

people into the vision set out for us in Scripture and in the tradition of the Church. New Agers reject this vision, believing that this belongs to the Age of Pisces which is passing, and are left with the Age of Aquarius in which human consciousness becomes ever more perfect. In this sense followers of New Age see the Christ-like God as being of the past and not of the future and have turned away from the reality of God's promise and find themselves trying to make sense of a world without a coherent and meaningful vision of the future. For them, then, making sense of the chaotic must come through the power of the human person and our resourcefulness in 'pick'n'mix' to make a whole. This is a condition of what is called post-modernity and leads some to believe that we are now in a post-Christian culture.

3.24 However, for many, an encounter with the Christian vision of God's kingdom made real on earth and the *eschaton* in which all things are created new and perfect, is not seen as a living reality. For such people sometimes, our Christian hope is dismissed as dead and dust even before they have had the chance to encounter it. The challenge to the Church is to present the vision of God's future as the sustaining vision of authentic spirituality, into which all desires to know what is in store may be poured and satisfied with God's promises.

Encumbered forever by desire and ambition

There's a hunger still unsatisfied

Our weary eyes still stray to the horizon

Though down this road we've been so many times

The grass was greener

The light was brighter

The taste was sweeter

The nights of wonder

With friends surrounded

The dawn mist glowing

The water flowing

The endless river

Forever and ever

(Pink Floyd, 'High Hopes' from *The Division Bell*, 1994,  
Pink Floyd Music, EMI Records)

3.25 This song, which refers not only to the stress of life, but also to the desire for quality and permanence, opens and closes with the persistent ringing of a (church?) bell, the 'division bell'. Those on the outside are aware of their unsatisfied hunger. The challenge to Christians is to convince those who hear the bell that it is not the death knell of Christianity but that there is a hope of a future that is indeed sweeter and brighter, and one which lasts 'forever and ever'.

### The natural world

3.26 Another important aspect of contemporary spirituality is the increased emphasis on the numinous aspects of the natural world and feelings of interconnectedness with all of creation, without losing the sense of the supremacy of self. This manifests itself in places of pilgrimage, such as Glastonbury, an interest in ley lines and in the planet as a self-regulating being: Gaia.<sup>14</sup> Where people's spirituality is inclined in this direction, green issues come to the fore and ecology and spirituality become mixed. Non-exploitation of the environment is stressed and non-harming of living beings. 'Do what you like but harm none' is the ethical maxim of some groups, including paganism. This touches the Church's pursuit of justice, peace and the integrity of creation in its task of furthering God's kingdom on earth. However, it also reinforces the challenge to the Church to be clear about its moral teaching and commitments in a world in which ethical issues become ever more complex. The Church also has to be clear about the relation between God and creation. The pantheistic colouring of some New Age beliefs may be attractive to many who are searching for faith, but Christianity sees a dynamic relation between the creator God and the created order. This allows us to perceive more of God as the creator and sustainer of all that is (see Chapter 4) by finding analogy rather than identity in the natural world.

3.27 For example, the seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell writes about a drop of dew as if it were longing for the sun to draw it back towards the sky. By using the analogy of the morning dew's evaporation in the sunlight, he writes about the dew as if it were a soul longing to be reunited with God.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, many other Christians have found God in contemplation of the natural world and have been able to express this. For example:



There are nights that are so still  
that I can hear the small owl calling  
far off and a fox barking  
miles away. It is then that I lie  
in the lean hours awake listening  
to the swell born somewhere in the Atlantic  
rising and falling, rising and falling  
wave on wave on the long shore  
by the village, that is without light  
and companionless. And the thought comes  
of that other being who is awake, too,  
letting our prayers break on him,  
not like this for a few hours,  
but for days, years, for eternity.<sup>16</sup>

3.28 Some argue that contemporary interest in the numinous power of nature taps into a spirituality that is more feminine, such that 'Mother Earth' corrects the overweening power of the traditional father-sky-god. The challenge to the Church here is that it has chosen from almost its earliest times to cause a patriarchal, austere version of Christianity to dominate and has written its theology to reinforce and sustain it. Today, there are seen various reactions to this. One such reaction occurs at the level of language, where it is felt that calling attention to the male, dominating language of Christian theology and worship, raises consciousness about what is missing and may seek to replace it. For example:

God our mother,  
you hold our life within you;  
nourish us at your breast,  
and teach us to walk alone.  
Help us so to receive your tenderness  
and respond to your challenge  
that others may draw life from us  
in your name. Amen.<sup>17</sup>

3.29 Others have pointed out that it is not necessary radically to overturn traditional Christian imagery about the fatherhood of God, because there is already a tradition of use of female images and expression in the Church which can be rediscovered. For example, in Isaiah the Lord says: 'As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you' (66.13) and Jesus also says, 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' (Matthew 23.37). In St Anselm, this image is extended:

And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?  
Are you not the mother, who, like a hen,  
gathers her chickens under her wings?  
Truly, Lord, you are a mother;  
for both they who are in labour  
and they who are brought forth  
are accepted by you.<sup>18</sup>

3.30 Mother Julian of Norwich also saw the idea of the motherhood of God standing in relation to the fatherhood of love and the lordship of the Holy Spirit. She finds in meditating on the nature of the Trinity that everything which can be said to be appropriate to the description of motherhood is found in God and that therefore it cannot be inappropriate to talk about God in this way.<sup>19</sup>

3.31 Some people feel that their spirituality cannot grow, or is restricted, unless they have access to this kind of language:

I find exclusive language, talk of Christ dying 'for all men' or praying that God will bestow peace 'on all men' highly offensive. For my wife, the insistence of the Church of England, on using exclusive language while claiming that it is really inclusive, is so offensive that she finds it virtually impossible to worship using conventional prayer books or hymns.<sup>20</sup>

Others find inclusive language and 'politically correct' hymns and prayers undermine their understanding of Christianity and feel their ability to worship and grow similarly compromised. The Church therefore is challenged in its mission to get *beyond* this issue to the theological meaning of what is felt to be lacking or lost. Palmer's own solution is to isolate stories we must tell and stories we must drop, in order not to permit the Church to become the



cause of its own alienation from people growing up and living in today's world. He also suggests that the Church is challenged to look into its roots to diagnose where the patriarchal, authoritarian expression of Christianity began, and to look at models of Christian worship and Christian theology that existed alongside this. The problem with this is that the recovery of other strands of Christian tradition may satisfy a felt need in relation to contemporary spirituality, but at the same time eclipse the processes within the mainstream tradition of Church which allow self-examination and self-criticism to promote confidence.

3.32 Some theologians, such as Matthew Fox, have attempted to address the issues of contemporary spirituality by working out a creation spirituality which is derived from early Christianity. It is 'the tradition of original blessing rather than original sin ... It is the tradition of the great mystics of the West: Hildegard, Francis, Aquinas, Eckhart, Julian of Norwich.'<sup>21</sup>

Creation is original blessing, and all the subsequent blessings – those we give our loved ones and those we struggle to bring about by healing, celebration, and justice-making – are prefigured in the original blessing that creation is, a blessing so thoroughly unconditional, so fully graced, that we can go through life hardly noticing it at all.<sup>22</sup>

3.33 Proponents of creation spirituality argue that Christians have spent so much time working out what it means to live in a sinful, fallen world, and on Christ's redeeming work on behalf of fallen humanity, that we have forgotten the beauty, harmony and blessedness of God's intention for our life as indicated in the Creation stories. Creation spirituality therefore seeks to recover this as a present, not a past state. Such a spirituality purports to be a more holistic expression of the relationship between humankind, the environment and God.

3.34 Here, perhaps, we should not underestimate the long experience of the rural church, in which the seasonal cycle, the weather, the harvest, the influences of sun and moon all have fed into Christian practice. We may note that many of the people now encountering numinous experiences of nature and seeking to be more closely identified with the rhythms of the planet, have not themselves ever been involved in sowing or cultivating food plants or rearing and slaughtering animals. The experiences of those who have and

do, within the Church and particularly in those areas of the world where food and human survival are intricately linked, may have much to inform the Church about the formation of its own creation theology. Fox suggests:

It is ... the basic spiritual heritage of native peoples everywhere. All these peoples had cosmology as the basis of their worship, prayer, economics, politics, and morality. All of them honoured the artist in all persons. All expected the divine to burst out of anyplace [sic] at anytime [sic]. To see the world this way is to be creation centred.<sup>23</sup>

3.35 In Great Britain this spiritual heritage can be seen in Celtic Christianity. The Church is challenged to listen afresh to writings, prayers and hymns which celebrate God in Welsh waterfalls, Scottish moors and Irish mountains. For example, this prayer is based on the traditional words of the *Benedicite Omnia Opera* (Song of Creation):

Hail glorious Lord! May church and chancel praise you. May church and chancel praise you.

May valley floor and mountain side praise you.

May the three well-springs, two above the wind and one above the earth praise you.

May night and day praise you.

May silk and fruit tree praise you.

Abraham, founder of the faith, praised you.

May eternal life praise you.

May bees and birds praise you.

May after-grass and fresh shoots praise you.

Aaron and Moses praised you.

May male and female praise you.

May the seven days and the stars praise you.

May the air and the upper atmosphere praise you.

May books and letters praise you.

May fishes in the river praise you.



May thought and action praise you.  
 May sand and soil praise you.  
 May all the good that has been done praise you.  
 I praise you, Lord of glory!  
 Hail, glorious Lord!<sup>24</sup>

3.36 Martin Palmer claims that the recovery of this kind of language and spiritual expression not only redresses the balance, but can have a transforming experience in our modern world of buildings and cities:

I have cycled that route, through urban Manchester hundreds of times. That evening, as the light faded I found myself looking at it through the eyes of the Celtic Christian prayers ... suddenly I saw a world I had never seen before. It was as if through the prayers my awareness and sensitivity to all around me had been heightened to an extraordinary degree. The road I take from the office suddenly had trees and bushes I had never seen before. The pattern of the landscape was like a picture laid out for me. I found myself caught up in the space of the skies above and the movement of the rain clouds.<sup>25</sup>

3.37 Again, a critical view would suggest that we cannot just ignore the Church's traditional teaching about sin and fallenness. Awareness of grace in a local and personal setting may be uplifting and refreshing for the individual, but the transformation of communities must also include acknowledgement of brokenness and request for healing, as well as commitment to action.

3.38 For example, *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, places the creation in the context of being known and experienced through the agency of the human person:

Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world. Thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator.

For this reason man is not allowed to despise his bodily life. Rather, he is obliged to regard his body as good and non-

ourable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day. Nevertheless, wounded by sin, man experiences rebellious stirrings in his body. But the very dignity of man postulates that man glorify God in his body and forbid it to serve the evil inclinations of his heart.

