

MARIO A. RUSSO**Soteriology, Eschatology and
Cosmology: Resolving the Dissonance
and Providing a Lens**

Recent studies of the relationship between science and religion yield a growing scholarly consensus over the compatibility of each category's truth claims, but there is continued dissonance in the relationship between the truth claims of cosmology and eschatology. On the one hand, cosmologists claim that the world ends in catastrophe; on the other hand, theologians working on eschatology claim that it is moving towards renewal and new creation. Recent scholarship responds to this dissonance by emphasising the bodily resurrection of Jesus. There is, however, another possible resolution to this dissonance that also provides an interpretive lens for understanding cosmology: using the Christian doctrine of soteriology as an analogy for eschatological claims. Through a comparative analysis of its own narrative with the narrative of cosmology, the Christian doctrine of soteriology lends a new perspective to the cosmological-eschatological dissonance while also providing a larger interpretive lens.

Keywords: soteriology, cosmology, eschatology, divine action, narrative theology, narrative of nature

More and more scholars in the fields of science and religion recognise the compatibility between the truth claims of both fields. Rather than offering conflicting views on the nature of existence and the existence of nature, science and religion are now thought to offer complementary views and perspectives. Recent studies exploring the relationship between cosmology and eschatology, however, are not so easily rectified. Some contemporary theologians seem to suggest that Christian eschatological hope cannot accommodate recent scientific findings regarding the eventual death of the cosmos. Modern cosmology and biblical eschatology appear to hold competing claims, after all, so science and faith therefore appear in conflict.¹ However, traditional Christianity sees no such opposition; offering the resurrection of Jesus as a starting point.² Recent studies have also offered resolution to the dissonance found between cosmology and eschatology, but little work has been done outside of the field of eschatology, or beyond the resurrection, to help resolve the dissonance. This

1 See Russell, R.J. 'Eschatology and scientific cosmology: from deadlock to interaction', *Zygon* (2012) 47: 4, 997-1014; and Russell, R.J. 'Resurrection, eschatology, and the challenge of Big Bang cosmology', *Interpretation* (2016) 70: 1, 48-60.

2 House, H.W. 'Creation and redemption: A study of kingdom interplay', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, (1992) 35, 3-17.

essay will argue that the narrative of soteriology provides an interpretive lens to the narrative of nature (as seen in cosmology). By exploring the broader doctrine of soteriology, we can hope to resolve the dissonance while developing an interpretive lens to include and explain other areas of cosmology.

Cosmological and eschatological dissonance

Cosmology claims that the universe will end in one of several possible ways, each of which assumes that the universe is moving continuously, though relatively slowly, towards destruction. Biblical eschatology, on the other hand, makes the claim that the resurrection of Jesus has set the world on a trajectory towards a new creation – ‘I am making everything new’, says Jesus in Revelation 21:5. These conflicting claims create dissonance between science and theology over the ultimate fate of the universe. Can this dissonance be resolved? Must one claim be held over or against the other? Must, perhaps, the universe be recreated prior to its destruction? Is the physical death of the universe theologically problematic? Does death precede the transformation of the old creation into the new creation or is death somehow part of that transformation?

Robert Russell lays out the apparent dissonance between cosmology and biblical eschatology.³ Russell is joined by John Polkinghorne in arguing that some resolution of the cosmology-eschatology dissonance lies in understanding the resurrection of Jesus.⁴ Especially important to Russell and Polkinghorne is accepting that, just as the post-resurrected body of Jesus had both continuities and discontinuities with his pre-resurrected body, so too will the new creation have both continuities and discontinuities with the present creation. Russell writes that the bodily resurrection of Jesus emphasises elements of continuity and discontinuity between Jesus of Nazareth and the risen Jesus. Based on the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the new creation is not a replacement of the old creation but a transformation of the old creation.⁵ This being the case, it doesn't necessarily follow, argues Russell, that the predictions of science *must* come true. The laws of nature, being descriptive and not prescriptive, allow for predictions that are subject to alteration. The resurrection of Jesus provides a basis for a radically new kind of divine action not reduced to or explained by the current laws of nature. God is, and will therefore be, free to act in the world in unprecedented and by such radical new divine action can resolve the dissonance of cosmology and biblical eschatology.⁶

While Russell's and Polkinghorne's claims certainly provide resolution to

3 *ibid.*

4 Polkinghorne, J.C. *Science and Christian Belief: theological reflections of a bottom-up thinker*, London: SPCK (1994).

