

The Narratives of Modernity and the Christian Story

J.R.R. Tolkien said that ‘mythology is language and language is mythology’.¹ What Tolkien meant was that the stories a society tells about what it means to be human, what counts as human success and what the world is like, decisively shape the very words and phrases people to use to communicate, and so determine the possibilities of what can be thought. Myths become more, not less, powerful when they become invisible. Once a story has been told so many times that we take its truth for granted, the story becomes part of the conditions of thinking and communicating.

Heresies are exaggerated truths. Ideologies are distorted loves. The narratives of modernity are mistaken reactions to how things appear to be or misdirections of genuine longings of the human heart. Their power and their plausibility derive from the fact that they pull us toward something that we think we want, by overstating its power to give meaning and significance to our lives.

1. The narrative of reason

The German Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant, wrote a book called *Religion within the limits of Reason alone* (1793). The book was a manifesto for what had been Kant’s life’s work, to explore just how far reason alone could get in understanding what human beings are, what counts as human success, and what the world is like. Kant was not so naïve that he thought that reason alone could answer those questions completely, but he did think that you could get a long way down the track employing reason alone. What Kant does is to divide knowledge (that’s not quite the right word but I hope you will forgive me for not unpacking it more at the moment) into two types: the things we can know through reason alone and the types we can only take on trust through faith. It is important to note two things about Kant’s picture. First, the dividing line between reason and faith is an absolute one. It is not that we need varying degrees of faith and reason across a spectrum where our ideas about the world shade from one into the other. It is not that reason and faith work together to give us epistemological access to truths about ourselves and about the world. For Kant, there is a

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy Stories* ed. V. Flieger and D.A. Anderson, expanded ed. (London: Harper Collins, 2008) 181; J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lay of Aotrou & Itroun* ed. V. Flieger (London: Harper Collins, 2019), 95-96.

realm of knowledge without faith and a realm of knowledge beyond reason. The second thing to note about Kant's picture is that the boundary between the things we can know by reason and the things to which we can only have access by faith is fixed, and it is determined by reason. As the title of his book indicates, the limits of religion are determined by reason alone. Reason is what dominates the field of knowledge; religion is left the residue of what is left once reason has run out.

Kant's story about the relationship between reason and religion has become part of the air we breathe in Western society. Religion is reduced to the level of supporting a football team. In public, reason alone applies. Religion can have nothing to say about how the public institutions of our society operate because reason alone is sufficient and because religion is, by Kant's definition, irrational. Religion is to be kept private because my faith is as irrational as my belief that Queen's Park Rangers are a football team worth supporting. My love for QPR and my love for Christ can both be tolerated, so long as they are hobbies I practise in private.

In the humanities, the belief in rationalism died around the time of the Second World War. I've stood in the death camp of Auschwitz and seen what can happen when the techniques of industrialisation are applied to the science of genocide. I've watched the black and white pictures of the atomic bombs being dropped on Japan and seen what can happen when the methods of warfare are judged solely by the criterion of efficacy without regard to the distinction between combatant and non-combatant. I've seen the Berlin Wall fall, the end of a seventy-two year experiment into the application of the methods of bureaucratic efficiency and rationality to the whole of society.

The lessons of the Second World War and of the terrible ideological experiment of Nazism are that human reason can be twisted to provide justifications for just about any ends whatsoever. Alasdair MacIntyre so brilliantly identifies in his book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, different worldviews have their own criteria of reasonableness, not vice versa.

One of the lessons from the failures of Communism is that, when it comes to human societies, not everything can be known and not everything can be controlled. Apparently, no-one told the New Atheists. Unlike Kant, the New Atheists do not recognise any limits to the application of the so-called scientific method. The results include Dawkins' theory that ideas are memes, analogous to genes. The atheist philosopher John Gray describes 'Dawkins's

“memetic theory of religion” [as] a classic example of the nonsense that is spawned when Darwinian thinking is applied outside its proper sphere.’²

Rationalism is over-confidence in God’s great gift of reason to human beings. Christianity has always stood for rationality. Christian missionaries took the gospel into societies and freed people from superstition. Christianity freed peoples from sacrificing to the gods of the woods and the water. James Hannam’s great book on how Christian thinkers created the intellectual world within which the revolutions of Copernicus and Newton were possible, is entitled *God’s Philosophers: How the Medieval World laid the Foundations of Modern Science*. If you believe, as pagan Europeans did, that the world is full of competing gods and spirits, then you spend your time seeking to appease them. If you believe, as Christianity taught Europeans, that the world is the creation of a good and loving God, then you have reason to believe that goodness and order exist in the world and are open, in principle, to human discovery.

