliquid*, there is no third option (*non datur tertium*). No stuff-out-of-which either. Strictly from scratch. Not a little something left over in the great Fridge. Nothing. There was Nothing. Then there was something. *Creatio ex nihilo*. And just to make sure, the Greeks and later the Scholastics packed down the idea, like a shaped charge, that there was a stage (not yet *Tim*) when nothing at all existed: "There was," they said, "when there wasn't!" That kind of directness attracts attention even today. Because there are few voices with that kind of sureness, authority, conviction, courage. And isn't Religion, most of all, supposed to be caring and sharing and Inclusive? Personal, subjective, sweet and soft, with the doctrinal firmness of a Hallmark card? And the last thing in the world to be unpleasant about! Just the opposite is, of course, the case. There are a thousand angles at which the tower will fall; only one at which it will stand. And the omission of that famous iota would have toppled all steeples of Christendom. It might just be that the stark simplicity of this doctrine may touch some long-dormant sense of what Orthodoxy really does mean. The stakes are very high.

A Work-in-progress

Every religious Truth has enormous implications for our world. But none is associated in the popular mind, as Creation invariably is, with all the dramatic unfoldings of the Space Age: with Black Holes, Anti-matter,

Evolution, Intelligent Life, and a Mother of All Molecules (DNA) for the human family. Yesterday's Sci-Fi is today's Eyewitness News. Moonwalks. Space walks. Star Wars. Spaceship Earth. Spiritually we are all Trekkies.

Within a generation we've learned to think in vastly different scales of Time and Space. Numbers once reserved for McDonald's beef ("Billions Sold") and Congressional pork ("A billion here, a billion there, next thing you're talking real money.") are used handily to talk real galaxies and real years. Fifteen billion of them since the Big Bang. And all recorded history, Carl Sagan reminds us, represents the last seconds of the last day of the last month of a *calendar year* since the Big Bang happened (*The Dragons of Eden*, p. 11 ff).

He also reminds us in passing that the two scales we use, one for the observable Universe (a 1 with 24 zeros); and Quantum Mechanics for things about a million of a millionth of an inch small are "inconsistent with each other: they cannot both be correct." (Sagan on Hawking's *Time*, p. 9). As once was true of miracles and mysteries in the ages of religious Faith, a thousand difficulties do not make a doubt. Until recently we have been largely untroubled and unquestioning within this scientific and secular *faith*. That may be what is changing.

It is impossible to imagine that all of this is not having its effect on our psyches. But how much of this translates into a sense of philosophical wonder or religious awe seems very hard to say. Limitation, frailty, vulnerability, yes. Aloneness, thrownness, lostness, certainly to some new degree. The other questions, the classic ones: how did it get here? what are we doing here? what's it all *for*? Is there God? By tacit agreement such questions are hardly ever raised in public.

There are concerns and you take your choice: the earth is warming and the sun is cooling. Not to worry, things may work out: since the earth (slowing) is getting near the sun at the rate of about a centimeter per century. We are almost certainly more aware of the splendors and wonders of our world than any generation before us. There is surely less arrogance and scoffing, probably more sense of mystery and kinship with all *Creation*: a work-in-progress, but not clearly a *work of His finger*.

Placards In The Park

Actually it may well be those picketers in the park can best help us understand how we got this way. Wrong they well may be on the issue. But they are dead right as usual in sensing the critical importance of the issue, the children of this world being street-wiser about this sort of thing. Whatever form it may take, civil liberties, academic freedom, whatever, the real issue is the same Old Enemy. Incredible to these sons and daughters of the Enlightenment that the bony old hand keeps popping up through the leaves. "O well," they say. "Let's do it right this time. *Ecrasez l'infame!*"

It's a strange lot, the protesters and demonstrators and lobbyists. A roundup of the usual suspects. The crowd you can always count on for political action when there's trouble in the Secular City. They understand as did their predecessors in the parks of Chalcedon and Nicaea, that Truths have consequences. Still, why *Creation*? With so many unpalatable religious affirmations to choose from, in a society so largely unaffected by religious teachings anyway, why make a such a public to-do about this one?