5 Russell 'Resurrection ...' *op. cit.*, (1), 52-54.

6 *ibid.*, 53.

the cosmology-eschatology dissonance, they fail to provide an interpretive lens for understanding the larger narrative of cosmology. By limiting the focus to only the resurrection of Jesus, Russell and Polkinghorne fail to take into consideration contributions from other areas of theology. What might other theological fields reveal about the end of creation, as well as the process of its renewal along the way? More specifically, what might a careful examination of the Christian doctrine of soteriology contribute to our understanding of the fate of creation and its continual, progressive process of renewal?

From eschatology to soteriology

According to the Christian doctrine of soteriology, believers in Jesus Christ are regenerated and justified by grace through faith, progressively sanctified over the course of their life and die a physical death prior to their glorification. The question at hand is, does a similar pattern of origin, development and destination exist for the universe? If so, what would such a similar pattern mean for cosmology? Resurrection stands as the central and foundational element of soteriology. Without resurrection from the dead, the Apostle Paul says, our faith is futile. So, while resurrection can never be separated from Christian soteriology, it is distinguished within it. The resurrection of the saints is distinguished from the justification and sanctification of the saints. Because soteriology encompasses more than just resurrection of Jesus and the saints, it is possible to understand the remaking of the universe in other terms in addition to the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. We can understand the remaking of the universe in terms of origins, progressive change and then renewal – mirroring the salvation story of the saints. By including other elements of soteriology in addition to resurrection the doctrine of soteriology provides a broad basis of understanding.

A close examination of the Christian doctrine(s) of soteriology has more to offer than a simple resolution to the cosmology-eschatology dissonance. Doctrines of soteriology further provide an interpretive lens for understanding cosmology. This becomes apparent when we understand nature in terms of a narrative and then carefully compare that narrative with the narrative of soteriology. All of nature is telling a story; theology is one way we make sense of that story. In Romans 1:20, Paul writes, 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.' Long before Paul, the Psalms pointed towards a natural theology. The most notable instance is Psalm 19:1: 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.' These verses in Romans 1 and Psalm 19 show that the universe has something to say. Nature is revealing a story and theology is helping us learn to read it. The work of both scientists and theologians throughout history has been to piece together that story. John F. Haught writes, 'Theologically understood, biological evolution is part of a great cosmic journey into the in-

comprehensible mystery of God...Perhaps, life at a dramatic level inaccessible to the mathematical abstractions of physical science, is an adventure stirred up by a God of persuasive love.⁷ If the cosmos is telling a story, and theology is the key to reading it, then soteriology can help make sense of cosmology, shed new light on the dissonance between cosmology and eschatology, and provide an interpretive lens for understanding cosmology.

What remains to be explored, then, is *how* Christian soteriology can bring new light and possible resolution to the cosmology-eschatology dissonance while also providing a lens for interpreting the cosmological story. How might we understand new creation transformation from the old creation based on analogy with soteriology? What other understanding does soteriology bring to cosmology? To answer these questions, we must look comparatively at the narrative of cosmology and then the narrative of soteriology.

The narrative of cosmology

Barbara Ryden, professor of Astronomy at the Ohio State University writes, 'Cosmology is the study of the universe, or cosmos, regarded as a whole.'⁸ The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (N.A.S.A.) says that Cosmology is 'the scientific study of the large-scale properties of the universe as a whole. It endeavors to use the scientific method to understand the origin, evolution and ultimate fate of the entire Universe.'⁹ Said another way, cosmology is the study of the universe to understand its origin, development and destination. Though no single theory is able to conclusively explain the origins of life on earth, the 'Big Bang' is the current model for understanding the origin of the universe. In one of its simplest forms, the 'Big Bang' theory states that 'the universe has expanded from an initially hot and dense state to its current relatively cool and tenuous state, and that the expansion is still going on today'. In a less technical sense, the 'Big Bang' did not occur at a single point in space as an 'explosion'. It is better thought of as the simultaneous and sudden appearance of time and space everywhere in the universe.¹⁰

After the appearance of time and space, the process of the development of life known as 'evolution' began. Atoms began arranging themselves into simple, and then progressively more complex, molecules.¹¹ Eventually, the building

7 Haight, J.F. *Making Sense of Evolution*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2010), p. 75.

8 Ryden, B. *Introduction to Cosmology*, Boston: Addison-Wesley (2003), pp. 1-2.

9 'Cosmology: the Study of the Universe,' N.A.S.A., last modified 21 December 2012, accessed 18 September 2016, <http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/>.

