

## CAN MODERN SCIENCE BE THEOLOGICALLY SALVAGED? Reflections on Conor Cunningham's theological and metaphysical evaluation of modern evolutionary biology

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In *Postmodern Metaphysics* the Athenian philosopher Christos Yannaras points out that scientific knowledge is modernity's functional metaphysics and that modernity's metaphysical integrity—and this is not science itself—is intellectually moribund.<sup>1</sup> For within a frame of belief premised on the acceptance of an entirely immanent nature and on the nominalist subject's internally situated epistemological capacities, the modern knower can have no certain knowledge of objective reality. So the modern approach to truth—having turned its back on faith, participation, revelation, and certainty—redefines truth to mean, not a genuine knowledge of reality, but rather a probable and ever-revisable psycho-social construct which is only 'true' because it is instrumentally useful to us. We

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<sup>1</sup> See Christos Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics*, translated by Norman Russell, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2004, pp. 1 – 66.

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have replaced reality with the legal fiction of empirical objectivity, and we have replaced truth with the instrumental criteria of pragmatic utility. Further, modernity has replaced meaning—a notion not amenable to the terms of empirical objectivity—with the syntax of language and with the epiphenomenal subjective belief-secretions of culture.

Thus modernity's theoretical premises hold that truth and meaning are functions of power, use, and fiction. What truth *really* is, is instrumental power. What meanings *really* are, are imagined fictions that have some psycho-bio-social use when overlaid upon the meaningless objectivity of the world, understood in probabilistic, empirical terms. Being more medieval than we like to admit,<sup>2</sup> we still live by notions of truth that assume some real knowledge of reality and utilize notions of meaning and value that we hold to be 'more' than simply psycho-cultural, instrumental constructs. But such ways of speaking and living are out of step with what we modern people believe to be *really*—that is, scientifically—the case. But if modern scientific realism is *really* true then there can be no philosophical integrity in our generally accepted belief that science gives us a true and meaningful understanding of reality.

Leaving obvious self-defeating contradictions to one side, in broad sociological terms, meaning and truth have recognizable signatures for us modernists. 'Meaning' is merely subjective; it is culturally relative and it is *really* only political and psychological. Likewise, 'truth' is concerned only with the type of reductively instrumental and purely material keyhole view of 'reality' deemed to be 'objectively' scientific. So the fact that science 'works' and is broadly believed in is the only basis we have for saying anything is true. Thus pragmatic

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<sup>2</sup> See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, 1993, p 47: "...we have never really left the old ... matrix behind, and ... it could not have been otherwise." Latour is not advocating any anti-modern frame of belief here, but clearly the manner in which we actually live is necessarily in tensions with what Latour calls the critical constitution of modernity.

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'realism,' combined with shameless sophistic appeals to constructed values as situated within the naturalistic givenness of our psycho-biological desires, has now largely replaced any public discourse of real meaning and substantive goodness. This explains the apparently contradictory situation in which the irrealist marketing mantra of our scientific age, 'perception is reality,' has a largely unquestioned currency in our popular, political, and commercial environments.

Manipulative political agendas aside, to the broadly accepted belief norms of modernity all interpretations of meaning are judged in relation to an ostensibly neutral objectivity so that their truth validity (if they have any at all) is decided simply on the basis of how well they pass muster under a 'scientific' standard of 'truth.' However, the conceptual benchmark of this standard is far from philosophically objective. In fact, it is enormously philosophically loaded: all the terms of its materialistically reductionist methodology betray prior existential commitments and a set of assumed metaphysical, methodological, and epistemological assumptions. So whilst modernity as a philosophical and socio-cultural enterprise has given up on knowing truth, it is science that is taken as our only really true vision of reality, as metaphysics—what Yannaras calls pseudoscience<sup>3</sup>—which stands in judgement over what modernity treats as true and false.

This generates an interesting dynamic. Within modernity's self-defeating assumptions about truth and meaning, pseudo-scientists can proclaim whatever negative assertions they like about non-scientifically framed understandings of truth and meaning, and the sociological life-form in which we live will largely uphold their pronouncements as valid. Modernity is fully committed, functionally and sociologically, to its distinctive categories of meaning and truth,

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<sup>3</sup> Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics*, p7.

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even though philosophically it dispenses with meaning and truth. For it is simply the case that truth and meaning cannot be functionally dispensed with if we are to remain, in normal, daily life, recognizably human. So idols must be fashioned out of tangible and controllable materials to stand in for truth and meaning so that we have something graspable to orientate value, choice, identity, and meaning in our lives. This collective worship—as with all public cultus—legitimizes its way of life and upholds the continuity of its life-form over time. And it is the pseudo-scientists—those who speak in the name of science to tell us what the truth about reality is, what the real meaning of our lives is, and what our human values and cultural narratives really amount to—who are the priests of our secular, materialist public cultus.

Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*<sup>4</sup> provides us with a wonderful example of what Yannaras calls pseudoscience. For Dennett takes what modernity cannot say about truth and meaning and uses these negatives to make assertions that he claims debunk any claims to truth and meaning other than those our pragmatic and materialistically eudemonistic cultural norms simply assume to be valid. And indeed, it is Dennett's harmony with our culture's dominant sociological 'reality' norms which gives his reasoning and knowledge its credibility. For it is a simple task to point out where Dennett philosophically cuts off the branch he is sitting on. By his own commitment to a reductively material universe, Logos is not 'out there,' and thus all meanings are radical constructs, so why should a reductively scientific meaning be truer than any other meaning? There is nothing terribly hard about pointing out where his interpretation of the meaning of science is way outside the pale of what science actually shows us. If science only shows us the current state of scientific theory, provisionally interpreting the epistemologically problematic notion of objective facts, then that is no grounds to make any simply true assertion. And it is easy to

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous idea*, Penguin, London, 1996.

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point out the delusional silliness of his claims that science casts the mountains of religion, transcendence, intrinsic meaning, genuine value etc., into the sea of oblivion just because 'the existence of God' cannot be meaningfully contemplated within the reductive parameters of scientism. Say it however you like, but the assertion that there is no God is a first-order metaphysical assertion, not a second-order scientific assertion. Reducing reality to only having meaning within a reductively materialist metaphysical frame is a move that rests on an existential preference that entails the self-defeating implication that all existential preferences and metaphysical convictions must be equally meaningless. No, Dennett is not a serious philosopher. But what is difficult about trying to argue against a rhetorically able pseudo-scientist such as Dennett is that the habits and assumptions of our way of life agree with him; even though his stance is philosophically unjustified, it is existentially incoherent, philosophically self-defeating, and beyond the warrant of what can be reasonably claimed by the current state of modern scientific knowledge.

It is a genuinely courageous theologian who will take on pseudoscience, given its status as both the creedal and the praxiological orthodoxy of modernity. Conor Cunningham has scientifically, philosophically, and theologically taken on pseudoscience, and he has done this by bringing Nietzsche's little hammer to materialist modernity's most holy golden calf, its worship of *natura pura* via the cultus of an anti-metaphysical and basely instrumental reading of Darwin's theory of evolution.<sup>5</sup> Cunningham's claim is that, contra Dennett, Darwin's idea is not dangerous to Christian faith, but is actually fully compatible with Christian piety, the coming of God into real flesh and blood, and the dignity and God-breathed nature of all life.

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<sup>5</sup> Conor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea*, Eerdmans, MI, 2010

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Cunningham, having done a lot of homework in biochemistry and genetics, seems to me to do an able job of taking the rod of Darwinian theory out of the hands of pseudoscience, and then hitting pseudoscience over the head with the science it simply asserts as its exclusive weapon in the war of reason against religion. But as I do not have a scientific background, I will not focus on the scientific aspects of Cunningham's work. Of particular interest to this paper is the manner in which Cunningham points out science's inability to bear the metaphysical weight thrust upon it by pseudo-scientists like Dennett. For whilst pseudoscience certainly is powerfully corrosive of meaning and truth, what Dennett does not seem to realize is the extent to which pseudoscience corrodes the meaning and truth of modern science, and eats itself and all knowledge and meaning as well.

Indeed, as Dennett partially recognizes, a frightening philosophical disappearance is indeed happening to modernity.<sup>6</sup> We are being eaten, from the inside out, by the irrealist relativism and political pragmatism of the pseudoscientific truth assumptions of the late-modern way of life. On this point David C. Schindler's extraordinary attack on contemporary misology shows us that the challenges for reason and meaning that Plato sought to overcome in a rhetorically instrumental and morally relativistic context are just as alive for us today as they were in Athens over 2000 years ago.<sup>7</sup>

What is so chilling about films like *The Social Network* is that they probably are a reasonably fair reflection of the social logic of popular culture which is built on pseudoscience. This film—dramatically chronicling the birth of Facebook—depicts a meaning and truth corroded life-form that simply assumes the validity of modern 'realism.' This life-form is in natural alliance with the merely

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<sup>6</sup> Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, p 63.

<sup>7</sup> See David C. Schindler, *Plato's critique of Impure Reason*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 2008, pp 1–84.

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instrumental logic of big money and a so called 'realist' outlook on political and legal power. What we get is a relentlessly driven and amoral lifestyle of frenetic and sordid activity obsessed with the manipulation of images and illusions in order to feed merely animal ambitions and satiations. This is despair. This is indeed a deep corrosion of the very notion of humanity as a form of life which allows for any 'high' expression of what it means to be human.

Acid is really there in our life-form. This is why Cunningham goes to one of the key sources of this corrosiveness and seeks to give us the neutralizing universal alkaline of deeply thought through, philosophically powerful theology. His strategy is to extricate Darwinian evolution from pseudoscience and to rehabilitate Darwin within a Christian theological framework that is orthodox, rather than liberal or fundamentalist. He returns to orthodox Christian theology as a living and viable first philosophy and finds that science, viewed from this vantage, need suffer no longer under the metaphysical burden modernity placed upon it. Theology frees science to be to be itself again—and to be so simply and joyfully.