Now, man is not wrong when he regards himself as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man. For by his interior qualities he outstrips the whole sum of mere things. He finds reinforcement in this profound insight whenever he enters into his own heart. God, who probes the heart, awaits him there. There he discerns his proper destiny beneath the eyes of God. Thus, when man recognises in himself a spiritual and immortal soul, he is not being mocked by a deceptive fantasy springing from mere physical or social influences. On the contrary he is getting to the depths of the very truth of the matter.<sup>26</sup>

3.39 The challenge to the Church, then, is to see how far the recovery of other strands of Christian tradition can speak to those who are searching for faith, while still being engaged on an exploration of revisions which the Church must make in terms of its own traditional teachings and understanding about the nature of creation and the relation of human beings to the natural world.

3.40 This kind of understanding indicates that the spiritual longings and embryonic experiences people have are evidence that God is at work in their lives, but they may be incapable of calling on the Christian tradition to make sense of them. In the search for truth, people naturally turn to whatever seems contextually relevant, which in today's western culture is as likely to be the choice-laden offerings of therapies and practices, as the way for spiritual growth offered by the gospel. Here the Church is itself faced with a choice: does it enter into the market place and compete for the spiritual lives of human beings, or stand aloof from the quick fix alternatives which are readily available but have short shelf-lives?

3.41 *Gaudium et Spes* suggests specifically that we need to acknowledge the presence of what is evil and sinful in the world. While a life-affirming spirituality is not in itself a bad thing, it is noticeable that the need to be in



control, to feel good, to have hope in the future pushes away the awkward questions the major religions seek to face: why is there suffering, poverty, injustice in the world? Contemporary spirituality may be concerned with the integrity of creation, but brokenness and imperfection are part of that creation and cannot be ignored. It is interesting in this respect that some aspects of New Age spirituality deal with evil by putting it off. Various versions of the law of karma are removed from their Hindu or Buddhist contexts, and often distorted; also belief in reincarnation, and ways of changing perception of the world, such as primal therapy (seeking out one's earliest feelings and impressions, and dealing with remembered pain by screaming or crying), colour therapy (finding out what colour combinations help you to feel relaxed and happy, or using colours as an aid to healing), and 'channelling' messages through, or meditating on, pyramids or crystals.<sup>27</sup> Peace and tranquillity may be installed in a person's local situation but effectively blot out responsibility to see the whole world changed. In this respect, we may say that this kind of spirituality cannot contribute to God's kingdom. It prompts us to include in our witness issues of social justice, and to make corporate effort, as the Body of Christ, to bring the world to match up to God's loving intention for all people.

## Renewal

3.42 Whatever the choice, New Age practices and contemporary spirituality offer a challenge to the Church in renewal. This is not just a matter of finding a deeper and richer commitment to faith, but also a matter of the Church renewing itself by finding new ways of expressing its truths. This may mean providing prayers which address the concerns of those whose experiences are powerful and intense, but dislocated; liturgies which are expressed in language people can understand; hymns and music which can pick up and solidify the strong but often inexpressible feelings of God's presence. This does not mean throwing out what is ancient, venerable and deeply loved in our Christian tradition in exclusive favour of the trendy or culturally relevant. It does mean that there must be sensitive discernment of the need for diversity. Some manifestations of diverse ways of being Church are already noticeable, for example the music of the composer John Tavener, who seeks to convey the mystical sense of his Eastern Orthodox spirituality through walls of orchestral, especially string, sound.<sup>28</sup> In this way, he creates

the musical equivalent of icons, as 'windows on heaven'. Arvo Pärt, by contrast, creates music of a pure, minimal variety, with much repetition, to concentrate the mind on the spiritual component of his music.<sup>29</sup> In other fields, the hymnody of Iona (Wild Goose Music) and Taizé allow more reflective styles of expression in worship, while Celebrating Common Prayer and the New Zealand Prayer Book are but two examples of new access for Christians into ways to pray and grow. What this also suggests is that the Church is becoming increasingly conscious of the need for a new aesthetic, in which art and nature provide the context for closer understanding of God. At the same time though, the Church is called to witness to those surrounded by ugliness and suffering, offering both solidarity with people in such conditions and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Fox's rejection of the 'Augustinian sin tradition' does not mean that the world is not marred, as *Gaudium et Spes* makes clear; nor should the Church offer a spirituality of goodness and beauty merely as a means of escape. In searching for ways of offering the gospel to people's emergent spiritual understanding, both the light and the dark must be held in tension.<sup>30</sup>

3.43 In what ways, then, can the Church respond to those who search for faith in terms of being human, of being hopeful, of needing to find grace, truth and beauty? One way, perhaps, might be for churches to commission pieces of art or sculpture, or to help people express themselves through artistic activity, such as at the Bromley-by-Bow Centre in London. The Church can also seek to mediate its missionary purpose through creative liturgies and tourist initiatives. If people walk through the door, they should find something that their own search for faith identifies with. More important, the God of our Christian witness should be recognisable as the same God who has touched those who are searching for faith but who understand the divine presence only dimly. It may be, then, that the Church also has to offer ways of praying, being and doing which promote this recognition.

3.44 In 1997, we remember the missionary journeys of St Augustine of Canterbury who arrived in Kent in 597 and also of St Columba who died in 597, and this idea of pilgrimage, in which the search for faith and the idea of journey to meet and to find come together. This may prove a helpful metaphor for ways in which Christian spirituality can commend itself to those searching for faith. This extended example from J. Philip Newell<sup>31</sup> may point the way forward:



Four stations of the Iona pilgrimage provide strong images of the interwoven strands of the individual and community in relation to prayer and spirituality. The first is the practice of gathering around the highstanding cross of St Martin in front of the Abbey Church, and being reminded that the custom of the ancient Celtic Church in Scotland and Ireland was often to pray-not in tightly bounded places like church sanctuaries, with their enclosing four walls and ceilings, but rather out in the great temple of creation itself. Standing together at the foot of St Martin's Cross, I was always reminded that the prayer and worship we offer is not separate from the great hymn of the universe but joins that ongoing hymn, whether it is in the rising of the morning sun, in the wind blowing over the sea or in the voice of every living creature. Spirituality should be a joining of our awareness to all that is vibrant with life, like the four living creatures of St John the Divine's vision, full of consciousness and prayerfully aware day and night in the temple of heaven and earth.

3.45 Here, J. Philip Newell directs us not to worship nature, but to join with it in the whole earth's orientation towards God the creator as envisaged in Psalm 148. Prayer and praise are not segregated from the world but present in and of the world.

The second pilgrimage image is of visiting the ruins of the ancient hermit's cell in a not easily accessible part of the island. Situated amidst numerous little hills and across boggy terrain, many pilgrims have not been able to locate it, just as many of us have had difficulty in finding the place and the time of inner quiet and prayer in our lives. What often lies in ruins for us in the Church today is not the times of corporate worship and liturgy but the practice of contemplation and silence. There are many tales on Iona of St Columba regularly withdrawing to the hermitage to pray, and of how delighted he was to have nothing but a little pool of water to wash in, and the lark above him singing. Do we not all know the importance for our spirituality of such times of solitude, whether it is actually retreating or simply finding a quiet corner or moment of still-

ness, in order to sustain the life in community to which we are called?

3.46 This image reminds us that we are not isolated in our expression of spiritual experience. As Christians, we belong in a long line of those who have witnessed and prayed before us. Although we may need quiet and reflection, we are not shut off from the community of believers living and dead.

The third image is of ascending the highest point on the island, Dun I, which simply means the Hill of I, or the Hill of Iona. Because of its spelling, many visitors, especially those from across the Atlantic, tended to refer to it as Dun One, which made it sound more like a lunar landing station than a hill on a Hebridean island. But, in a sense, it was that sort of perspective that we were seeking. Remember the view of earth that first became ours twenty-five years or so ago after the first moon landing. We should often gaze at the photograph of the sea-blue earth to regain our perspective. It is akin to the common biblical practice of prophets, including Jesus, going to high and remote places to be renewed in their vision. From the top of Dun I it is possible to see the White Strand of the Monks at the north of the island, where in the ninth century the abbot and fifteen monks were martyred, blood spilt on the pure white sands of Iona. Our times of withdrawal, whether it is physically to a mountain or simply to an uncluttered space, within or without, where we may see with clarity, are essential to the well-being both of our inner life and of our shared common life. And in the set apart places, it is not just to the beautiful landscape of life that we are to be looking, but to the painful and broken places as well, for it will usually be to something of the latter that we are called to return in our descent from the mountain place, or our time of interior renewal. Our spirituality, if it is to be true to life, needs to include a gazing out on the world, on both the goodness and the evil that we see in it, and to be conscious that the good and the evil are also within our own souls.



3.47 This image is important, because here we are reminded of another perspective: to see the earth in its wholeness, and we should see the darkness and brokenness as well as the light and the beauty. If we go to the mountain, we must needs come back down to the plain and resume our life. We must, as Christians, build a life of prayer in order to witness more effectively to what God has done in our social interactions and relationships. Our prayer life is therefore an extension of our being Christians and not a separate cell which is not connected to the rest of our being.

The fourth image is that of the Reilig Oran, the Iona graveyard where Scottish Kings and Lords of the Isles are said to be buried. There the emphasis is to reflect not only on the themes of death and resurrection, of new beginnings coming out of endings in our lives and world, but on being part of those who have gone before us, who, having died, are separated from us, as George MacLeod used to say, only by a veil thin as gossamer. Part of a true spirituality is the awareness of heaven's company of light surrounding us in both the light and the darkness of earth. The ladder that connects heaven and earth, and thus the company of heaven with earth's people, is within us, and provides the flow of movement from above and below. The individualist culture of the western world has often gone hand in hand with a materialism which denies that matter is shot through with spirit, and that earth's people are enfolded by the saints and angels of heaven. Rather it sees matter and the things of earth as entirely separate from spirit and the things of heaven, if indeed it even recognizes that there is a spiritual realm. On Iona there are stories of Columba and angels of light ascending and descending on him in time of prayer. This is an image of our inner life being hid with Christ in God, enfolded in the host of light, an intimation that even in death we are not separated from one another and the saints before us.

3.48 In this image, we are reminded of the nearness of the transcendental realm and of the continuity between those who have gone before us and ourselves. This image also speaks of the recovery of a heavenly language, bringing the concepts of spirituality into the descriptions of daily life. We

may also learn from theologians such as Walter Wink, who in his Powers trilogy brings back the language of powers and principalities to redescribe human affairs. In this view of the world, angels are not arcane beings conducting human beings to and from the astral plane as in some branches of New Age philosophy, but truly messengers, conveyers of meaning between human beings and God; they are images of right relation with God, and bearers of the promise that prayer really does act as a mode of communication between our life here and God. J. Philip Newell concludes:

In these images of spirituality and the relationship between the individual and community, the emphasis is not on being *either* more separate or more involved, but on being *both* more separate and more involved. In our times of withdrawal and individual retreat, it is a matter of being more deeply involved in the inner heart of all humanity.

