

## **Contributors**

**SCOTT COWDELL** is a Research Fellow in the Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre, Charles Sturt University.

**JANE FOULCHER** is a Lecturer in Theology, Charles Sturt University.

**CATHERINE LAUFER** is a Lecturer in Theology, Charles Sturt University.

**THORWALD LORENZEN** is Professor of Theology, Charles Sturt University.

**RAY MINNIECON** is from the Kabi Kabi Nation, South East Queensland and Community Chaplain in Redfern.

**STEVEN OGDEN** is Principal of St Francis' Theological College and Lecturer in Theology, Charles Sturt University.

**DAMIAN PALMER** is a doctoral candidate in Theology, Charles Sturt University.

**JANICE REES** is a doctoral candidate in Theology, Charles Sturt University.

**HEATHER THOMSON** is Associate Head (Canberra) of the School of Theology, Charles Sturt University.

**PHILLIP TOLLIDAY** is Senior Lecturer in Theology, Charles Sturt University.

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# Speaking Differently

Introduction	1
Phillip Tolliday	
<b>In the end is my beginning</b>	7
1 Origins: A cosmic, Christian perspective	9
Scott Cowdell	
2 Vocation: Hearts on fire	17
Heather Thomson	
3 Death and our ultimate destiny	31
Catherine E Laufer	
<b>The difference 'difference' makes</b>	49
4 Freedom: God, Moses and Australia's national story	51
Ray Minniecon	
5 Human rights: A theological perspective	61
Thorwald Lorenzen	
6 Sociality: A reading of Bonhoeffer's <i>Sanctorum Communio</i>	79
Phillip Tolliday	
7 Disability: Consider the Crepe Myrtle	93
Damian J Palmer	
8 Humility: Christian de Chergé and the 'other'	105
Jane Foulcher	
<b>Making a difference</b>	125
9 Power: Michel Foucault, human identity and the church	127
Steven Ogden	
10 Gender: Difference, sin and the Trinity	145
Janice Rees	
Index	161

# Introduction

Phillip Tolliday

The essays in this collection do not seek to uncover a comprehensive theological anthropology. Instead, they hope to move the reader *within* a theological anthropology to fill out what we have learned from more recent scholarship about the importance of attending to difference and context. In their several ways and discrete approaches they attempt to do this under the heading of ‘difference’.

To speak about difference is, at least, to raise the question of the ‘other’. But ‘the question of the other is not, of course, *a* question; it is a complex of questions.’<sup>1</sup> It asks, for example, whether unity has priority over plurality; what is the relationship between identity and difference; to what extent is my being constituted by that of another; is God as ‘Other’ somehow mediated through my relationship with other people; does the alterity or otherness of those around me call forth an ethical relationship from me; and might the radical otherness of the divine call forth from me a religious relationship.

Each of the chapters or essays within this collection seeks to address some of these questions. Some chapters adopt a deliberate and intentional focus towards the theme of difference, whereas for other authors the notion of difference is not so obviously addressed and must instead be discerned through their responses to some of the questions outlined in the previous paragraph. However, in every essay, whether explicitly expressed or not, there is the assumption which is embedded in the book of Genesis that it is not good for the human being to be alone. In all of the essays there is an implicit

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<sup>1</sup> Mark C Taylor (ed.), *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Theology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, p. 4.

acknowledgement that human beings and their identities are constituted by their relationships with the other.

In any discussion of difference and the other there will arise the question of just who is the other. Do we mean other people? Do we mean God? Do we mean the whole order of nature with which we are surrounded? In seeking to answer these questions the issue of context is all-important, and some chapters will explore one of these questions more than others, but the reader will not be misled if, overall, she or he gives an affirmative reply to all three questions.

In the first chapter, on origins, Scott Cowdell situates the human being within, and as ineradicably part of, the natural order as created by God. Painting a picture of the scientific development of the universe he points deftly to the intricacies involved in the multifarious combinations of particles and elements and 'goo' that have produced human beings. From the seemingly inauspicious has arisen the universe come to consciousness. Pulsating, as it were, within each element in nature, from smallest to largest, from primeval 'goo' to the human capacity for reflexive thought, there exist the uncreated energies of God. Sustained at the root of its being by God, everything in the universe holds together. God, as the radically Other, is the necessary and sufficient condition for all that is. Here difference is not antithetical to identity; rather, it is its very condition.