Cunningham is very good on the relationship between science and metaphysics. For meaning and truth cannot be other than conceptually prior to perception, syntax and use.<sup>8</sup> As prior, one must have faith in them rather than seek to prove them in derivative terms. This modern urge for the proof of what Aristotle calls "the primitives" is at the core of modernity's deep irrationality and

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<sup>8</sup> Syntax cannot account for meaning, though meaning requires syntax as its medium. Use cannot account for value, though values express themselves in goals that need practical means in order to achieve the good ends that values inspire. Truth and understanding cannot be derived from perception, though understanding is functionally dependent on perception. Thus whilst there is a two way process between the first order higher realities and their second order modes, mediums and functional pre-requisites, such that the lower does shape the higher and the higher is functionally dependent on the lower, there remains an irreducible distinction between the first order and the second order, as the first order cannot be derived from the second order.

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intellectual futility.<sup>9</sup> This modern refusal to ground reason in a living and grateful faith in meaning and truth is at the core of its hubristic folly and its hopelessly disintegrative approach to knowledge. The modern attempt to establish meaning and truth by philosophically secondary proofs was never going to work, and we must face up to this and look at our options. Yet one option that is not worth taking seriously is the rejection of meaning and truth themselves. This fundamentally irrational move is not an alternative to modernity but is simply the logical continuation of the modern project.

But what would really happen if we were to try to return to grounding science in first philosophy, return to the priority of ethics grounded in transcendence over instrumental power, return to theology as the highest and unifying queen of the sciences? Would this be a regressive negation of modern science and culture? Would this impose doctrinaire limits on the pursuit of objective truth? Would this send us into an intellectual dark age? Or, to phrase this question from the opposite pole, can we keep modern science if we are to recover orthodox Christian theology as the first philosophy framework for Western culture?

Cunningham's rhetoric insists that we can have the knowledge of modern science largely as it is. That is, Cunningham's stance seems to uphold the idea that we can separate out the pseudoscience—as a false metaphysics—from the simply factual knowledge of modern science, and re-insert that knowledge into a theologically framed metaphysical vision, which will then give that knowledge its proper meaning. For if we accept that knowledge is always secondary to meaning and truth, this does not make knowledge the blind slave of unreasoned faith, but rather it frees us to understand that the interpretation of science and

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, book 1, part 3, lines 5-7: "Now some think that because one must understand the primitives there is no understanding at all; others that there are demonstrations of everything. Neither of these views is either true or necessary."

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the use of technology must always be grounded in frames of belief that are not themselves scientific. Along these lines Cunningham refuses to marry Christian theology to any scientific theory—Darwinian evolution included—but equally he wants science to be free to go where its warrant leads it in relation to carefully tested, perception-dependent knowledge and mathematically defensible rational theory. Cunningham believes that there will always be fruitful ground for engagement between good theology and good science, but science is by its nature provisional, whilst theology—though its doctrines are always unfolding—is grounded in truths that transcend the notion of perpetual revision and continuous progress. So the stability of theology and the freedom of science live together in a happy synthesis in Cunningham’s vision. Thinking from within this frame, Cunningham does some powerful—yet always provisional—synthetic reasoning on Darwinian evolution and orthodox Christian doctrine.

Cunningham’s patristic, Christological framing of the Genesis cosmogony is full of deep and rich theological insights, and does allow for the intersection of orthodox Christian belief with an account of natural history that does *not* entail an archaic fall from an Edenic state of sinless, non-predatory, and deathless originary harmony. Thus nature, as modern science sees her, can now be harmonized with sophisticated orthodox theology. Augustine and Maximus the Confessor bear witness to this long and sophisticated trajectory within patristic Christian theology, and Aquinas takes up the trajectory of the unity of the two books of revelation—nature and Scripture—re-framed in a more scripturally dogmatic age than was the case in the late classical world. So Cunningham’s claim to continuity with the rich intellectual traditions of the church and of Western culture is unquestionably valid.<sup>10</sup> Even so, this Christian history also

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Ames’ beautifully argued chapter “Why would God use Evolution?” (in Jacques Arnould (ed.), *Darwin and Evolution: Interfaith Perspectives*, ATF Press, Adelaide, 2010, pp 105 – 128) is another example of how a scientific appreciation of evolution (Rev Canon Dr Ames

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contains a metaphysical and existential prioritization of theology over science that modern science does not accept. And as powerfully as Cunningham argues that such an arrangement is still necessary and possible, modern science is now so disengaged from that tradition, and so culturally and sociologically powerful compared with the Christian intellectual tradition, that I fear any Christian advocacy of a cosmological and epistemic harmony between science and theology can only end with theology's subjugation to terms its claims for metaphysical and existential priority over *scientia* cannot accept.

