

## **SIMON CONWAY MORRIS**

# **A Response to the Boyle Lecture**

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In reviving, if not resurrecting, the Boyle Lectures the Trustees showed great wisdom by inviting as the first speaker, Professor Haught. He has set a new milestone in the discussion of how science and religion can enter into dialogue and, more importantly, has shown us a way to deepen our understanding, if not our love, of the Universe in which we find ourselves so strangely placed. How right he is that the cosmic unfolding makes better sense as history, as narrative, or even as a story. If we knew the whole plot, our admiration of the Author could only increase; but of course we see only dimly, as in a tarnished – and buckled – mirror. Nevertheless, we have good reason to hope, not least because the alternative of inhabiting either a clockwork or a chaotic universe would be respectively equivalent to living in a doll's house or a lunatic asylum. The world has a structure, and as a product of evolution we must ask at the least two things: How can we make sense of the deeper realities of the Universe, and how we can (re)join these insights to what is seen to be divine Revelation?

In this discussion, it is not my intention to criticise Prof Haught. That, in any event, would be difficult given both his fair-mindedness and his emphasis that the great story is by no means finished. Neither need we doubt that the Author is in the gallery, nor feel that our impatience to know the dénouement is in itself an unreasonable instinct, even though our thoughts in this regard may be markedly different when that Day comes. Rather my principal thought with regard to Haught's Boyle Lecture is that he has perhaps been too accommodating to the received shibboleths. Indeed, given our commission, dare I say that he has not been bold enough? The dilemma is, of course, well known. As Christians how on earth – and on Earth – do we reconcile our present world-picture with the foundational events centred on Jerusalem (and Rome) two millennia ago? When we put it so baldly, we can hardly be surprised that the tide at Dover Beach is so low, not least as it exposes a wilderness of slimy stones and gasping, stranded creatures.

Haught is surely right to argue that from a Christian perspective reconciliation is not just possible, but essential. Yet in attempting to do exactly that, has he ended up offering some hostages to fortune? Yes, it is self-evident that an engagement between science and religion is the only option, but on whose terms and at what cost? In this respect, recent history is not exactly encouraging. Despite the ever-increasing interest in the links between science and religion, a topic so ably addressed by Prof Haught both in his Boyle Lecture and elsewhere, have any of the principal protagonists really yielded any ground? That in itself is valuable information: apparent failure of inter-communication is probably because one side is broadcasting on short-wave, while the other is twiddling the metaphorical knobs on long-wave. But mutual incomprehension can only be part of the answer. Much more disturbingly, in my opinion, is the

relentless corrosion of Orthodoxy in the Chestertonian sense. To deplore the erosion of religious instincts is one thing, but to embrace what anywhere else would pass as relativist pantheism in a desperate attempt to reach some nebulous 'accommodation' is suicidal. As ever, G.K. Chesterton saw further than most, and even if the morass of New Ageism may have been a predictable end-point, it is scarcely encouraging. In some quarters it seems to have escaped notice that dilution of the central creeds will paradoxically do more to postpone reconciliation and dialogue between science and religion than slipping into a soft intellectual ecumenicalism. Is it not the very strangeness of the Christian claim that should define the starting point for discussion?

At first sight this would seem to be the best way to maintain the barrier to mutual comprehension. As such it can be reduced to its starkest when one considers the two extremes. Picture the battleground: two hills, one with the fluttering pennants of the naturalist encampment, the other with broad and comfortable tents of the religious gathering. Our eye travels to those pennants. Despite their breezy self-confidence and thinly disguised contempt for any religious sentiment, in reality the militant atheists are hoist by their own petard in that, for them, the justification for any action must ultimately be meaningless. These people have literally no ground. Indeed their rhetoric of facing reality unflinchingly – the cliché 'ours is a high, noble and lonely destiny' comes to mind – is a recipe for either totalitarianism, madness, or, more likely, both as the exercise of limitless power in a moral vacuum. Not for a moment do I suggest that the current proponents of this view, notoriously Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, subscribe to that extreme, but the poverty of their metaphysic, a wilful blindness to the realities of radical evil, and the encouragement of a corrosive world-picture of relativism are all pointers in that malign direction. But is the encampment on the opposite hill any more encouraging? To be sure the light emanating from the tents is less sickly, but the appearance of strength and security may be a dreadful illusion. For here the strict observers of religious truths, fundamentalists of one ilk or another, may find a crooked shelter in the storm but sooner – rather than later – the sands upon which their houses are built will be swept away. By using pseudo-science and flawed logic to attack science they too will be hoist by their own petard. In offering an accommodation, by virtue of a narrative of unfinished business, will Haught's approach reconcile these two camps? It is certainly a start, but I rather fear it is only a first step.

