

Response to Robert John Russell, “Evolution, Natural Theodicy, and ‘New Creation’ Eschatology”

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Yesterday Jeff Schloss showed us room for accounts of the universe that acknowledge certain aspects of ‘evil’ in the world without radicalizing them as earlier Darwinians had. Natural evil is extensive, even ubiquitous (though not necessarily ‘ultimate’ or exclusively so) in the universe. It is basic (though not necessarily ‘central’) to the universe. It is integral (though not apparently ‘comprehensive’). The data are ambiguous and open to more than one interpretation. Yet as Dr. Russell recognizes, this does not deproblematize them. We still need to know what to do with natural evil after we have taken away its cosmological monopoly.

Is this so different from the good old days? Jacques Monod thinks chance has torn apart the covenant and Dr. Russell himself worries that entropy could have the last word. “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong ... but time and chance happeneth to them all” (Eccl. 9:11). Some of our dismal scientists strike me as doing little more than updating our Lord’s own wisdom literature. If Ecclesiastes 1:1-12:8 is not a dysteleological metaphysics of nature, I don’t know what is. Perhaps evolutionary biology is nothing new under the sun.

It is true that one reason for the appeal of Darwinist dysteleology is its ability to accommodate data the Church has ignored. Yet another reason is that the Church has gotten out of its habit of grounding its story on the data of Jesus Christ. We then struggle with our faith in God, watch friends turn away from faith because of natural evil, and attempt in vain to respond to atheistic challenges to faith.

My own story of faith reflects the story of many in both ancient Rome and the modern West:

I saw that the wickedness of God was great in the firmament and the biosphere, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented me that I had made God in my mind, and it grieved me at my heart. And I said, "I will destroy God whom I have created from the face of the heavens; both God, and gods, and religions, and teleologies; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Jesus found favor in my eyes (cf. Gen. 6:5-8 KJV).

You see, today's sad narratives need not dislodge the story of Jesus any more than the ancient ones prevented it. Our challenge as followers of Jesus is not to construct a 'natural theology' that eases the burden on 'special revelation'. It is to discern where *all things* – in heaven, on earth, and under the earth; former sufferings *and* latter comforts, and vice versa – belong in Christ's story. This is not something we are able to achieve ourselves; it can only be given by the Holy Spirit who "will take ... all that ... is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:15). Without that grace, we are bound to misunderstand the world and mistrust its maker.

For a satisfying Christian account of natural evil, I support Dr. Russell's bold embrace of creation in all its wonder and horror. This keeps nature's interpreters from drifting into Gnosticism and any other form of idealism – including the counter-idealism of nihilism. I support his refusal to root all natural evil in human or even angelic sin. This respects the Bible's refusal to do it too (see Gen. 1-2 and Psalm 104) and honors the Bible's *praise* of God for some things we call natural evil (such as original chaos, geological and environmental catastrophe, and cycles of predation) – a theme that could use further development in the context of this symposium. I support his centering on the resurrection of Jesus. This forever overturns Richard Dawkins' tyranny of "blind, pitiless indifference." I support his appeal to *kenosis*. This respects that the cross is both the free and definitive expression of the eternal self-giving that constitutes the Son, the Father, and the Spirit, and the apocalyptic instrument of the transformation of all things. I support his appeal to eschatology. This acknowledges the vast, irreducible difference between the old and the new.

Now I regret to say that I have issues with particular aspects of his appeals to just about every one of these things. (That is the way it is with us theologians.) For example, I disagree with his application of Niebuhr's theology to entropy, and with his appropriation of Hick's "soul-making" theodicy, which contradicts the Christian theme of sanctification through fellowship rather than alienation.) I also think more attention to incarnation, anointing, and indwelling is in order. This would help remind us that entropy or thermodynamics need not pass away for the new creation *not* to pass away – or to arrive proleptically in the midst of the present order (2 Cor. 5:7). The New Jerusalem's inhabitants "need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever" (Rev. 22:5). I am not a physicist, and I don't understand the dynamics of that imagery any more than I understand the dynamics of resurrection, feeding miracles, healings, or transubstantiation; but I do know an open system when I see one!

Nevertheless, in the main I think Dr. Russell is pointing both science and theology in the right directions; that is, he is pointing us back to the story of Jesus Christ as the story of all things.

His presentation evokes in me a desire to move further in that direction. For instance, another category I would find helpful here is ecclesiology. The Church is new creation, sign of the Kingdom, the Spirit's Temple, the tangible means of the ascended Christ's presence in the world. It is a key link in the chain of cosmic renewal that moves through Israel, Jesus, Church, nations, world, nature, and finally all things. While sight demonstrates that the Church is matter, energy, time, space, and all the rest, faith still trains us to see it as having teleological qualities the naturally evil world allegedly lacks: *e.g.*, unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. Isn't the Church a harbinger of what is coming to the whole cosmos? Why not then search for signs of

those qualities elsewhere in the chain? In Genesis and elsewhere the God who is ‘wholly other’ ordains a race made in his image to represent him in and for the earth. Thus we are both of the earth and other than the earth, both common and holy. Israel, Jesus, and Church begin to fulfill the early promise of that dialectic. Does being simultaneously like God, unlike God, in rebellion against God, and restored to God not describe at least some of our qualities of goodness, natural evil, moral evil, and freedom from evils?

Drs. Russell and Schloss raise in me other leading questions about how our Christian story might inform biological and physical research programs, such as:

- *How can feeding miracles and Eucharist inform our understanding of economics, life cycles, and competition and cooperation?*
- *How can liturgy inform an appreciation of beauty and elegance?*
- *How can sanctification – cosmic, social, and personal – inform our understanding of apparent biological teleology and dysteleology in animal suffering and extinction?*
- *How can practices of the fear of God (and not just on account of sin and Torah) locate at least some of our revulsion at natural evil?*
- *How can spiritual warfare inform our understanding of emergence and causation?*
- *How can healing and resurrection inform our understanding of death as well as natural science’s intrinsic heuristic limits?*
- *How can the charisma of ecclesiastical order inform our understanding of entropy?*
- *How can the definitively yet partially disclosed mystery of God’s plan to unite all things in Christ inform an account of scientific inquiry as non-random (as it was in Christendom), or even a Theory of Everything?*

Of course, every one of these questions can and should be reversed; scientific research programs can and should inform Christian practices and categories. As missiologist Lesslie Newbigin noted, the Spirit leads Christ's disciples into encounters and conversations that run in both directions. In the Kingdom theology, biology, and physics live in mutual submission, for all things *already* belong to Jesus. All we have been learning is *how*.