2. The myths of evolution and progress

I don’t want to get into a discussion about whether Christian biologists should be creationists, supporters of intelligent design, or theistic evolutionists. I do, however, want to highlight how the ideas of evolution and of progress function as myths within modernity. Evolution is an inductive hypothesis, based on observations of adaptive behaviour in the short term, of how different species, indeed how different branches of the tree of life, could have derived from a single source. Evolutionism is the position which combines evolution with naturalism. Evolution is a hypothesis as to *how* species came to be differentiated; evolutionism purports to explain *why* such differentiation occurred.

The problem with evolutionism is that evolution is blind. Evolutionism imagines a world in which species compete for space and in which only survival counts as success. Beauty has no place in evolutionism other than as a means of surviving. Excellence has no meaning, beyond being able either to thrive in a wide variety of environments or being able to exploit a particular niche better than other species. If survival is the only aim of the game, then whether the only species alive on the planet are blue-green algae or whether the world contains something as majestic as a blue whale is irrelevant.

² John Gray, ‘Evangelical Atheism’.

The problems with evolutionism run even more deeply. If evolutionism is true, we have no reason to think of ourselves as “selves” at all. This is what Francis Crick, one of the co-discoverers of the molecular structure of DNA said in his 1994 book *The Astonishing Hypothesis*:

“You,” your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll’s Alice might have phrased: “You’re nothing but a pack of neurons.”³

If evolutionism is true, there is no “self” to express, there is no mind operating as a source of consciousness. All that is occurring within my brain is the reception of data and the generation of responses by a pack of neurons whose switches flip on and off. As Peter Jackson has the orc Bolg say in the second *Hobbit* film, and as a demon-possessed man said to Jesus: “I am legion” (Mark 5:9, Luke 8:30). Human identity dissolves and human being disintegrates in the face of such an analysis. There is no ‘me’, other than in the trivial sense of a collective noun for that bundle of appetites whose only unifying characteristic is that they arise, flourish, compete and decline within a particular body.

The atheist philosopher, Thomas Nagel, wrote a book exposing the fallacies of evolutionism. The book is called *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*.⁴ In that book, Nagel argues that life, mind, consciousness, intentionality and values are all features of the world which evolutionism cannot explain.

In the humanities, the functional equivalent of evolution is the myth of progress. The great achievements of the Victorian Era were driven by the conviction that “things can only get better”. It was humanity’s destiny (or at least the white man’s destiny first) to overcome the

³ Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, 3.

⁴ Thomas Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 16

issues of poor health, poor climate, poor education, poor housing etc., through a series of inventions and reforms.⁵

It might be thought that evolutionism supports the idea of progress: that because we are just the products of mindless evolution, we can now master it, direct it and shape ourselves as we want. But this presumes that we have minds, and that we are masters of these. Evolutionism, Nagel points out, gives us no reason for either conclusion.⁶

Why should a world in which evolutionism is true, contain within it the potential for the long term flourishing of the human race? In a world which has already seen (according to the Eden Project) not just the extinction of the dinosaurs but four other mass extinction events, not be one in which human beings are racing towards their own Ragnarok?

Without a belief in God, the myth of progress really is opium for the masses. And when the belief in progress dies, the masses turn to the consumption of real opium.

3. The narrative of equality

George Orwell's famously commented on the equality promised by communism in *Animal Farm*: "all animals are equal, and some are more equal than others." In the twentieth and twenty-first century, equality has been a powerful rallying cry: driving the suffragette movement, the civil rights movement and the gay rights movement amongst others.

