



# How soteriology can make sense of cosmology

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What is *natural theology*, broadly defined? Some might argue that natural theology is more about how nature is interpreted than how nature interprets itself.<sup>1</sup> Others, that natural theology is the theological lens through which creation is viewed; a theological perspective on the natural. Again, with regard to Christian faith, the explanation of why something exists instead of nothing, and the purpose that all of creation serves is addressed from within the field of natural theology.

Within the realm of the natural sciences, a field closely related to natural theology is *cosmology* – the study of the origins and development of the natural universe. How the universe began, how it progresses, unfolds, and develops, and towards what end – all these are aspects of cosmology. Cosmology is, then, a field of the natural sciences and as such follows its own set of rules and guidelines for exploring the cosmos. Theology, however, also intersects with cosmology because theology is helpful for making sense of cosmology.

The French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil once wrote,

If I light an electric torch at night out of doors, I don't judge its power by looking at the bulb, but by seeing how many objects it lights up. The brightness of a source of light is appreciated by the illumination it projects upon non-luminous objects. The value of a religious or, more generally, a spiritual way of life is appreciated by the amount of illumination thrown upon the things of this world.<sup>2</sup>

For more than two billion people in the world, Christianity is such a light.

In a similar line of reasoning to Weil, C. S. Lewis once infamously said, ‘I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.’<sup>3</sup> Employing a similar metaphor, Oxford theologian Alister McGrath offers explanations on the relationship between science and Christianity. In his book *Surprised by Meaning* McGrath states, ‘Christianity offers an intellectual sun that illuminates an otherwise dark and enigmatic world: it gives us a deeply satisfying “empirical fit” between theory and observation, which suggests that the map of reality that it offers is reliable and may be trusted.’<sup>4</sup> To summarize what these thinkers are saying, theology helps to make sense of the natural world.

If theology makes sense of the natural world, and Scripture interprets nature, then it raises all sorts of questions. What might various Christian doctrines tell us about nature? How could various historical and orthodox teachings of the Church help Christians interpret creation? For the purposes of this paper, one doctrine will be explored: the doctrine of salvation (soteriology). How might soteriology help the Church interpret nature? Or, more specifically, does knowing God’s character in redemption/recreation help make sense of cosmology?

In Romans 1:20, the Apostle Paul states, ‘Ever since the beginning of creation God’s attributes have been perceived and understood through what God has made.’ Long before the Apostle Paul, the Psalms pointed toward a natural theology. Notably in Psalm 19:1, ‘The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament displays his handiwork.’ These verses in Romans 1 and Psalm 19 show that the universe has something to say. Nature is revealing a story. Georgetown University professor John F. Haught wrote,

Theologically understood, biological evolution is part of a great cosmic journey into the incomprehensible mystery of God. [...] Perhaps, life at a dramatic level inaccessible to the mathematical abstractions of physical science, is an adventure stirred up by a God of persuasive love.<sup>5</sup>

If the cosmos is telling a story, and theology is the key to reading it, then soteriology could help make sense of cosmology.



## Similarity in divine action?

As cosmology is looked at in light of theology, God's character informs our understanding of the universe. Theology interprets nature. One perspective adopted and expanded by Jonathan Edwards is the view of typology; the 'foreshadowing' or 'prefiguration' at one time or place of something greater yet to come.<sup>6</sup> The field of Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) studies has documented well the typological relationship between the two. However, Edwards drew a typological connection and harmony between more than the relationship of OT and NT; he drew a typological connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. Edwards argues:

That natural things were ordered for types of spiritual things seems evident by these texts: John 1:9, "This was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh in the world"; and John 15:1, "I am the true vine." Things are thus said to be true in Scripture, in contradistinction to what is typical. The type is only the representation or shadow of the thing, but the antitype is the very substance, and is the true thing.<sup>7</sup>

For Edwards, nature is full of 'representatives' or 'shadows' that point to a greater reality in the spiritual realm.

When God creates life in the spiritual realm, and that action is based in his character, it can be reasonable to expect that God might sometimes create life in a similar way within the natural realm. Because the action is based on God's nature and character, the action can be similar across both the spiritual and physical realm, though it need not *necessarily* be so. Given the possibility of such similarities, God's nature and his work in the spiritual realm can lend insight and help make sense of what we find in the physical realm.<sup>8</sup> The image that Jesus uses of being 'born again' in John 3 is helpful for understanding this. Jesus uses physical birth to help Nicodemus understand spiritual birth. Why? It is possible that God brings forth new human physical life in a way that is similar to how he brings forth new spiritual life. It is possible that the divine action of creation can be similar across both realms.

