



Readings II in Faith & Science

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Literalness

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Literalness

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Over the last few months I have read in various works three interesting -- and very different -- descriptions of “the beginning” of creation. The author of the first claims that, if Genesis were written today, it might read as follows:

In the Beginning, God fixed the Numbers of Creation. God fixed two Numbers [physical constants] to operate at the smallest level of existence, the level of the nucleus of the atom; and a third Number to operate at the largest level, the level of the planets. Then God released enough of God’s own energy to provide the substance of the universe. And God watched as the first two Numbers formed this energy into gases which could burn to provide light and heat for eons; and as the third Number formed these gases into burning suns with planets of the right size and distance from these suns, so that life could emerge on such planets. . . .

Or take another description:

There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught was made. And he spoke to them, propounding to them themes of music; and they sang before him, and he was glad. But for a long while they sang only each alone, or but a few together, while the rest hearkened; for each comprehended only that part of the mind of Ilúvatar from which he came, and in the understanding of their brethren they grew but slowly. Yet even as they listened they came to deeper understanding, and increased in unison and harmony. . . .

Or, finally:

Yahweh created me (Wisdom) when his purposes first unfolded, before the oldest of his works. From everlasting I was firmly set, from the beginning, before earth came into being. The deep was not, when I was born, there were no springs to gush with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, I came to birth; before he made the earth, the countryside, or the first grains of the world’s dust. . . .

. . . when he laid down the foundations of the earth, I was by his side, a master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere in his world, delighting to be with the sons of men.

Which of these is a true account of the creation? Clearly all three are, and equally clearly none is. One of the real problems of our age is our cultural tendency to assume that, if one is true, the others are false. One of the worst results of a “scientific” culture is the literalness with which we now take everything. If I may say so, we live in a “prosaic” culture, not a “poetic” one. Everything is taken literally, nothing can really be playful; it can be satiric, yes, but one uses satire at his or her own risk these days. All too often it is simply taken literally, hence is “the truth” or a lie. Often enough in such a culture the truth is seen as a lie.

Perhaps, I am simply projecting my own biases and my own inner tendencies when I say that our culture is prosaic. Imputing such a condition to any particular person is something only that person can do in the secrecy of his or her own heart. Nevertheless -- there's always a nevertheless in such a procedure -- it seems as if the culture has lost its sense of play. To think of Wisdom playing everywhere in the world is a thought that is not very congenial to our western culture at the moment. Above all, we must be intellectually serious - even dull, if I may say so. Perhaps that's because academics have laid special claim to wisdom.

I personally (I'm not projecting this beyond myself) do not advert often enough to the statement of St. Paul in Ephesians 2:10: "We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it." If Wisdom in the beginning was at play, we might well ask ourselves what the role of play (even what is play?) is in our lives. We must be careful, however, not to over-intellectualize it while we reflect on it. Even our games have become very serious business. Sport strikes are merely symptoms of the deadly seriousness that permeates our lives. There is no sense of fun; cultural humor is not so much playful as mordant. Too often it's meant to hurt, not to delight.

Note, though, that we are God's work of art. Should we, because of that, be somewhat cautious in how we set about to change ourselves? In earlier and perhaps less complicated times, it seems that the first response to scientific discovery was a sense of wonder at what God has wrought. Now, it seems, if we can trust the literature, the first thought is not wonder so much as a desire to change the research object (or subject). Again, if the literature can be trusted, God doesn't even enter into any scientific reflection nor into thoughts about how it might be used to improve the human situation. Everything has an ad hoc flavor to it.

This, I think, is one of the things at the bottom of the Church's "problem" with scientific advance. There is, whether we like it our not, a Promethean character to the contemporary scientific enterprise. It is not the sole characteristic of that enterprise, but it is certainly an important one. While it will be centuries or millennia (if ever) before we can alter galaxies, it will be in the lifetime of most people presently alive that we shall be able (deliberately and predictably) to alter living systems. Of course, we have been able to alter living systems from the beginning, if only by killing them. It would be more than mere curiosity to read the story (in the Book of Genesis) of Jacob's attempts at "genetic engineering" when he was tending Laban's flocks. So, the story is not all that new. But that ability and attempts to alter things was basically trial and error, not rising from a determined effect scientifically to renew the face of the earth and its inhabitants, man and beast and plant.

