MIKE PARSONS

Never in the Shallow End

The report, by Nick Spencer and Hannah Waite of Theos, 'Science and Religion: Moving away from the shallow end', was published in May 2022 It makes a number of interesting observations, based on both quantitative and qualitative research, as to how the debate about the relationship between science and religion has changed over the last fifteen years. The report title draws on the humorous observation that in swimming pools all the noise comes from the shallow end. The debate certainly has been 'noisy' at times and their report outlines areas where serious discussion has moved into deeper waters and with recognition of multiple ways of approaching formerly contentious issues.

Alister McGrath's work over many years illustrates this concern for discussion and not confrontation, along with a concern for an inference to the best explanation as the way forward. In particular his taking up of Mary Midgley's suggestion of 'multiple maps of meaning' has significant resonances with Spencer and Waite's outline of the 'areas of deeper concern', key areas in the science and religion debate, and the evidence from their expert interviews. This paper considers these areas in the light of the deeper, ultimate decisive questions that all human beings need to ask of themselves, as referred to by McGrath in his approving use of the work of José Ortega y Gasset. It observes that McGrath, throughout his writings and verbal presentation, never inhabited the shallow end of discussions. The paper then considers what insights these considerations might have in the Christian tradition for a more grounded missiology in the twenty first century.

Key words: McGrath, Theos, Midgley, Ortega y Gasset, missiology, Bosch, Polanyi, religion, science, world view.

In May 2022 *Theos* published their report *Science and Religion: moving away from the shallow end,* conducted by Nick Spencer and Hannah Waite[1]. The title was a play on the joke that discourses of conflict are like swimming pools: all the noise comes from the shallow end. The report was based on both quantitative and qualitative observations, a YouGov survey of over 5,000 UK adults and over 100 in depth interviews with scientists, philosophers, theologians and sociologists (from committed atheists to religious believers). The results were quite striking and will be referred to later.

1 Spencer N & Waite W, *Science and Religion: moving away from the shallow end*, London: Theos (2022)

Alister McGrath has never been a person to spend time in the shallow end of discourse yet still communicates lucidly and accessibly in his many publications. Lord (Richard) Harries of Pentregarth described *The Great Mystery* as 'a book that will challenge all dogmatists, whether scientific or religious, and which will greatly encourage those who are tentative and searching'[2]. Lord (Rowan) Williams of Oystermouth was equally enthusiastic about *Inventing the Universe,* 'a salutary shock to anyone who has taken for granted the received unwisdom on this subject'[3]. And the received unwisdom is extensive, facilitated in many cases by both popular and academic discourse failing to acknowledge what the philosopher Mary Midgley describes as 'Multiple Maps of Meaning'. McGrath is an admirer of Midgley's work and quotes her in several places, but particularly in *Inventing the Universe*.

Alister McGrath uses the terms 'a story to live by', or 'an interweaving of narratives' in his *Inventing the Universe*, rather than a single world view, where a world view may well include a number of interpretative narratives integrated into a coherent whole. The philosopher Mary Midgely's 'multiple maps of meaning', referred to several times by McGrath, adds to this necessary picture of a coherent matrix of stories by which we find meaning. These stories, for the theist, all find their origin in the Creator, however we may perceive such a deity.

World views are integrative frameworks, means of finding meaning in life, and interpretative frameworks, in which order and disorder are judged. A belief structure that is both irrefutable and unprovable: it is both descriptive (tells us how the world is) and also normative (how the world ought to be). They need not eliminate doubt but contain it within a greater overarching structure. The missiological challenge is not so much confronting the world view of the committed scientific secularist (such as Richard Dawkins) but that of the 'ordinary' person in society who does not realise that there are other ways of interpreting the world that are just as respectful of scientific enquiry, perhaps even more so, in which the Christian faith offers a credible alternative.