How does soteriology help to make sense of cosmology? The answer lies, at least in part, in the possible similarities in divine action between the spiritual and natural realms. If God designs the spiritual creation process to work in a specific way, and that process flows from and displays God's character, it is possible that the natural creation process can be similar at times and in some ways to the spiritual creation process. That means the spiritual creation process of soteriology, in some ways at least, can help make sense of certain aspects of the cosmological creation process. Comparing the doctrine of soteriology with the science of cosmology is a good place to begin to identify some possible similarities in the acts of creation between the spiritual and natural realms.



### **The spiritual realm: soteriology**

Discussions of soteriology may well be regarded as simply historic battles over doctrines like predestination, justification by faith, the role of grace, etc. In more recent scholarship, however, debates over the nature of the atonement, the resurrection, new creation, and mission have played a much larger part in soteriological debate. Most notably, the work of scholars such as E. P. Sanders, N. T. Wright, James D. G. Dunn, and Peter Leithart have offered new perspectives on our understanding of the nature of justification; the process by which God redeems his people. Nevertheless, we find common ground among the old and new perspectives, most notably that God recreates a sinful person by faith in Jesus, and then that person spends their life becoming who they were declared to be. In short, there is a sudden spiritual recreation in the life of a person that is then followed by a gradual process of change.

While the specific out-workings of this doctrine are still being debated among theologians, there is however a majority consensus among evangelicals and mainline protestant denominations.<sup>9</sup> That consensus states that a person is recreated before God by faith through grace (termed 'regeneration') and then continues on in a process of righteous change over the course of his life by faith through grace (termed 'sanctification'). The whole life of the Christian is summarized in Reformed evangelical theology in the following way. A person, by

grace, experiences a sudden re-birth called regeneration. That person is justified by faith and declared to be righteous on the basis of Christ's work on the cross and his resurrection. New Christians then spend their lives living by faith and becoming in reality more righteous. They become in reality what they have been declared to be.



## **Regeneration, justification, sanctification**

Within theology, regeneration is defined as an instantaneous transformation from spiritual death to spiritual life.<sup>10</sup> Regeneration is the starting point of spiritual resurrection. There is a 'sudden burst' (if you will) of life: the old man dies; the new man is born. Without it, no one can see the kingdom of God (John 3). Regeneration is the starting point of the Christian life. It is the sudden appearance of spiritual life in the soul of a human being. As to justification, N. T. Wright offers a definition and summary that is both relevant and helpful. He states,

To start with, a bare definition: justification is the declaration that somebody is in the right. [...] In theology, therefore, justification is not the means whereby it becomes possible to declare someone in the right. It is simply that declaration itself. It is not how someone becomes a Christian, but simply the declaration that someone is a Christian.<sup>11</sup>

In short, justification is God declaring that a person is in the right. This is done on the basis of and through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

There are, however, differing views, opinions, and positions on the nature and definition of sanctification. There have been volumes written on this subject, and it would not serve our purposes here to try to offer a new theory or definition. Nor is there time and space to offer an overview of the various positions. It will suffice for our purposes here to simply state a prevalent view of sanctification in accordance with the discussion that follows. There are different 'kinds' of sanctification; first, what is sometimes referred to as 'initial' or 'positional' sanctification. This simply means the act of setting aside – to 'set apart' or 'make holy'. We will not be dealing with this particular

aspect of sanctification. We will, instead, be exploring what is called ‘progressive sanctification’. Progressive sanctification (henceforth referred to simply as ‘sanctification’ unless otherwise stipulated) is the process by which a person becomes more holy. Sanctification is the process by which a Christian, who has been declared righteous in Christ, actually and progressively becomes so. In short, for the Christian, sanctification is the progressive process of becoming in reality what we have been declared to be in Christ: a new creation.



### **The physical realm: cosmology**

‘Cosmology is the study of the universe, or cosmos, regarded as a whole’, writes Barbara Ryden, Professor of Astronomy at Ohio State University.<sup>12</sup> NASA defines cosmology as ‘the scientific study of the large scale properties of the universe as a whole. It endeavors to use the scientific method to understand the origin, evolution and ultimate fate of the entire Universe.’<sup>13</sup> To put it simply, cosmology endeavours to understand the origin, development, and destination of the universe. The ‘Hot Big Bang’ or what is sometimes simply called the ‘Big Bang’ is the current standard model for understanding the universe. Essentially, it states that ‘the universe has expanded from an initially hot and dense state to its current relatively cool and tenuous state, and that the expansion is still going on today’. We can say that the ‘Big Bang’ model is technically broadly defined as ‘the universe expand[ing] from an initially high dense state to its current low-density state.’<sup>14</sup> In a less technical sense, the ‘Big Bang’ did not occur at a single point in space as an ‘explosion’. It is better thought of as the simultaneous and sudden appearance of space everywhere in the universe.<sup>15</sup>