10 'Foundations of Big Bang Cosmology,' N.A.S.A. last modified 24 January 2014, accessed 18 September 2016 http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/bb_concepts.html.

11 Bahadur, K. & Ranganayaki, S. 'Photochemical formation of self-sustaining coacervates', *J. Brit. Interplanetary Soc.* (1970) 23 12, 813-829.

blocks of life were formed, followed by what we understand today as organic life.¹² Biological evolution is the process of progressive biological change in a population of organisms over time. According to the University of California Museum of Paleontology:

Biological evolution, simply put, is descent with modification. This definition encompasses small-scale evolution (changes in gene frequency in a population from one generation to the next) and large-scale evolution (the descent of different species from a common ancestor over many generations). Evolution helps us to understand the history of life. Biological evolution is not simply a matter of change over time. Lots of things change over time: trees lose their leaves, mountain ranges rise and erode, but they aren't examples of biological evolution because they don't involve descent through genetic inheritance. The central idea of biological evolution is that all life on Earth shares a common ancestor... Through the process of descent with modification, the common ancestor of life on Earth gave rise to the fantastic diversity that we see documented in the fossil record and around us today.¹³

Through the duplication and transference of DNA from parent to child, changes take place. Those changes have resulting effects on subsequent generations. Sometimes those changes become increasingly organised and more complex. Single-celled organisms became multi-celled organisms. Multi-celled organisms eventually became highly complex organisms capable of processing and theorising existence. Through evolution, life progressively changes. The term 'progressive' here refers to the gradual accumulation of naturally selected traits, which are transferred to subsequent generations. That progressive change continues to this day, but according to modern cosmology there will eventually come an end to the universe and an end to that progressive change.¹⁴ This progressive change, in many ways, resembles the progressive change of sanctification, which, for further examination, we now turn to the Christian doctrine of soteriology.

The narrative of soteriology

In recent scholarship, debates over the nature of the atonement, resurrection, new creation and mission have taken a larger role under the umbrella of soteriology. Most notably, the work of scholars in the aptly named 'New Perspective' have given new perspectives to our understanding of the nature of justification

12 Follmann, H. & Brownson, C. 'Darwin's warm little pond revisited: from molecules to the origin of life', *Naturwissenschaften* (November 2009) 96 (11), 1265–1292.

13 'An Introduction to Evolution,' UC Berkeley, accessed 18 September 2016, http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/evo_02.

14 Bahr, B., Lemmer, B. & Piccolo, R. 'The end of the universe', in *Quirky Quarks*, Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag (2016), pp. 314-319.

– the process by which God redeems his people. Still others see redemption as involving all creation.¹⁵ In this view, and others, atonement is not limited to humanity, but extends to the whole cosmos. This view is best summarised by Moltmann when he writes, ‘If Christ is the first-born of the dead, then he cannot be merely “the new Adam” of a new humanity. He must also be understood as the firstborn of the whole creation. He is present not only in the human victims of world history, but in victimized nature too.’¹⁶ From the Catholic theology perspective, Haught writes, ‘It is now possible for Catholic theology to take more seriously than ever the Apostle Paul’s belief that *all of* creation has been promised the redemption proclaimed by Christian faith. In Christianity’s foundation phase, devotees of Christ did not separate either their redeemer’s or their own destiny from that of the rest of creation.’¹⁷ However, this essay approaches this topic from a broadly Reformed perspective; in what follows, the arguments are made presupposing this broad tradition and make no comment on whether this is the way theologically to think about such matters. In short, we can find common ground among the different perspectives, which can help shed new light on the story of the cosmos. The pattern of regeneration, sanctification, physical death and glorification resemble similar cosmological events.

This pattern of regeneration, sanctification and physical death is initiated and guided in the life of a person by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works in the life of a person to bring them to faith. He is continually active in their life to conform them to the image of Christ until they die, after which point they become fully renewed. So, the Holy Spirit causes a person to be reborn, then empowers that person to become more conformed to the image of Christ until they die and become fully renewed. In this way, the Holy Spirit is active in redemption from beginning to end.