The human being, as the universe 'come to consciousness', finds itself to be summoned or called. Ineluctably part of the universe though we undoubtedly are, we are, nonetheless, a very special part of it. Heather Thomson points out that vocation relates to how and what I am. It is, quite simply, the way God calls us to be in the world. Vocation invites us to consider the world through 'Easter eyes', that is, from the perspective of resurrection. This consideration places us in a position of responsibility in the sense that we are answerable to the claims of the call or vocation upon us. The vocation of each human being is to be fully alive, as some early Christian writers have noted, for which the image of a fire or flame serves as an apt analogy. The themes of difference and identity are worked out in one's daily life, whether sacred or secular, whether flamboyant or mundane, in responsible responsiveness to those other people who are equally called by God.

Vocation is a constant struggle, for it is, as Levinas remarks in another context, a journey to 'a land promised but not [yet] possessed'. Catherine Laufer's chapter addresses the destiny of human existence. She argues that our destiny is indeed hopeful, in that we may hope that our wills, which are currently enmeshed in competing desires, will be set free by God. With a

careful reading of history she unpacks the relationship between various ideas of the afterlife and the contemporaneous notions of justice and punishment. The view with which she concludes – the wider hope of universalism – is one that some may not find to their liking. It does, perhaps, strike at some notions of justice. Yet, if God calls all people and wills all people to be saved, what would be so wrong with that? It might just mean that people would live out their vocation or call with a focus on responsiveness to the other rather than with an eye to their eternal reward or punishment. Indeed it might just be that this vision of a wider hope suggests that vocation is not simply the space, as it were, between origin and ending, but that vocation and destiny are radically intertwined and, though distinguishable, are not separable.

Levinas' comment about a land promised but not possessed also has strong resonances with Ray Minniecon's chapter, which seeks to raise our consciousness to the connections between the biblical story and the contemporary story of the Indigenous peoples of Australia. Identifying the discourses of God, of the Powerful and of the Powerless, Minniecon demonstrates that the themes of difference and the other are double-edged: they can produce life or death, joy or sorrow, hope or despair. The discourse of God aligns itself with the powerless and the cause of justice. In this chapter we gain a sense of how the theme of difference has been used to crush Indigenous communities; of how 'different from' means 'less than' or 'worse than'. However, our hopes for justice are stirred by reflecting upon the discourse of God in the Scriptures. This leads us to discern the various ways in which God's voice manifests itself today in striving for a just future for all people.

Thorwald Lorenzen reminds us that one way in which this voice may be heard is through the discourse about human rights. The language of rights has several advantages over speaking about compassion or even responsibility because, when we talk about rights, we are looking 'at reality from the perspective of those whose dignity is threatened, diminished or distorted'. The danger with the language of rights, however, is that it might be construed to mean nothing other than individual entitlement, but here Lorenzen makes clear that this is a distortion of the meaning of rights. 'Human rights ... designate and describe what is essential for being human in the context of society and nature'. The language of rights permits us to make ontological claims about what it is to be a human being. And on reflection we notice that these rights with their ontological claims are embedded in the Christian notion of the *imago Dei*. Rights language confronts us with the concrete claims of responsibility for one another – a responsibility that is part of the human vocation.

In his chapter on sociality, Phillip Tolliday argues that the human being is *essentially* social: being so is not a negotiable extra. His focus is on the early work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, he suggests, foreshadows much of the later work on sociality and relationality that we have come to take for granted in theological anthropology. The themes of difference and identity arise through Bonhoeffer's reference to the 'I-You' relationship. However, this interpersonal relationship only arises at all 'because the human person is always in relation to God'. Indeed, for Bonhoeffer, my relationship with the other is the form in which God is experienced, while at the same time it is only God who allows me to experience the other person as what Bonhoeffer calls the 'You to me'. Here it becomes apparent that human identity is constructed within the ambit of difference: the absolute difference of God as the radically Other and the relative difference of other people to whom I am called to respond ethically.

