The Hand of God and the Evolution of Life

Abstract
Both Catholics and Protestants in the late middle ages shared a cosmology, one forged by Thomas Aquinas. As their drawings and catechisms reveal, they believed that the hand of God was on the crystalline spheres and that God distributed life-giving power to the earth through these spheres. The discoveries of Galileo shattered these crystalline spheres, and Christians have struggled ever since to pick up the pieces and explain how the hand of God touches the world.

Acknowledging the scientific discoveries of Galileo and others, theologians forged a new cosmology, a universe with two non-overlapping spheres: a spiritual sphere in which God resides and to which God draws humankind and a material sphere which is a self-contained system of matter and motion. This cosmology has not served Christians well. It blesses the present economic practices and complicates the conversation between faith and science.

The secure findings of the evolutionary sciences offer Christian theologians not only a challenge to traditional doctrines but also an opportunity to recover a more integrated and biblical cosmology. The story of the emergence of life and consciousness on our planet suggests that God’s relationship to the material sphere is much more intimate and glorious than the two-sphere cosmology allows, and this emergence of life comports well with various biblical images of God creating and sustaining the orders of creation.

The Hand of God on the Crystalline Spheres
-Calvin’s commentary on Ps. 93:1:
A simple survey of the world should of itself suffice to attest a Divine Providence. The heavens revolve daily, and, immense as is their fabric, and inconceivable the rapidity of their revolutions, we experience no concussion — no disturbance in the harmony of their motion. The sun, though varying its course every diurnal revolution, returns annually to the same point. The planets, in all their wanderings, maintain their respective positions. How could the earth hang suspended in the air were it not upheld by God’s hand? By what means could it maintain itself unmoved, while the heavens above are in constant rapid motion, did not its Divine Maker fix and establish it?
-Calvin’s Commentary on Genesis:
If the astronomer inquires respecting the actual dimensions of the stars, he will find the moon to be less than Saturn; but this is something abstruse, for to the sight it appears differently. Moses, therefore, rather adapts his discourse to common usage. For since the Lord stretches forth, as it were, his hand to us in causing us to enjoy the brightness of the sun and moon, how great would be our ingratitude were we to close our eyes against our own experience?
-Calvin’s Institutes: Calvin says of angels that they are to be regarded as the hands of God “moving to our assistance just as he directs.” (1, 14, 12)
Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?
A. The almighty and ever present power of God by which God upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

- Christians saw these spheres as rungs on the ladder connecting heaven and earth.
- “Jacob left Beer-Sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood on it.” (Genesis 28: 10-13)
- “When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’” (John 1: 47-51)

- Galileo was what we would call today an astrologer.
- In his book, the Starry Messenger (1610), Galileo writes about his discovery of the moons of Jupiter. He dedicates the book to Cosimo II and wrote: “Who, I say, does not know that [clemency, gentleness, agreeableness, splendor, majesty, and authority] emanate from the most benign star of Jupiter, after God the source of all good? It was Jupiter, I say, who at Your Highness’s birth, having already passed through the murky vapors of the horizon, and occupying the mid-heaven and illuminating the eastern angle from his royal house, looked down upon Your most fortunate birth from that sublime throne and poured out all his splendor and grandeur into the most pure air, so that with its first breath Your tender body and Your soul, already decorated by God with noble ornaments, could drink in this universal power and authority.” (Sobel, 34)

The discoveries of Galileo shattered these crystalline spheres
- One hundred years after Galileo, Baron Paul-Henri Thiry D’Holbach (1723-1789), trained at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands and friend of Diderot and Rousseau expressed the new, emerging cosmology with utmost clarity and confidence: “For a being formed by Nature, who is circumscribed by her laws, there exists nothing beyond the great whole of which he forms a part, of which he experiences the influence. The beings his imagination pictures as above Nature, or distinguished from
her, are always chimeras formed after that which he has already seen.... The universe, that vast assemblage of everything that exists, presents only matter and motion: the whole offers to our contemplation nothing but an immense and uninterrupted succession of causes and effects” (System of Nature, 1770).

A cosmology of two non-overlapping spheres and its limitations

-Paul G. Hiebert describes this state of affairs in his much-discussed article, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle.” Hiebert became keenly aware of what he called the western “two-tiered worldview” when he moved to India and encountered people who believed in unseen powers operating between heaven and earth. He writes: “How did this two-tiered worldview emerge in the West? Belief in the middle level began to die in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the growing acceptance of Platonic dualism [I would argue the shattering of the Ptolemaic/Aristotelian cosmology] and of a science based on materialistic naturalism. The result was the secularization of science and the mystification of religion. Science dealt with the empirical world using mechanistic analogies, leaving religion to handle other-worldly matters, often in terms of organic analogies. Science was based on certitudes of sense experience, experimentation, and proof. Religion was left with faith in visions, dreams, and inner feelings. Science sought order in natural laws. Religion was brought in to deal with miracles, and exceptions to the natural order, but these decreased as scientific knowledge expanded. (Hiebert, Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues, 196-97.