This is not a call to renounce science and technology. It is a call, perhaps, to restore a sense of beauty and wonder to our sciences and to our technologies. Perhaps, it's little more than an early morning reflection on our human need to control, to domesticate, our environment. Management has become the focus of our lives and of our attempts to cope with the world around us. I certainly see in myself the need to domesticate my surroundings, even to try to domesticate the living God. Yet, if I am God's work of art I ought to let him finish what he has begun. I believe the same is true of the world. Let's let God finish what He began.

Does this get us off the hook? No, in fact it fixes the hook more firmly. God certainly will not finish his work of art, will not sing the rest of the aria of creation, alone, without us. We are in the choir now. Indeed, each of us and every other creature is a part of the music. In continuing the story of Ilúvatar which I quoted above, J.R.R. Tolkien writes:

Then Ilúvatar spoke, and he said: "Mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor (the one who fell); but that he may know, and all the Ainur, that I am Ilúvatar, those things that ye have sung, I will show them forth, that ye may see what ye have done. And thou, Melkor, shall see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined."

We may well propose (even must propose) new themes for the completion of the divine symphony. We will produce things (good and evil, harmonic and discordant) for that symphony that God will weave into greater melody. But we cannot just sit around and listen. We ourselves are part of the song. Yet, we must never forget that it is God's music, leading to his delight and joy above ours.

Perhaps by taking ourselves, our works, our scientific and technological achievements so seriously, we work to trivialize them. We try to exalt ourselves, individually and communally, rather than exalting (and exulting in) God who has given us the creation. Shouldn't we be as delighted to be with Wisdom as she delights to be with us? (I would think that the fact that Wisdom in the Old Testament is feminine has a deep message for us, although I cannot even begin to explain it.) We cannot so delight if our achievements are directed to self-definition, to self-creation, rather than to the flowering of the creation.

Which of the quotations I started with is the best way to our truth and God's? All three, integrated in our quest for union with Mystery, with Love. The scientific has a beauty of its own; the poetic has a splendor we cannot afford to lose; Wisdom must always be our companion as we walk through the creation and through our very lives to God.

Please let me recall the end of a magnificent quotation from Hippolytus of Rome. This hymn, actually part of an Easter homily was written about 1750 years ago:

God appeared as a man and man rose up as God when he shattered the gates of Hell and burst the iron bolts thereof. And the people that were in the depths arise from the dead and announce to all the hosts of heaven: "The thronging choir from earth is coming home."

The thronging choir, God's creation, especially ourselves, singing our love for God because he has loved us, carry with us the crowning works of our hands. But let's not carry them too literally or too solemnly. Let's exhort ourselves first and then the culture to play in the field of the Lord and to recognize his beauty and stand in wonder at the works of His hands, not the least of which are ourselves.

It's only in a spirit of joy, of play, that we can sing to the Lord, that we can be the Lord's work of art. Let's see the true poetry in our science and in our technology. Let us, without losing our sense of truth or goodness, turn our gaze (and our heart) to the beauty around us, to our own beauty before God and above all to God's beauty.

Questions

If it is true that the culture has lost its sense of "play," what part has "modern" science played in this role? How can we discover "poetry" in our scientific endeavors? Should we? If genetic engineering at its base, merely expresses the human need to control nature, how can the scientists/ technician justify his or her work?

Is our culture "too scientific," too prosaic? Has our scientific culture gotten too serious? Is it true that it has lost its sense of play, its sense of humor?

Can we cite cases where science is more playful, or is all a "very serious business," as if playfulness necessarily reduced thought to insignificance?

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