Almost certainly because they sense that something altogether crucial is at stake here. It has to do with God and Revelation and the Church, with Education and pluralism, and the Great Wall of Separation. Only far more fundamental. It has to do with Meaning and the Material world. It has to do with Intelligence and Intelligibility. It has to do with Nature. And, one might cautiously assume, with Nature's God.

The Book Of Nature

Kierkegaard observed that only way to understand our lives is to trace them backwards; but that unfortunately we have to live them forwards. The West lived so long off the accumulated riches of the classic and Judeo-

Christian inheritance that it has taken centuries to achieve a kind of spiritual bankruptcy. Conversely, for us, after four centuries of conditioning, it is hard for us to imagine how our modern way of looking at *Nature* could ever have been otherwise. Not very different from our everyday lives; because most people live rather sanely in their world. But very different from our *theory*: from the sort of *explanations* offered in the textbooks.

Nature's Voice

How do we know the fire is hot? To say it *tells* us so is neither projection, nor poetry, nor anthropomorphism. Reality *speaks* by being and doing. "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same. . . Crying what I do in me: for that I came." (Gerard Manley Hopkins, Poem 571).² No sane philosophy ever doubted it. It is in fact the ultimate criterion for sanity. In philosophy and in people. Reality therapy means looking at, listening to, Reality.

None of the great philosophies ever doubted that things *expressed themselves* by the very fact of being themselves. Their question was rather the mystery of it all. How it could it be? whence it came? where it might be found in its purest expression, this inner intelligibility of things? The universal Exemplarism of Plato, and above all the Greek understanding of the *Logos* made possible a synthesis in which the Alexandrine Jews, the Fathers of the Church, and Christians for the next thousand years took it for granted that all creatures, great and small, glorified their Creator, each with the voice of its very nature.

For Bonaventure, "The created world is a book wherein we may read the creative Trinity. It is a resplendent mirror showing forth the wisdom of God" (Lacroix, p 26 f). For him and for all Christians, the *Logos* made Flesh, itself the Symbol, the Sacramental Center of the Cosmos, brought about the unity of all things, visible and invisible, in Christendom.

The Finger of God (*digitus Dei*) was not only there (quickenning Adam in Michelangelo's great mural), it left traces, patterns, impressions, calling cards (*vestigia Dei*). If we can tell in an instant that it was John who parked the car and Aunt Flo who made the soup, is it conceivable that things so splendid, so unlikely, so funny, would bear no mark of their Maker?

What is *Nature*? Nature according to Thomas is that: *ratio cuiusdam artis, scilicet divinae, indita rebus, qua ipsae res moventur ad finem determinatum*. The standard translations are not good:

The reason of a certain art, namely, the divine, written into things, whereby they are moved to a determinate end. (In *II Physics* lec. 14. Cited by McCoy, p. 163.)

Despite the translation, what shows though is a theology, a spirituality, a prayer and a hymn of praise. It is also the kind of real philosophy anybody's uncle could say "Yup" to with a lot of understanding. But it is nearly impossible to translate into English for the very reason that we are talking about here: the severing of our metaphysical roots. Roughly, *Nature* is the very design, meaning, essence, structure that the maker's art, skill, know-how, builds right into things (a wrench, a light bulb); by reason of which (design, structure, etc.) things do what they are designed to do, achieve the purpose they were intended for (tighten bolts, light the room). In the case of things not made by us (the sheep, the rose) it is the Divine Artist who puts that *Nature* into things, that power by which they are themselves, *do their own thing*, and achieve their purpose and that of the Artist who made them.

Not without reason the changed relation to Nature in modern Science and Philosophy almost perfectly parallels the very concept of the "artist," human and divine.