It is the ethical dimension of difference or otherness that is unveiled in Damian Palmer's powerful chapter on disability. At stake is the issue of human identity and various constructions of normality. Who decides what – or rather, who – is normal? Within the context of disability – itself a problematic term – the theme of difference comes laden as a threat. It suggests that people who are 'disabled' are 'different' from other people inasmuch as they suffer from a sort of 'deficit' or 'loss'. There appears to be some ideal image of humanity from which people living with a disability are a declension. But on this understanding, who shall serve as the ideal? Jesus might spring to mind; however, in relation to him, as Barth opined, we are *all* less than fully human. Are we all then, to some degree or other, living with disability? However we choose to define disability we are aware when we meet someone who is not just like us. In meeting people who are disabled we certainly encounter the theme of difference and the ethical challenge it presents. Can we see the other as just different from us – not better, not worse – but just different, and, in that difference, contributing to making me who I am?

The ethical implications of viewing the other as a gift to us from God is probed further in Jane Foulcher's chapter on humility and the other in the work of Christian de Chergé. A question of critical importance for us in our time is how we engage with others who hold a different religion from ourselves. In Australia, tensions have arisen between Muslims and non-Muslims; and the often uncritical equation made between Islam and the 'other', meaning 'terrorist', is a heady and destructive mix. Foulcher's work documents how one man's reflections in a small monastic community in the midst of a predominantly Muslim environment served to construct a vision whereby the

'ladder of humility' opened a space for dialogue with the other. In a helpful reflection on 'difference as the gift of God' she notes that difference existed within the community as well as outside it. The practices and habits the monks needed for a fruitful community life – notably obedience and humility – were exactly the same virtues required for an interreligious dialogue with those to whom they were 'other' and who were 'other' to them. Though difference may indeed be the gift of God, the image of the ladder of humility with its rungs that must be climbed is well chosen, for the gift of difference is one we come to appreciate only through much practice and perseverance.

Steven Ogden uses the work of the critical theorists Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to reflect on the use and abuse of power. Once again the theme of what is 'normal' is raised. Following Foucault, Ogden notes that the issue of human identity is value-laden and contested. People are categorised as 'normal' or 'abnormal' according to those who have the power to make decisions about what constitutes the norm. Nowhere has this discussion been more vigorous than in the debates about sexuality and gender that are taking place in the church. Using the Anglican Church of Australia as an example, Ogden points to the destructive ways in which churches manipulate what counts as knowledge in the quest to exalt some forms of human identity and to deny others. He notes the well-known observation from Aristotle that we feel comfortable with people who are similar to us and uncomfortable with those who are different from us. Thus difference becomes a form of 'boundary marking' and a way of excluding others. Ogden points up the potentially dangerous aspect of difference, of what happens when difference becomes a way of demonising the other. The poignant example of the author's own experience at General Synod illustrates just how thin is the veneer that covers the seething desire for power and control.

The final essay in the collection, by Janice Rees, is also formed by critical theory, in this case, feminist theology. If a one-sided understanding of difference is the foil against which Ogden writes, for Rees the threat to gender comes from the potential for difference to be eviscerated and for all to be reduced to sameness. The challenge here is to negotiate a path between a difference that excludes, and a sameness that collapses the sense of otherness and relationality that is constitutive for human identity. She senses that the doctrine of sin might be a clue to this pathway. The essence of human sinfulness is a totalising desire to turn all difference into sameness and thus display the 'depth of the human intolerance of difference'. Instead, we should seek to model our negotiation between difference and sameness on the life of the triune God, where the

differentiated persons of the Trinity are constituted by their relations to each other and comprise the unity of God.

From origins to transformation through critical theory, a discussion of human rights, and reflections upon concrete engagements with others, these essays have sought to display at least some of the play of difference that forms our identity as those who are created, loved and called by God. They demonstrate that, although theological anthropology is sometimes discussed as if humans were merely individuals, such an approach is an unhelpful abstraction. Instead, the truth is that we are radically relational and social – sometimes even when we might wish it otherwise. Sartre once remarked that ‘Hell is other people’. It’s a sentiment that often draws a wry smile, for we have just enough experiences to make it sound plausible. But in our better moments we know that Alexei Khomiakov was closer the truth when, from his Russian Orthodox perspective, he judged the human being to be ecclesial. He observed that if one is saved then one is saved within the body of the community, but if one falls then one falls alone. Sartre was wrong: hell is not other people: it is isolation. We were not created to be alone. We were created for community, but in order for that to be so, difference must be ineradicable and we must befriend it. These essays invite us to move in that direction.



