

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

These, in the words of a French poet, and much else that is worthy to be loved and prized, have come to us from Henry Suso, the old "Minne-singer of Eternal Love and Wisdom," and "the particular Friend of God."

WILLIAM COWAN.



ART. V.—THE NEW CREATION.¹

"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature."—2 Cor. v. 17.

"CREATURE"—"Creation": what a wide and deep meaning have these two cognate words! To know their meaning fully would be to come to the end of all scientific inquiry. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," but the formless matter existed before this globe took form and shape.

"By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear," says the inspired writer. The development of the visible universe from the invisible is one of the grandest ideas of modern science.

The forming or shaping of the worlds, the evolution of their beautiful order out of *χάος*, takes us back to the "Beginning [in which] God created the heavens and the earth;" but this statement has no meaning, unless there was something for the formative, the creative, will to act upon. Try, if you will, to realize to yourself the idea of "making something out of nothing." You cannot; the thing is unthinkable. So, on the other hand, is it just as difficult to take in the opposite idea—that matter is eternal, that it never had a beginning and can never have an end. On this the Bible tells us, and professes to tell us, simply nothing at all. Without attempting to teach men physical truth, for the discovery of which God has endowed them with proper faculties, it tells us much of the action of Almighty Power in forming and upholding and controlling the present order of things; and the furthest point to which scientific inquiry has been pushed can tell us nothing, absolutely nothing, of the source and inner essence of *life*. It can tell us much (and this is, as

¹ A sermon preached at Beeston, Nottingham, on Sunday, September 17, 1893, on the occasion of the Nottingham meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, by Rev. A. Irving, B.A., D.Sc., Vicar of Hockerill, Herts, late Science-Master of Wellington College, Berks; formerly second master of Nottingham High School.

the present occasion reminds us, one of God's greatest gifts to our time and age)—it cannot tell us much of the ways in which the matter of which the universe is made up has had the most wonderful laws impressed upon it, giving it that beautiful order of which it is the privilege of the real student of science to know something, even though it be but a little, as the reward of patient inquiry and honest work; but it can neither go beyond nor call in question that profound truth to which the great Apostle gave utterance at Athens in the first century—that in every breath we breathe, in every thought we think, it is in the Almighty Author of Nature “we live and move and have our being.” Scientific inquiry has taught us, and still is teaching us more and more, how the matter of which the worlds are made up is made to serve the purposes and ends of life, but what that life is it cannot tell us.

To know things as they are, to understand the laws which govern the world, the double world of matter and life, is the true end and aim of the study of nature, of all scientific inquiry; and there is no necessity why this should be opposed to a belief in God's revelation of Himself to us, or make us fail to see the truth of that grand utterance of the psalmist, “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the hosts of them by the breath of His mouth.” That “Word of the Lord” we recognise as we learn to know something of those laws and properties of matter, in which, if we will, we may see the expression of the Will of Infinite Power, which has also revealed Itself to us as Infinite Goodness.

The great advances made in the last half century in our knowledge of living beings, bringing us face to face at a nearer view with questions and problems relating to the life itself, have, as the President of the British Association has reminded us during the past week, resulted from improvements in the methods of inquiry and in the instruments of research. But, as he has also shown, while these advances in our knowledge of the framework of the organism have been very great, the *life itself still remains a mystery*—still eludes the grasp of the most searching analysis. There is still a something behind the phenomena that can be observed and measured and demonstrated—something, whether you call it “specific energy,” or “specific activity,” or by any other name—which guides and controls to a definite end all the minor properties and activities which manifest themselves in the outer framework of the individual unit of being, whether that individual consist of a mere microscopic cell, or such a highly differentiated organism as that of man; and that end is, as old Treviranus saw early in the century, the advantage of the whole. As the foremost biologist on the Continent was fain to admit in the

Croonian lecture of last June before the Royal Society, so the present president of that great association, which has honoured our ancient borough of Nottingham with its presence for a second time, is also fain to admit that "the origin of life, the first transition from non-living to living, is a riddle which lies outside the scope [of scientific inquiry]."¹

If, then, it is impossible to recognise life as itself evolved out of dead inorganic matter by the operation of the mere physical properties of the matter of the universe, the main prop of the much-vaunted materialistic philosophy of the past half century is knocked clean away. Admitting that there is a something, which is essential to the living being, which is not a part or property, or summation of properties, of the outward physical framework of the being, the ground is clear for the faith of the Christian theist. For if design, or intention, or some controlling power "once operated in the production of the first life-germ, how can it cease operating," and mere chance or haphazard adaptation continue the work? The working of natural selection, leading to the development of higher and higher forms, we can recognise; but without *variation* there would be no possibility of *selection*. Mediate creation on an ascending scale requires two chief factors: selection, which we can to some extent account for, and variation, which is a part of the mystery in which the guiding and controlling activity of each living individual is involved.