The New Atheists and many others in the West naively assume that the equality of all human beings is self-evident but this far from being the case. In his book, *Atheist Delusions*, David Bentley Hart draws attention to just how radical the Christian belief in the equality of all human beings was. In the Ancient World, it was taken as self-evident that slaves were worth less than those who were free-born, that men were worth more than women, that adults were worth more than children, and within the Roman world, that Romans were worth more than barbarians.

To take one example of where such beliefs persist today: consider the caste system. The caste system in India is based on an interpretation of Hindu texts, and of *The Law Code of Manu* in

⁵ John Gray warns in 'Evangelical Atheism' that 'The problem with the secular narrative is not it assumes progress is inevitable (in many versions, it does not). It is the belief that the sort of advance that has been achieved in science can be reproduced in ethics and politics. In fact, while scientific knowledge increases cumulatively, nothing of the kind happens in society'.

⁶ Thomas Nagel says '[t]he existence of conscious minds and their access to the evident truths of ethics and mathematics are among the data that a [strong naturalist] theory of the world and our place in it has yet to explain.' Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos*, 23-29.

particular.⁷ It is a theory according to which different levels of society were created out of different parts of Brahma: the priests from his head, then the warrior caste, and the trader caste, and finally, from his feet, the servant caste. This leaves the lowest caste of society, the untouchables, who were not created from the body of Brahma at all.

Why does the West take equality of all human beings so seriously? There are two reasons at its root: first, the teaching of Judaism and Christianity that all human beings are made in the image of God, and second, the example of Jesus.

At Christmastime, Christians celebrate the extraordinary story of God born as a baby, not in a palace but into poverty in a nation under foreign occupation, forced as a child to flee his homeland as a refugee, a displaced person, then returning home and working as a manual worker, living a travelling lifestyle as a homeless preacher, making a point in his ministry of associating with women, even prostitutes, half-castes and foreigners, suffering a criminal's death by being executed naked. In the Christian story God affirms the fundamental equality of all human beings in the most dramatic way possible. Jesus, the God-man, identifies with all the categories of people that we are apt to see as somehow less worthy: the refugee, the homeless, the worker, the criminal, and the slave in his birth, life, ministry and death (*Atheist Delusions*, chapter 13).

The basic equality of all human beings is extraordinarily difficult to defend on any atheistic basis. If there is no God, then why should we think there is anything special about the human species as such? If you don't recognise anything special about the human species as such, if we are simply one branch on a tree which is a product of a mindless evolution, then you have to define what is worth defending not in terms of the uniqueness of the human species but rather in terms of the capabilities which normal human beings tend to have. This involves sneaking some evaluation into one's evolutionism but so be it. But if you take a capabilities approach you define the class of those worth protecting either in ways which exclude certain members of the human species, for example, the unborn, the severely disabled or those in a coma. Thus abortion rights have spread because the unborn do not count as persons because they cannot speak, reason or vote. The alternative is that you define the class broadly and then you face arguments that at least some chimpanzees or dolphins possess the same

⁷ P.Olivelle tr., *The Law Code of Manu* (Oxford: OUP, 2004). Whether casteism is integral to Hinduism is a matter for debate, see, for example, Sanjoy Chakravorty, *The Truth about Us: The Politics of Information from Manu to Modi* (Hachette: 2019) and 'How the British reshaped India's caste system'.

capabilities. Thus, Peter Singer and others campaign for basic legal rights to be extended to gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos and orang utans. In the USA in December 2013 the Non-Human Rights Project filed a court action seeking recognition of four chimpanzees: Tommy, Hercules, Kiko, and Leo as legal persons.⁸

John Wyatt rightly identifies that scientific discoveries which are going to be made in the twenty-first century will mean that ‘[t]he pivotal significance of the Christian belief that we are made in the image of God is about to be tested as never before’.⁹

The myth of equality feeds into an ideology of choice, whose wellspring is the ideas of the American revolutionary, Thomas Paine. For Paine, “The formation of society was itself a choice made by free individuals, so the natural rights that people bring with them into society are rights to act as one chooses, free of coercion. ... Politics, in this view, is fundamentally an arena for the exercise of choice, and our only real political obligations are to respect the freedoms and choices of others.” (Levin, *The Great Debate*, 91).

