Creation's Persistent Voice: Critiquing the Secondary Status

Bouma, Rolf
Boston Theological Institute

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3934

Boston University
Creation's Persistent Voice: Critiquing the Secondary Status of Creation as Revelation

Rolf Bouma

Christianity struggles with the concept that nature/creation is truly revelatory of God, and not merely confirmatory of theological conclusions derived from special revelation or deduced from rational reflection. The result is a stilted and narrow conversation between theology and the natural sciences, with the contribution of creation to knowledge of God being limited to certain well-worn paths. If theology is willing to hold a full-fledged conversation with the natural sciences, it may just find that new metaphors and conceptions of God arise that illuminate our understanding of God in ways that scripture alone cannot. Such conversations must be characterized (on both sides) as serious and tentative, with conclusions never considered to be final, but always open to further conversation as new paradigms emerge.

Among the effects left behind at Jonathan Edwards' death in 1758 was a notebook of sketches and illustrations intended for future publication as his theology of creation. Containing a myriad of examples from nature, it represents Edwards' conviction that certain phenomena within creation signify deeper, spiritual realities. A rose with its thorns, for example, signifies that glory only comes through suffering and the cross, while the ways of serpents and spiders with their prey are "lively representations of the Devil's catching our souls by his temptations." Waves in a storm signify God's wrath, while blue skies, green fields, and pleasant flowers figure "the mild attributes of God." 

Perry Miller, who edited the notebook for publication in 1948, notes that "[a]t first sight the manuscript seems to be nothing but a catalogue of morals to be read into natural phenomenon by a pious, though to our taste naive, mind." It is, of course, much more than that, standing in a tradition of Puritan use of emblems and allegories, and fitting Edwards' understanding of typology. Edwards' conviction was that certain manifestations within creation were so remarkable and outside the norm that God obviously intended them to be special signs of spiritual truths.

Edwards' intentions display more than naiveté. At a deeper level the implications of his approach are decidedly unsettling. On Edwards' view, one finds manifestations of God and spiritual reality only in abnormal phenomena, not in the normal workings of the created order; and these signs can be linked with spiritual truths only because those truths are known previously by special revelation. In other words, creation itself is not truly revelatory, but only signatory.

Edwards' approach is symptomatic of a larger ambivalence within Christian theology regarding creation as a source of revelation about God. On the one hand, theology holds that creation is laden with meaning and significance as God's handiwork. Theologies of creation tend to push inexorably beyond the Pauline image of God as maker of pedestrian clay pots to a deeper portrait of God as artist. Since a work of art invariably reveals something of its maker, the sense persists that creation, too, must reveal something of its creator.

On the other hand, theology encounters a significant challenge when it begins the task of unmasking the mind of the maker. Creation is no Norman Rockwell portrait. It exhibits angularities and oddities that raise questions about the One who stands behind the Many. There is an understandable fear
Darwin's theory of natural selection challenged theology to find value in death and the struggle to survive, traditionally disvalued in Christian theology.

status of creation under suspicion, carefully circumscribing its power to reveal. Scripture and creation are acknowledged as two books of revelation, special and general, respectively; but creation is relegated to secondary status. Scripture is canonical; creation is deuterocanonical. Like the apocryphal books, creation is available for edification, but not for establishing doctrine. Creation at best merely confirms what is already present in Scripture. Nature is confirmatory and signatory, not truly revelatory.

As a result, much of the Christian community limits creation to minor, supporting roles in human life and understanding. Creation is suitable to teach children and to induce praise. Parents and educators use a bowdlerized creation to teach children about God's wisdom, ingenuity, and unfailing providence. For adults, a few of creation's many-splendored exhibitions are mined over and over to prove God's power and majesty. Like a poorly planned evangelical worship service in which the praise chorus, "Our God Is an Awesome God," is repeated ad infinitum and ad nauseam, just a few of the many wonders of creation are harnessed to churn out the same sweet song again and again and again.

Compounding the problem is the fact that significant portions of the Christian community steer clear of the junction between creation and theology. Decades of watching colleagues get caught in the creation/evolution crossfire have added a wariness to the subject, which discourages honest interchange between the natural sciences and theology. Add the prospect of ecclesiastical suicide to the natural feeling of vulnerability that follows from opening oneself up to the contributions of another discipline, and there is little inclination to ponder the scandals of this creation's particularity. Those who do wish to consider nature as well as the Christian faith are tempted to resort to the old dodge of compatibilism with its erroneous claim that religion and science each have their own domain, and can co-exist, so long as each limits itself to addressing the questions appropriate to its domain.

Ignored is the fact that science and theology have inevitably had an interchange, with a resulting impact upon theology's understanding of God. The immanently active God of medieval and reformational thought gave way, in the face of scientific conceptualizing, to the wise and consistent God of infinite foresight of Isaac Newton and William Paley. The Darwinian revolution provided a deeper challenge with the abandonment of biological determinism and an open future within the natural order. Darwin's theory of natural selection challenged theology to find value in death and the struggle to survive, traditionally disvalued in Christian theology. The simplicity with which the theory pushed God to the margins, or out of the picture entirely, led to theological uneasiness. Uneasiness in theology and unrest in society encouraged the conversation between theology and science to slow to a trickle. Natural scientists and theologians frequently contented themselves with intra-disciplinary conversation.

