

“Can we believe in.....?”

Taking a punt on Creation

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A sermon delivered in Trinity Chapel, Sunday 10 October 2010

To paraphrase Dr Johnson: “A scientist’s preaching is like a dog’s walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all”. Of course, Dr Johnson’s reference was to “A woman’s preaching”. Were there much more time then it would be my solemn duty to explore this massive example of deepest political incorrectness, and No! No! I’ll hear nothing in Dr Johnson’s defence – a great, a good man, who took the threat of damnation with deadly seriousness? There can be no excuse: we all know that to offend the canons of the age is to bring swift and just retribution on our heads.

But one can be sure that just as Dr Johnson would have been un-nerved to hear a woman proclaim the gospel from the pulpit of his church of Clement St Danes, so there must be a similar unease if today’s surrogate is a scientist. Yet here I stand. But hang on; aren’t we the chaps who have disproved the existence of God? Commanders of invincible logic, and Masters of facts far beyond the ken of Dr Johnson. Listen as our well-shod feet crunch across the shards of the greatest illusion of them all. And to pursue the metaphor, should I stumble across a piece of stained-glass encapsulating some little bit of nonsense – let’s say a man subjected to the supreme Roman penalty – then a careless turn of the heel will serve as obliteration. But presumably if I subscribe to this violent and destructive view I would be in a better position on the soap-box outside – or more likely the welcoming embrace of any television studio of my choice. But still, a scientist, a chapel, strange company. But who holds a monopoly in illusions?

Perhaps my atheist colleagues, whose reiterated certainties I have to observe are beginning to sound just a little shrill, are themselves victims of a yet more massive delusion? Consider. Here we are assembled in a chapel. But even what I grip, this lectern, can hardly be said to exist. It is a common-place that at the quantum scale this wood that grew in sunlight centuries ago has no such identity. Solid enough to me, can even burn it, but look ever finer and all we “see” are fluctuating packets of energy. How this entirely counter-intuitive quantum world actually collapses into what we perceive as reality is effectively

enigmatic. Indeed it is by no means ridiculous to suppose that this Chapel – of the Holy and Undivided Trinity – only exists because we observe it. As absurd, of course, as a box housing a cat that is neither dead nor alive. But consider what Nicolas Gisin¹ writes in a recent issue of *Science* on the wholly peculiar phenomenon of quantum entanglement. Concluding his absorbing essay on what physicists call quantum non-locality – what Einstein labelled “Spooky action at a distance” – Gisin wrote “No story in space-time can tell us how nonlocal correlations happen: hence, nonlocal quantum correlations seem to emerge, *somehow*, from outside space-time”². I have no intention of hanging any theological washing on this quantum clothes-line. Rather it is simply to register a tremor of suspicion that the world about us might be, well, rather strange?

But there’s worse to come. To be sure with the obvious exception of God, who might take a somewhat different view, so far as we know we are the only beings in the Universe to even dimly understand quantum processes, even though we harness them in increasingly diverse ways. But so far as can tell when it comes to life then quantum processes hardly seem to impinge. The stupendously complex mechanisms of photosynthesis may be one exception, and of course Roger Penrose has speculated that somehow the solution to consciousness might lie in the quantum world. But consider what it is to sense the world. Eyes see a red sunset. Ears hear the Good Friday music of *Parsifal*. Tongues – if they are very lucky – taste the 1947 Chateau Pétrus. But of course none of this is true. Photons have wavelength, but no colour. Sound is compression of gas, not music. Aromatic molecules in alcohol are not taste. Sipping the Pétrus as the sun sinks below the horizon and Wagner’s music tugs at our soul are all qualia. So not to worry. Our nervous systems are superb at sensory detection, but the qualia are simply fictions, little tricks of the neurons.

These speculations, revolving around the nature of the quantum world and whether sight, sound and taste actually exist, are so far removed from every-day experience that we might as well shrug our shoulders and refill the glass. But that is something scientists are never allowed to do – and neither are theologians. Both insist we must have a warrant for truth. And here perhaps they might have something to say to each other. Indeed for just once the scientists might do better to listen. I suggest that as we consider the imponderables of quantum non-locality and who knows how many buried dimensions that knit the sinews of the Universe together, and equally when we ponder the enduring mystery of

consciousness and the nature of qualia – more Pétrus? – then we engage in a wager that Blaise Pascal might have appreciated.

The fact – brutal, distressing or alienating as you prefer – is that much – or more likely nearly all – of the world remains utterly beyond our comprehension. We certainly can't blame Mother Nature. Our Pleistocene brains have done remarkably well – hunting mastodons to the Large Hadron Collider in the blink of an eye surely deserves *some* notice – but is it not reasonable to assume that even *we* have neurological limits? Well so we should, until we remember that we are engaged in a wager that insists we are embedded in neither a virtual world nor in a Manichean nightmare. On the contrary we dwell in a genuine and freely given Creation.