The specific outworkings of redemption are still debated among theologians, but there is a majority consensus among evangelicals and mainline protestant denominations.¹⁸ The majority claims a person is recreated before God by faith through grace (‘regeneration’) and then continues in a process of progressively righteous change over the course of their life by faith through grace (‘sanctification’). The whole life of the Christian can be summarised as a person, by grace through faith, experiences a sudden re-birth called regeneration. That person is a new creation on the basis of Christ’s work on the cross and his

15 See Deane-Drummond, C. *Christ and evolution: Wonder and wisdom*, Augsburg: Fortress (2009); Deane-Drummond, C. & Clough, D. (eds.) *Creaturely Theology*, London: SCM Press (2009); Deane-Drummond, C., Artinian-Kaiser, R. & Clough, D. (eds.) *Animals as Religious Subjects*, London: T & T Clark/Bloomsbury (2013).

16 Moltmann, J. *The Way of Jesus Christ*, London: SCM (1990), pp. 278-279.

17 Haught, *Resting on the future: Catholic theology for an unfinished universe*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing (2015), pp. 113-114; (emphasis his).

18 Some have argued that consensus exists among the catholic faiths (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, etc.) as well.

resurrection (2 Cor 5:17). That new Christian then spends his or her life living by faith and becoming, in actuality, progressively more righteous. He becomes what he has been declared to be. He dies a physical death in the hope of a final resurrection and glorification in which he attains a final new creation state. There is a pattern of sudden spiritual re-creation in the life of a person that is then followed by a gradual process of change, a physical death and final glorification. Regeneration, the instantaneous transformation from spiritual death to spiritual life, is the starting point of spiritual resurrection. There is a 'sudden burst' of spiritual life: The old man dies; the new man is born. Without it, no one can see the Kingdom of God (John 3).¹⁹ A person is instantaneously re-born as a new creation. This, in many ways, echoes the sudden 'big bang' beginning of the cosmos.

Justification follows regeneration. N.T Wright offers the following summary of justification: "To start with, a bare definition: justification is the declaration that somebody is in the right...In theology, therefore, justification is not the means whereby it becomes possible to declare someone in the right. It is simply that declaration itself. It is not how someone becomes a Christian, but simply the declaration that someone is a Christian."²⁰ For some, such as those in the Reformed Protestant tradition, justification is God declaring that a person is in the right on the basis of and through that person's faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Others within the Reformed tradition, most notably Barthian theologians, see justification as God declaring that a person is in the right on the basis of and through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.²¹ From this latter tradition it can be argued that the faithfulness of Christ in his death and resurrection provides an analogy for the cosmological story. Christ's death is analogous with the end of the cosmos. Christ's resurrection is analogous with the new creation being simultaneously here and not yet. Therefore, soteriology provides a lens for an 'already and not yet' understanding for how cosmology and eschatology are in unison.

Following justification is a life of sanctification.²² A person is then progressively changed ('sanctified') throughout life to become the new creation in reality. Progressive sanctification is the process by which a person becomes more holy. A Christian who has been declared a new creation in Christ progressively becomes so. Sanctification is the progressive process of becoming in reality

19 Hodge, C. *Systematic Theology*, Vol 3, Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans (1999), p. 10.

20 Wright, N.T. *The Great Acquittal: Justification by Faith and Current Christian Thought*, Reid, G., (ed.), London: Collins (1980), p. 13.

21 Barth, K. *Church Dogmatics*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers (2010), pp. 744-755.

22 There are different 'kinds' of sanctification; first, what is sometimes referred to as 'initial' or 'positional' sanctification. This simply means the act of setting aside, to 'set apart' or 'make holy'. For our purposes here, we will not be dealing with this particular aspect of sanctification. This paper deals with the second aspect, namely, 'progressive sanctification'.

what she has been declared to be in Christ: a new creation. Sanctification is a 'progressive' process in that there is a gradual accumulation of righteous thoughts, motives, affections and actions. It is a gradual and progressive process of bringing the 'not yet' into the 'already'. This process echoes the progressive process of evolution. Much like sanctification, evolution is a progressive process over time that results in 'new creations'. Sanctification, therefore, shows how the 'not yet' is being progressively worked towards in the 'already'.