The Modern Spirit

The change was barely perceptible, at first. Most of the early modern scientists were Believers. Often their scientific quest was scarcely distinguishable from their reverential awe of God's handiwork. Each puzzle solved only led them to greater admiration for the *Mind of the Maker*. Above all they were astounded at the

correspondence between the way things worked and the mathematics that first explained what happened and then even predicted what would happen, what in fact would have to happen.

The *Laws of Nature* seemed to take care of everything. But for that very reason the sense of mystery gradually diminished. And of course the more admirable the machine, the less need for maintenance, let alone for the Inventor to be hanging around. Not that God was honored less, but that Nature was honored more. So the Creator became at best the God of the Deists, the God of the Philosophers.

As is so often the case, it is the poets, like canaries in the mineshafts, who first express alarm. None were more prescient or more uneasy than John Donne:

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
The Element of fire is quite put out;
The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to looke for it. . .
'Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence gone;
All just supply, and all Relation. . . .
For the world's beauty is decayed, or gone,
Beauty, that's color, and proportion.

The metaphysical experience of contingency, stupefying wonder that the Great Clock of the Universe was running so well, or existed at all, was fading fast. Asked by Napoleon where God would fit into such a perfectly functioning Universe, LaPlace gave his reply: "I have no need of that hypothesis." LaPlace would not be the last among the great mathematical and scientific minds who seem to find it almost impossible to distinguish computation from causality. We hear it continually in explanations about Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Randomness, Chaos. We are taught that the earth's axis is off, or its speed or orbit not exact. It is a very understandable mistake, an occupational hazard. But it's a Faustian slip if there ever was one.

Both Aristotle and Thomas had taught that the mode of the natural sciences must be *dialectical*, inquiring, with reserve and tentativeness, because we are not after all the *artists* who made these things. Far different is the spirit of the *New Learning* which sees that Knowledge is Power. Now instead of just listening to Nature, letting her *speak*, we should put her on the rack and make her tell us what we want to hear.

So obvious today. But it was clearly both shocking and exhilarating to the early modern mind. Even for an Immanuel Kant. We can still hear the fascination in this passage which provides exceptional insights both into the methodology of the sciences and the psychology of the modern soul:

It is hypotheses, then, that our reason produces after its own design, and compels nature to reply to [the *rack* theme, by then a commonplace].

When experiment confirms our hypotheses, we are flattered to find ourselves *artists*, as it were, who have made the *designs* which we recognize in nature. But the reason for this is that we increasingly share *in the divine art by which the universe is made*. [Italics mine]. (Preface to the 2nd Edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Cited by McCoy, p. 162).

The view does indeed begin to look familiar, though probably not from this angle. In classic and Christian philosophy knowing (theoretical, speculative science) was the highest occupation; then *doing* (the exercise of virtue); then *making*. But the modern spirit finds that being an *artistis* far more fulfilling (*flattering*) than contemplating the works of the Creator.

What is all important is that this spirit is by no means confined to the natural sciences. In the Arts, creative genius becomes a law unto itself. With Machiavelli, Politics, once the highest exercise of Virtue becomes pragmatic professional technique (both lion and fox, knowing how to be bad as well as good). Not even the

traditional Common Good is any longer the norm, but an arbitrary goal established by the Artist/Ruler. Form and Finality, *Nature in her givenness*, all is melting away. This time Tennyson:

O Earth, what changes hast thou seen.
There where the long street roars, hath been
The silence of the central sea.
The hills are shadows. For they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands.
They melt like mist, the solid lands;
Like clouds they form themselves
And go. . . .

So that in its final stage, it is not a question of any sort of further *desacralization* of Nature. But rather its denial. In what would seem to be in obvious contradiction to the very object and dynamism of Science, a denial of fixity, of form, of causality, of certitude, objectivity, meaning itself.

The problem is not really that mountains, thought to be the very symbol of permanence, are peaking and troughing like waves; that there is more *space* than *solid* in Professor Eddington's famous table (nor thereby any less a *Table*); or that the cellular structure of the mongoose has any bearing on the philosophical meaning of its soul, animating principle, organic Form, Nature.