Admittedly, these generalizations apply primarily to that branch of Christian theology considered to be conservative and evangelical, and certain movements within
Christian theology (for example, process theology) have consciously and conscientiously pursued rapprochement with the natural sciences. But such tendencies outlined above can be found in the practice, if not in the theology, of almost all segments of the Christian community. It leads one to ask what the result would be if the Christian community allowed creation to be taken out of the children’s section and off the secondary reference shelf and moved to a place of genuine engagement. What if the natural sciences were truly allowed a dialogue with theology, and Christian theology were to resist the impulse to cut the conversation short? It would undoubtedly mean some uncomfortableness as the conversation starts, and perhaps a few raised eyebrows and a few winces at observations and comments initially deemed inappropriate and in poor taste. But it would certainly provide lively table talk, and would, in all likelihood, produce unanticipated insights. While the results of an extended conversation between the natural sciences and theology cannot be traced here, perhaps some initial instances can be given of how such a conversation might shape our understanding, metaphorically and otherwise, of God and God’s intentions toward this world.

To begin, consider one of the more famous references in the scientific literature to venture into theological terrain: Einstein’s famous assertion that “I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world.”7 In context, of course, this is not Einstein’s conclusion, but rather an assertion in the face of evidence to the contrary, pointing towards randomness and probability within the natural order. Einstein shared with theological orthodoxy an uneasiness about what indeterminateness meant, regarding the ultimate nature of the physical universe (and for theology, the God who stood behind the universe). The image from which both Einstein and theology drew back was of a non-providential God, of God as compulsive gambler, who jams dollar after dollar into the slot machine and mindlessly pulls the crank of the one-armed bandit.

But is that the image that persists if the conversation is allowed to continue? In other words, is the metaphor apt? True, Einstein’s assertion notwithstanding, if contemporary physics and biology shed any light upon the nature of God, it is of a God enamored of stochastic event. But there’s method to the madness. Outcomes may not be certain, but tendencies inherent within the system produce jackpots of order and life with uncanny regularity. The probabilities are skewed. If God is a gambler, then it is the sort who gets banned from blackjack tables for counting cards. God plays with a stacked deck and rolls loaded dice. If the conversation between science and theology is allowed to continue without being cut short, the metaphor for God undergoes a subtle shift, from one that repels to one with provocative power.

Or to take another casual comment from the natural sciences, consider the comment of the biologist J. S. B. Haldane, that the sort of Creator nature reveals must possess “an inordinate fondness for beetles.”7 This tongue-in-cheek retort to a half-serious question from a theologian (at least so the story goes) contains the germ of a fascinating conversation between biology and theology. What of the fact that there are somewhere between ten million and forty million species of living things, of which fully a quarter of all known species are beetle variants? Biology tells of a world in which nature’s fecundity is only matched by its quest for diversity. If, as Annie Dillard puts it, “[n]ature will try anything once,” what does that say of the God who stands behind it all?8 If the conversation is allowed to continue, there would be ample room to explore the ideas of fecundity and biodiversity, as well as of the place and importance of humanity in the cosmos. If theology had taken such conversation seriously, it may have avoided at an earlier date the anthropocentric hubris that is now increasingly recognized as reprehensible. Instead, statements continue to emerge in line with the sentiments of the Second Vatican Council, that “[a]ccording to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and

THE BOSTON THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

3
unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown.” This little bit of Aristotelian nonsense has produced much grief and little grace for the created order. Perhaps humans are crown, but certainly not center. As James Gustafson suggests, anthropocentrism in theology must give way to a theocentrism that allows all the disciplines to participate in the conversation. A healthy encounter with the “otherness” of creation, as well as openness to the contributions of other disciplines, prompts the sort of questioning that moves humans off center and toward a more inclusive worldview.

Conversation such as these have so many interesting angles to explore. What if Biblical theologians were allowed to speak their piece about the God who, in mythic terms, conquers chaos? The Old Testament speaks of the God who splits the chaotic waters to call forth the world, who splits the Red Sea waters to call forth the people of Israel, who erects gates and bars to keep chaos from returning, even when human disobedience threatens to allow chaos to return. The New Testament reveals a Jesus who stills the chaotic winds and waves, and returns the demons to their proper abode in the chaotic Abyss. Chaos is a principle of disorder and dissolution. Then let the natural sciences speak of the emerging concept of chaos within its field—a chaos not to be overcome, but one that names an organizing pattern that in-forms the structures of physical reality. This chaos borders on the oxymoronic, being described at one and the same time as unpredictability and determinedness. It stretches the relationship of notions of order and disorder, of randomness and predictability. The biblical etching of God doing battle with “chaos”—a principle of disorder—is brought into deeper relief in dialogue with modern science’s exploration of “chaos”—a principle of subtle order. God, it seems, conquers chaos with God’s own variant of chaos. God patterns the universe in unpredictable fashion.