James Sire defines a world view as 'a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story, or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partly true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic makeup of our world, and that provides the foundation on which we live, move and have our being'[4]

One of the problems with world views is that we are often not conscious of them until they are challenged, or we find ourselves abandoning them. The

2 McGrath, A, *The Great Mystery*, London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd (2018) back cover.

3 McGrath, A, *Inventing the Universe*, London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd (2015) back fly leaf

4 Sire, J, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Leicester: Inter Varsity Press (2010) p.17

testimonies of former Marxists, Freudians, National Socialists and converts to another religion etc. give evidence of the personal upheaval and often community estrangement involved in such a move.

Most academic scientists are instrumentalists in their presentation of research results: the questions of meaning and why should such things be so generally get left to discussions in the bar afterwards (when they often turn into critical realists!). But these big questions, the ultimate questions of life, are of major importance. McGrath, in *Inventing the Universe*, quotes the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset: 'Scientific truth is characterized by its precision and the certainty of its predictions. But science achieves these admirable qualities at the cost of remaining on the level of secondary concerns, leaving ultimate and decisive questions untouched.'[5]

These Ultimate Questions, I suggest, include:

1. What is the nature of this world and how do we discover it?
2. Why is there something rather than nothing?
3. How do our feelings and emotions affect our view of the world and others?
4. How do we determine a basis for morality and ethics?
5. What does it mean to be human – and what is the place of other species?
6. Is there a purpose for our existence – and how might we discover it?
7. What are our possible futures – and how might we discover them?
8. What sort of epistemology might enable us to frame answers to the above?

McGrath comments that a response to this will involve adopting one of three options[6]:

1. Ignore them as too difficult, irrelevant or uninteresting.
2. Believe that scientific enquiry is the only secure path to knowledge.
3. Hold multiple maps of meaning to answer such ultimate questions.

We can, of course, choose to ignore questions about ultimate meaning as too

5 *ibid*, p.144
6 *idem,* p.145

difficult or un-interesting at the present time. Or we may agree that they are interesting questions but fundamentally unanswerable and therefore spending time on them is pointless: just get on with life.

Or we may see that leaving the safety of a science that gives definite answers for 'the wastelands of philosophy or theology' is a deeply unattractive option and best well avoided. Far better to assume that scientists know what they are talking about; they alone can deliver hard knowledge: leave it to them; they deliver on the evidence.

It is difficult to see how anyone who has any knowledge of the development of quantum theory, cosmology or particle physics could be happy with such a position, for the evidence is frequently ambiguous and capable of more than one interpretation. The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory, developed by Bohr and Heisenberg, is by far the most widely accepted – and taught to undergraduates as the current state of knowledge – yet there are still adherents to hidden variable and other theories. Cosmological theories develop, and sometimes are proved quite wrong. Lev Landau, the great Soviet theoretical physicist, commented concerning his cosmologist colleagues that 'they are often in error but seldom in doubt'.[7] Such theories are proposed on the basis of the evidence available, but then often overtaken by new evidence.

In many other fields of enquiry where the evidence available is ambiguous and open to many interpretations the role of the researcher is to provide an *inference to the best explanation*, and then after that to seek other corroborating evidence. This is the process of abduction and is a powerful tool which has proved highly successful. Yet what seems at first to be the best explanation needs constant examination and we should always hold out our meta-truths and meta-narratives for inspection and criticism both by ourselves and others. Take for example major scientific theories, such as Quantum Theory, or the Standard Model of particle physics, where a central core of the theory is surrounded by other theories; hypotheses which are still to be tested and at times found wanting and in need of revision: yet the core remains until such time as a major re-appraisal takes place. This may well be a paradigm shift, which is itself for most participants a major upheaval in their 'beliefs'. Paradigm shifts are often associated with a startling counter-intuitive insight, of something assumed not possible, that on deeper examination turns out to be the key to the problem. Quantum theory and superconductivity are both in debt to counter-intuitive thinking.

It is misleading to see theology characterised as a discipline that deals in truth about the ultimate things and compare it with science that is always

7 This comment by Landau is widely quoted, often in slightly different forms, but never referenced. My authority for it is as a personal communication from J. C. Polkinghorne, who knew Landau and heard it from him!

open to revision and development. If either science or theology make claims to 'truth' they are mistaken; the purpose of science is to enable understanding.