In a way, Haught himself has put his finger on the problem. We have surely forgotten how astounding is 'the descent of God', the 'strong meat' of Dorothy L. Sayers' famous essay.<sup>1</sup> The beauty, precision and logic of the Incarnation too easily become accepted platitudes rather than a constant focus of our lives. If, however, we accept this as one of our guiding principles then a number of the points that Haught makes shift in perspective. To start with the old criticism that it is religion that is at fault for objectively failing to come to terms with science, not

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1. Sayers, D.L.. 'Strong Meat' in *Creed or Chaos? and other Essays in Popular Theology*, London: Methuen (1947), pp. 14-19.

least in the form of the Darwinian explanation, may miss the point. If, after all, science is a God-given gift – and that would be entirely consistent with its origins in mediaeval Christian Europe – then its seeming autonomy is a mirage. One certainly does not need to subscribe to the corrosive relativism of the Kuhnian paradigms, let alone the higher lunacies of feminist algebra or Islamic biochemistry, to demand that science be placed in, and must belong to, a wider context. But in what context, and again on whose terms? Is not the fault with religion, though perhaps not in the ways traditionally imagined? Science is often enough portrayed as an adventure, but too often we seem to forget that religion is the greater quest. Overlooking this has led to grievous results. So it is not only that we are saddled with the misreadings of the ‘scientific’ creationists, but also that we find that science is distorted by operating in a moral vacuum. Its gifts turn all too frequently into curses, as they are distorted and misapplied in the interests of the few and to the detriment of the many.

We forget too easily how completely radical is the Incarnation, and how in his earthly life the table-turner and questioner of the central pieties sought always to un-harden the peoples’ hearts. In this context, how might we choose to re-read science? Here is a gift, an extraordinary glimpse of the astonishing nature of Creation, yet these days does not science itself have many echoes of a sort of pharisaism? Recall its proponents’ smugness, their rectitude, not to mention the constant references to the existing power structures, even its humourlessness. Rather than being a key to help us understand the universe, has it passed the buck and sold us a pup? Even in evolution, the area of science I am most interested and perhaps most expert in, the delineations of the battle-lines are usually formulaic and make little attempt to grapple with the deeper realities. Surely rather than brooding on the activities of the parasitic ichneumon fly, we should be asking how we stand in Creation when we choose to take charge of evolutionary processes, not least for our crops, our animals and – grim thought – ourselves.

Am I being too narrow? Haught is certainly correct to emphasise how the immensities of the cosmos must make us rethink our religious perspective. But is there a danger of conceding what should never have been a point of issue? What exactly is the relevance of these immensities, other than to provide the necessary structure for our existence, and for all we know myriad other life forms, scattered as islands of hope across the galaxies? But in terms of light years, parsecs or whatever metric you prefer in an attempt to grasp those immensities that dwarf the human body, if not the human mind, then the furthest galaxy might as well be at the same distance from us as the Andromeda galaxy. And what of our time in the narrative? Haught hints that we may be very early participants, the australopithecines of religious experience. Quite possibly so, but others have argued with perhaps equal plausibility that ours is very close to being the last generation. Either way does it matter? After all, only we, and from an entirely different perspective also God, know and appreciate time. It may be no accident that amongst the most primitive technologies are tally-sticks, measuring the diurnal and lunar cycles. Before that history did not exist. Were the brachiopods

drumming their metaphorical fingers as the eons of the Palaeozoic slipped by? It remains true, of course, that from a human perspective time and space are unimaginably long and large, but we still scarcely know why this is so. Ignorance in this context, however, should not engender despair. If Creation, and our part in it, are consistent with God's good order rather than a blind concatenation of accidents, then we can be sure that these immensities are as vital to our existence as nucleosynthesis or the gravitational constant.

Let me conclude with some thoughts that I hope will both extend Prof Haught's stimulating and evocative lecture and also be ones that as a scientist I shall explore in the next few years. That science and religion are compatible may not be a popular concept. Taken, however, from the perspectives of scientific investigation, the powers of rational thought, and the evidence for the fine-tuning of the universe, then indeed the reunion of science and religion may take us to a fertile dialogue. Consider, for example, two of the most mysterious scientific problems. What is consciousness and how is it that this complexity emerges from such (apparently) simple beginnings? Both surely provide clear pointers to a religious engagement. That organisms, including humans, know the world may not be a cause for surprise, but as has often been pointed out to know it so that reliable and deep truths can be discovered is far more remarkable. I doubt very much we would have been able to predict such from the Big Bang, but the suspicion grows that all this, and for all we know more, was embedded from that primal instantiation.

This leads me to the final point about how seriously we are prepared to take the Creation, even if its individual episodes of discovery are ones of joyous amazement. Science is the gift which allows us to navigate to deeper understandings. It has become popular to suppose that these voyages are ultimately finite; in other words there will be an end of science.<sup>2</sup> This is a testable hypothesis; and it has a corollary relevant to theology. Suppose that there are no limits, no end to investigation, no final depths and certainly no equation that – absurdly – will allow us 'to know the mind of God'. Such a perspective, I suggest, is far more vertiginous than the above-mentioned immensities of the physical universe. That there might be no limit to the complexities of the world we inhabit might not only refresh our wonder at Creation, but would inevitably shift our theodicy. At one level it would be an invitation to continuous growth and understanding. But it would also be a salutary reminder that God is ultimately unknowable, and that for all our strutting certainties they are but so many pieces of straw.

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2. Horgan, J. *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age*, London: Little, Brown, (1996).