Conversations such as these can take place, however, only if the participants are willing to continue conversing even should discussions take an uncomfortable turn. In particular, conclusions that are either dismissive of other conversation partners or that are rendered with finality, closing off further interchange, bring the conversation grinding to a halt. The nature of scientific theory as open to correction and reformulation must be matched by a willingness on the part of theology to keep lines of inquiry open.

If one were to characterize this sort of conversation, it would best be described as both serious and tentative. Stakes are high. Discussion has implications for our conceptions of God, the world, and the place of humanity in relation to each. It is not a conversation to be taken lightly. Participants need also agree, however, that renderings can be no more than tentative, constantly open to correction and further input.

Deviation from these guidelines in the past has led participants from both sides to leave the table and proceed to carry on their own intra-disciplinary monologues. While carrying on these discussions, the respective sides have eavesdropped on the other, listening for some word or phrase that indicates an opportunity to restart the conversation, but again, on their own terms. Such a point seems to have been reached in recent years with a new period of interchange between biology and theology. The emergence within the past year of the concept of “irreducible complexity,” with its promise of a powerful critique of Darwinian evolution as an all-encompassing theory
accounting for all variations of life forms, has again piqued interest. Once again, it is intellectually civilized to posit a God of design. What is unseemly is the rush to the table with a readiness to talk, now that it seems like there may be an opening to discuss nature on theologian’s terms.

The danger is that those joining the conversation will continue the tendency in theology to treat nature as confirmatory and not revelatory, as a means of saying “I told you so,” rather than listening to what the natural sciences are saying (the science of biochemistry in the case of irreducible complexity) and attempting to discern the impact this new debate has upon conceptions of God and the world. New discoveries almost inevitably lead to altered conceptions, which subtly change our understandings of divinity. Fears that dialogue with the natural sciences will irretrievably alter understandings of God need to be countered with the remembrance that exploration of ideas is not the same as commitment to those ideas, nor is opening up conversation with the natural sciences the same as allowing the sciences univocally to set the agenda for discussion.

At its most basic, this means that theology in its various traditions must be willing to let creation be moved from secondary status on the reference shelf and from its circumscribed role in Christian thought and life, and to become a full partner in pointing towards the God whose glory creation proclaims. In other words, let creation reveal, not merely confirm. Otherwise the Christian community lingers with a theology of creation, like that of Jonathan Edwards, that is moralistic and naive, and can at most point toward God without making substantial contributions to our knowledge of the Divine.

Works cited:


Endnotes:

1Edwards, p. 45.
2Ibid., p. 49.
3Ibid., p. 3
4In her book, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Annie Dillard uses the name “the devil’s tithe” to refer to the ten percent of all species that engage in parasitism. She then suggests that “we give our infants the wrong idea about their fellow creatures in world. Teddy bears would come with tiny stuffed bear-lives; ten percent of all baby bubs and rattles sold should be adorned with colorful
blowflies, maggots, and screw-worms” (p. 233). The idea certainly provides an alternative to the saccharine versions of nature typically dispensed.

For an example of a recent attempt at compatibilism, see Van Till.

Clark, p. 340. This rendition is actually a paraphrase of remarks made in letters from Einstein to Max Born and James Franck.

For a recounting of the event, see Quammen, p. xiii.

Annie Dillard’s capacity for observation of and reflection on nature and its meaning for theology is well documented, particularly in her work Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. Her skill at asking the right questions in the right places has led Eugene Peterson to recommend her as the pre-eminent “exegete of creation” (see Peterson, p. 77). Dillard’s literary approach allows her to mediate between the natural sciences and theology without being accused of favoritism. Literary skill allows her to explore metaphors and conceptions that are unnerving but provocative. For instance, at one point, she refers to God as a “deranged manic-depressive with limitless capital,” and asserts that creation “is one lunatic fringe.” Insect are “an assault on all human value, all hope of a reasonable god,” and the dynamics of natural selection lead her to conclude that it is “a hell of a way to run…a universe.” Dillard’s saving grace is that she is willing to follow the conversation through to the end, and to allow tension to remain alongside resolution. Those who stay with her to the end come to appreciate in doxological fashion the mystery of encounter with God through creation.


See Gustafson.

Genesis 1:1-2; Psalm 104:7-9.

Isaiah 51:9-10.


For a description of the emerging concept of chaos within science, see Gleick, Stewart.

Rolf Bouma is entering his second year of doctoral studies at Boston University School of Theology. He is a member of the Executive Board of AuSable Institute for Environmental Studies, in Mancelona, Michigan, where he teaches environmental ethics. He has served in congregational ministry for ten years, and is currently Pastor of Hope Church in Framingham, Massachusetts.

This essay received a First Prize and the Grand Prize.