# Origins: A cosmic, Christian perspective

Scott Cowdell

How can Christianity call itself catholic if the universe itself is left out?<sup>1</sup> *Simone Weil*

I write on behalf of a significant movement in theology today that holds science and faith together.<sup>2</sup> And I find that people are surprised by this. If they understand modern science at all, they can't see how I can believe what physics tells us about cosmic origins, along with the Bible's story of creation. How can the Big Bang fit with a world created in six days? And what about evolution by natural selection?<sup>3</sup> It simply doesn't fit with the old belief that God created all the species together and put them on a relatively new earth. There are still Christians who think that the world is under 10,000 years old,

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- 1 Simone Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', reproduced in *Waiting on God*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1979, pp. 81–142, at p. 100.
  - 2 See my book *A God for This World*, Mowbray, London and New York, 2000. Helpful to me on the subject of science and religion not being at odds were John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998; Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming – Natural, Divine and Human*, enlarged edn, SCM, London, 1990; Ian G Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures 1989–1991*, Vol. 1, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1990; Holmes Rolston III, *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey*, Random House, New York, 1987.
  - 3 For a useful discussion taking us beyond what the creation scientists and the radical atheists have to say about creation and evolution, see Conor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2010.

and that dinosaurs and humans were around at the same time – or, worse, that God put dinosaur bones in the rocks to test our faith. I want to assure you that the mainstream church doesn't think this way. Faith doesn't mean tearing up the biology of evolution, or the physics of radioactive decay that gives us our carbon dating. As for the first three chapters of the book of Genesis, these are best understood as a celebration of our belonging to God's good creation and not to one of the other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies grounded in foundational violence and chaos; they certainly do not comprise a weird kind of science or history lesson. The beginning chapters of Genesis are best understood as theologically-minded spiritual poetry extending Israel's understanding of its covenant God to the whole of existence, rather than as a compendium of scientific fact.<sup>4</sup>

If we want to talk about God, and many people still most certainly do, I'm convinced that it's a God for *this world* that we need to talk about, the real world. If God is real, and worth believing in, and significant for you and for me as we discover the meaning of our lives, then God must be the God of galaxies and dinosaurs, of blue oceans and gorgeous sunsets, of tsunamis and cancer. As for our lives, if we're to talk about God, it has to be in terms of the real world we experience: as people who grow and struggle, who suffer and are confused, who're subject to strong urges and secret fears, who strive for great things and often fail, who know profound satisfaction in the joys of having a body – from eating good meals to playing hard football, from making love to making music. So when we talk about God it needs to be the real God of our real world.

So let's start at the beginning.<sup>5</sup> Our universe is 13.7 billion years old, with billions of galaxies each with billions of stars. Our earth is 4.5 billion years old and the first life may have emerged a billion years after the earth came to be. We had recognisable ancestors 2 million years ago called *Homo habilis*, but agricultural human communities have been in existence for around only 9,000 years, since the Neolithic period. These are the timescales and dimensions involved in making a world fit for human beings, on which you and I

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4 Very clarifying here is Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (Vol. 1 of a 3-volume commentary on Genesis), SPCK, London, 1984; see also his briefer and more popular *Creation*, Fortress, Philadelphia, and SPCK, London, 1974.

5 There is quite a literature here, but on the Big Bang and cosmic origins I recommend Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe*, Fontana, London, 1983. On how the universe took shape thereafter, see Harold J Morowitz, *The Emergence of Everything: How the World Became Complex*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.

will have our adventure of life and love, of meaning and purpose. Science debates the origin of the Big Bang, in which energy and matter, space and time emerged together. The standard question of what came before the Big Bang makes little sense when we realise that there was no before, since Albert Einstein taught us that space and time, matter and energy, are all integrally related and bound together.