## Conversion

3.49 Another way in which the Church is challenged to respond to contemporary spirituality is in and through the notion of conversion. Christian witness is required to say that those who encounter the Christ come to recognise that they are changed in a way that alters the framework and perspective of their lives. This is the origin of *metanoia*, a process of becoming that places a person's past and history in the context of a coming to know and recognise what God has done in Christ and reshapes a person's future in the context of God's promises for our ultimate destiny. We may say that this is significantly different from the spirituality of some New Age followers, with its ideal of self-realisation and emphasis on feeling good through 'quick fix' aims and practices. We have seen too that the deepening of a Christian's prayer life and Christian spirituality goes beyond casual practice of meditation or nature worship, and reaches its greatest satisfaction in the corporate worship of God, with others, and ultimately with all creation. For this reason, those quoted at the beginning of this chapter are able to articulate only a tiny piece of the larger picture, for the process of conversion to life in Christ offers the certainty of hope, the ability to face up to evil and suffering in the God who suffers with us, obviates the need to try and control our local world to our own ends and offers a lasting joy and peace beyond the quick fix rem-



edy. The Church is therefore challenged to make these distinctions to those who search for faith, and to encourage those whose emerging spirituality is made manifest, to build on these beginnings for the 'life in all its fullness' promised in St John's Gospel (e.g. John 10.10).

## Conclusion

3.50 Contemporary spirituality offers a number of important challenges to the Church. However, mission theology provides an important insight into how these challenges can be addressed.

3.51 First, the idea that the missionary God affirms every human person helps to provide a basis on which to reach out to those people identified by research such as that done by the Alister Hardy Research Centre. People who have a religious awareness, no matter how poorly articulated, may be seen to be already touched, or disturbed by God, and Christian experience can similarly affirm and ally with such experience. Further, this allows us to distinguish between affirmation of the self as good, but self-centredness as being antithetical to the gospel. The sensations of power and control which are associated with the individualistic attitudes of today have therefore to be dealt with and appropriately assimilated within our interpretation of the gospel.

3.52 Similarly, mission theology allows us to speak to a desire to affirm the whole body as God's good creation, just as Jesus Christ was himself embodied, and that orthopraxis, the right way to behave in respect of our bodies, is given to us in Jesus's own example. For Jesus himself was made known to us as a human being as the creed says [*enanthropesanta*], and made known to us as a man. In this way, 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth' (John 1.14). Mission theology gives us the tools to describe God's future according to his promises, allowing the human need to hope to be poured into this and located in the vision of his glory.

3.53 By affirming this vision, the awareness of evil and of the brokenness of the world can be addressed. What is significant here is the need to see this as a contemporary meaningful vision, not an outdated fantasy. We also need to develop a more robust form of creation theology which appropriately locates contemporary planet-related spirituality. Consequently, we need to be seen to be not just reacting to contemporary spirituality in 'too little, too

late' mode, but actively leading the way in making the Church the natural place where these spiritual journeys can be continued.

## Summary

### KEY WORDS

● spirituality ● transcendence ● numinous ● complementary medicine ● spiritual direction ● holism ● New Age ● exclusive language ● creation spirituality ● Celtic spirituality ● renewal ● conversion

There is a commonly understood sense that 'being religious' is not restricted to attending a place of religious worship. Spiritual experience is common to all human beings, whether they acknowledge it as such or not. Research shows that descriptions of such experiences carry certain themes. First, the experience is highly personal and concentrated back on the individual, not the corporate nature of the experience. Second, the enhanced sense of self occasioned by such experiences raises expectations of being in control of one's destiny, whether that is in partnership with God or perceived as a need to reject God. Third, experiences underline the need to feel good about oneself, not just in terms of mental confidence, but in terms of the body, its health, its appearance, its sexuality. Fourth, people are greatly concerned with the future and a need to find means of generating hope. Fifth, there is an increased concern for, and interest in, the natural world, and a sense that our place within creation is an important matter which requires addressing. Many people who experience their spirituality in this way look around to find contextually relevant ways of furthering their spiritual growth. They are faced with and attracted by the many ways of doing this offered by our choice-ridden, quick fix market culture. In particular they may opt for New Age-style practices, alternative therapies, or adopt a mixture of ideas, rituals and philosophies. Some may eventually find their way into a permanent home with one of the major world religions, which may or may not include Christianity.



The Church is therefore challenged to offer the Gospel of Jesus Christ into these spiritual experiences and spiritual journeys, but in doing so it needs to be sure about its faithfulness to Scripture and tradition and not merely compete for people's attention. For this reason, there is renewed interest in working out a theology for creation spirituality, for the ministry of healing, for forms of spiritual expression which draw on traditions such as Celtic spirituality. In these ways, the mission of God's love to the world is advanced by offering an holistic vision of spiritual growth, which people may turn to for a permanent and enduring home for their experience, not just an immediate gratification, and which allows them room to grow for all of their life.

### Further reading

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- Gaudium et Spes*, Documents of Vatican II, *The Church Today*.
- Palmer, Martin, *Living Christianity*, Element, 1993.
- Thomas, Patrick, *Candle in the Darkness: Celtic Spirituality from Wales*, Gomer Press, 1993.

Further information can also be obtained from:

The Alister Hardy Research Centre\*  
Westminster College  
Oxford

\*(Alister Hardy Trust and Religious Experience Research Centre)

## Things to do

- **AIM:** to look at some elements of contemporary spirituality concerning God and the natural world and to see how the Church can respond positively as well as critically to them.
- **PURPOSE:** to find ways of reaching out to people through their expressions of spirituality.

### BIBLE VERSE

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. (Hebrews 10.23)

Things to do include:

- a. Thinking about pleasurable things
- b. Reading a poem
- c. Looking at a picture
- d. Looking at images or advertisements
- e. Discussion starters
- f. Singing hymns

### 1. FAVOURITE THINGS

Ask people in pairs to write down their favourite foods, favourite scents, favourite piece of music, favourite clothing material, favourite colour.

Write them up on a chart. Do any of these have anything to do with the Church? Discuss ways in which our favourite things might lead us to encounter and form relationships with those outside the Church.

### 2. A POEM

Ask someone to read the poem aloud, or let the group read it to themselves.



## God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, Morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs --

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

(*Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*,  
(ed.) W. H. Gardner, Penguin, 1953, p.27)

Ask people to get into pairs and to talk about the words in the poem.

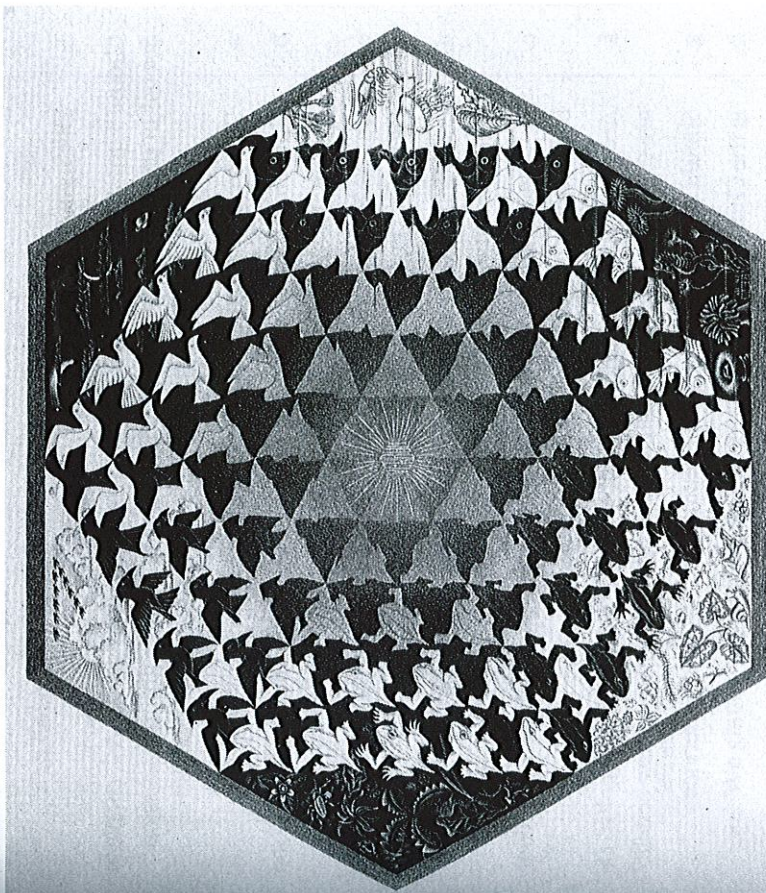
Questions for group discussion:

- Do you understand the poem?
- What do you think the poem tells us about nature? About God?
- Have you had an experience of God's grandeur? What happened?
- What Bible passages link with these poems?

## 3. PICTURES

Ask the whole group: what does this image say to you (see Figure 6)?

Figure 6 Verbum © 1996 M.C. Escher. Cordon Art, Baarn, Holland. All rights reserved.



In pairs, discuss how we can get across our understanding of God's relation to the natural world to people who think nature and God are the same thing. (This can also be discussed in relation to the poem.)

You could also cut out magazine or holiday brochure pictures of beautiful places and ask how these make people feel. Then try images of destruction and decay. Which ones make people think most readily of God? Think about how we can help people find God in *any* situation.

## 4. ADVERTISEMENTS

Look at advertisements in magazines or the local paper for various therapies or New Age practices. Also look at instructions on e.g. aromatherapy oils, etc.



Ask people in small groups to talk about which they may have tried or would like to try. Which ones would people definitely not try? Why not?

## 5. DISCUSSION STARTERS

Choose a question or questions that are relevant to your group. Ask people to discuss in pairs and then contribute two ideas to a whole group discussion.

- a. Do you have to go to church to be religious?
- b. How do personal experiences of transcendence or the nearness of God fit with being a church community?
- c. Do you think people searching for faith have already been touched by God? If so, how should we talk to them about the gospel?
- d. Is the sense of self-worth a religious experience? Is the Church responsible for damaging people's sense of self-worth?
- e. Is it important to feel good about yourself, your appearance, your body? Does the Church contribute to this?
- f. Are therapies and New Age practices bad for your spiritual health? Or are there practices and therapies from which Christians may benefit?
- g. Should the Church develop its healing ministry within services?
- h. Is the Church failing to preach a message of hope?
- i. Does the Church need creation spirituality? Can different spiritualities enrich the Church?
- j. What should our attitude be towards those who find a spiritual home in other faiths?

## 6. MUSIC

Sing a Taizé chant such as *Ubi Caritas* or a quiet hymn you use in your church or group. Ask people what effect the music and the words have.