Philip Bell, in his review[8] of Angela Potochnik's book, *Idealization and the Aims of Science* [9] observes that 'science is not after truth but useful, comprehensible, workable theories of the world. Understanding trumps truth'.

There has been something of a struggle over this distinction but now most science disciplines concede that total objectivity is impossible – we, the subject, are always part of the question with varying effects. Interestingly it is the quantum physicists, those supposed by the general public to be the most objective, who realise most acutely this problem: that the act of observing alters the state of that which is observed. At the level of the wave function this inability to know exactly what happens as a measurement is made gives rise to a number of competing interpretations of quantum mechanics.

More controversially, theology also cannot make claims to possess absolute truth, as this can only lie in God. Our theology is our best explanation, and missiologists such as Bevans and Schroeder[10] have shown how the church's answers have changed over the centuries.

Scientific enquiry continues apace and there are some who will have the opinion that science will be able to explain all in due time, holding to the second response to answering ultimate questions. Some of the 'ultimate questions' will be rejected as meaningless ('Why is there something and not nothing' is a frequent candidate). However, despite that it is far from clear how a strictly scientific evidence based approach can provide a framework for moral judgement other than saying that whatever benefits the species development will be right. Dawkins generated considerable controversy by applying this to the evolutionary desirability of aborting foetuses with identified abnormalities. He is not alone in this, the Australian social-philosopher Peter Singer also generates controversy in this area. Not all scientific naturalists would take such a strong view; many would recognise that there is a need for explanation for morals, aesthetic values, perceptions of beauty etc. but would separate such explanations and leave them to religion and metaphysics whilst maintaining that everything else is the realm of science. McGrath points out that the more doctrinaire would despise and ridicule such a soft approach, but that there are others who, whilst still being committed to a naturalist position, would be equally dismissive of those who fail to allow for any form of satisfactory answer to the deep questions of human existence[11].

8 Bell, P, 'Is Science really the only game in town?', *New Scientist*, 3 March (2018), 44-47

9 Potochinik, A, *Idealization and the Aims of Science*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2018)

10 Bevans, S & Schroeder, R, *Constants in Context: a Theology of Mission for Today*, New York: Orbis Books (2004)

11 *idem*, pp.147-150

McGrath's third option of multiple maps of meaning allows scientific enquiry its pre-eminence in explaining the natural world, its origins and its processes whilst also having additional maps that cohere with the scientific one: maps that explain that a God who creates the world is not going to be an object we observe within this universe Such a God, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, is by his or her very nature a creator so then it is not unreasonable to find that creation reflects the properties of the creator. And if, in some way, we see human beings as occupying a special place in creation as rational, self-aware, creatures, then they too should exhibit some of the properties of the creator. This is the doctrine of humankind being created in the image of God. The Lutheran theologian Phil Hefner describes human beings seen in this light as 'created co-creators', a description full of resonances and possibilities which gives theological explanation as to why the human race is so curious and also so inventive, themes developed in his *The Human Factor*[12].

McGrath succinctly sums up his argument:

> So, does engaging with such questions mean abandoning science? No. It simply means acknowledging and respecting its limits and not forcing it to be something other than science. Christianity is able to enrich this vision of science – not by proposing itself as a competing science, but by being what it is and doing what it does best, which is raising and answering ultimate questions. Of course, it does much more than this – but it does it *distinctively* and it does it well. And it needs to be done[13].

A theistic, Judaeo-Christian world view, allied to a rigorous scientific understanding of the world we inhabit, constitutes a robust world view that can be held with integrity.

The *Theos* survey has shown that the mind of the general public, at least in the UK, has moved on from a simple conflict model. Whilst the proposition that science and religion are at least partly incompatible finds general favour; if the questions are more specific about which *particular* science conflicts with religious belief there is much less perception of conflict (particularly among religious believers). 'In reality, both science and religion are highly complex, contestable, polyvalent, terms which means the science and religion debate is similarly complex[14]'

The report draws out six different dimensions in the science and religion debate, which it examines in more detail, and suggests as a programme for the

12 Heffner, P, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture and Religion,* Minneapolis: Fortress Press (1993)

13 *idem*, p. 152

14 *ibid*, p. 3

future six key areas for deep end exploration[15].