The subatomic particles that make up all the atoms in our bodies, and all we can see around us today, were all born within an instant of the Big Bang. So the most basic building blocks of you and me are 13.7 billion years old. The four basic forces of physics emerged almost instantaneously, and under the work of those forces matter clumped together. Eventually the forces acting on this matter ignited the energy locked up in it, and these clumps became the first stars. For a long time, stars were born, aged and died without much else happening in the universe. These stars were cosmic factories for turning all that simple hydrogen of the early universe into more complicated forms of matter. When after billions of years a star goes through its whole lifecycle and produces heavier elements, such as carbon and oxygen, it eventually collapses under its own gravity, then it explodes because the atoms all want to keep their integrity and they push back. In these explosions, called supernovas, all those heavier elements are released into space in clouds of matter. The bigger and hotter the star, the heavier the elements it can cook up in its interior. The very heaviest elements, such as uranium and plutonium, emerged in the last seventeen seconds or so of the life of the largest possible stars, before they collapsed and these heavy elements were spewed out in giant explosions.

Eventually a new sort of thing started to happen. Star clusters, galaxies and even clusters of galaxies were forming thanks to the forces of gravity, but also things were happening with those clouds of matter spewed out from exploding dead stars. All that carbon and oxygen, that sodium and iron, that gold and silver, that tungsten and aluminium, was gathered together by gravity and formed into the most energy-efficient structures, which were of course our round planets. And today astronomers are discovering lots of so-called exoplanets, so that our little solar system isn't the only one. Planets are apparently common throughout our Milky Way galaxy.

Every bit of matter in my body and yours comes from the material substance of planet earth, though originally it was stardust. The iron making your blood red, the traces of potassium in your food without which your heart stops beating, and the gold in my wedding ring, were all cooked into existence in the interior of stars then released by mighty supernova explosions into space.

Eventually these substances were pulled together by gravity into the orbit of other stars, perhaps new ones, and one such pulling-together was the earth. We know how the gold got into my wedding ring: it was deposited by aeons of geological activity into seams, discovered, dug up, purified and then moulded by a jeweller. As for how the iron got into your blood to make it red, however, it wasn't thanks to miners or jewellers. It was thanks to that incredible process of order and randomness that we call evolution by natural selection.

Inside planets, the inner heat left over from the planet's formation and the different matter available combined in various ways. On our world, the lucky mix of conditions was just right for certain chemical reactions to take place so that the amino acids and other building blocks of life emerged from water and methane and other basic things. Self-perpetuating complex chemical reactions in separate clusters became the first living cells, and the journey from the Big Bang to you and me took a decisive turn. Ten billion years after the universe began conditions were ready for life on at least one planet.

Our universe was built step by step, with each step building on the stability attained by the previous step. The same natural forces governed the evolution of life on earth. Any gain in stable structure or efficient production of energy and any avoiding of harmful conditions in the environment were preserved. Single cells with porous boundaries eventually grouped together because nature's demand for energy-efficient structures made it possible. Capacity for movement, for taking in energy in the form of food, and for passing on the structure that had been built up all emerged. A chemical called DNA ensured that this structure was preserved, through its capacity to assimilate matter into the forms of living tissue.

Anything that did well handed on its structure, while most creatures and most species didn't manage to do so. If you were a little blob of goo with a photosensitive cell in a fold of tissue, you could sense movement, and that would give you an advantage. DNA allowed all sorts of mutations like this to happen, and some of these caught on. A blob of goo that could sense the presence of other blobs of goo was on its way to becoming part of more developed stable structures, eventually creatures with eyes, finally creatures like us whose eyes contain lenses, able to form true images of the external world. And so it goes. The DNA from the blob of goo became part of the DNA of the trilobite, then of the coelacanth, then of whichever dinosaur of sea or land, and eventually of the first mammals, building all the way, via earlier primates

and proto-humans, at last on to us.<sup>6</sup> Our DNA reflects this whole evolutionary history, as molecular biology has shown. Human DNA differs by only about one percent from chimpanzee DNA, with recovered Neanderthal DNA representing the genetic halfway point between the chimps and us. But we still share an awful lot of our DNA with dogs, less with birds, less still with fruit flies, though there remains a significant overlap.<sup>7</sup>