Prior to final fulfilment of new creation, the great majority of followers of Jesus die a physical death. This is where the dissonance between cosmology and eschatology resides. Eschatology claims new creation at the end while cosmology claims destruction. However, the doctrine of sanctification brings new light here as well. Physical death is, for most, a prerequisite to final glorification as new creations. All believers in Christ, prior to the Parousia, die before experiencing their glorification. In this way, death acts like a bridge from the old to the new. There is a ceasing of the old prior to bringing in the new. So, death is simply another step in the transformational process. Death is the penultimate climax of transformation. 2 Peter 3:10 helps make sense of this: 'But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.'

Wolters explains it this way,

We must bear in mind that 2 Peter 3 speaks of three 'worlds', 'each consisting of heaven and earth: a world before the flood, called 'the world that then existed' (3:6), the present world between the flood and the Day of the Lord, called 'the heavens and earth that now exist' (3:7), and a future world after the Day, called the 'new heavens and new earth' (3:13). The three worlds (which are really the same world in three periods of its history) are marked off from each other by two cosmic crises: judgement by water in the flood, and the judgement by fire on the Day. In speaking of the future world judgement, the apostle is explicitly drawing a parallel with the earlier world judgement. Just as the former world 'was destroyed' (*apôleto*, 3:6), so the present world is facing the day of 'destruction' (*apôleia*, 3:7). However, just as the 'destruction' wrought by the water did not cause the world to vanish (it continues to be preserved 'by the same word' [3:7]), so the 'destruction' which will be wrought by the fire will presumably not cause the world to vanish either. Just as the second world is the first one washed clean by water, so the third world will be the second one even more radically purged by fire... In Peter it is the entire cosmos, not just the Israelite priesthood, that is to be refined in the crucible of judgement on the great day of God's appearance (cf. *parousia*, vv 4, 12). In apocalyptic fashion the metaphor is given a cosmic application, for a renewed and purified heaven and earth is found at

the end of the refining process (v. 13).²³

Peter indicates that the cosmos, like most believers in Christ, will meet death before its final transformation in 'glorification'. That physical death is a part of the transformational process from old to new. While physically there seems to remain a cosmos, there is an element of 'destruction' that must come as a final stage before renewal. This same theme of cosmological destruction is mentioned in Revelation 21:1: 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.' Again, the cosmic story echoes the story of soteriology. While there is implied continuity between old and new, there is also simultaneously implied some measure of discontinuity.²⁴ Just as most followers of Jesus will experience a physical death followed by a resurrection to new creation, so too will the cosmos experience destruction prior to and part of its recreation and final renewal.

Glorification refers to the final state of all believers in Jesus Christ. This event is the culmination and actualisation, sometimes called the 'realisation' of redemption for believers in Jesus. James T. Turner writes, 'The [soteriological] story vis-à-vis humanity moves forward to a particular and divinely ordained climax: being bodily resurrected into the New Creation (better: Renewed Creation) to live and work as a corporate people in God's cosmic temple as redeemed and glorified images; that is, images that won't rebel.'²⁵

When Christ returns, those who have already died in Christ will be physically resurrected to new life. Those who are still alive and justified through faith receive their new body, reward, eternal life and final, renewed state. Creation, which has been groaning for redemption, is made new, and death and brokenness are no more. Glorification is the destination of every believer in Jesus and the entire creation. The progressive renewal process of both the believer in Jesus and natural creation finds its culmination and completion in glorification – the state of renewed creation towards which the whole universe and everything in it is moving.

Soteriology and the story of the cosmos

How does soteriology help to make sense of cosmology? The answer lies, at least in part, in the possible similarities in divine action between the spiritual

23 Wolters, A. L. 'Worldview and textual criticism in 2 Peter 3: 10', *Westminster Theological Journal* (1987) 49 2, 405-413.

24 Stephens, M.B. *Annihilation or renewal?: the meaning and function of new creation in the Book of Revelation*, No. 307, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck (2011).

25 Turner, J.T. 'How to Lose the Intermediate State without Losing Your Soul', in Loftin, R.K. & Farris, J.R. *Christian Physicalism? Philosophical Theological Criticisms*, New York: Lexington Books (2018), p. 274.

and the natural realms. If God designs the spiritual creation process to work in a specific way, and that process flows from and displays God's character, the natural creation process can be seen as similar to the spiritual creation process at some times and in some ways. If there are similarities between the natural and spiritual creation processes, then it is possible that there are things to learn regarding the origins, development and destination of the universe. The spiritual creation process of soteriology can help make sense of certain aspects of the cosmological creation process. If similarities between the natural and spiritual creation process are based in the nature and character of God, then soteriology can be used as an interpretative lens for cosmology.