As has been well said by a master of biological science² not many years ago, "The whole advance, by taking advantage of every creature's best, has made strife work, in the struggle for existence, for good in an ascending series, not from discord to harmony, but from simpler to fuller harmonies, until we reach the stage of the life of man; on the one side a wholly exceptional being, on the other side an object of natural history, a part of the animal kingdom, of the fauna of this particular planet. And the student of natural science can join hands with St. Paul, with the deeper insight which he gains from his scientific studies into the profound meaning of the words, when, in contemplating the twofold nature of man, he can truly say, 'That was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural, and afterwards that which is spiritual' (1 Cor. xv. 46)."

View these deep matters how you will, the outcome is the emergence of a free and self-determining personality, which, being capable of conceiving it, may hope for immortality.

¹ Presidential Address by Dr. Burdon-Sanderson, F.R.S.

² Dr. Asa Gray, "Natural Science and Religion" (Scribner, New York, 1891).

With all life goes duality of being—the material and the non-material sides of the individual existence—there is the matter and there is the life; and as the lower stages of living existence serve their purpose for a time and give place to the higher, the more consummate, so evolution, so far from robbing us of this fundamental hope of the Christian, “points to the probability that the perfected soul survives the struggle of life, and, indeed, then chiefly lives, because in it all ends and all worths inhere.”

Now, brethren, this seems to me to be the point at which the religion of the Incarnation takes up and continues that revelation which science is making of God’s mode of operation in created things. Science having brought us thus far, and having lent its emphasis to that “earnest expectation, that groaning and travailing in pain together, of the whole creation, waiting for the revealing of the sons of God,” of which the great Apostle speaks, Christ the Lord offers to take us by the hand and lead us a step higher. He comes to us as One appearing among men, who has taken the form of the sons of men, who alone, standing in the midst of nations, can exclaim, “I say the truth, I am the truth”—One who, in bringing to us the revelation of the Father, can meet the innermost yearnings of our hearts and spirits, and can answer our deepest questionings. Without opposing itself to the highest teachings of true science, or attempting to extinguish its light, the revelation of Jesus Christ presents us with something more. It adds its own light to help us where the light of science fails us. It lifts us out of the slough of materialistic despair, by presenting us, even if imperfections occur in the records, with a perfect life, involving perfect suffering, in the contemplation of which the longing, the questioning, the seeking of every man’s inner spirit finds its fulfilment and answer; where all lines so wonderfully converge, and everything tells us that the revelation of the Divine penetrates all human individuality. And the true function of all sound theological science is to grasp and illustrate in all their significance the entire relations of this perfect revelation of the New Testament, and so to lead us with the one hand, while science leads us with the other, to that higher and true philosophy which deals with the self-consciousness of humanity and its history, and can reach perfection only through a profound understanding of these.¹

All that this higher revelation assumes is that, as life has been imposed upon the matter of the universe, so there is a spiritual sphere of activities—an operation within the sphere of human life and experience, of thought and action, of the life

¹ After Stier.

which, as St. John tells us, is brought to the souls of men through the Incarnate Word; and this assumption is not negatived, but rather strengthened, by the doctrine of evolution, if we allow our minds to direct their gaze up the scale of being as well as down it.¹

Darwin has taught men to look down the scale of living things; Jesus of Nazareth has taught us to look upwards. We thus come to recognise in the "new creation" the "new creature," of which St. Paul speaks, another and a higher phase of development, which requires the same Divine power for creating and sustaining it as the physical life in the world does. As the seed cast into the ground develops out of itself a new individuality, a new set of powers and relations to things around it, in the living plant which springs up from it, so it is with the Word of God sown in our hearts. We do know something as to the method and order by which the seed springs and grows up—something more, at any rate, than they did to whom our Lord's words, about "the seed growing secretly," were first addressed; but the mystery of that life, which is at the same time the motive power and the controlling influence, determining the innumerable forms of plants and animals out of the same formless material, is as great still to the most advanced student of nature as is the mystery of the spiritual birth and the sustentation by the indwelling Spirit of Christ, both of the sacramental life of the Church and the spiritual life of the individual Christian. Yet experience shows us, in the light of that larger philosophy, which can embrace all the facts of being within its ken, that the one is as much a fact of the spiritual world as the other is of the natural world. As the Divine Word or will going forth created and sustains life in the world around us, so that Word or will going forth (which is as true an expression for "law" in one case as in the other) has implanted in us the germ of that higher life which we call spiritual, and has provided means for the developing and perfecting of the one as of the other. This higher development of human life, with its powers and faculties, by the ingrafting upon it of a new principle, through the Incarnation of the Son of God, is that which justifies and gives meaning to such strong expressions as those of the Apostle, when he speaks of a "new creation" and a "new creature." And as the God of Truth cannot contradict Himself, we may be sure that there is a deep and true harmony between God's revelation of Himself in His works, and that revelation in which He speaks to us through His Son; and that it is so in spite of all the loud talk with which