Once time and space appeared, the process of the development of life known as ‘evolution’ began. Evolution is the process of biological change in a population of organisms over time. According to the University of California, Berkeley:

Biological evolution, simply put, is descent with modification. This definition encompasses small-scale evolution (changes in gene [...] frequency in a population from one generation to the

next) and large-scale evolution (the descent of different species from a common ancestor over many generations). Evolution helps us to understand the history of life. [...] Biological evolution is not simply a matter of change over time. Lots of things change over time: trees lose their leaves, mountain ranges rise and erode, but they aren't examples of biological evolution because they don't involve descent through genetic inheritance. The central idea of biological evolution is that all life on Earth shares a common ancestor [...] Through the process of descent with modification, the common ancestor of life on Earth gave rise to the fantastic diversity that we see documented in the fossil record and around us today.<sup>16</sup>

There are different 'kinds' of evolution. Microevolution, contrary to popular belief, does not consist of micro-changes in an organism. Microevolution simply means change on a small scale – within a single population.<sup>17</sup> If a small change in a single organism is observed, that is not necessarily microevolution. Microevolution refers to the sum of biological changes in an entire population.<sup>18</sup>

Macroevolution, on the other hand, is evolution on a large scale. Again, contrary to popular belief, macroevolution is not a large change in a single organism, but rather biological change in an entire *clade* of organisms (in contrast to a population). For example, microevolution could take place through biological changes in a specific population of beetles. Macroevolution, however, consists of biological changes in all beetles. Evolution, then, is a process of biological change over time. Through the duplication and transferring of DNA from parent to child, changes take place. Those changes have resulting effects on subsequent generations. Nevertheless, what we see from the study of evolution is that, over time, life changes progressively. Life is becoming increasingly organized and complex. Single-celled organisms became multi-celled organisms. Multi-celled organisms eventually became highly complex organisms capable of processing and theorizing existence. Through evolution, life progressively changes.



## Soteriology makes sense of cosmology

Jonathan Edwards's typology saw consistency and analogy between the natural and spiritual realms. He reasoned that since there is harmony and similarity within the natural realm (horizontal similarities) that there must exist similarities between the natural and spiritual realms (vertical similarities). He writes in "Images of Divine Things" that given the harmony and similarities between objects in the 'visible world' it is reasonable to conclude that there might be similarities between objects in the 'visible world' and things in the 'invisible world'. For Edwards, things in the visible world reflect a spiritual reality:

[...] why should not we suppose that [God] makes the inferior in imitation of the superior, the material of the spiritual, on purpose to have a resemblance and shadow of them? We see that even in the material world God makes one part of it strangely to agree with another; and why is it not reasonable to suppose he makes the whole as a shadow of the spiritual world?<sup>19</sup>

And again,

If there be such an admirable analogy observed by the Creator in his works through the whole system of the natural world, so that one thing seems to be made in imitation of another, and especially the less perfect to be made in imitation of the more perfect [...] why is it not rational to suppose that the corporeal and visible world should be designedly made and constituted in analogy to the more spiritual, noble, and real world? 'Tis certainly agreeable to what is apparently the method of God's working.<sup>20</sup>

For Edwards, the 'inferior' natural realm pointed to a 'superior' spiritual reality. Could it be that the spiritual reality helps to make sense of the natural order through similarities? If so, it could be argued on the basis of such similarities that God's design in guiding



the development and change in life (both spiritual and natural) could be a progressive process over time. In such a way, the spiritual reality of progressive sanctification could help to make sense of evolutionary change over time.

When it comes to the doctrine of soteriology, it is understood that God recreates his people through a sudden act of regeneration, and then progressively changes them over time. Those who are ‘dead in their trespasses and sin’ are suddenly made alive in Christ Jesus. Then, over time, they are progressively changed. The Holy Spirit conforms the Christian into the image of Christ. In short, a Christian is declared to be a new creation, and then spends the rest of their life being made into a new creation. The entire act of God is one that demonstrates a pattern of sudden regeneration followed by progressive change toward a goal.