As impressed with Cunningham's work as I am, there are two very difficult problems I see for the synoptic overlaying of the visions of modern Darwinian science and orthodox Christian theology which Cunningham has fashioned. Firstly, there is the problem that modernity will in no manner accept the prioritization of theology over science. Secondly, I am concerned that by de-temporalizing the biblical narrative structure and situating orthodox Christian belief within the framework of modern 'natural history,' Cunningham appears to be attempting to fuse cosmological horizons that entail enormous imaginative dissonance.

We could well read Cunningham's text as signalling a new type of harmony between carefully de-metaphysicalized natural science and sophisticated Christological theology in a way that bears some resemblance to Stephen Jay Gould's notions of non-overlapping magisteria, but with a crucial inversion.<sup>11</sup>

To Gould, science and religion are two completely different orders of human endeavour. Science is about facts and truth, and it has a method premised on empirical testing and continuous theoretical revision in the light of empirical

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has PhDs in both Physics and Theology) can find deep synergies with the high traditions of Western theology.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria", Natural History 106 (March 1997): 16–22.

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knowledge. Values and meanings derived from religious belief, however, are—like all values and meanings—cultural constructs; whilst they are very important for what it means to be human, they are not matters of verifiable truth (i.e., they are not, in scientific terms, true). For Gould, what is true *is* scientific, so what is religious and moral can only be true to the extent that it does not conflict with what is scientifically true. In practise, this means that any non-naturalistically framed belief, practise, or experience is not true, and not, in its own terms, real—even if it is meaningful and important to those who choose to believe in notions like intrinsic value, cosmic meaning, revelation, and miracles, and even if such human beliefs and cultural practises of life are somehow of deep significance for our humanity. In relation to truth, and thus to reality and metaphysical belief, there is a clear priority of science over all other conceptions of truth. Gould is a sophisticated and apparently conciliatory advocate of the metaphysical self-sufficiency and primacy of science over religion in all matters of truth, just as much as Dennett is a crude and pugilistic advocate of the metaphysical self-sufficiency and primacy of scientific truth over the delusions of religious belief.

If we are to talk of non-overlapping magisteria in the terms that Cunningham might offer, then the metaphysical priority of truth must shift from science to theology. Here, only those things that are of primary meaning and which concern realities that transcend the 'merely' immanent can be true (which is not to say that any belief concerning religion and transcendence cannot be false) and all things that concern the natural sciences are provisional and useful bodies of knowledge, constructed in their own epistemic terms, but always of relative value to those things which alone could contact genuine reality—the categories of analogically understood transcendence and real value. For where first philosophy comes before science, then the important questions of truth and value must not be determined by science, but rather the use and meaning of science must be

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determined by theology—that is, by a divinely revealed, analogically framed apprehension of real reality.

Put like this, it becomes inescapably clear that we would not be talking about ‘science’ as understood within modernity if we were to reframe Gould’s conception of the relationship between science and theology in the terms that Cunningham implies. For what modernity finds so useful about prioritizing science over theology in matters of truth is that this supposedly belief-neutral criteria grants a more or less universal, testable, rational, and objective acceptance of what counts as public truth. Formed by this approach to truth, modernity is now unable to use theology as a culturally unifying frame of acceptable public belief. It is entirely conceptually valid to claim that theology, or some genuinely metaphysical frame of belief, needs to be our first philosophy (rather than science), but our culture’s commitment to liberalism in relation to religious beliefs—the privatisation of religious belief itself—means that practically, it is only meaningless and merely instrumental ‘facts’ that we now *can* collectively believe in as publically true.

The end result of this is that if we were to seriously attempt to recover orthodox Christian theology as first philosophy, the deeply culturally ingrained ideology of modern liberalism—in our attitudes to religious beliefs, practises, ‘personal’ moral values, and ‘private’ metaphysical, existential, and cosmological commitments—would simply reject this stance. Science is never just science to us moderns, but it is the integral public discourse of modern liberalism. Modern liberalism says that science is one thing—just about value neutral facts—and each person, be they religious or not, interprets the meaning of their own subjective experiences and decides what values they will embrace entirely on the grounds of their own freedom of conscience. But Cunningham’s commitment to the prioritization of first philosophy over science—the stance that knowledge must always be made meaningful by its relation to prior metaphysical commitments—

cannot accept modern liberalism and can only be fundamentally rejected by modern liberalism.<sup>12</sup> Hence—socio-culturally—Cunningham's stance can only be rejected by modern science, for it is the assumed value neutral truth foundation of modern liberalism.