For Paine, to be human is to have equal rights to everyone else. Success as a human being is demonstrated by exercising one’s equal rights in ways which lead to the maximum satisfaction of one’s choices. The world is simply the arena in which my choices are exercised and the material on which my choices can be exercised. The narrative of equality therefore feeds into, and feeds off, the narrative of self-actualisation.

4. The narrative of self-actualisation

The American Christian philosopher, Jamie Smith, returns to Tolkien’s point about the link between stories and language. The West has inhaled philosophy without knowing it. There is philosophy in every Disney film, in every pop song, in every book. They are all telling us

⁸ <http://www.nonhumanrightsproject.org> ‘Our mission is to change the common law status of at least some nonhuman animals from mere “things,” which lack the capacity to possess any legal right, to “persons,” who possess such fundamental rights as bodily integrity and bodily liberty, and those other legal rights to which evolving standards of morality, scientific discovery, and human experience entitle them. Our mission is to change the common law status of at least some nonhuman animals from mere “things,” which lack the capacity to possess any legal right, to “persons,” who possess such fundamental rights as bodily integrity and bodily liberty, and those other legal rights to which evolving standards of morality, scientific discovery, and human experience entitle them. Our mission is to change the common law status of at least some nonhuman animals from mere “things,” which lack the capacity to possess any legal right, to “persons,” who possess such fundamental rights as bodily integrity and bodily liberty, and those other legal rights to which evolving standards of morality, scientific discovery, and human experience entitle them.’ The petitions were rejected by the first instance judges. The Non-Human Rights Project have appealed.

⁹ Wyatt, ‘Human identity in a technological world’.

something about what it means to be human, about what it means to succeed as a human being, and what the world is like.

Sarah Bakewell's book, *At the Existentialist Café*, looks at one type of philosophy which has become extremely influential in the twentieth century: the philosophy of existentialism. Existentialism tells us that (3) there is no meaning in the world other than the meaning we create for ourselves, (1) human beings are beings who are therefore destined to create meaning despite the absurdity and futility of the world, (2) success as a human being is creating and living in accordance with meanings which are true to yourself. The aim is what Heidegger called *Dasein*, authenticity.

Existentialism was spread through stories: through the novels of Albert Camus but more effectively through films such as *The Seventh Seal* and *Groundhog Day*. Bakewell says that existentialism has succeeded in becoming invisible, existentialism has succeeded in becoming simply part of the air the secular West breathes. Jamie Smith describes it as “a bourgeois philosophy for those with the luxury to pretend that this is all there is”. It is certainly an attractive philosophy for a café-culture, whether in 1960s Paris or twenty-first century Cambridge, which believes that it has outgrown God. The act of buying a coffee in Starbucks is the epitome of an existentialist act. My choices: cappuccino, latte, flat white, skinny, soya, almond milk, cinnamon, chocolate, nutmeg, express my individuality resulting in a coffee of my chosen size and flavour. Yet the expression of my individuality in any city around the world is delivered to me by the employees and franchisees of a corporation which has gone to enormous lengths to ensure that, as the Stereophonics sang, only the accents change.

The truth in existentialism is that we all long for significance, we all long to matter in a way that is unique and irreplaceable. But if the fact that I chose something is the only thing which gives it value, then value is nothing but a matter of taste. If there is no value other than choice; there is also no such thing as the truth. What is true, what is good, what is beautiful are no longer things which exist objectively, out there or in reality. All that there are the things that are true for me, the things that I think will be good for me, and the things that I regard as beautiful.

The great contradiction of our age is that the humanities are dominated by assertions that free will is absolute and that everyone must be permitted to do whatever they choose whilst in the

hard sciences, strong naturalism claims that free will is an epiphenomenon, an illusion which deludes us into thinking that there is a conscious self whose responses to stimuli are not pre-determined reflexes adapted to enable the survival of our genes.