1. **Epistemology**: how do we know what (we think) we know? (faith vs fact)
2. **Metaphysics**: what is the fundamental nature of reality? (natural vs supernatural)
3. **Hermeneutics**: how do we read texts, particularly authoritative religious ones? (literal vs metaphorical)
4. **Anthropology**: what does it mean to be human? (material vs spiritual)
5. **Ethics**: what is good and how do we progress as a society?(moral polarisation)
6. **Politics**: who gets to decide? ('playing God')

This is a rich agenda for future activity in the deep end.

The scientific and academic community are not the problem. The real problem posed in this paper is that the majority of the population, at least of Western society is still conditioned to think in shallow terms unless challenged by an interest in a particular area.

Most people never come to consider what sort of world view they are operating within. In the relics of Christendom, we may well profit from a residual belief structure that perhaps the 'God and Jesus Story' actually works. For many converts a feeling that they express is a sense of the 'rightness' of their new faith, that it 'fits', that it allows them to make sense of the world around them in a way that was not possible before. Such language is essentially experiential and not intellectual. Faith would seem to be caught, not taught.

In 1991 the South African missiologist David J Bosch wrote an essay on a missiology of Western culture entitled *Believing in the Future*[16] After an insightful analysis of Christian faith in a post-modern age he observed that, except in the Western world, theology and missiology were virtually indistinguishable, yet in Western theological departments missiology was almost totally absent, except as a pastoral addendum to ministerial students.

Bosch concludes his short essay by quoting Polanyi as to the consequences for humanity if we do not communicate the shallow inadequateness of its rationalism and materialism.

15 *idem*, pp.77-123

16 Bosch, D J, *Believing in the Future*, Leominster: Gracewing (1995)

> Then law is no more than what the courts will decide, art but an emollient of nerves, morality but a convention, tradition but an inertia, God but a psychological necessity.

Then man dominates a world in which he himself does not exist. For with his obligations he has lost his voice and his hope and has been left behind meaningless to himself [17]

This is a descent into nihilism, and the signs of this are clear in aspects of western society. How do we set about a missiological programme to counter this?

Bosch[18] claims that the problem lies in the way that the churches have regarded mission, or evangelism, as something that is done to others, to those outside; whereas he argues that Western theology should learn from the theologians of Asia and Africa that mission is the very heart of theology, not its outworking. Doctrine should be taught through mission; missiology is not a subset of doctrine. This is an outworking of the statement that 'It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but that the God of Mission who has a church in the world.'[19]

The problem of relating science and faith is so often High School science and Sunday School religion. The problem is not so much in the academy – although debate can be fierce, the argument is by and large acknowledged to exist – but in the schools, churches and religious communities. Too few churches address seriously scientific theories of creation, life and death, human meaning, in their relation to sacred texts and traditions. So many school science teachers fail to indicate that there may often be other valid answers to a question than a purely mechanistic one from science.

The film version of Victor Hugo's book *Les Misérables* is a wonderful story of a life turned around. In the film the refrain is frequently that 'Another Story Must Begin'. Another story must begin in society and in the church. Theological faculties give the impression at times of being engaged in re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic rather than engaging in a theological understanding of society. Christian congregations all too often operate as safe fortresses from the hostile world outside, and clergy of all denominations still appear to regard their role as that of 'safeguarding their congregations against error in religion and viciousness in life'[20] rather than that of resourcing them in a society that has largely forgotten (or never knew) the Christian story. The US community

17 Polanyi, M, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (1958), p.380

18 *ibid*, pp.17ff.

19 Dearborn T, quoted in *Mission Shaped Church*, London: Church House Publishing (2004) p. 85

20 *idem*, p.28

theologian Walter Bruegemann describes evangelism as 'the invitation to re-imagine our lives in these narrative modes'[21].

Some of us must be called to articulate that story.

Mike Parsons was Executive Director of the Ian Ramsey Centre, Faculty of Religion and Theology, University of Oxford.

21 Breugemann, W, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-storied Universe*, Nashville: Abingdon Press (2011)