And there is another problem for any attempted synthetic reading of Darwinian evolution and Christian doctrine, even if one accepts the prioritization of first philosophy over science. Entirely de-temporalizing the cosmological and teleological horizons of the biblical narrative does profound damage to the biblical narrative, for that narrative is inescapably temporally constructed. History is the texture of Judeo-Christian revelation, even if history is certainly not understood in modern historiographical terms.<sup>13</sup> That is, whilst the Christocentric nature of a Christian understanding of the Hebrew scriptures (and, of course, the New Testament) is basic to the Christian faith—and Augustine and Maximus are entirely orthodox in bringing out the trans-temporal and ontologically pre-temporal significance of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ—trans-/pre-temporal Christocentrism is one thing, but Cunningham overstates his case by entirely de-temporalizing biblical cosmogony and eschatology in order to make orthodox faith compatible with Darwinian natural history.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, Eerdmans, 2008; see Daniel M. Bell Jr., *Liberation Theology after the End of History*, Routledge, London, 2001. These texts provide us with a deep analysis of modern political and economic liberalism showing clearly the deep structural commitment our liberalism has against any public vision of transcendence, real value and qualitative reality, including an ostensible rejection of metaphysics itself. These texts also argue that modern liberalism is not freedom but rather a profound and all-encompassing bondage to the instrumental and pragmatic nihilism which governs the modern Western life-form with an iron fist, and which disciplines and forms our desires at every turn.

<sup>13</sup> For a very sensitive appreciation of the place of the distinctively Christian understanding of history within the very texture of biblical revelation see Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic*, Wipf and Stock, OR, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Conor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea*, Eerdmans, MI, 2010, p 379. "... for theology, protology leads to eschatology. So, for example, according to the Church Fathers, Adam was

The assumption of a real fall of nature, a fundamental alteration its very structure, from an Edenic state of paradise which is in some manner temporally prior to the human history of civilisations, is very strong in the church fathers. After all, the church fathers had no pressing modern naturalistic need to think that sin, death, and disease were simply and always natural.<sup>15</sup> On the patristic

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Christ and Eve was Mary, while paradise is the church and the Fall signals humankind's redemption in Christ." What Cunningham is describing here is protology replacing eschatology and cosmogony, not leading to it. This stance does not fairly reflect the manner in which multiple interpretive layers co-exist in the patristic reading of scripture. Whilst scepticism about even trying to know 'what really happened' in primeval times is often put forward by patristic theologians, typically the fathers of the church *do* believe in a real fall prior to civilizational history, and this belief does situate their cosmological and soteriological outlooks (see St Basil The Great, *On The Human Condition*, SVS Press, NY, 2005, pp. 74–80). Christocentric protology undergirds and overshadows everything for the early church fathers, but it does not obliterate that which stands within it. That is, the early church fathers, as Christocentric as their interpretive lens really is, typically maintain a profound respect for what we would now call a decidedly pre-modern, pre-scientific belief in some actual historical reality underlying the cosmogenic myths in Genesis. This at the same time that they maintain profound Christocentric meaning is at the core of cosmology, and at the same time as they understand how to read myth as truer than that which can be located in terms of the merely 'factual'. On patristic hermeneutics see Henri De Lubac's magisterial work on the scriptural hermeneutics of Origen in De Lubac's *History and Spirit*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2007. On patristic readings of Genesis, see Andrew Louth (ed.) *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Genesis I – II*, IVP, Ill, 2001. See also Augustine, *On Genesis*, New City Press, NY, 2002. And it is also the case that there is no one patristic outlook regarding the relationship between the biblical revelation (primarily concerning the Hebrew Scriptures) and Greek philosophy and science. Christopher Kaiser brings this out well in his *Creation and the History of Science*, Marshall Pickering, London, 1991, pp 1- 52. That is, whilst some of the Fathers were very keen to situate an understanding of cosmogony in ways that aligned with Greek science, Tertullian's complex rejection of the compatibility of Christian belief and Greek knowledge is no mere absurdist fundamentalism and is well represented amongst the church fathers. Negotiating a relationship between Athens and Jerusalem involves upholding the "absurdity" and "foolishness" of Christian doctrines in the light of sophisticated Greek knowledge and philosophy, as per Tertullian, as much as it involves Origen's "plundering the treasures of Egypt". See Eric Osborn's very helpful text *Tertullian*, Cambridge University Press, 1997. Tertullian had more to do with reason than a few contextless quotes about his opposition to Athens would have us believe. Likewise, Origen had more to do with faith than his just reputation as an outstanding Greek intellect might have us assume. On Origen's opposition to Greek philosophy, see Mark Edwards, *Origen Against Plato*, Ashgate, England, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Father Thomas Hopko from St Vladimir's Seminary in New York, in full harmony with patristic teaching, puts it succinctly like this: "Death is not natural." (October 1999, St George's Orthodox Church, Brisbane, Australia. Transcript here: <http://www.orthodoxchristian.info/pages/afterdeath.htm> .) This is a statement that can

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outlook, the tragic features of fallen reality are inherently abnormal, even though the fallen order of nature is now characterised by them, and even though death is the means to life in the Christian faith. Classic Christological patristic readings of Genesis typically do *not* assert disbelief in a real, pre-fallen state of innocence. Further, I do not know that the historically situated salvation narrative of a Christian reading of the Hebrew scriptures can really do without a primordial entrance of sin, death, and the devil into the originally good order of nature, which the cosmic Christ comes into time to deliver us from. Certainly Christ's particular temporal coming is also a trans-temporal reality, for the Lamb of God was slain from before the foundation of the world, but the texture of history cannot be extracted from the Christian revelation, and that history has an Edenic age just as it has an eschatological age, and those alpha and omega ages are ages located within Christ, yes, but they are ages of a *different* yet real nature to the present and somehow less than fully real nature.