Does it help you to feel close to each other, to God, or to pray?

Ask people how they think we can reach out to people searching for faith through our music. Or consider this hymn: 'This web of words and images' (tune: Ellacombe or Kingsfold).

This web of words and images,  
This net of sight and sound,  
This linking of humanity,  
By space and time un-bound,  
Leaves God bemused, for what excites  
Each possibility,  
Was grounded in creation's form  
At time's nativity.  
  
We download data, file or fax,  
Through cyberspace we probe;  
We surf the net, we browse the web,  
We navigate the globe;  
And God observes, involved within  
The body that he wove:  
Joined by a net that's limitless  
Whose access code is love.

We glance, we merely glimpse a part  
That all creation holds;  
We tinker with infinity,  
Eternity unfolds;  
Before the internet, the web,  
The highway was in place,  
The Word, God's cosmic interface,  
Gave form to time and space.

(Andrew E. Pratt)

Discuss what this modern hymn says to people.



## Notes

1. Edward Robinson and Michael Jackson, *Religion and Values at Sixteen Plus*, Alister Hardy Research Centre, Christian Education Movement, 1987, p.73.
2. These three examples come from *ibid.*, p.17.
3. *Ibid.*, p.19.
4. *Ibid.*, p.20.
5. In Martin Forward's paper on The New Age Movement, for the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Conference, he points to 'the emphasis on the individual and the individual's right or ability to select from all that is on offer the mix that is appropriate for them' (p.4).
6. Mary Loudon, *Revelations: The Clergy Questioned*, Penguin edition, 1995, p.20.
7. See, for example, Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship*, Epworth, 1986, pp.98ff.
8. *Religion and Values*, op. cit., p.20.
9. *Ibid.*, p.22.
10. W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, Macmillan edition, 1979, p.284. In this poem Yeats rejects Christianity for the richness of the pre-Christian experience, as represented by 'Homer and his unchristened heart'.
11. For example, see the Revd Mike Starkey, *Fashion and Style*, Monarch, 1995. Are Christianity and looking good incompatible?
12. *Brave New World* 1932, Penguin edition, 1995.
13. Julie Burchill, 'The Religion for the Me Generation', *Sunday Times*, 15 October 1995.
14. The 'Gaia' hypothesis in which the whole planet is seen as a self-regulating organism, was advanced by Professor James Lovelock.
15. Andrew Marvell, 'On Drop of Dew', in James Reeves and Martin Seymour-Smith (eds), *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, Heinemann, 1969, pp.18-19.
16. R. S. Thomas, 'The Other', in *Collected Poems, 1945-1990*, Phoenix edition, 1995, p.457.
17. The St Hilda Community, *Women Included: A Book of Services and Prayers*, SPCK, 1991, p.45.
18. 'Prayer to St Paul' in *The Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm*, Penguin edition, 1973, p.153.
19. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Penguin edition, 1966, especially chapters 57-63.
20. Martin Palmer, *Living Christianity*, Element, 1993, p.139.
21. Interview in *Third Way*, June 1995, p.17.
22. Matthew Fox, *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*, HarperCollins, 1991, p.11.
23. *Ibid.*, p.14.
24. See Patrick Thomas, *Candle in the Darkness: Celtic Spirituality from Wales*, Gomer Press, 1993, p.139. (Translation by Patrick Thomas from the Welsh.)
25. Palmer, op. cit., p.80.
26. The Documents of Vatican II, *The Church Today*, 14.
27. For further information about these various practices and therapies, see Eileen Campbell and J. H. Brennan, *Dictionary of Body, Mind and Spirit: Ideas, People and Places*, Aquarian Press (HarperCollins), revised edition, 1994.
28. For example, *The Protecting Veil* (1987), or *We Shall See Him as He Is* (1990) (text by Mother Thekla, Abbess of the Orthodox Monastery in Normanby, Tavener's friend and spiritual adviser).
29. For example, *Passio* (1982).
30. So in Sir Michael Tippett's oratorio *A Child of our Time* (1944), the final section begins with the words 'I would know my shadow and my light, so shall I at last be whole' until the work ends in the affirmation of the spiritual Deep River.
31. J. Philip Newell, 'Spirituality, Community and an Individualist Culture', in *Teaching Spirituality, The Way*, Supplement 1995/84, Autumn 1995, pp.123-5.



## Why world? Why oysters?

*My name's Sally. I'm into science. What I like about it is the way everything's being discovered and worked out. It's so wonderful what scientists are doing to tell us the answers to the big questions and when I think about it, the universe seems so big, so beautiful, so empty. Scientists are finding everything out, even down to the way a butterfly affects all the weather systems of the world. You don't need God in all that. It's like evolution: everything happens by chance and we're here only because our genes need bodies to survive in. Sorry God, you're out of date on that. I don't think you need the transcendent stuff cluttering everything up; the circle of life is complete.*

*I don't want to start trying to match up people's Christian faith with what the scientists say. I'll put my faith in the great technological advances we've got now; that's got to be better than prayer!*

*The Church shouldn't interfere. Religion is just an invention to stop us being frightened of death. I'm happy with the knowledge we've got nowadays. God's been pushed in a corner and he'll soon disappear altogether, right? The Church is always looking backwards, but we've got to push on into the undiscovered country.*

---

### Introduction

*Many people who think that religious belief is no longer relevant to twentieth-century living do so because they see scientific advance in a highly technological society as able to provide answers to all modern problems and questions. Other people feel faced with a choice between religious and scientific worldviews, or that science belongs in the public world, especially where they encounter 'popular science' and that religion belongs only to the realm of private opinion, to be kept under wraps.*

*The Christian Church, then, has to face up to a challenge to show its witness to be complementary to the scientific worldview. The Church has an opportunity to point to a view we have forgotten, in which relationship with God guides and frames our attempts to make discoveries through our scientific abilities. As cosmologists attempt to describe the universe more and more completely, we must not allow God to become merely the God-of-the-gaps. In the quantum world, we believe God to be there as the sustaining presence, even where there are limits placed on our observations. Similarly, the life scientists challenge the Church to make sense of evolution, and to promote our vision of what God is calling us to be.*

*The Church is also challenged to bring its witness into the complex situations created by today's technology. Where human beings have the power to bring about life in a test tube and to keep alive those who cannot sustain their own lives independently, the Church can offer something of its own view of life and death where people are asked to face increasingly difficult decisions.*

*This chapter examines what the Church can say in all these circumstances, which highlights our missionary task to be the people of God's future.*

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## Science and the search for faith

Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.<sup>1</sup>

The whole history of science has been the gradual realization that events do not happen in an arbitrary manner, but that they reflect a certain underlying order, which may or may not be divinely inspired.<sup>2</sup>

### Why?

4.1 It is in the nature of most human beings to ask fundamental questions about themselves and about the world. Why are we here? How did the world begin? When will the world end? Why am I as I am?

4.2 When we consider these questions, we can see that there are different categories of question: questions relating to the self, questions relating to the



world and questions relating to the universe. There are also different kinds of expected answer: answers of fact, which effectively decline the question, answers of accommodation, which do not 'solve' the question but point towards a helpful conclusion, and complementary answers which provide the questioner with different levels of satisfaction and which provide different frames of reference and perception. It is this last category which will become important in our discussions in this chapter.

4.3 The majority of known religions include a narrative or story which is designed to explain how the world and human beings came into being; what our relations are with the transcendental realm and what is likely to happen to us when we die. We have already made reference to these narratives in the Christian tradition in Chapter 2. These narratives are not straight answers, but stories which can be given orally, remembered and passed on. Who and what human beings are passes into the narrated history of a people. Anthropologists have given us many descriptions of how such stories carry an important means of sense-making for people, generating art, ritual and meaning for daily life. What is pre-eminent in such stories is the existence of the transcendent and the centrality and importance of human beings in relationship with the transcendent realm. When modern science seems to challenge both these important elements, we have to consider carefully the effect on our ability to make sense of what we know, experience or believe.

4.4 Consequently, when Christians tell the Good News of what God has done for us through salvation history and quintessentially in Jesus Christ, we speak of things which emanate from the history of the Jewish people and from a world-changing event nearly 2,000 years ago. Christian writers, theologians and philosophers have been trying to refine our understanding of what took place then, ever since, and to relate this to contemporary situations. In doing so, Scripture and tradition are basic tools for our understanding.

4.5 Christians, then, have had answers to fundamental questions about human life, which relate directly to our understanding of the work of God in history. The framework of understanding which Christian faith provides is given to us as a narrative: the history of God's saving work. The churches have developed a story of creation, a story of the way God relates to human beings, a story of the end-time and of God's intentions for human beings.

Across the whole breadth of the Christian Church theological approaches to these matters vary, but broadly speaking, the Christian confession of belief is set down in the historic creeds agreed and summarised at the four great Councils of the Church (AD 325-451) (see Chapter 5) and is still said by Christians in their churches today.

4.6 When we say the creed, we assent to a particular understanding of why things are as they are. We assent: to God's creatorship of all that is known to us and ever will be known to us; to God's missionary action in reaching out and acting in history; to his supreme act of self-revelation in Christ; to God's plan for all that has been created: the kingdom without end. Our very ability to ask questions can be seen as an act of God-seeking or God-pointing, whether we discover God through our questions or not.

4.7 The processes of secularisation and individualisation, however, mean that for many people today access to this kind of perceptual frame is missing. For example, in the face of knowledge about the human genome, and even fairly elementary knowledge of genetics, the virgin birth of a male child may appear simply too unbelievable. Many people have had no contact with the kind of epistemological base offered by the Church or by any other belief system, and therefore have no way of dealing with this kind of truth claim. Many people simply do not get to hear what the Church has to say about these matters, or if they do, they do not believe it. Why is this? What can the Church do about it? Is it that the Scriptures, the creeds, the witness of Christians are simply not enough to those who search and ask questions? Is it that people have access to other systems for sense-making which crowd out the Christian perspective, that are ultimately chosen over the Christian, or other religious ones? Is it further that the Christian, or, indeed, any other religious perspective is no longer brought into people's lives early enough, so that faith development is marred or deflected by the satisfaction of answers obtained from other disciplines? Are the *first* answers the ones which lay down the sense-making apparatus for people's lives? If so, the place of religion in education becomes paramount.

4.8 In order to respond to these questions, which are crucial for the mission of the Church, we need to look at the places where people find answers that satisfy their needs. In this chapter, we will look at the perspectives offered by science.



4.9 In the first place we must distinguish between science and 'scientism'. That is to say, many people are satisfied by explanations called 'scientific' but which bear little relation to the actual science involved, which may be very complex and provide a variety of information rather than one 'answer'. One example of a scientific point of view is the popular misconception that science and Christian faith have been at loggerheads for centuries. However, this idea of a continuous conflict stems from a nineteenth-century rewriting of history. There is also a view that 2,000 years of Christian thought have been sidelined by advances in the sciences. Christianity, and religion in general, are sometimes seen as a marginal refuge for those who cannot quite hold on to the scientific revolutions of the twentieth century.