What a journey it's been. It took 10 billion years of cosmic evolution, including whole lifecycles of stars, to turn all that base matter of the Big Bang into the ninety-one naturally occurring chemical elements, and then into planet earth. It then took 3.5 billion years of evolution on earth to get from a blob of goo with a hint of attitude to you and me. So a whole universe has needed 13.7 billion years to make us what we are today. But then, for us, in twenty years, or in fifty or in seventy years, something catastrophic will happen to our bodies, because nature didn't build us with a stability that can hold up for ever. It will be as if the cosmos has decided that our little flash of life is no longer sustainable. Then our form will dissipate and the collection of atoms making up our bodies at the time of our death will be released again into the environment. Eventually, when our sun has evolved to its next stage and turned into a red giant, it will absorb the earth, along with all the atoms now comprising you and me, wherever they've gone. Then eventually the sun will go supernova and expel all that matter back into space, and who knows what new worlds and even new creatures might one day share the matter you now feel in your skin, and weigh in your bones?

Now that's the big picture. You may have been struck by what a destructive process nature is, as the price of building matter and structure into more complex forms. Individual creatures flourish briefly if they're lucky, then they die and their bodies return to the flux of matter through the universe. All this

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6 Very good on the whole evolutionary journey of life is Neil Shubin, *Your Inner Fish: A Journey into the 3.5 Billion-Year History of the Human Body*, Pantheon, New York, 2008.

7 One important issue that I do not touch in this brief discussion is the nature and evolution of human consciousness. My approach would be in terms of emergent complexity, on which I recommend Philip Clayton, *Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004. On the newer field of cognitive palaeontology, which addresses questions of how the human mind evolved, see the following standard works (in order of publication): Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: A Search for the Origins of Art, Religion and Science*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1996; Merlin Donald, *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness*, WW Norton, New York, 2001; Colin Renfrew, *Prehistory: The Making of the Human Mind*, Phoenix, London, 2007; Terrence W Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*, WW Norton, New York, 2012.

seems so immense and its purpose, if any, seems so far beyond anything to do with you and me. It's no surprise that these doubts and questions are at the centre of humanity's religious quest. For a start, humans typically experience wonder when they ponder nature's processes. Even a communist such as the poet Pablo Neruda could describe himself as being summoned by the cosmos to be a poet and to celebrate the wonder of being alive in it. In a poem actually called 'Poetry', Neruda puts it like this:

... poetry arrived  
 in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where  
 ...  
 I felt myself a pure part  
 of the abyss,  
 I wheeled with the stars,  
 my heart broke free on the open sky.<sup>8</sup>

But the wonder of being born into a world like ours can also give way to terror. The great French thinker Blaise Pascal put it simply in his *Pensees* when he wrote 'The eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me'. Perhaps as a Christian believer he felt more keenly the gap between the vast impersonal cosmos revealed by science and his Christian belief in a personal God, a God who knew him and cared for him. Not the God of the philosophers, not God as a theory, as Pascal testifies elsewhere, but the God of Jesus Christ who he'd met in prayer. How could that personal God be the God of a universe such as the one revealed by modern science?

The Eastern religious answer tends to see the whole process as sacred. The terror and the wonder belong together; the sacred is both creator and destroyer. As for the individual, we're very insignificant against a vast spiritual backdrop, and we pass away into the stuff of other lives – often later lives, according to those who believe in reincarnation. No wonder that modern writers have connected Eastern wisdom and modern science. I remember gobbling up books about this connection when I was a young student: books with titles such as *The Tao of Physics* and *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*.

In the West we've tended to split the terror and the wonder. God gets the wonder and the devil gets the terror. And as for science, since the late Middle Ages our earlier sense that God was invested in the way things went in the world broke down. Many Christians didn't like what science taught and

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8 Pablo Neruda, *The Essential Pablo Neruda*, English and Spanish edn, ed. Mark Eisner, City Lights, San Francisco, 2004, pp. 167–69.

they declared that scientific laws were only approximations to the way God actually did everything in the world. God worked all the levers behind the scenes, according to this view, and the devil worked some too. Science isn't really taken seriously in views like these. I don't think they take very seriously the Christian faith in God as creator, either.