¹ Compare Lecture on Evolution by Archdeacon Wilson (S.P.C.K.).

the charlatan, who speaks in the name of science, denies the revelation of Jesus Christ, and of the bigotry of insufficiently-informed Christianity, which has from time to time attempted to bar the progress of scientific inquiry.

Owing to the limitations which beset human knowledge—limitations of which every real advance only makes us the more sensible—it must often happen that when theologians and men of science reflect upon any doubtful matter, their opinions may seem to each other wrong and incompatible with truth. Yet they may both be true; they may be distant parts of one system of truth, whose common bond has not yet been found. With a little more charity and conciliation, both theology and science might well be content to wait, not for the untying, but for the tying (by further discovery) of the knot which shall combine their many truths in one.¹ In one department and in the other there is room for the exercise of faith, and patience, and humility.

It is too often forgotten that a great deal which passes for knowledge in the domain of science is only, after all, the beliefs or views of those who, as workers in science, hold those views as the best expressions for known facts and their relation to one another; and that as religious views or beliefs undergo modification with the advance of knowledge and the casting of new light upon them, so scientific views or beliefs in many cases fall far short of demonstrable or certain knowledge, and are frequently set aside for others with the progress of scientific work and discovery.

In concluding the few thoughts which the present occasion has called forth, as more or less fitting, upon the twofold nature of God's creation, I may remind you of our Lord's words: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." As I have said elsewhere,² anything like a gradual development of the spiritual out of the physical life seems to be as untrue as the doctrine of the development of life from non-living matter, with its energy and properties, a doctrine which was held by many scientific men a generation or two ago, and is still held by some. Each life has its place in guiding and controlling to higher ends properties and forces of a lower order than itself. As science can tell us nothing directly of the intrinsic nature of the physical life, so can it have nothing to say for or against the spiritual life; for this we must turn to the "revelation of Jesus Christ" as unfolded in the sacramental order of the Church and tested by Christian

¹ After Sir James Paget, F.R.S., Lecture to the Leeds Clergy School (Rivingtons, 1881).

² "Faith and Science" (see *Clergyman's Magazine*, June, 1893).

experience. Scientific knowledge "cometh by observation" in the laboratory, the cabinet, the field, the observatory; the other is much more a matter of the inner consciousness: "the kingdom of God (says our Lord) is within you." Each life is in itself shrouded in mystery, but known in its manifestations as two phases of the universe of being, of which matter, with its properties and energy, is not the be-all and the end-all. Rooted in the depths of our humanity, and expanding in the light of that revelation of which St. John speaks consciously when he says, "We have seen and do testify that the Father hath sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world," there is that deep-seated and ineradicable instinct—that *childlike faith of the heart*—which finds it easier to respond in prayer to the revelation of the Father than to express itself with scientific precision, which resolves Christianity from a philosophical system (about which men may dispute) into loyalty to the life of the Son of God; which gives meaning and emphasis to much that in revealed religion appears otherwise vague and shadowy; and seems to furnish the connecting-link between the leading idea of the science of biology and revealed religion. The life of faith need not fear to challenge appeal to the highest of all tests—its power to develop and form character; and the experience of nineteen centuries has raised what have been called the "wild dreams" of a few "visionaries" of the first century to the position of verified and established laws of the spiritual world. The "new creation" of God goes on doing its work in the world. And when clever men and clever women have picked holes in the written records, and have shown to their own satisfaction that, as Nature's record of the past is incomplete, so the Divine oracles may appear to be when judged by a critical standard, they are still confronted by the great fact of God's Church in the world, with its sacramental life, opposing itself to the hardening tendencies of our age—the hardening influences of Mammon-worship and luxury, separating class from class in human society, and the hardening tendencies of modern materialistic thought; seasoning society with the salt of purity and self-sacrifice; softening down that hard and selfish individuality which gives such a ring of solitary sadness to the lives of many men and women; lifting and purifying the outcast and the fallen, and bringing into the midst of human life the very "peace of God."

A. IRVING.