4.10 It is a fact of our present western culture that, while many people do not have exposure to the basic stories about Jesus, the majority do have good access to scientific ideas. Television programmes like *Tomorrow's World* and *Horizon*, radio programmes such as *Science Now*, and science articles in newspapers give the general public access to complex scientific ideas, and provide entry points for learning about matters of particular interest or concern. Such matters might include the understanding of the structure and transmission of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV); the development of the information technology and computer culture; the mechanisation of society, with continuing advances in robotics and automation in industry; the probable origin of the universe in the Big Bang. The strong interest in gaining general access to otherwise specialist areas of scientific study and analysis is demonstrated by the phenomenal success of Professor Stephen Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time*, and of a host of other 'popular science' books.

### Three consequences

4.11 First, we can see the consequences of the scientific discussions and advances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in terms of a general addition to our understanding and capability. We now understand the part that evolution has had to play in shaping our minds and bodies and this has led us to examine our own genetic make-up; we understand the huge expanse of the universe in terms of general relativity and the sub-atomic world in terms of quantum theory. We use lasers in surgery and compact

disc players; we use computers to write, calculate and communicate; we have the ability to travel in space and explore our solar system by remote control; we have advanced medical techniques and machinery to produce and to preserve life, even to the point of engineering the DNA evolution has given us. We can even try to make sense of the world around us through the mathematics of chaos and complexity theories, and so to relate everything around us to ourselves.

4.12 Second, through dedication to scientific advance, it seems that human beings have the ability to penetrate the secrets of almost anything within reach. This fuels the view that anything strange, mysterious or unknown can be made accessible to humans as long as there are resources for adequate technology to be put in place. There is, as it were, 'nothing sacred'.

4.13 Third, people can be seen to place faith and hope in a future in which science has solved the ills of the world and overcome the limitations of human beings. One day, perhaps, there will be a 'cure' for cancer; pollution-free synthetics will return the earth to its original cleanness; people will travel to the stars and create new paradises. Against this is set the other side of human behaviour: advances in science and technology permit the creation of the Semtex explosive, and provide more sophisticated methods of waging war and committing crime. Science may 'work', but it can also have frightening consequences. With scientific advance come important questions about accountability.

4.14 The majority of people have some idea of these advances, if not through education or the media, then through experience of technology in daily life. The matter of science teaching in schools is of particular importance, since most schoolchildren have exposure to classroom science through its significance within the National Curriculum. We therefore have to ask whether or not the prominence of science teaching leads to the description of a particular worldview (which may not be particularly scientific) becoming the dominant one for young minds. There are two important points arising from this which have consequences for the mission of the Church. The first is that people receive more knowledge about the scientific perspective than they do about the religious perspective and their ability to compare those perspectives and gauge their satisfaction is impaired. This



naturally raises questions about the place of religious education and about catechesis and whether teaching the Christian faith to those whose exposure to its story has been minimal is made more difficult by what they may have learned through other disciplines, as Craig Raine suggests:

I never liked God, but struggled with him  
like algebra and trigonometry.<sup>3</sup>

4.15 Second, popular modes of encounter with scientific ideas do not for the most part address the role of religion or religious belief along with the scientific contribution. Consequently, and however mistakenly, there often emerges a perception that science and religion are somehow incompatible, or actually competing with each other. There are various reasons for this. For example:

1. Science may appear to *displace* or *undermine* religious understanding. For example, steady state models of the universe in which energy comes into existence out of nothing and Stephen Hawking's 'no-boundary' proposition suggest that in these models of the creation of the universe there would have been nothing for a Creator God to do.<sup>4</sup>
2. Science may appear to *disprove* matters of faith. For example, when the religious authorities presented the Turin Shroud for testing, the result of this test (if it was accurate) appeared to 'prove' it to be a medieval fake and therefore 'disproved' the hope that it is Christ's burial sheet. For some people, this also meant that science had disproved the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, it is still not clear how the Turin Shroud came into existence; people are not generally aware of the existence of other shrouds and also do not always understand that carbon dating cannot make any difference to the truth of the resurrection.

3. Science may appear to *explain away* miracles and collapse experiences of transcendence. For example, in his book on migraine, Dr Oliver Sacks shows that the 'visions' experienced by Hildegard of Bingen and interpreted by her as religious experiences, were most likely caused by typical migrainous scotoma – disturbances of vision, typified by flashing lights and bright patterns before the eyes.<sup>5</sup> The

historical evidence for miracles may appear so flimsy that people today cannot find any meaning in them, either as events or as contexts.

4. Science *enters into* areas typically thought to be in God's hands. For example, doctors can bring about human life *in vitro*, and preserve the vital functions of the brain dead through life support machines.

### Choices: either/or

4.16 It is not surprising, then, that people who are searching for faith and looking to see what the witness of the Church can do for their search, sometimes find themselves in positions where they may think they have to choose between a 'scientific' explanation of the world and our place in it and a 'religious' explanation of the creation and our role in it. There is further the added suggestion, sometimes, that the holders of the religious view do so 'against the evidence'. It is perfectly true that there are scientists such as Peter Atkins who may see the world as beautiful and ordered, but entirely mechanistic and clockwork and whose reductionist view of the world leaves no room for God or for true humanity or for any kind of belief.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, there are also people who choose the religious view so exclusively as to reject what science can tell us altogether. Creationists, for example, believe in the literal truth of the creation stories in Genesis, and do not accept ideas about the age of the universe, or that animals, plants and human beings evolved. Yet is the either/or distinction necessary? In recent years there have been a number of books by scientists who are also Christian believers, demonstrating from their own intellectual position that there is no contradiction in terms.<sup>7</sup> The mathematician Abdus Salam, who refers to himself as a Muslim, finds no conflict at all, seeing a directive in the Qur'an to study nature and to find the signs of God in nature.<sup>8</sup>

- 4.17 In addition, Bishop Hugh Montefiore suggests:

There are aspects of the natural sciences which are not dissimilar to those of religion. For example, both inherit a tradition, and in both trust is needed in that tradition. There are other aspects which are very different. Faith in God is different from a mere hypothesis about God. While religions may hope to refine or develop their systems of belief, faith in God is not regarded as provisional in the sense that a better hypothesis is



forthcoming. For the most part the natural sciences are concerned with a different question from that of religion.<sup>9</sup>

### Complementarity

4.18 If, through their traditions, science and Christian faith can be said to address similar big issues which are of concern to ordinary people, then we can begin with the premise that science and religious belief, including Christianity, are not as incompatible or mutually exclusive as they may sometimes appear to be. They may be becoming more compatible as our understanding increases. Science and Christianity may each contribute to the process of giving satisfying responses to complex questions about ourselves and the world we live in. Nor is this merely a defensive argument, saying that no matter how much scientists discover and explain, Christianity will never be displaced, rather, it is a confidence that the longer scientists spend on their investigations, the more likely they are to need to start thinking about God. This is true of the thought of Paul Davies, for instance (winner of the 1995 Templeton prize), whose claim is that 'science offers a surer path than religion in the search of God'.<sup>10</sup> What does this mean, though? For Christians this suggestion may not go far enough, for knowledge of God or the search for faith does not mean response to God or participation in worship. The mission question for the Church here, then, is to give people (scientists included) a deeper understanding of God and the divine work in creation as part of a larger truth which is none the less often overlooked. Some scientists who mention God in their popular books, talk in an unconstructed deistic way. That is, they categorise God as a function, such as creator, without reference to God's relationship with human beings or, indeed, God's missionary purpose of sending love into the world. We can provide more, not just through academic theology, but through the experiences of Christians in the everyday world. This means that those who search for faith do not have to be torn between choices; Christianity and science can be seen as complementary in offering different considerations of what we know. Further complementarity itself points to a more complete understanding of ourselves in creation. We examine this under two headings below.

4.19 Addressing the whole person is not a new concept, as we have seen in Chapter 3. We might do well to remember that, in the western world at least, science has emerged from roots in religious understanding. The Wellcome Museum of Medicine in the Science Museum in London demonstrates the close relationship between medical research through the centuries and the search for a healing that was not just physical, but spiritual. Often remedies and prayers were integrated in the treatment. Without the kind of understanding of anatomy and physiology which modern medicine has today, whole person medicine was developed and practised, on which a stronger focus is gradually being recovered today.

4.20 For example, ancient treatment for a snake bite would first include drawing out the poison and applying a poultice or other medication. Yet there would also be a prayer or other form of words to focus the patient's mind on getting rid of the poison in the body. The treatment might also include confrontation with a real snake (maybe *the* snake) or an image of it to confirm healing from the event and to restore the world in which snakes and humans do not injure each other.<sup>11</sup> An example of this in the Bible is the brazen serpent of Numbers 21.9 where the Lord tells Moses how to treat snake bite: 'Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.' Modern treatment for phobias may also include confrontation with the source of the fear (desensitisation). Another example of how holistic medicine is being recovered today would be the practice of giving patients control over their own pain relief, giving them freedom from anxiety about pain and control over their illness.

4.21 The Christian tradition developed the Ignatian idea of the eucharist as *pharmakon*, the remedy given to us by Christ the Healer. Emphasis was placed, not just on dealing with injury or with disease, but on recovery of right relationship with God. The family therapist Jeremy Woodcock, writing of his experience of assisting those who have suffered human rights violations, agrees with Anne Nasimiyyu-Wasike that the image of Christ the Healer is precisely what is required by many African women. For them, T. S. Eliot's paradox 'The wounded surgeon plies the steel', the healer who suffers our wounds himself in solidarity with us, is a source of hope: 'Beneath the



bleeding hands we feel/The sharp compassion of the healer's art/Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.'<sup>12</sup> Because God has suffered in Christ, healing is related to compassion and mercy for the sufferer, beyond the physical damage sustained by the body. Further, the idea of *pharmakon* is not restricted to Christianity:

On the anniversary of executions in their family, I suggest to a [Muslim] couple that they bring the halvah into the Medical Foundation to share in solidarity with the suffering of others. Halvah is the confection of honey and sesame seeds which it is traditional to bake and offer to others with a blessing.<sup>13</sup>

4.22 In considering a whole person approach to medicine, there also has to be preserved the proper balance between the activity of God and medical skill:

When the surgery was completed and Margaret returned from hospital to our home remarkably quickly and feeling surprisingly well, friends assured us that it was all down to their prayers. We had been supported, we knew, by a considerable volume of prayer and we were extremely grateful for it. Nevertheless their response to Margaret's recovery was a little irritating. It seemed to demean the efforts of the surgeon and his support staff. He was superbly sensitive and understanding in all our meetings with him, ready to explain each stage carefully and to answer all our questions in a straightforward manner. As far as we could tell, the surgery had been carried out with great skill. All the good things we had heard about him in advance were confirmed in our experience. We could not now deny that and give all the credit to God and our praying supporters. The surgeon's professionalism and care must be given proper notice in any understanding of providence at work in the situation. [But] ... It may be that the totality of our experience during Margaret's illness would have been different without prayer.<sup>14</sup>

4.23 Here, Mervyn Willshaw considers how it is possible to hold together scientific skill and Christian faith in an inclusive way. His reference to the totality of the experience of his wife's illness and treatment reminds us that illness, suffering and pain are not things which are passed over into the sci-

entist's hands when God has failed, nor things to be passed back to hope of a miracle when doctors and technology fail. Rather, the placing of an artificial distinction between the activity of God and the activity of the doctors needs to be eroded. We may look at the advances made by the hospice movement today as recovering the balance between medical treatment of the body and mental and spiritual requirements. Offering the opportunity to die well and with dignity, using pain-relieving drugs to enhance quality of life rather than its length is seen as responding to the needs of the whole person rather than just 'the patient'.