5. “All you need is love”

From the half century beginning in the 1960s, one of the dominant cultural messages has been “All you need is love”, as *The Beatles* sang in 1967. The cultural reference was to love of a particular kind: romantic love. From Disney films to *Gavin and Stacey*, fulfilment was to be found in the sort of feeling that would leave you weak at the knees. As the divorce rate has climbed and the amount of sex people are having has actually decreased, the plausibility of the story has declined. Romantic love has now become something accessible only to a lucky few. Most of us can expect to end up like Bridget Jones (in the books, not the films), alone but with our memories of the “one that got away”.

Old age can bring clarity about what it is really important. The Apostle John, in his old age, wanted his readers to know, above all else, that “God is love” (1 John chapter 4 verse 8). The truth that God is love cannot be disentangled from the truth that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As Augustine expressed it: the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. Love is intrinsic to the eternal life of God, love is the motive power that brought creation into being, the love of God in Christ for creation lies at the centre of the universe and its history.

The Bible affirms the importance of love, and describes the love between Christ and his church in terms of the passionate, overwhelming, all-embracing love that a husband feels for his bride at the moment of their wedding (Matthew 22; Revelation 19:7-9). But the Bible places great emphasis on the constancy of God’s love: the Father always loves the Son, and we as God’s children are always loved no matter how prodigal we are. Ruth’s lifelong commitment to Naomi, her mother-in-law, is commended to us as an example of how we, like God, are supposed to invest ourselves in other people and to be committed to their welfare in the long term. To be human is to be involved in relationships, and to succeed as a human being is to enable others to flourish because of our long term commitment to them, through thick and thin.

Part II: The Christian Story

The Christian story is a meta-narrative, a big picture story, a theory of everything. It begins with Creation, takes account of the Fall, weaves in stories of providence and redemption, and offers a future hope. What we are going to do now is to explore how that story differs from and fulfils the desires expressed in the narratives of modernity.

Creation

The book of Genesis tells us that human beings were made in the image of God: all of them – male and female, black, white and other ethnicities, rich and poor. In fact, the book of Genesis tells us that God is the creator of everything that has been made.

Implication: the world is there for human beings to explore and to nurture

Foundational to Christian thought is the recognition that God, our God, the God who has revealed Godself to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the creator of our universe and of our world. There have been heretical sects (such as the Cathars) which have looked at the state this world is in and concluded that it must have been created by the Devil or by a different God than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but orthodox Christian belief has always insisted that this world is God's creation.

Babylonian mythology had a theogony, an account of the genesis of the gods. Babylonian gods were creations of the universe. Jewish and Christian belief has always asserted the opposite: the universe is the creation of God.

When God created the world, it was very good (Genesis 1:31). We might understand that as meaning that when God made the world it was perfect and fully formed, but another way of understanding the Creation is that God made the world full of potential, a perfect place for humanity to enjoy, explore, and develop.

Neo-Calvinism understands Genesis 1:26 and 28 as setting out the “cultural mandate”, what Nigel Wright calls a “nurturing dominion” over creation (*Disavowing Constantine*, p.173). God made a world which was perfect for humans to explore and develop and, despite the Fall, there are ways in which we can still do so. This cultural mandate is not a licence to exploit the world without regard for things such as bio-diversity or the integrity of the

environment. Instead, it is a specific calling to responsibility for the planet (Gunton, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, p.112).

Implication: the world is orderly

“The fact that the world is rational at all is a mark of its coming from its creator” (Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, p.61). In his television programmes, Professor Brian Cox repeatedly expresses wonder at two things: the orderliness of the universe and the fact that so much of that orderliness is capable of being understood by beings who are, from a naturalistic perspective, simply overdeveloped monkeys.¹⁰

There is a mysterious beauty to the world. In 1999, there was a total eclipse of the sun over Cornwall. On the B.B.C. T.V. coverage they kept talking about the coincidence that the sun is 400 times the size of the moon but also 400 times further away from the earth. Only on earth throughout the whole solar system is it possible to see a total eclipse of the sun! No other planet is the right distance away from the sun and has a moon of the right size. It is not a coincidence, it is God’s magnificent design and ordering of the universe.

So the doctrine of creation tells us that the world was created orderly and good, that human beings are made in the image of God, that human success consists in discovering the order within creation and in nurturing and caring for ourselves and for our planet.

Fall

There is a serious problem with our world. It manifestly is not working perfectly. As G.K. Chesterton drily observed: “original sin ... is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved” (*Orthodoxy*, p.10).