I rejoice in Cunningham's Christological reading of creation, fall, and redemption, yet I do not see that this should entail dispensing with the idea that there is something now radically wrong with nature which is contrary to an original harmony of creation deemed very good by God. I cannot see that Christianity can do without the belief that the whole of nature still needs radical redemption. I find I cannot dispense with the Pauline notion that the whole of creation was subjected to futility by sin and is in travail waiting for its full redemption, and the church is the sacrament and foretaste of this radical eschaton in which all of material reality is to be caught up. Yet the idea central

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make no sense to modern scientific naturalism. Note also Gustav Aulen's classic text *Christus Victor*, Macmillan, NY, 1958. In the primary atonement vision of early church the triumph of Christ over the very real but not divinely ordained fundamental enemies of humanity – sin, death and the devil – very much in harmony with Dante's understanding of the great intervention of Christ to liberate us (and ultimately all nature) from the segue of demonic power, and equally Milton's penetrating vision of the drama of salvation history, is not some aberrant unsophisticated neo-atheistic sub-theological outlook as Cunningham seems to imply, but is simply orthodox.

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to modern scientific natural history is that things have always been the way they now are, from the lifeless and meaningless beginning of time so many billions of years ago, and will always be this way until the equally lifeless and meaningless end of time, so many billions of years hence. Modern naturalism recognizes only one age, only one nature. Life is a strange and transitory visitor in such a picture of reality. Without some sort of true meaning to Eden, the radicality of goodness in creation, which persists but is marred by sin, death, scarcity, and disease, is lost, and the radical eschatological horizon of total redemptive hope for nature is also lost.

If we are to hold onto any real notion of Eden we cannot simply accept the one age, one nature view basic to modern naturalism. But any real notion of Eden cannot be understood in scientific terms; there can be no recourse to Creation Science here. For the logic of fundamentally different orders of nature which are at the alpha and the omega of the biblical narrative makes any prelapsarian order of nature as inaccessible to the knowledge categories of the present natural order as is the post-eschaton natural order. This logic of different natural orders is, for all intents and purposes, the same as the logic of alternative universes.<sup>16</sup> Hence myth and irreducibly symbolic imagery are the only revealed

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<sup>16</sup> Perhaps there is an entirely magical solution to the dissonance between what modern natural science reveals to us and what the Edenic mythos reveals to us. Perhaps there really are multiple universes, as speculative physics is prepared to contemplate. Imaginatively, this is a very satisfying speculation. C.S. Lewis plays with this idea of multiple universes, and of the transposition not simply out of one age into another, but out of one entire nature into another. And this imaginative stance seems to be consistent with the non-returnable expulsion from Eden and with the notion of a new heaven and a new earth in the apocalypse. In the *Last Battle*, Lewis locates entirely separate natures within the one primary order of true reality – Aslan’s country – and relativises vast tracts of time in giving them over to the awakened powers of natural gods in the times outside of the central creative purposes of God. It is clear that the Inklings take these sort of imaginative speculations very seriously, and whilst they cannot possibly be scientific in nature, they may well be truer than what science within our nature could tell us, if the intuition behind this speculation is well placed. All Charles William’s novels, take *Many Dimensions* and *Place of the Lion* for example, play with the notion that different orders of reality, entirely different natures which are ‘normally’

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access we have to both of those ages (or different universes). So it cannot be avoided that any commitment to Eden and to different natural orders is going to be a stumbling block to the one age/nature assumption of natural history, which is simply presupposed by modern science. Equally, any reduction of Christian doctrine in order to fit a one age/nature understanding of natural history is going to render the cosmogenic, cosmological, and teleological tropes of Christian belief's sacred narrative as having no actually true redemptive meaning for us who seek to inhabit this poignantly beautiful veil of tears in hope.

Johann Hamann makes a powerful case for the wisdom of God's folly and the indispensable nature of the prescientific, pre-Enlightenment tissue of biblical revelation, which will certainly not fit the prejudices and respectable wisdom of our times.<sup>17</sup> Against Kant, and against all attempts to redefine revelation so as to make it amenable to what our learned sages call valid phenomenological knowledge, I am inclined to go with Hamann and stick with what Paul calls the folly of God, as given to us in the very non-modern terms of the scriptures.