-All of us in the West live in political, social, economic, and religious systems that are built on the distinction between public matters of fact and science and private matters of value and religion.

-N.T. Wright makes this case.

“Sadly the church colludes with this [deistic cosmology] because the church basically treats [salvation] as an escape from this world off to this distant God....In the Bible God and the world, heaven and earth, mesh together and you find Jesus in the middle of that, you find the Bible in the middle of that, and you should find yourself in the middle of that. Part of the point of being a Christian is that we are living at those strange overlap points between heaven and earth. That is what prayer and the sacraments are all about; that is what ministering to the poor in Jesus’ name is all about for as Jesus himself said, “If you do it to the least of these, you do it to me.”

“It seems to me that we need to unpack [this deistic cosmology] and to understand how we got to where we are...all that worldview baggage from the 18th and 19th centuries....Otherwise [the dialogue between science and faith] will be a dialogue of the deaf, a battle in the dark.”

“There is a distinction in Scripture between heaven and earth. But the thing about heaven and earth is that they are supposed to overlap and have an interesting, interlocking interplay with one another. They are never supposed to be apart. In
Genesis God makes heaven and earth and it appears that humans are in the earth but God is around as well. Genesis is about God making a place for himself to dwell.... [If we assume that] God is out of the mix and we observe change happening, then it must be a change that has happened [without God and] from within the processes of the world...development of an explicitly godless kind, God out of the picture kind.” (an interview, From the Dust produced by BioLogos).

The secure findings of the evolutionary sciences offer Christian theologians a challenge
-First, we affirm one God and one truth expressed in both general and special revelation. We believe therefore that all truth is God's truth and that the truth of general and special revelation is complementary. That is to say, we understand that the truth of Scripture helps us to see more clearly the truth in the natural world and that the truth in the natural world helps us see more clearly the truth of Scripture.

-Second, we affirm that the process of rethinking our fundamental doctrines is Spirit led. We believe in the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. That is to say, we believe that the Holy Spirit is working in the hearts of all of us and will over time bring us to an understanding of the truth that God intends for us to present in our world. We trust that the Holy Spirit will preside over our conversations as the Spirit has in past difficult conversations, conversations about the deity of Christ, about slavery etc., and that the process of rethinking the doctrines of the fall and original sin will end well.

The secure findings of the evolutionary sciences offer Christian theologians an opportunity to re-engage the biblical cosmology
-Two words that are common in Scripture and commonly misunderstood are holy and glory. Both words depict the essential character of God as abundant. God is life and love, but the life-giving and loving power of God knows no limits. It multiplies in the heart of God. It is the bush that burns and is not consumed. It is the widow's jar of oil that keeps flowing. It is Jesus multiply bread and fish. The holiness and glory of God fill the world like heat and light radiate from the sun; like water flows from a spring or well in the desert; like seeds grow and bear fruit. The people of Scripture saw the abundant character of God manifested in the world that God created, in the structures of the created order: in the radiance of the sun, in life-giving flow of water, in the fruitfulness of plants, animals, and humans. Thus they confessed again and again: The glory of the Lord fills the earth! The steadfast love of the Lord fills the earth. The people of Scripture rendered the truth of their abundant God in images of the cosmos, images that we today often overlook tending as we do to reduce texts to theological truths.

-One image depicts a river of life flowing from the heart of God. The prophets and the psalmists depict God as the fountain of living water, and they depict this water flowing from the throne in the temple where God sits. Jesus takes this same image and
identifies himself as the river of life to the Samaritan women. The most captivating reference to river of life is found in Ezekiel’s vision of the restoration of the temple: Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple towards the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside to the outer gate that faces towards the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

Going on eastwards with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, ‘Mortal, have you seen this?’

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on one side and on the other. He said to me, ‘This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.’ (47: 1-12)

-A second image of the cosmos in Scripture depicts God as a Gardener planting seeds and saplings. Garden imagery is not limited to the early chapters of Genesis. Reading through the Scriptures, we see that God plants individual people; plants the nation of Israel, plants all the nations of the world, the world itself being the Garden of God. Jesus picks up this image in the Gospel of John:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and
my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

-In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus offers a parable, depicting God as a Gardener planting the kingdom of heaven on earth:

He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’

-Taking up the words of Charles Kingsley, a clergyman friend of Darwin, Rev. Dr. John Polkinghorne says that God has done something cleverer than producing a ready-made world with the snap of divine fingers. God has brought into being a world so full of fruitfulness and potentiality that creatures could be allowed to be themselves and to make themselves. We have to recognize that God acts as much through natural processes as in any other way. If the nature of God is love, as Christians believe, then I think [evolution] is the way you would expect the God of love to create. Not through brute power but the unfolding of potentiality. (interview in From the Dust by Biologos)