HOW FAR COMPLEMENTARITY? (II) COSMOLOGICAL DISCOVERY AND THE CHURCH

Man has measured the heavens with a telescope  
Driven the gods from their thrones

(Michael Tippett, *A Child of our Time*, oratorio)

4.24 Just as medicine demonstrates an historical closeness between science and faith, so the study of the heavens and the discovery of the position and status of the earth in relation to the solar system, the galaxy and, indeed, the universe was set in the context of a theological and metaphysical understanding which exercised a powerful hold on the minds and imaginations of people, including the scientists. This led to a highly complex historical situation, but the religious view defining human beings and God, earth and heaven, was often perceived to be so dominant that the scientific view about actual observation was declared to be incompatible, leading to persecution and charges of heresy.<sup>15</sup> Yet often the religious view had encouraged scientific enterprise, and many scientists worked with explicitly religious presuppositions.

HOW FAR COMPLEMENTARITY NOW?

4.25 Today, we can see that the history of western physical science has required a series of large leaps of conscious understanding. Not only have we had to accept the loss of the idea that the existence of humankind is central and pre-eminent (although some of this is now being reconsidered), but we have to accommodate the complex mathematics of describing time and



space, and the need to imagine all events as relative to one another. Einstein's theory of general relativity which suggested that there is no one privileged platform for observation of physical events has consequences for our philosophical enquiries. There is perhaps also the sense that science has advanced and changed so radically while Christian faith, as, for example, set down in the creeds, has remained in the same place, old-fashioned, outdated and irrelevant. We need to admit that new models of the universe and scientific discoveries challenge our ideas of God and encourage us to think about God in a new way.

4.26 The challenge here to the Church is to show that while Christians still hold to the central doctrines of Christian faith, the amount we know and understand about God's mission of love to the world may also change with time and human experience. We really do have new things to say to today's world, even if the foundations for our faith are unchanging, for these are born out of our exciting and creative interactions with new knowledge, especially that arising from scientific enterprise.

4.27 This means that Christianity is not a fossilised religion, but is continuously remaking itself in creative and fresh ways. We are challenged to fill our language with new pictures, metaphors and stories which allow us to make our description of the way the world is and about our place in it more referential of God. We are challenged to represent what we believe God has done and will do, as set out in the creed, and draw on all current sources of knowledge to enrich that belief for others. In particular, Christians have three things to offer:

4.28 We have a view of our future which generates hope: *he will come again in glory ... and his kingdom will have no end*. In the fulfilment of God's promises, Jesus Christ will be with us again in a world which is created and experienced in accordance with God's will.

4.29 We have a way of understanding that is personal and relevant: *for us ... and for our salvation he came down from heaven ... and became truly human* (English Language Liturgical Consultation). Jesus, God incarnate, became a human being and shared our life.

4.30 We have a way of describing reality in terms of value, purpose and meaningfulness: *for our sake he was crucified ... and rose again*. Jesus died, as we do, but he rose from the dead to show us that we have an eternal destiny

and a meaning and value in God's eyes which extends beyond our death.

4.31 Why should these perspectives be of any use, when science can give us deeply satisfying and beautiful explanations? In order to illustrate this at a general level we may look at the description of a kiss, which allows us to use language in a metaphorical way that will be helpful in the following parts of this chapter. A 'scientific' description might suggest that a kiss signifies the approach of two pairs of lips with the exchange of carbon dioxide and microbes, and contraction of the orbicular muscles. But such a description would be meaningless to two people whose purpose in, and experience of, kissing would be in terms of value, enrichment, love. Both descriptions might be true, but would give a different satisfaction in terms of the answer to the question: 'What is a kiss?' It is also clear that it is the latter description which provides the most information about what a kiss means for a person, for relationships and for a person's future.<sup>16</sup>

4.32 In the following paragraphs, we will consider in very brief outline some of the topics which people often regard as challenging to the Christian faith and see what issues are raised by these advances to the mission of the Church and how the Church may respond.

## The natural sciences

### ORIGINS

- I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen.
- The idea that space and time may form a closed surface without boundary also has profound implications for the role of God in the affairs of the universe ... So long as the universe had a beginning, we could suppose it had a creator. But if the universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place, then, for a creator?<sup>17</sup>
- I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens. (Isaiah 45.12)
- 4.33 When we ask the question, 'How did it all begin?', cosmologists currently tell us that the universe 'began' in what is known as the Big Bang: a vast explosion out of which came everything we now observe in the uni-



verse, and possibly more that we cannot observe at all. There is much evidence for the idea that there really was a Big Bang, but it is very difficult to discover what happened right at the very first moment (if there was a first moment). So what was before the Big Bang? We are told the question has no meaning, since time and space emerged together at the Big Bang. What we know is that the universe is expanding and is now very big indeed; our local patch of the universe is far away from the origin in time.

4.34 People who are searching for faith, whose perception of God is weak or unformed, are sometimes perplexed by Christians' claim to believe in a Creator God, when science seems to have shown that such an idea is unnecessary. What people sometimes fail to grasp is that a belief in the 'maker of heaven and earth' does not commit us to the view that the universe has a beginning. However, what tends to happen when people grapple with these ideas, is the formation of a 'God-in-the-gaps' theology. That is, whatever is as yet unknown by the scientists can be left to the 'hand of God'. Gradually, as more and more is known, God's role shrinks away until finally the 'Creator' evaporates altogether. There is simply nothing, as Stephen Hawking has mooted, for God to do.

4.35 This way of thinking, however, can also lead to a picture of God in which God lights the blue touchpaper and sets everything off to run by itself. God then remains aloof from creation and is merely a deistic theological backcloth for people, or worse, people may think God abandons creation altogether. It is necessarily difficult to recognise that the emergence of the universe and the presence of God's being are not of the same order of existence, but we believe in a missionary God whose creatorship is not just a one-off activity but a continuous activity. We could not speak of the *missio dei*, the term we use for God's mission of love to the world, unless God's creative nature were continuously present. For this reason, we also present God as the sustainer of all that is. An illustration may help here.

4.36 If a person watches a television programme, that person might well be able to describe the programme in terms of its story. A group of people watching the same programme might be able to provide a very full account, each supplying details the others had missed. In time, a very complete account might be arrived at, in correct sequential order with no gaps. But it is highly unlikely that anyone telling the story of the television programme will mention the complex array of magnets, electron guns and electronics at

the back of the television set which keeps the picture continuously before our eyes when we watch the TV. Yet without these, sustaining the picture moment by moment, there would be no picture and no story. This then is how science and religion may provide complementary pictures of reality. Science deals with the story as it is oriented in linear (and asymmetric) time; Christianity emphasises that there is a creation in each and every moment, simultaneous with sustaining what is in being.

4.37

The Big Bang theory concerns the beginning of our universe as *presently ordered*. It moves from where we are now back to the time when our universe was a very small, very dense mass.

The theory does not assume that there was nothing before that small, dense mass ... even if we could identify the beginning of the universe, we would be no closer to the divine creative activity than we are right now. God's creative activity in sustaining the universe is precisely the same at the present moment as it is at every moment of the universe's existence. According to the Christian doctrine of creation, whatever exists whenever it exists owes its existence to the continuous creative activity of God. To be clear that God is the *source* of all things and that science only deals with the transformations and relations between *existing* things prevents confusions.<sup>18</sup>

4.38 This kind of view allows us to draw an important distinction between what theology and science are offering in answer to our questions. Under this distinction, God allows the laws of physics to be unchanging, so that the universe does conform to given, discoverable principles which scientists can describe and use in their quest for understanding.<sup>19</sup>

4.39 The notion that God sustains the universe and everything we can possibly know about, in being, means that Christians have something to say in any kind of debate about who and why we are. It may also give confidence to those searching for faith, that the witness of the Church can present God as the basis of our being, having been involved with every moment of our history, the history of the world and the history of the universe. Faith is not just something that fills the 'gaps' temporarily, but confirms the orderliness and sense of all creation, the very creation that God saw was 'good'.



4.40 The trouble is that some of the most important discoveries in the physical sciences can make us feel very insignificant and alone, when we try to grasp the ideas and numbers involved. For example, cosmologists can show us that the universe is about 15 billion years old and that before our evolution on earth an entire generation of stars had come into being, burned their available fuel and died, many in supernova explosions of extraordinary brightness. They can further show that *unless* a first generation of stars had died, elements such as oxygen, nitrogen, carbon and iron would not exist in the quantities needed for life to occur. We therefore seem 'fixed' in a particular age of the universe; we belong to a point in its history when it is dark and cold, and the spaces between stars so great that it seems impossible that we can reach them by our own means. In order to make sense of this, some scientists have formulated an argument called the 'anthropic principle' of which there are two forms, so-called 'weak' and 'strong'. This argument supports the view that everything scientists are discovering about the precision of quantities and balances in the universe suggests that we are meant to be here and that we are meant to observe and find out about our universe. We have a 'place' in the universe, which we can explore by means of our minds and hearts, but not, apparently, by means of hands-on experience. We cannot just go off to have a look. The distances involved are so great that even if we could travel at the speed of light many human lifetimes would pass before we could reach even the nearest stars.

4.41 This is how the poet Elizabeth Jennings feels about the realities science has discovered for us:

#### Delay

The radiance of the star that leans on me  
Was shining years ago. The light that now  
Glitters up there my eye may never see,  
And so the time lag teases me with how

Love that loves now may not reach me until  
Its first desire is spent. The star's impulse  
Must wait for eyes to claim it beautiful  
And love arrived may find us somewhere else.<sup>20</sup>

4.42 She touches on an important question raised by the facts of distance. When we look at the night sky we see a beautiful picture of the past. Some writers, such as Danah Zohar, also experience a sense of aloneness and isolation when confronted by these facts. Surely our little world is completely cut off? If we cannot talk directly or immediately to anyone but ourselves, how can we believe that God loves us, acts in the world, and that we are capable of transcendence? 'When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, that you have established; What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?' (Psalm 8.3-4).