John Milbank describes creation as a palimpsest (*Theology & Social Theory*, p.417). A palimpsest is a piece of parchment or paper which has been used for writing on twice. It was quite common in the days when paper was much rarer than it is today for paper to be re-used, even on the same side, so you would have a piece of paper which had been written on twice. Milbank is suggesting that this is a helpful way to think about our world. There are two

¹⁰ Thomas Nagel says ‘[t]he existence of conscious minds and their access to the evident truths of ethics and mathematics are among the data that a [strong naturalist] theory of the world and our place in it has yet to explain.’ Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos*, 23-29.

realities which we can see when we look at our world: one is the reality of the world as God's good creation, the other is the reality of the world as fallen, full of sin and violence.

Implication: There is work to be done mitigating the effects of the Fall

What the Christian doctrine of the Fall tells us is that the world is broken and that disaster and violence are to be expected. The doctrine of the Fall tells us that human beings are sinful, selfish and mortal.

The doctrine of the Fall also tells us, importantly, what human success looks like. The twentieth century was a century of revolutions, of theories which asserted that human selfishness was solely or principally the result of social conditioning, and that if only radical political reforms were implemented, an earthly paradise could be built. Such revolutions always left a trail of bloodshed and often left their subjects worse off than before.

In Genesis 3:23-24 we are told that the Lord God has banished humanity from the Garden of Eden and has placed angels and a flaming sword outside to "guard the way to the tree of life." Because of the Fall, there is no way back to Eden, only forward through redemption to heaven. Though there is work to be done mitigating the effects of the Fall, we are not to assume that we can establish heaven on earth.

Implication: The Fall affects us all, even if we think we are working to mitigate its effects

The Bible locates the story of the Fall in the earliest chapters of the book of Genesis because its message is that the Fall affects all of us. The Bible does not allow us to play goodies and baddies, them and us. The Bible is against identity politics. The Apostle Paul addresses this in the book of Romans. He looks at the Jews and the Gentiles and concludes that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The Bible also frequently reminds us that individuals outside of faith community may be saying or acting in the ways God wants more than we are. Think of Melchizedek's interaction with Abraham, of Balaam's prophecies to the Israelites, of the Emperor Cyrus's treatment of the Jews, or of Jesus telling a parable in which he deliberately chose a despised Samaritan as the hero.

I think Christianity is pretty clear that whilst we can expect to progress in virtue and to become more Christ-like, we will never achieve perfection in this life. Christians should

always be realistic about the extent to which all our efforts, even our best ones, are compromised by fallenness, finitude and failure. We should always be open to correction and to insights from non-Christian colleagues in our field.

Implication: Over-reaching ourselves: the Tower of Babel

Satan's Fall from Heaven was because of his sin of pride, his attempt to usurp the authority that was God's alone. Humankind's Fall in the Garden of Eden was over a fruit which carried the promise of "being like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). In other words, it carried the promise of being able to make your own decisions about what was good and evil, of no longer having to rely on God's judgement, of no longer being under God's authority.

Chapters 3 to 11 of the book of Genesis describe the Fall not as a single event but as a series of events. Humankind keeps falling, from Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3, the fratricide of Cain killing Abel in Genesis 4, the generalised wickedness of human beings in Genesis 6, to the *hubris* of humanity building the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is a story which highlights the almost limitless possibilities of what human beings can achieve, but also the dangers of human pride and over-confidence. When Gordon Brown was Chancellor of the Exchequer he announced that the New Labour government had solved the problem of the economic cycle. A few years later, the Western world plunged into the greatest recession for half a century. Predictions of the end of economic history were exposed as *hubris*.

Providence 1: Common Grace

Providence: God has not abandoned God's world but is at work within it, preserving it and preparing it

In this world, created good but now fallen, God is still at work. The difference between Deism and Theism is that Deism sees God as a clockmaker who made the world like a clockmaker makes a mechanical clock, and then retires from the scene leaving the clock to tick away entirely by itself. Theism, on the other hand, sees God as continuing to be involved in the world after its initial creation.