There is a similar pattern that can be seen in the physical creation process. The story of the cosmos reveals that the world came into a sudden existence followed by a long process of progressive change over time. Such a similarity raises the question of the goal of the cosmos. Does the similarity between the physical and spiritual realm indicate that the cosmos is working toward a state of new creation? A comparison of the history and workings of the natural cosmos with the doctrine of soteriology reveals a natural process of creation similar to the spiritual process of creation. It is possible that the doctrine of sanctification makes sense of cosmology by showing that since both have a similar process, they could both have a similar goal: a new creation.



## **Conclusion**

Similarities between the physical and spiritual realms offer a possible explanation as to how theology can make sense of what we see in nature. If God is functioning as sovereign Creator over both realms, and is actively guiding the processes in both the spiritual and natural realms, then it stands to reason that it is possible for similarities to exist between the natural and spiritual realms. Similarities between the natural and spiritual realms are possible because of a common Creator.

Alister McGrath observes, ‘We long to make sense of things. We yearn to see the big picture, to know the greater story, of which our own story is a small but nonetheless important part. [...] The world around us seems to be studded with clues to a greater vision of life.’<sup>21</sup> One possible way we can make sense of cosmology, and more specifically evolution, is through understanding the doctrine of sanctification and God’s design of regeneration followed by progressive change for his people.

Soteriology can help us to make sense of cosmology. In some ways, cosmology and soteriology are not at all similar, but in other ways they are. The pattern of a sudden creation followed by a continuous process of change that we see in cosmology through a scientific study of nature, is similar to what we see in soteriology through a careful examination of Scripture. When God creates, he may not always use the same pattern across both the spiritual and natural realms, however, it is possible for him to use a similar pattern at certain times and in certain ways. Comparing how God works soteriologically with how he works in nature reveals a similar pattern. Understanding the divine creative process in such a way shows how theology can make sense of cosmology: there is a common sovereign Creator and king over both the natural and spiritual realm.

Given that the spiritual creation of Christians and the natural creation of the cosmos are both under the sovereign reign of God, it is reasonable to expect that it would be possible, at least in some ways, for there to be similarities in the workings of both realms. In identifying the possibility of such similarities, the question then needs to be asked, if the processes are indeed similar, might the outcomes and goals of those processes possibly be similar as well? If it is possible that the outcomes and goals of both the spiritual and physical creation processes are similar, then the doctrine of sanctification helps make sense of cosmology by pointing to its destination: a new creation.

## Notes

1. Alister E. McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 14.
2. Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 147.
3. C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?” in *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Leslie Walmsley (London: Harper Collins, 2000), 21.
4. Alister E. McGrath, *Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith and How We Make Sense of Things* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 57.
5. John F. Haught, *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life* (Louisville Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 75.
6. For a helpful discussion on what the early Church thought of typology see: Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Dom Wulstan Hibberd (London: Burns & Oates, 1960): 277–81.
7. Jonathan Edwards, “Images of Divine Things”, in *Typological Writings. The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 11, eds. Wallace E. Anderson, Mason I. Lowance and David H. Watters (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 62.
8. For a helpful discussion on divine action in nature see: Craig Rusbult, “Divine Action in Natural Process: Is Natural Process Guided by God?”, *American Scientific Affiliation*, 2006 <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/education/origins/te-guided.htm>, accessed September 18, 2016.
9. And some have argued that consensus exists among the catholic faiths (Roman, Greek, etc.) as well.
10. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 3:10.
11. Tom Wright, *The Great Acquittal: Justification by Faith and Current Christian Thought*, ed. Gavin Reid (London: Collins, 1980), 13.

12. Barbara Ryden, *Introduction to Cosmology* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2003), 1.
13. NASA: WMAP Science Team, “Cosmology: The Study of the Universe”, <http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/>, accessed 18 September 2016.
14. Ryden, *Introduction to Cosmology*, 6.
15. NASA: WMAP Science Team, “Foundations of Big Bang Cosmology”, [http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/bb\\_concepts.html](http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/bb_concepts.html), accessed September 18, 2016 [emphasis mine].
16. UC Berkeley, UCMP project team and the National Center for Science Education, *Understanding Evolution* website, “An Introduction to Evolution”, [http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/evo\\_02](http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/evo_02), accessed September 18, 2016.
17. Ibid., “Defining Microevolution”, [http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/evo\\_37](http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/evo_37), accessed September 18, 2016.
18. Here ‘population’ is defined as ‘a group of organisms that interbreed with each other’.
19. Jonathan Edwards, “Images of Divine Things” (no. 8) in *Typological Writings*, 53.
20. Ibid. (no. 59), 69f.
21. McGrath, *Surprised by Meaning*, 3.