4.43 The answer to the psalmist's cry is the other side of the poem's conclusion. That love is not of the same order as light. We can say that God loves us, because of our direct experience of that love; it is a consequence of God's missionary nature that the universe is sustained in being and permeated with the experience of God's love. We can say, further, that God's love touches every part of creation, not just human beings, and allows the universe to be in the very special and particular way that we have discovered it exists. Our journey is known, cherished and understood. The future and ultimate destiny of the universe is already mapped in God's intention, and falls into conformity with his will.

4.44 This idea that the whole of the universe's history and future is already infused with God's will helps us to make sense of what the cosmologists tell us about the fine tuning that seems to be apparent in the universe. In order for there to be observers of the universe at all, the forces of gravity and expansion at the Big Bang are reckoned to be balanced to a sensitivity of 1 in  $10^{60}$ . This sensitivity is the same as pointing a gun at a target 1 cm<sup>2</sup> at the other side of the observable universe – and hitting it.<sup>21</sup> Now this in itself is not a proof that God did the fine tuning. If there were an infinite number of universes, it would be more than likely that one universe of this kind of sensitivity would be bound to occur sooner or later. We do not, however, have any evidence to suppose that there are any universes other than our own. What is remarkable is that it is then only in a universe of this kind that we can ourselves exist to wonder at it. *We belong* here.

4.45 What this also means is that scientists are now beginning to reassess the importance of our self-awareness, not just the fact that we are conscious, but that we are here to ask questions about the universe and discover the



laws that govern it. The 'anthropic principle', as mentioned above, looks at the idea that we are somehow meant to be here.<sup>22</sup> Some scientists are also looking at the idea that for a universe to be, there must be conscious observers of its being, although this would be a minority speculative view. While we might claim that we know about value, purpose and meaning, we should not be sidetracked into thinking this puts us right back at the centre of the universe and that human beings are pre-eminent. As Christians we only understand value, purpose and meaning through the experience of God's love. The religious experience has the capacity to make sense of all the known details and to make our wonderings about who and why we are fall into place. This is not just an intellectual satisfaction, but a sense of wonder and awe at the intricacy of nature in all its forms.

4.46 Another manifestation of this is now given to us by chaos and complexity theory, which aims to show how small causes may have large distant effects. A now famous example is the assertion that the effect of a butterfly moving its wings in a tropical forest creates enough disturbance in the balance of the world's weather systems to effect storms in another part of the world at a later date.<sup>23</sup> The suggestion is that every breath we take and every motion we make is affective and interrelational. This is a holistic view of creation which science is opening up for us. But we believe the world is affective and interrelational, because this is also in the nature of God.

4.47 This is how Walt Whitman saw it:

O vast Rondure, swimming in space,  
Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty,  
Alternate light and day and the teeming spiritual darkness,  
Unspeakable high processions of sun and moon and countless stars  
above,  
Below, the manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees,  
With inscrutable purpose, some hidden prophetic intention,  
Now first it seems my thought begins to span thee ...

After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,

Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,  
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

Then not your deeds only O voyagers, O scientists and inventors,  
shall be justified,

All these hearts as of fretted children shall be sooth'd ...

('Passage to India', section 5)<sup>24</sup>

4.48 Many scientists are moved to awe and wonder by their enquiries about the universe, but such awe is commonplace among human beings. These feelings prompt us to look beyond ourselves and shake us out of our complacency. For many people, such experiences mark the beginning of a sense of transcendence and it is to these people that the witness of the Church must speak its truth. This truth will not be a counter to the experience, but will emerge from it. We therefore need to look to science to find out what can be known about the universe we contemplate and that so disturbs us. In particular, we are challenged to speak of a God who is not infinitely beyond our finite minds and unknowable, but who rather is both personal and accessible. Further, this God has revealed himself as one of us in a way that allows us to relate the human person of Jesus to the 'Cosmic Christ' of the letters to the Colossians, the Ephesians and particularly of the Prologue to St John's Gospel, who, according to the first letter of Peter, 'was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake' (1.20).

4.49 In his book, *God in Us*,<sup>25</sup> the Revd Anthony Freeman, whose views are echoed by the Sea of Faith movement,<sup>26</sup> argued that if there is a God 'out there', we can know nothing of such a God.<sup>27</sup> In responding to such an idea, we can see that recent scientific thinking can help us to relate 'out there' to the entire complexity of the world in a way that is explicitly God-revealing. God is not confined within the summation of human ideals, but continuously creating and sustaining creation.

## The quantum world

4.50 We are also challenged to maintain our view of such a God where scientists are probing what we can know of nature's smallest components.



Here our very notions of reality are challenged, as well as our fundamental premises about how thinking relates to experience. This is because, for any event at the quantum level, the answer you get depends on the kind of question you ask. This means that the more precisely you try to determine what has happened in one aspect of an event, the more information you lose about other aspects of it. Moreover, the very act of observation, of measurement, of human interference, itself affects what is going on. This is encapsulated in Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which need not concern us here, except that there is a genuine philosophical problem about what we may and may not know located deep down at the heart of nature and with which scientists have to grapple.

4.51 Christians may have some sympathy with those scientists who are working on the indeterminism of the Uncertainty Principle, even if the way in which we approach mystery and the unknowable is a long way from the complexities of quantum physics. However, those searching for faith may well wish to know what Christians do with concepts which are outwardly unbelievable or inwardly unknowable and find reassurance from those who are familiar with both scientific and religious mystery. For example:

If the unpicturable world of electrons gives us some surprises, we shouldn't be too amazed if the unpicturable God has some surprises in store for us also. If, as a Christian believer, I find – as I do, and as millions have done before me – that when I talk of Jesus Christ I just can't talk about him in human terms, but I'm also driven to use divine language, then I have to accept the reality of this experience, however difficult it is to understand how the infinite God and a finite man in first-century Palestine can, in some mysterious way, be joined together ... it's not a case of scientific fact versus religious opinion. It's a case, with both science and religion, of trying to interpret and understand the rich, varied and surprising way the world actually is.<sup>28</sup>

4.52 We are challenged to show those people who encounter the Christian faith and who simply cannot believe its message because its paradox, mystery and extraordinary claims cut against the rational, testable and measurable, that scientists too must now grapple with the strangeness and uncertainty that seem to lie at the very heart of nature.

## The life sciences

### EVOLUTION

- I had religious doubts from the age of about ten or eleven ... I must have been quite young, but obviously I must have been beginning to ask questions, and by the time I was thirteen or fourteen my doubts were pretty severe, and they were quite largely fuelled, I think, by evolution. I already knew about dinosaurs and about Darwin, and so on, and I think my original interest in evolution was really almost a philosophical one: how did we get here, were we really created, and ultimately, whether religion as I was taught it was true, which, by and large, I think it isn't.<sup>29</sup>

- Authors of the highest eminence seem to be fully satisfied with the view that each species has been independently created. To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual. When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled ... as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.<sup>30</sup>

4.53 Ever since Charles Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species*, the demonstration that all life on earth, including humankind, has evolved from other creatures through time in a process of progressive and cumulative mutational change, has been perceived as a challenge to the religious understanding that God created the world and everything in it. Where the Church has failed to meet this challenge, the 'scientific' answers to the important questions have held sway. Yet this was not at all Darwin's own intention. Rather, Darwin gave a detailed insight into the nature of the created order and pronounced his own sense of wonder and amazement at the beauty and variety of the living world, of whom the Creator is the originator and under whom living things become increasingly complex and advanced.



4.54 Today, the Church is challenged by many neo-Darwinists and other evolutionary biologists whose reading of Darwin excludes the idea of origin in a Creator and any teleological function of biology. This is an important challenge, because what has not been lost in this increasingly reductionist view is a profound sense of wonder and appreciation of the variety of nature. Consequently, anyone who has been captured by the images of David Attenborough's nature films might well be convinced by Desmond Morris's argument in his wonderfully filmed television series *The Human Animal*, on the natural history of human behaviour, that religion is a behavioural response to fear of death and nothing else. Why it is that human beings alone ponder death and ultimate destiny is in itself of interest to the Church.

4.55 The Church, then, must be careful to respond to the arguments without seeking to diminish the deep love and wonder at the variety of animals and plants which biologists who attack Christian faith truly hold, for this is a point of consonance. Further, we should not, in our formation of an apologetic which answers these criticisms, forget that these scientists have a great deal to teach us, for the mission of the Church must include a comprehensive view of the integrity of creation and this is particularly something which evolutionary biology gives us.

4.56 In the rest of this section, then, we will look at the critical stance of the biologist Richard Dawkins, whose beautifully written books not only introduce his readers to the remarkable complexity of animals and plants, but also seek to refute Christian claims about the creation. These may be summarised as follows:

1. Dawkins refutes the Argument from Design as a proof of God's existence and shows it to be erroneous as a pathway to faith. In his book *Climbing Mount Improbable*,<sup>31</sup> he shows how complex structures such as eyes can evolve without any need for a Designer God.
2. Dawkins refutes the view that there can be any purpose to evolution. The beauty of nature is not a reflection of God's intention, but the result of the blind chance of random mutation being acted on by natural selection.<sup>32</sup>
3. Dawkins posits the idea of 'memes', in which ideas act like genes, ruthlessly using bodies to survive through the generations. In this argument, religious inclination or faith occurs because the 'memes' for being religiously inclined are very good at survival.

4.57 In dealing with the challenge presented by 1., the Church cannot afford to defend Paley's original argument without considering what we now know. In *Natural Theology*, William Paley argued that a stone discovered on a heath would not draw attention, but the discovery of a watch would lead the finder to infer that its existence could not be an accident and that a designer must be responsible for its existence. Extrapolating from this, he suggested that a complex organ like an eye could not have occurred through random processes and must therefore carry the evidence for God as creator. Dawkins argues that this cannot be sustained in his book *The Blind Watchmaker*.<sup>33</sup>

4.58 This does not, however, mean that the Christian idea of God as creator is redundant or meaningless. Richard Swinburne argues:

God could have created humans without doing so by the long process of evolution. But that is only an objection to the theistic hypothesis if you suppose that God's only reason for creating anything is for the sake of human beings ... God also has reason to bring about animals. Animals are conscious beings who enjoy much life and perform intentional actions, even if they do not choose freely which ones to do. Of course God has a reason for giving life to elephants and giraffes, tigers and snails. And anyway the beauty of the evolution of the inanimate world from the Big Bang (or from eternity) would be quite enough of a reason for producing it, even if God were the only person to have observed it ....