Christianity is a theistic religion. The triune God continues to be actively involved in the world which God has created. It is through the Son of God that the world is ordered. It is by the power of the Spirit that the world is preserved and directed towards its end.

The Holy Spirit is not just active in salvation, the Holy Spirit is also involved in creation. Dutch theologian, church leader and politician, Abraham Kuyper, following John Calvin, taught this in terms of ‘common grace’.

There are three aspects to common grace.

- (i) The Holy Spirit gives life to the entire biophysical world and to every living thing in it;
- (ii) The Holy Spirit gives human beings the gifts of rationality, of organisation and of creativity;
- (iii) The Holy Spirit restrains sin and keeps creation from falling to chaos (Bacote *The Spirit in Public Theology*, pp.114-115).

It is through these acts of common grace that God is active, preserving God’s world from the worst effects of human sinfulness and causing the world to give glory to God. Common grace tells us that the world continues to be the object of God’s care,¹¹ that God blesses human beings, both the just and the unjust, and that human success is to recognise and thank God for God’s providence.

Common grace is vital to our collaboration with our non-Christian colleagues. Kuyper argued that even though the world had been corrupted by sin, was in rebellion against God, and in need of redemption and re-creation through Christ, “creation was still under the sovereign rule of God, who restrained the destructive effects of the fall and called his followers to fulfil the cultural mandate he had entrusted to them. Human nature, once good, had not become absolutely or essentially bad as a result of the fall, even though every part of it had become corrupt – that is, warped, twisted, and misdirected. Culture, therefore, was not inherently evil but was perverted good, and the solution to the problem of Christianity and culture was not withdrawal from fallen creation in anticipation of the coming of a new order in the future, but

¹¹ Jesus said in Matthew 10:29 “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.”

a radical conversion and renewal of that creation in the present.” (Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview*, p.269).

Providence 2: Israel

Alongside God’s common grace shown to all human beings, there is God’s special grace shown towards God’s people. Professor John Lennox always refers to the fact that the Jews have continued to survive as a distinct people as one of the major reasons for believing in God and in what the Bible has to say about God.

Christian academics working in the humanities need to pay close attention to God’s dealings with Israel. It is in the Old Testament that we find a worked example of a vision for a good society on earth and an extended commentary on why that society was never realised. It is in the Old Testament laws that we first find the two Great Commandments: the commands to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. It is through the books of the Law and the historical books that we see that human success does not consist in having all the horses, wives, and wealth that Solomon had, that it does not consist in military conquest or increases in GDP, but that human success is about holiness, about knowing God, about acting rightly towards one’s neighbours, and about paying particular attention to those suffering from relational or material deprivation (typified in the Old Testament as the widow, the orphan and the foreigner).

Redemption

The Bible is not a self-help book. The arc of the Old Testament leads to the point of recognition that the establishment of a godly society in Israel is impossible. In Jeremiah’s memorable words, for people who have been doing evil to start doing good is as impossible as a leopard changing its spots or an Ethiopian changing the colour of his skin (Jeremiah 13:23).

Rescue, redemption, salvation has to come from outside.

What messages because of the incarnation?

The story of that rescue begins with a baby born in a stable. If you are asking the question: what does it look like to be made in the image of God, the incarnation is the answer. The

incarnation is the demonstration that it is not inappropriate for God to become a human being. That is an extraordinary elevation of human dignity.

Jesus grows up as a child, in need of education. He works as a carpenter, dignifying the business of manual work, of labour, the need to work in order to earn one's bread. And then, one day he goes to the synagogue in Nazareth and he reads from Isaiah 61:1-2.

What messages because of Jesus' ministry?

Isaiah 61:1-2 says "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God". This was the passage which Jesus chose as the manifesto at the start of His ministry. What is striking, however, is that when Jesus stood in the synagogue at Nazareth and read that passage He stopped before the final phrase (Luke 4:18-19).

What Jesus's hearers would have heard him say was that he was he was promising freedom for those who were being held in physical chains, restoration of physical sight to the blind, and food for those who were starving. And Jesus did all of those things.¹² Whilst Jesus also made it clear that human beings' most important need is the restoration of their relationship with God, Jesus addressed natural human needs with real, practical responses.