When God creates life in the spiritual realm – an action that is contingent with God's nature – one can expect that God might sometimes create life in a similar way in the natural realm.²⁶ Because the action is based on God's nature and character, the action can be, though doesn't necessarily need to be, similar across both the spiritual and physical realms. Given the possibility of such similarities, God's nature and work in the spiritual realm can lend insight to and help make sense of what we find in the physical realm.²⁷ The image Jesus uses of being 'born again' in John 3 is key for understanding this. Jesus uses physical birth to help Nicodemus understand the spiritual birth Jesus is referring to. Jesus's illustration shows it possible for God to bring forth new human *physical* life in a way that is similar to how God brings forth new *spiritual* life. Divine creative action can be similar across both realms.

As we view cosmology in light of theology, God's character informs our understanding of the universe. Theology interprets nature. More specifically, soteriology becomes a theological lens for viewing and interpreting cosmology. One perspective adopted and expanded by Jonathan Edwards is the view of typology: the 'foreshadowing' or 'prefiguration' at one time or place of something greater yet to come. The fields of Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) studies have documented well the typological relationship between the two. Edwards draws, however, a typological connection and harmony between more than the relationship of OT and NT; he draws a typological connection between the physical and spiritual realms. Edwards argues,

That natural things were ordered for types of spiritual things seems evident by these texts: John 1:9, 'This was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh in the world'; and John 15:1, 'I am the true vine.' Things are

26 See Russo, M.A. 'What is the significance of modern cosmology for theology today?', *Theology in Scotland Journal* (2018).

27 For a helpful discussion on divine action in nature see: Rusbult, C. 'Divine Action in Natural Process: Is Natural Process Guided by God?', *American Scientific Affiliation* (2006); Edwards, D. *How God acts: Creation, redemption, and special divine action*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2010); Dodds, M.J. *Unlocking Divine Action*, Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press (2012).

thus said to be true in Scripture, in contradistinction to what is typical. The type is only the representation or shadow of the thing, but the antitype is the very substance, and is the true thing.²⁸

For Edwards, nature is full of 'representatives' or 'shadows' that point to a greater reality in the spiritual realm.

Edwards's typology claims consistency between the natural and spiritual realms. He reasons that since there is harmony and similarity within the natural realm (horizontal similarities) there must exist similarities between the natural and spiritual realms (vertical similarities). He writes that given the harmony and similarities between objects in the 'visible world' it is reasonable to conclude that there would be similarities between objects in the 'visible world' and those in the 'invisible world'. For Edwards, things in the visible world reflect a spiritual reality. He writes:

Why should not we suppose that [God] makes the inferior in imitation of the superior, the material of the spiritual, on purpose to have a resemblance and shadow of them? We see that even in the material world, God makes one part of it strangely to agree with another, and why is it not reasonable to suppose He makes the whole as a shadow of the spiritual world?²⁹

And again:

If there be such an admirable analogy observed by the Creator in His works through the whole system of the natural world, so that one thing seems to be made in imitation of another, and especially the less perfect to be made in imitation of the more perfect...Why is it not rational to suppose that the corporeal and visible world should be designedly made and constituted in analogy to the more spiritual, noble, and real world? It is certainly agreeable to what is apparently the method of God's working.³⁰

For Edwards, the 'inferior' natural realm points to a 'superior' spiritual reality. Could it be that the spiritual reality helps make sense of the natural order through similarities? If so, then on the basis of such similarities soteriology becomes a lens for understanding cosmology. God's design in guiding the development and change in life (both spiritual and natural) is a progressive process over time. In such a way, God's action in soteriology (regeneration, progressive sanctification, physical death and glorification) helps to make sense of cosmology – the origin, development and destination of the universe.

The development and destination of the universe can be understood theo-

28 Edwards, J. *Typological Writings*, Anderson, W.E. (ed.), New Haven, London: Yale University Press (1993), p. 62.

29 Edwards, J. *Images of Divine Things*, vol. 11, Anderson, W.E. (ed.), New Haven, London: Yale University Press (1993), p. 53.