Darwin showed that the universe is a machine for making animals and humans. But it is misleading to gloss that correct point in the way that Richard Dawkins does ... It is misleading because it ignores the interesting question of whether the existence and operation of that machine, the factors which Darwin (and Wallace) cited to explain 'our own existence', themselves have a further explanation. I have argued that the principles of rational enquiry suggest that they do. Darwin gave a correct explanation of the existence of animals and humans; but not, I think, an ultimate one. The watch may have been made with the aid of some blind screwdrivers (or even a blind watchmaking machine), but they were guided by a watchmaker with some very clear sight.<sup>34</sup>



4.59 Interestingly, we can look at this idea from the point of view of Dawkins's own writing. For example, he tells us about writing a computer program to 'create' generations of insect-like pictures on the screen:

With a wild surmise, I began to breed, generation after generation, from whatever child looked most like an insect ... I still cannot conceal from you my feeling of exultation as I first watched these exquisite creatures emerging before my eyes. I distinctly heard the triumphal opening chords of *Also sprach Zarathustra* ... in my mind, I couldn't eat, and that night 'my' insects swarmed behind my eyelids as I tried to sleep.<sup>35</sup>

4.60 We are called to be co-creators with God of the world which God has brought into being but which is being shaped and moulded by us. We are further to be responsible for the continuing welfare of that creation. Here Dawkins himself teaches us something of the wonder and responsibility which go with this aspect of acting in accordance with the *missio dei*. As if sensing this, Dawkins is at pains to remind us that 'his' insects, brought into being by his computer program, were not consciously created by him.<sup>36</sup>

4.61 Yet he continues to give us his sense of joy at perceiving the fruits of his activity, but he makes them familiar and gives them names: 'spitfire', 'scorpion', 'lunar lander'. He sees them as creatures, not just as bits of information and these accrue meaning as he labels and identifies them. He searches for them when they are 'lost' in the computer, and rejoices when he comes across some semblance of them again. He then acts (by recording their genetic codes) in order to make sure they cannot be lost any more. All of this makes sense to Christians who believe in a creator who calls individuals who become conscious of his presence by name; who searches out what is lost and rejoices in the found. These things are contained in the nature of the responsibility of creatorship, and define our own relationships to the Creator God. Dawkins therefore confirms, rather than refutes, what the mission theological view of the Creator God is. God is a creator who rejoices in our becoming, who (in existential terms) lets us be, and who waits patiently for our own wanderings to bring us at last to recognition and conformity with the excellence of the creator's originating action:

[There is] a miraculous theophany in the stability and infinite variety of DNA .... Genetic risk is the price creation pays for the

infinite proliferation of species that grace the earth. Without such risk, life as we know it would not have been possible at all. DNA enables us to exist, systemically. As such it can declare the glory of God.<sup>37</sup>

4.62 What Wink says here is important for our apologetic. In his book, *River out of Eden*, Dawkins refers to a man who was converted to a deep religious faith in God by the delicate relationship between a species of orchid and the wasp which pollinates it. Dawkins shows that the relationship between wasp and orchid cannot be inferred by the Argument from Design and therefore the man's experience is based on a false premise. However, he fails to consider the actual language involved:

I will never forget the sinking feeling that overwhelmed me, because it became clear to me in that minute that some kind of God in some kind of fashion must exist, and have an ongoing relationship with the processes by which things come into being. That in short, the creator God was not some antediluvian myth, but something real. And, most reluctantly, I also saw at once that I must search to find out more about that God.<sup>38</sup>

4.63 The wasp and the orchid are not the first cause of the person's disturbance (as Dawkins assumes). Rather, these form the *agency* by which the person is stimulated to think about God. Although the wonder that the person feels is not clarified by the arguments concerning cumulative evolution, that person's being is profoundly stirred and the need for enquiry kindled. Dawkins's arguments against the validity of this experience cannot preclude the possibility that God may indeed act in this way to disturb individuals.

4.64 This example similarly helps us with Dawkins's argument against teleological principles being effective in nature. As an evolutionary biologist, Dawkins can show that there are as many evolutionary dead ends and extinctions as there are surviving species and flourishing phenotypes. He is especially helpful in showing how evolutionary stable societies (a theory developed by Maynard Smith above) develop genetically.

4.65 As Christians we hold that purpose does obtain in the created world in the sense that we believe in a kingdom theology which represents a cumulative process of corporate human interaction towards a different kind of



stable society, which will be realised eschatologically. Inevitably, we tend to stray from this ideal, although our own working, as Christians, is for conformity with God's intention as we understand it, such as the vision which is given to us in Isaiah 65:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.  
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating:  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight.  
I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;  
No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the cry of distress.  
No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime ...  
They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards  
and eat their fruit.  
They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and  
another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.  
They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord  
and their descendants as well.  
Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like  
the ox.

4.66 In this way, then, what biologists tell us about behaviour and genetic influence makes sense in terms of what we are trying to achieve through our own generations in accordance (we believe) with God's will.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting that Dawkins is very unhappy with 'Why?' questions and attempts to bypass these as irrelevant (this is a true test of reductionism). For him the world, as it is, is so intricate and extraordinary that it is almost sacrilegious (this word advisedly) to place it in a larger context.<sup>40</sup>

4.67 We can further see that, in the attempt to reduce religious belief to a marginal quirk, some life scientists then try to provide descriptions of all parts of life, even moral choices and religious understanding, in their own terms. Richard Dawkins has proposed that religion may be the result of a kind of mental virus ('memes') which infects successive generations, replicating itself purposelessly across generations. The Christian response to the idea of 'memes' includes the charge that it is not serious science and that it is merely elaborate argument to make all nature subscribe to the selfish gene theory.<sup>41</sup> To those searching for faith, the idea may come across that belief is merely an intellectual construct arising from inherited memes; the relationship of Christian encounter with a personal God is simply absent.

4.68 Dawkins also discusses altruistic behaviour in terms of gene strategy and shows interesting evidence for it, but others, such as Lyall Watson, extrapolating from Dawkins, are able to propose an 'anthropology of evil', as for example in *Dark Nature*,<sup>42</sup> in which Watson seeks to redefine good and evil in biological terms by drawing freely from other scientific disciplines. We therefore have to be critical of pseudoscience creeping in on the back of the scientific frame of reference (such as Darwinism) which makes sweeping statements aimed at excluding theology from those areas where people may find the Christian perspective most helpful.<sup>43</sup> Notions of repentance, conversion, forgiveness, judgement, mercy and the giving of peace are strongly operative in the gospel message and these must not be undermined by uncritical scientific views which suggest that we are driven to act solely by our genes.

4.69 This is related to the response we must make to those reductionist scientists, such as Francis Crick (who discovered the structure of DNA), in *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, who claims that human beings are no more than their neurological processes. What we pass on in the process of evangelisation is not a package of information *per se*, but a life-transforming experience which is taken over and made relevant in the context of another person's life. Persons who have almost no mind can therefore also witness to being touched by God in a meaningful and transformative way. To this extent, Christians know that conscious experience and experience of personality are additional to what is going on in the brain. For this reason, the mentally disabled and the terminally ill are still to be valued as human beings loved by God, and capable of contributing to the Christian community. Similarly,



there are traditions in the Christian Church which see it meaningful to include the dead in remembrance and prayer in a way which is thought to enrich the spiritual life of the living. In evolutionary biology, the dead have no purpose except in terms of the legacy of genes. In Christian understanding, the dying and the dead form part of the community of faith which generates hope in the kingdom and the *eschaton*.

4.70 Another telling example of how much further our Christian hope extends is given in this extract. An explorer from Oxford has a theological conversation with his indigenous guide:

'At Kapit, I reach the fifth grade. We taught to be Christian at school. The old men they think like that. They believe in the spirits. Me and Inghai, sometimes they think they right, sometimes we laugh at them. What about you, Redmon? Do you believe it?'

'No, I don't. But I don't believe in Christianity, either. I think that when we die, we rot. And that's the end of it.'

'Then I very sorryes for you,' said Leon, looking immeasurably sad, getting up and collecting his things. 'I tired, I sleep now.'<sup>44</sup>

4.71 In this story, Leon feels that Redmond is deeply lacking a part of his essential self, and regrets Redmond's reductionist view of his ultimate destiny. It is this basic understanding that we are more than the sum of our parts that makes sense of the Christian conviction that religious faith is more than the influence of 'memes'. In this sense, then, we are able to refute the reductionist view and seek to assert that the experience of the life scientists feeds into, rather than destroys, our view of the world.

4.72 There is one further problem which Christians must address, both from the point of view of reductionism and of modern technology. In the field of enquiry known as Strong AI (Artificial Intelligence), the study of the capabilities of computers, human beings are not an end point in evolution, but a means to the equipping of supercomputers. This kind of suggestion again moves away from the centrality of humans in the narrative of existence. In *The Dragons of Eden*,<sup>45</sup> the astronomer Carl Sagan suggests that computers are 'intended' to travel through space and colonise other planets, carrying our acquired wisdom and (if we insist on being anthropocentric), our genes

and memes. Again, this is a speculative inference from what we know about computers, but even the idea confronts the religious notion of a special and privileged relationship with a Creator God who created us in his image.

4.73 Further, a God who becomes a human being is missing the point if human beings are only an intermediate stage in cosmic history. This means that Christian apologetics must move beyond the argument for God as Mind, which may for many of those searching for faith be seen as unhelpful.<sup>46</sup> God's action in and among human beings is personal and involves not just mind but body as well. This is borne out through the Incarnation of the eternal Word as Jesus and only makes sense in the totality of what we are. Our theology of kingdom and resurrection is based on fulfilment of our human potential: 'yet in our flesh shall we see God'. Our creatureliness is therefore an integral part of this vision and not negotiable with Sagan's version of Strong AI.

4.74 If we separate out scientific knowledge and speculation we can say that as science continues to advance into unknown areas, it will not push God further and further back into the dark spaces, but reveal God as intricately bound up with all that is, has been and will be. If God guarantees the laws of physics, sustains the quarks and gluons, then God is present in singularities and black holes and in adenine, guanine, cytosine and thymine, the building blocks of DNA. Everything we explore and seek to know can become a potential agent of revelation, mediated to us through our explorations, if only we do not lose sight of the religious perspective that informs the world with meaning and hold on to our faith as providing a complementary and significant insight into the results of scientific enquiry.

## Technology and ethics

4.75 One further aspect of the relationship between science and religious faith raises an important challenge for the Christian Church. Because technology is so advanced and its mechanism so specialised that only those specially trained are likely to understand it, this means that many people may have to make decisions which are increasingly complex about how their lives are affected by technology. The area in which this becomes acute is that of medicine, where people may be baffled by the kinds of choices they have to make and need help in making (literally) life and death decisions. It