For in the final analysis, there is a profound imaginative dissonance between a reality outlook embedded in a three age canonical narrative of salvation history and modern naturalism, particularly in relation to cosmogony. And whilst Cunningham's amazing and very important text has many wonderful assets, I do not think it does justice to this profound imaginative dissonance.

The prehistoric, imaginative landscape depicted in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, as set to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, is profoundly dissonant in relation to, say, the

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discontinuous with one another, actually overlay one another and are in fact interactive at a level beyond the functional warrants of each order taken on its own terms.

<sup>17</sup> See John Betz, *After Enlightenment*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2009, for a very fine book on Hamann and his approach to scripture and Enlightenment conceptions of reason. Ronald Smith's beautiful introduction and anthology of Hamann extracts, particularly his section on biblical reflections which spends considerable time in Genesis 1 – 4, is a good door into Hamann's work in this area too. See Ronald G Smith, *J.G. Hamann 1730 – 1788*, Harper, NY, 1960, pp 117 – 138.

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creation of Narnia as depicted in C. S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew*. This imaginative dissonance is situated within competing primary mytho-poetic visions of reality.

The *Origin of Species* is clearly the raw material out of which the imaginative primal, mytho-poetic narrative of *Fantasia* is fashioned. But the *Origin of Species* does not arise from nowhere. The cultural landscape in which Darwin's 19<sup>th</sup> century agnostic naturalism is embedded is the amoral political realism, competitive free market thinking, and imperial notions of power and progress of his era. This contextual texture is by no means absent from Darwin's work. Indeed, the assumed brutal 'realism' of Darwin's milieu throws any Christian piety that his idea might entail into serious jeopardy.<sup>18</sup> There is a competitive and survivalistic outlook on the structure of natural reality in the *Origin of Species* which is profoundly non-Christian. I find Marduk's ancient cosmogony of primal violence to be very at home in *The Origin of Species*, whereas Augustine's mythos of originary harmony is, at best, a kind of invisible hand guiding the processes of violence and survival towards the apparently valuable ascent of man. In contrast, the original harmony of the Garden of Eden is clearly the primary myth behind the imaginative depictions of *The Magician's Nephew*, the *Voyage to Venus*, and the medieval outlook on reality which C.S. Lewis so loved and respected.

Now I take it as given that there is no meaning and no thinking without primary myths. As such, I would place them amongst what Aristotle calls "the primitives," so there is no point in trying to derive or refute them from secondary things, such as science. But any science—any knowledge of nature—will view and

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<sup>18</sup> And, of course, Darwin's theory is not unconnected with Social Darwinism, eugenics and some horrifying racial extermination programs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moltmann, with his profound sensitivity to the legacy of Hitler is not afraid to remind us that the underlying political and bio-medical logic of Social Darwinism is still deeply a part of the modern outlook on reality. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness Arise!*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2010, pp. 209 – 223.

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understand reality through the lens of one primary myth or another, or it may view reality incoherently through a range of incompatible primary myth lenses.

Secular modernity after Darwin feels a deep mythic empathy with one age 'primitivism,' a cosmology of naturalistic, violent contest and the primary governing principles of Death, Sex and Power. Look at Picasso, Freud, Stravinsky, look at Facebook. Darwin plays no small role in the broad intellectual acceptance of this mythology. On that front, Dennett is right. Although Cunningham has fashioned a sophisticated means whereby orthodox Christology can be understood as compatible with the contemporary life sciences and their evolutionary underpinnings, my question is whether, in mytho-poetic and cosmogenic terms, it is really possible to forge an alliance between such totally incompatible views of reality.

In the 1880s John Henry Newman noted that it was becoming increasingly hard to communicate with people whose cultural imaginations were then largely unschooled by Christian faith, and whose way of life was increasingly opposed to the imaginative landscape in which the Christian faith is set.<sup>19</sup> Newman was no opponent of Darwin, so this comment is best understood as a reflection on the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in general. But his comment was undoubtedly correct. The imaginative landscapes of cosmogonies are very culturally powerful, and we

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<sup>19</sup> John Henry Newman: "It is not reason that is against us, but imagination... The ways in which we 'see' the world, its story and its destiny; the ways in which we 'see' what human beings are, and what they're for, and how they are related to each other and the world around them; these things are shaped and structured by the stories that we tell, the cities we inhabit, the buildings in which we live, and work, and play; by how we handle – through drama, art and song – the things that give us pain and bring us joy. What does the world look like? What do we look like? What does God look like? It is not easy to think Christian thoughts in a culture whose imagination, whose ways of 'seeing' the world and everything there is to see, are increasingly unschooled by Christianity and, to a considerable and deepening extent, quite hostile to it." From *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*. Vol. XXX: A Cardinal's Apostolate, Oct., 1881 to Dec., 1884, p. 159. As quoted and cited on Peter Orchard's blog at this address: <http://www.besideourselves.com/2011/04/after-discussing-mythological-method-i.html>

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should think very carefully before we concede truth to the assumptions of a modern, naturalistic cosmogeny.