Whatever it means to speak of God creating the world, it means that God loves the world and human beings and wants us to be at home in the world. According to the Bible, too, God is big on the wonder but also faces up to the terror. God in the Old Testament is on the side of struggling humanity, on the side of Israel, on the side of prophets who call us to face the truth. If sometimes the Bible makes God the direct author of terror, as some Christians still believe today, the main theme of the Bible is that God stands with us in the terror and transforms it. The story of Jesus in the New Testament is the heart of this faith.

The church quickly realised that Jesus the man was at the same time God with us in this world. He was made from stardust like we are, he grew and made mistakes and learned wisdom like we do. He loved and laughed, wept and hoped like we do. And he died like we do, though in his case it wasn't by natural causes or by accident. He called us to live free and confident and upright in this very world I've been discussing, standing up to the comforting lies people tell to make it seem more bearable. Jesus taught us not to do violent and controlling things to avoid the terror, but to face up to it with him.

Many people are angry with the God of Christianity for giving us so cruel a world, and one in which you and I are such tiny specks, our lives over so quickly, with so much disappointment and suffering.<sup>9</sup> Yes, this is the world God gives us. If God has created the world, it has to have been through this whole 13.7 billion-year process that it took to produce creatures like us – creatures who are blessed to know the wonder, but also cursed to feel the terror. The only answer to this anger is that Jesus did not seek to escape from the worst the world had to offer. Jesus drank this cup of human suffering to the dregs by choice: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This cry of Jesus before his crucifixion is a great sign of God's suffering solidarity with humanity. The

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9 There are many treatments of divine providence in general and the problem of evil that engage with a modern scientific worldview. For a useful introduction, see John Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence: God's Interaction with the World*, SPCK, London, 1989. For a range of perspectives on a variety of questions to do with so-called natural evil, see Nancey Murphy, Robert John Russell and William R Stoeger SJ (eds), *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil*, Vol. 1, Vatican Observatory Publications, Vatican City State, and Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Berkeley, 2007.

Christian singer-songwriter Sydney Carter put the modern world's regular complaint against God into the mouth of a thief crucified alongside Jesus:

They can blame it on the Romans,  
 They can blame it on the Jews,  
 They can blame it onto Pilate.  
 It's God I accuse.  
 It's God they ought to crucify, instead of you and me.  
 I said to the carpenter, a-hanging on the tree.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, Jesus' resurrection is the start of a whole new story for our cosmos.<sup>11</sup> Jesus' resurrection, whatever it was like, certainly meant a new life for Jesus with us and for us with God, gathered around Jesus. The church teaches that, in word and sacrament, in Scripture and prayer, and in our solidarity together as Christians, we find a way to live in this world childlike enough to see the wonder and adult enough to brave the terror. The final extinction of our life, and ultimately of the physical universe itself when all the lights in the sky have gone out, is not the absolute end. Everything we were and everything of value, all those structures that we were, are preserved in the loving heart of God and will ultimately find their fulfilment in God. That's what heaven means. We believe this because we believe in Jesus' resurrection. But also because we see God at work changing people, healing hopeless situations of violence and stupidity, helping people live with calm and poise in the world. We sense the love of God and so we trust the wonder. We know the terror was and is inevitable in a world like ours, the only world from which human beings could emerge. But we also believe that God is taking steps to transform the terror, to heal it, and ultimately to overcome it.

Here lies the Christian answer to who we are, and what the meaning of our life is in this wonderful but also terrifying cosmos. God has been waiting a long time, 13.7 billion years, to meet us, you and me, to know us, and to bless us. And because of Jesus Christ, who is a part of this wonderful cosmos yet who points beyond its terror and its limitations, God is not going to let go of us.

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10 Available, for example, on his compilation album, *Lovely in the Dances: Songs of Sydney Carter*, Osmosys, 2002.

11 For a broad and comprehensive account of the resurrection and its inclusive cosmic scope in modern theologies, see Brian D Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence*, Crossroad, New York, 2009.