Agreement (or even disagreement) is difficult since the frame of discourse has been so long neglected. But the problem is almost certainly deeper, a thing of the spirit rather than of the mind. It will not accept *Nature* because it feels that it cannot, whether for reasons of pride or self-respect, accept the givenness of things.

Cannot accept being given, gifted, graced. It is not *flattering*. And then there is always the worry that where there is the *give*, there may also be a Giver.

Post-modern World

It is no longer the age of purely *objective* Science in the distorted sense. We are much more aware of how much we do indeed *structure* our world, whether the symbol-system we use is that of myth or metaphor or mathematics. That is just another way of saying that we are living in *the post-modern* world.

Science is rightly esteemed. But the mood has changed. It the age of Hi-Tech. But also of Hi-Touch. It is the age of The Person. And no message will sound like *Good News* to men and women today if it does not contribute to *being a person* --- whatever that may turn out to be. But with *Person* we are drawing very close to the greatest of the Mysteries. All *things* the Fathers used to delight in point out, "are created in God's Image; but only of Man and Woman is it written that they are made also in His Likeness."

And here, in the coming age, our differences from the secular world may grow more apparent. The enlightened secular may realistically doubt that all human needs and desire will ever be satisfied; but seems very confident in knowing what those needs and desires are. The believer is not entirely sure what the depths of his mind and the hollows of his heart are aching to be filled with; but he has no doubt that filled they will indeed be, pressed down, heaped up, and running over. "I shall make them drink the torrent of my pleasures!," saith the Lord who telleth it like it is.

It is not a question of disinterring *that old-time religion*. The gifts are not lacking. We have scarcely begun to open them yet. If we do, we will find them consonant with our greatest hopes and aspirations. Only greater. Greater than our hopes, our logic, our hearts.

For the Theology of Creation, of the Image, and of the Logos is centered on the culmination of all *Nature*: which is Person. It is not as splendid *thing* but uniquely as *person* made in His very Image and Likeness that we are:

Hearers Of The Word

God stands in need of nothing, we would say, protecting the divine sovereignty. But for the modern person, it's not much fun trying to relate to someone who stands in need of nothing. And protecting His sovereignty hardly seems what He was about. Since we are here, it seems much more likely that He wanted somebody to talk to, maybe even talk with. Maybe we're not listening.

Speakers Of The Word

In what are we more like Him than in His creativity? Like the Divine Artist, we too have the *creative word* that constructs, fashions our world. Not in *words* only but everything we do, creating our world, creating ourselves. So it is that we are the Lords, *having dominion*. That we are the Scientists, *naming the animals*, knowing their natures. Artisans. Charged with *keeping the earth and working it*. Collaborators with God.

Sharers Of The Self

Finally we have learned that the ultimate expression of the Self is the gift of the Self. That's the ultimate *word* that can be spoken. Amazing, as the old joke had it, how much Our Father seems to have learned in such a short time. St. Paul keeps asking what did God know and when did He know it. But the evidence is overwhelming. He knew all along, Paul concludes, planned the whole thing. *That was the Mysterion* hidden from the beginning. Even then. The Word was with God. And the Word was God. And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us.

But we will need the grace of asking for the grace of accepting the gift. And so we pray:

*Adjutorium nostrum in nomine Domini.
Qui fecit coelum et terram.*

Our help is in the name of the Lord.
Who made heaven and earth.

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Endnotes

1. In the Arian controversy, finally settled dogmatically at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, the difference between orthodoxy and heterodoxy literally was the difference of an iota: is Christ Jesus *theos* (God) vs *theios* (God-like) or *homoousios* (of the same substance) vs *homoiousios* (of like substance) as God? As we know, the Fathers at Nicaea proclaimed Christ as *theos, homoousios*.

2. Citing Hopkins is always a problem because many of his poems have not “titles”. This famous poem is often referred to by its first line (“As kingfishers catch fire ...”). This standard numerical reference is from *Poems of G. M. Hopkins*. W.H. Gardner (ed.). Oxford University Press. Third Edition. 1956.