30 *ibid.*

logically as continually and progressively achieving now (already) what will be ultimately achieved (not yet) in the new creation. If believers in Christ are becoming now what they will one day fully be in the new creation, then in what ways is this echoed in nature? One way this is echoed is in the progressive change that evolution brings. Studies in the fields of evolutionary biology, biochemistry and molecular biology have shown that evolutionary processes seem to be operating with a purpose and towards a goal.³¹ In this way, it can be argued and understood that natural evolutionary processes, which bring changes in the present, are teleological. Those changes have a goal. From this perspective, soteriology provides a lens for seeing redemption working itself out towards a final glorified goal. Elements of the future new creation can be seen in the present order. Theologically, we can understand the progressive process of evolution in light of the progressive change of sanctification. Just as sanctification is slowly bringing about in the present the future glorification of the believer, so too the evolutionary process is slowly bringing about in the present the future new creation. Although seemingly slow from a human perspective, the cosmos has progressively developed over its existence. Evolutionary processes are bringing the new creation into the present.

Another question that arises from seeing the similarities between the soteriological and cosmological narratives is related to the problem of evil. The evolutionary process is far from efficient in producing new life forms. How can soteriology make sense of the cost of pain and suffering to produce humans? Miller brings much needed insight to this question. He argues that insisting that creation moved from pre-Fall paradise to 'fallen' undermines the biblical understanding of God's continuing creative and sustaining action in nature. Rather he sees death, pain and suffering as a necessary and good part of creation. He writes,

Those beings designed to die promote the good of the whole by fulfilling their part in God's plan for governing the universe. This view of the goodness of creation subsumes the experience of pain and suffering of the individual animal life into the goodness and beauty of the creation as a whole.³²

Creation as it is now, not a pre-Fall paradise, gives glory and praise to the Creator.³³ If death, pain and suffering are not good and necessary parts of God's work in creation, then how could it glorify God? And how could humans be

31 See Garte, S. 'Teleology and the Origin of Evolution', *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (2017) 69 1, 42-42; Gray, T.M 'Biochemistry and evolution', chap. 12 in Miller, K.B. (ed.) *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (2003), p. 256; Shanahan, T. 'Evolutionary Progress from Darwin to Dawkins', *Endeavour* (1999) 23, 171-174; Cunningham, C. *Darwin's Pious Idea: Why the UltraDarwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (2010).

32 Miller, K.B. 'And God saw that it was good: death and pain in the created order', *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (2011) 63 2, 92-93.

33 *ibid.*, 87.

moved to glorify God through observing creation? If creation was originally free of pain, suffering and death, then there would have been a complete transformation from its original state of 'perfection'. Since it is no longer in its original form, the natural world could no longer be a source of praise to God or a revelation of God's character.³⁴ However, if death, pain and suffering were always a part of God's creation, then they bring praise and glory to God by accomplishing his purposes in creation.

If this is true, then soteriology makes sense of death, pain and suffering in the evolutionary process. The process of sanctification contains death, pain and suffering that brings praise and glory to God by accomplishing his purposes in the life of his children. God uses death, pain and suffering to sanctify his children towards holiness and bring praise to himself (cf. Is. 1:25; Jer. 6:27-30; Ezek. 22:18-22;;1 Pet. 4:12-19). Soteriologically, eventually, that pain and suffering will end (for most believers) in death that will lead to new creation. Similarly, in a cosmological way, God can use death, pain and suffering for the good of the cosmos that will eventually lead to new creation. God can use death, pain and suffering in similar ways, for similar good, and with a similar purpose for the universe as he does for his children.

Given the similarities between the soteriological and cosmological origin and development narratives, we may conclude that the cosmos has a similar destination of physical death followed by new creation. The doctrine of soteriology claims that through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, God re-creates through a sudden act of regeneration and then progressive change over time. God progressively brings the 'not yet' of new creation to pass here in the 'already'. Those who are 'dead in their trespasses and sin' are suddenly made alive as a new creation in Christ Jesus. Then, over time, they are progressively changed towards glorification. The Holy Spirit moulds the Christian into the image of Christ. One day, the believer in Jesus experiences physical death (if it is prior to the Parousia), and that believer is then fully remade as a new creation in the new heaven and new earth. In short, a Christian is declared to be a new creation (now in the already) and then spends the rest of his life being made into a new creation, until his new creation-ness is fully actualised in the new heavens and new earth (not yet).

