PETER MOTT

Banishing the Spirit and the Glory from the Material World?

I was disappointed with John Jefferson Davis's article 'The Spirit and the Glory's Banishment from the Material World: Reimagining Divine Immanence in the light of Later Modern Science', *Science & Christian Belief* (2020), 128-143. He argues that the mechanisation and mathematisation of modern science by Galileo, Descartes and Newton removed the divine glory from creation. But Galileo, Descartes and Newton, along with other founders of modern science such as Copernicus, Kepler and Francis Bacon, were all devout Christians, who saw God in the physical mechanisms they discovered. Newton even said 'God is a mathematician' – high praise indeed from the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics! They were not following the dominant metaphysics of their day, but pioneering a new mathematical natural philosophy, which was essential to the development of modern science.[1]

It is true that the mechanistic/mathematical approach is open to a deistic/atheistic interpretation, but it does not have to be: in a recent survey by Ipsos-MORI of professional scientists in Western Europe, about equal proportions classified themselves as Religious/Spiritual compared to Atheistic/Agnostic.[2] At theological college, I was able to set aside Rudolph Bultmann's dismissal of everything unscientific in scripture as myth, because in my first degree in Natural Sciences I had studied a course in the History and Philosophy of Science; so I realised (as Bultmann obviously did not) that his definition of myth included the whole of empirical science! By then the concept of 'myth' becomes so wide it is meaningless.

My second problem/privilege is that I was a botanist for ten years before turning my collar round. My physics stopped with A-Level in 1966, when the syllabus did not go much further than Newton. I still do not understand Maxwell's equations of quantum physics, nor Einstein's Theory of Relativity. So how can I find God's glory via them? To me it smacks of God-of-the-gaps.

But I was heartened by the following article in *Science & Christian Belief*.[3] There Kaiser emphasises the importance of the text from Wisdom 11:20/21b

1 Cohen, H.F. *The Rise of Modern Science Explained*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2015).

2 Lorimer, D. (ed.) Science and Religion: *A survey of Spiritual Practices and Beliefs among European Scientists, Engineers and Medical Professionals*, (2017) Network Review.

3 Kaiser, C.B. The 'Marks of God's Wisdom' in Comenius' Panorthosia: a Biblical Commonplace at the Foundation of Modern Science (2020) *Science & Christian Belief* 32, 144-160.

'You ordered all things by measure, number, weight.' This text was widely quoted by the Church Fathers and the medieval natural philosophers; and even after the Reformers relegated Wisdom to the Apocrypha, it was quoted by protestant Kepler, Newton, and Maxwell. My A-level physics is up to understanding why surface tension makes raindrops spherical, and a combination of reflection and refraction of sunlight in those raindrops produces the spectrum we know as a rainbow. For me, this does not unweave the rainbow, but makes me think 'How clever of God to use a few simple physical laws to create such a marvel!' The glory of God is seen in the maths!

William Blake wrote:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
and Eternity in an hour.[4]

Blake was no friend of modern science, but as a modern botanist, I can still see heaven in a wild flower. Yes, I accept Darwin, and understand how the flower has evolved to attract insects to pollinate it. But the flower is still beautiful, and there is glory in the complexity of the pollen tube fertilising the ovule, which ripens into a seed and the ovary into a fruit, all adapted to aid dispersal of the seed. The glory of God is enhanced, not diminished by modern scientific understanding.

Revd Dr Peter Mott has a doctorate in Plant Ecology.

4 Blake, W. 'Auguries of Innocence'.