Rowan Williams, in a recent series of lectures on Narnia, understands Lewis' enterprise as the attempt to recover the freshness and vitality of Christian doctrine in a post-Christian culture via the use of imagination.<sup>20</sup> Reopening the richness of the underlying mythos of Christian doctrine via the tools appropriate to that task—imagination and narrative—can awaken us to the truth about what it means to be human, where life comes from, and what life is all about, in a manner more primary than science. If we can but grasp the deep truth in Aslan singing the magical world of Narnia into being in a wonder of love, if we can but grasp the harmonic plurality, the joyous anarchic freedom, the endless variation in creativity of the originary splendour undergirding creation, then we will understand reality in a way compatible with the underlying mythos of the Christian faith. Whatever Eden was, it cannot be *less* than the myth we have. Jacques Ellul, too—no fundamentalist by any measure—sees that in all our modern scientific sophistication, we cannot better the Genesis myth, and we do it a terrible injustice if we seek to interpret it in a manner compatible with modern science.<sup>21</sup>

Cunningham's text does indeed expose pseudoscience as facile and its interpretation of the meaning of modern science as highly problematic. Cunningham does indeed offer a very sophisticated way of making orthodox Christology prior to science and finding bridges between the knowledge of the

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<sup>20</sup> Podcasts of these lectures can be accessed at Ben Myer's blog, at this address: <http://faith-theology.blogspot.com/2011/04/rowan-williams-three-lectures-on-narnia.html>

<sup>21</sup> See the chapters 8 ("Technique and the opening chapters of Genesis") and 9 ("The relationship between Man and Creation in the Bible") by Jacques Ellul in C. Mitcham & J. Grote (eds.) *Theology and Technology*, University of America Press, 1984. These remarkable treatments of paradise and fall fully recognize the difficulty faced by the modern scientific consciousness in relation to the biblical texts, and yet Ellul draws deep truths from the text by taking it seriously without resolving the problem of the modern scientific gaze.

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modern life sciences and orthodox Christology. Cunningham's theology acts as a much needed universal alkaline to the universal acid of Dennett's pseudoscience. In the end, however, I am not persuaded that modern science—as beholden to the cosmological and teleological assumptions of Darwinian naturalism—*can* be incorporated into a Christian metaphysical framework. I suspect that modern science is too deeply embedded in a 'one age' imaginative mythos of originary contest and nihilistic materialism to contain insights compatible with the truths of Christianity. Sociologically, modern science's cosmogenic speculations, cosmological assumptions, and teleological nihilism, are foundational to modern liberalism and modern secular reason. For these reasons I do not think modern science, as inextricably enmeshed with modernity as it is, can be accepted if one believes that Christ is the alpha and the omega of all that is, and if one is to think about nature and reality in the light of divine knowledge which is given (and hence nothing we own, possess, or stand over) to us by the grace of God.

Faith has a different stance than does anthropocentric, autonomous knowledge, a different relation to what is unknown, what will always remain beyond the mastery of human knowledge, than does 'science.'<sup>22</sup> And the knowledge of love and trust in the service of faith is of a fundamentally different ken than knowledge as an objective power over nature and as an assertion of independence from God. A Christian understanding of knowledge and nature is thus going to be different to a modern naturalistic secular understanding of knowledge and nature. Thus, in relation to science and theology, I think we would be wise, after John Milbank's fashion, not to surrender anything in our faith—certainly not our cosmogony and eschatology—to the gaze of methodological atheism.<sup>23</sup> If that means standing at a distance from the

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<sup>22</sup> See Wendell Berry's very important text *Life is a Miracle*, Counterpoint, CA, 2001 on science's inability to deal with what we do not know and never will know.

<sup>23</sup> See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Blackwell, Oxford, 2006.

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cosmology and teleology implicit in a Darwinian understanding of natural history, and even from the scientific truths which the epistemic framework of naturalistic modern science itself presents, then I think we must be prepared to look foolish in the eyes of the wisdom of our time. I think we have a problem with the operational scope and methodological assumptions of modern science itself, and with the implicit *natura pura* frame of interpretation which cannot be simply extracted from modern science<sup>24</sup>—and in the final analysis, I do not think *modern* science can be theologically salvaged.

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<sup>24</sup> See Louise Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, Yale University Press, 1993 and Goetz & Taliaferro, *Naturalism*, Eerdmans, MI, 2008. The notion that there is a discrete nature and a discrete super-nature, and functionally only a ‘pure’ nature without any participation in a transcendent dimension prior to and beyond the directly tangible, is the functional foundation of modern science. Modern science works within this anti-metaphysical cosmology. This cannot be squared with any orthodox doctrine of creation. The science that is produced from within the operational framework of *natura pura*, then, should not be expected to align with Christian faith regarding the nature of nature, the meaning of human life, and the alpha of primeval goodness and the omega of redemptive glory which is the origin and teleology of creation as understood by the Christian faith.