This raises some additional questions. What becomes of the universe after human existence? Does the universe 'die' with human extinction, or at the second coming of Christ, or does it continue? This leads further to questions such as, what is death? What similarities are there between human death and the death of the cosmos? Is death simply the ceasing of function as originally designed? How are the deaths of humans and the cosmos similar? How are they different? What elements of the old creation will be found in the new creation (continuity), and what of the old creation will not be found in the

³⁴ *ibid.*

new creation (discontinuity)? These questions cannot be sufficiently explored here. Further research has been and should be done to explore these questions. Wilkinson, in dialogue with Polkinghorne and feminist theology, concludes the cosmos will be transformed in such a way that has both continuity and discontinuity.³⁵ However, the questions of when and how such transformation occurs need further exploration.

Nevertheless, soteriology gives some insight into these questions. One example is from the work of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Holy Spirit is active from beginning to end in the regeneration and sanctification of the believer, so too is he active from beginning to end in the origin and development of the universe. The Holy Spirit was present 'in the beginning' as he 'hovered over the face of the deep'. He, as Walton and others argue, brought order to chaos, and function to forms.³⁶ The Holy Spirit is active in the evolution and development of the cosmos. Just as humans will eventually die, bringing an end to their original function, so too the cosmos will meet with an eventual end; a ceasing of its original function. This process is guided entirely by the Holy Spirit. He brings both humans and the entire cosmos from their origin, through their development, to their ceasing of function, towards their final goal of new creation. How and when the cosmos ends in relationship to the work of the Holy Spirit needs further consideration.

The creative and sustaining acts of God demonstrate a pattern of sudden regeneration followed by progressive change towards a realised goal. A similar pattern can be seen in the physical creation process. The story of the cosmos reveals that the world came into a sudden existence, a long process of progressive change followed over time, and creation is heading towards a final destination. The point of dissonance exists here with science claiming cosmic physical death and Christianity claiming cosmic renewal. However, with such narrative similarity, the lens of the doctrine of soteriology reveals that perhaps the cosmos does have a goal *after physical death*. The similarity between the physical and spiritual realm seems to indicate that the cosmos will die some kind of physical death and then enter a state of new creation. The doctrine of soteriology makes sense of cosmology by showing that since both the physical and spiritual realms have similar origin and development, and the same Holy Spirit guiding them, they could both have a similar goal: physical death followed by new creation.

35 Wilkinson, D. *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe*, London: T&T Clark (2010), p. 157.

36 See Walton, J. *The Lost World of Genesis One*, Chicago: InterVarsity Press (2010); and Irons, L. 'The framework interpretation: an exegetical summary', *Ordained Servant* (2000) 9 1, 7-11.

Conclusion

Alistair McGrath observes, 'We long to make sense of things. We yearn to see the big picture, to know the greater story, of which our own story is small, but nonetheless important part...The world around us seems to be studded with clues to a greater vision of life.'³⁷ The primary dissonance between cosmology and Christian theology is destination. Cosmology claims the universe will end in catastrophe, while Christian theology claims it will end in renewal. This is where the narrative of soteriology brings the whole cosmological narrative into perspective and resolves the dissonance. One way we make sense of the cosmological story is by viewing it through the lens of the Christian doctrine of soteriology. A comparative analysis of how God works soteriologically with how he works cosmologically reveals a similar pattern between the spiritual and physical creation processes, most notably in the origin, development and destination of what he has created. The pattern we see in cosmology is a sudden creation (origin), followed by a progressive process of change (development) and eventual physical death (destination). This is similar to how God is acting in spiritual creation: sudden re-birth (origin), progressive sanctification (development) and physical death and glorification. With such origin and development narrative similarities between cosmology and soteriology, we might ask: Does the cosmos have a similar destination? Does the similarity between the physical and spiritual realms indicate that the cosmos is working towards physical destruction followed by a state of renewed creation?

Any dissonance between eschatology and cosmology is resolved by the soteriological narrative. Just as the believer in Jesus (and Jesus Christ himself) experiences physical death followed by a renewed, glorified state, so too will the cosmos experience a physical death and reach a renewed, glorified state. God is progressively bringing to pass in the 'already' (through his redemptive work) what will come to pass in the 'not yet' (new creation). This conclusion is based in God's nature as Creator. Comparing the history and workings of the natural cosmos with the doctrine of soteriology reveals a natural process of creation that is similar to the spiritual process of creation. Since both cosmology and soteriology have similar origin and development narratives, it stands to reason that they have a similar destination: new creation. Thus, soteriological narrative brings harmony to the dissonance between cosmology and eschatology.

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37 McGrath, A. *Surprised by Meaning*, Westminster: John Knox Press (2011), p. 3.