What are the implications of Jesus' death?

- Forgiveness of sins
- Healing, especially of relationships
- Restoration of creation

What are the implications of Jesus' resurrection?

The Scottish Enlightenment atheist philosopher David Hume set out an argument against miracles which was designed to make them impossible *a priori*. C.S. Lewis famously responded in his book simply entitled *Miracles*. In that book, C.S. Lewis describes the Incarnation as 'the Grand Miracle' but it seems to me that he really gets to the crux of the matter when he turns, in his chapter 'Miracles of the New Creation' to the Resurrection.

¹² In Matthew 11:5, Jesus summarises his own ministry in the following terms: "the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."

Christianity depends on the big miracle, the unanticipated ending, what Tolkien called a eucatastrophe, of the Resurrection. It is the Resurrection which is the definitive confirmation that the birth of Jesus in the stable was the incarnation of the Son of God. It is the Resurrection which overthrows the verdict of human authorities that Jesus was a fraud and a liar. It is the Resurrection which demonstrates that the power of death has been broken. As the Apostle Paul made crystal clear in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 14 “if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith”.

If God has the power to raise Christ from the dead, and God has the power to create the universe, in all its vastness, in all its intricate microscopic and sub-atomic detail, then the miracles recorded in Scripture are all well within God’s power.

This brings us to the last two elements of the Christian story.

Providence 3: Church

The challenge for Christians is to live with the tension of the “Now” and the “Not Yet”. Christians live in the light of the redemption Christ has accomplished, and in anticipation of the consummation of Christ’s victory. In this time we live as followers and as witnesses. Christ has already won the victory over sin and death. God is already waging war against violence, injustice, and sickness. As the Church witnesses to Christ, so too the Church should be witnessing to the victory of Christ over violence, injustice and sickness. Christians should show by their actions now, signs of the fullness of the Kingdom of God to come.

The Church lives in continuity with the promises God made to Israel. Just as God was faithful to Israel, so God will be faithful to the Church. The gates of hell will not prevail against her (Matthew 16:18).

The Church’s mission includes the following aspects:

- witnessing to God who saved Israel and who has saved the whole world in Christ
- modelling community
- caring for creation
- depending on God

Future Hope

The outcome of history, the future reign of God, is assured because of what God has done in Christ. Oliver O'Donovan puts it this way: It is "only from within the perspective of our time-frame [that] anything remain[s] to be accomplished at all. Christ's triumph is complete, and in that event mankind has been brought into the presence of God's glory. Nothing remains to be added to what has been done; we wait only for a fuller sight of it." (O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p.143).

Nonetheless, there is important work to be done on earth and the full disclosure of God's rule is still awaited. There are two opposite dangers to be avoided in these last days: one is called "over-realised eschatology" and the other is "apocalyptic resignation".

Over-realised Eschatology

Over-realised eschatology is the attempt to bring about, in the here-and-now, the fullness of the Kingdom of God which will only be revealed in eternity. If we assume that we can build the perfect Church, or worse still, the perfect nation, then we are guilty of over-realised eschatology.

Apocalyptic Resignation

Whereas over-realised eschatology attempts through activism to bring in the fullness of God's kingdom, apocalyptic resignation does not attempt anything. It takes a dogmatically pessimistic view of the world in which things are going to get worse and worse and the church is going to get smaller and smaller until the Return of Christ.

Conclusion

Societies tell stories about themselves, about what it means to be human, what counts as human success, and what the world is like. The most successful stories are ones which are not wholly false. They identify genuine human needs and promise to fulfil them in particular ways.

In the first half of our time together, we have looked at how the myths of reason, evolution and progress, equality and choice, self-actualisation and the promise of romantic love have shaped modernity.

As Christians, we live in the light of a different story, a true myth, a big story about creation and the Fall, about God's providential care for the world as a whole and for Israel in particular, about the depth and breadth of the redemption Christ has won for us, about God's providential care for the Church and its mission, and about the future hope of the coming of the Kingdom of God in all its fullness. The challenge for us as Christian scholars is to live all of our lives, including our scholarship, under, from within and on the basis of that story.

Reading List

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