So will you clasp hands on this bet? Others, I fear, will hold back, not least when I insist that as we weigh the odds the Christian perspective has a great deal going for it. Nevertheless it remains a wager, one set against any number of existentialist absurdities that in their various twisted ways implore us to believe that we live in a world of shadows and illusions, devoid of meanings and purposes. Mind you, it is also a fair wager, only you have to decide – yes, free-will exists – and it is difficult to think of a wager with more momentous consequences. Yet before we put our shirt – and perhaps our life – on the Table I must remind you that as with Pascal's wager your choice will need to be considerably more subtle than the cliché that one should adopt my view-point on the “just-in-case principle”. Only the trousered ape would see it as a choice between annihilation and catching the number 5 bus for eternity. No, the choice is whether to trust our hunches and accept God's invitation to explore reality in all its depths or to abandon ourselves to existentialist despair, where all is ultimately an illusion, suspended in a coruscation of quantum fields of which the human is one piece of flotsam whose vaunted rationality is a veneer to keep at bay the mad-house.

But science, be it quantum physics or neurobiology, drives us relentlessly to a world where ultimately all are fictions or at least to a world without foundations. If Dr Johnson were here he would, of course, have exploded. Recall the famous episode where after church he and Boswell “stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the Universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to

refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it – “I refute it *thus*” “.

Good old Johnson, but Johnson’s world is no longer our world. Not only do we doubt, but we doubt ever more corrosively. But remember I have offered you a wager. So where lies my warrant for trust in the nature of Creation? Why, where better to turn than the opening book of *Genesis*? A collective groan. Another exercise in concordism? Perhaps your preacher is a closet young-earthier? No, the genius of this narrative lies in an entirely different direction. First, whilst it is an almost universal Christian view that the Universe is created out of nothing – *creatio ex nihilo* – it is far from obvious that this can be inferred from *Genesis*. Nor should this concern us for at least two reasons. To begin with: It is, at least, as important that God sustains the Universe. Whatever the strengths of *creatio ex nihilo* (and I believe they are many³), there is a constant but misguided temptation to conflate God’s action with historical events, most obviously the Big Bang. If evidence emerges for a “world” before the Big Bang that would in no way render God redundant. Next, and as John Walton⁴ forcibly reminds us, whatever Genesis 1 is, it is not and never was a scientific document. Rather as he compellingly argues the materiality of Creation was of no interest to the Jewish writers; what concerned them was the functionality of the Universe. As he writes: “If we desire to see the greatest work of the Creator, it is not to be found in the materials that he brought together---it is that he brought them together in such a way that they work.....functions are far more important than materials”⁵. And note too the emergence of man is not some after-thought, but the introduction of the central agent: God’s gift, our responsibility.

And it is the astounding metaphysical framework of *Genesis* that provides our confidence in the wager. Far from our being arbitrary puppets, accidents of evolution, in reality not only are we meant to be here, but by Grace we are endowed with a rationality. This not only allows us to plumb the Universe but contrary to the misgivings of a deracinated ape burdened with a Pleistocene brain, in fact we are offered not only a beautiful universe but one in which infinite exploration is not a possibility, but a command. It reveals a Universe that is not only remarkably self-ordered, to the extent that matter can think, but it is also one of quite ludicrous fecundity. I suggest that it is no coincidence that as our Western societies, and fear not the contagion is spreading, sink past scepticism to nihilism, so too a direct corollary is to see the world only as one be-devilled (so to speak) by ever-

growing shortages. Oil will “run-out” to be sure, but our very reliance has proved not only politically catastrophic but blinds us to the fact the world effortlessly re-news itself. And such, of course, is consistent with Jesus turning water into wine and feeding thousands from a picnic. Not myths but what happens when the Creator makes a surprise visit.

But Christians offer another wager. Not one that led to Dr Johnson kicking his large stone, but one that paradoxically transcends any current understanding of reality. As Ronald Blythe⁶ reminds us, Christians are the people whose “language and music escapes from an interior where the living worship, to an exterior where the dead dance”⁷. And at least here we can agree with our materialist friends; the Universe is indeed doomed. But not in some stupidly remote heat-death or ever-expanding vacuum, but as David Wilkinson⁸ insists in a eschaton. This will be the final refutation of the Universe’s supposed futility.

In his fine book Frank Morison⁹ famously asked “*Who moved the stone?*”. If you fancy taking a punt on the reality of Creation, trust to your resurrection.

1. See his article in *Science* 326, 1357-1358 (2009).
2. Gisin (2009), p. 1358 (my emphasis).
3. See my chapter (pp, 176-191) in *Creation and the God of Abraham* (eds, D. B. Burrell *et al.*) (CUP; 2010).
4. See his *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (IVP Academic; 2009).
5. Walton (2009), p. 59.
6. See his *Divine Landscapes* (Viking; 1986).
7. Blyth (1986), p. 228.
8. See his *Christian Eschatology and Physical Universe* (T & T Clark; 2010).
9. Published by Faber and Faber.

My thanks to Owen Gingerich (Harvard) for drawing my attention to John Walton’s book, and of course the Master and Fellows of Trinity College for their hospitality.

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