

## Sermon: Religion and science

As I speak, there is a large international conference taking place in the north of England about science and religion. There will inevitably be a lot of talk about the question of whether human life can be explained entirely by evolution or whether there must be some element of intelligent design – in other words, whether God is allowed a walk-on part. As I have learnt from the great G.K. Chesterton, it is generally useful to look a bit askance at these big issues. So when anyone goes on about intelligent design, my mind turns to the cutlery draining tray in our kitchen which definitely betrays evidence of *unintelligent* design and, when I'm washing up, occasions me to use words that really belong in raucous kitchen sink dramas. It's always the night of the long knives with that draining tray: the long knives fall out of it and onto the floor, so they have to be washed again.

So we may infer perhaps that, since unintelligent design is possible, then intelligent design might be possible also. And it is. The Christian writer Chesterton had other things to say about the theory of evolution. It was no great problem for him. He said, *God is quite able to make something slowly as well as quickly*. Chesterton probably regarded evolution as true, but he had wry and thought-provoking things to say about it:

*So many poets after Darwin try desperately to write about machinery: touching which nobody has yet disputed the Argument from Design. No Darwin has yet maintained that motor cars began as scraps of metal, of which most happened to be scrapped; or that only those cars which had grown a carburetor by accident survived the struggle for life in Piccadilly.*

And he added:

*There is always something unthinkable about the whole evolutionary cosmos, because it is something coming out of nothing; an ever-increasing flood of water pouring out of an empty jug. In a word, the world does not explain itself, and cannot do so merely by continuing to expand itself. But anyway it is absurd for the evolutionist to complain that it is unthinkable for an admittedly unthinkable God to make everything out of nothing; and then pretend it is more thinkable that nothing should turn itself into everything...*

One of the biggest problems in trying to discuss science and religion is that many Christians are ignorant of science and many scientists are clueless when it comes to the basics of philosophical reasoning. So the problem of design is abstracted and made, as it were, into a distinct issue to be argued over merely in the literal-minded context of the way the world came about. But a philosopher would ask a question at once more profound and more simple.

He would say, *You can't discuss design in isolation. You must observe that the concept of design, of purpose, is constituent of human life and we can't live from one minute to the next without it. So even when the neo-Darwinian Richard Dawkins denies all design and purpose, he himself purposes and designs to go to his study and design a purposeful argument against design and purpose...*

Awkward - and useful – people, philosophers. Design and purpose are built into every moment of human life, and we could not last a minute without it. I meet a few of what the newspapers would call *top scientists* in the City. The other week I was sitting next to Professor Ian Cook at the Fuellers' Company Banquet. This is the man who has worked on nuclear fusion as a provider of domestic energy since 1968. Nuclear fusion is awesome. As Ian said, *A thimbleful of silicon and a bathtub of water and we could provide all Europe's energy needs for thirty years.*

We got talking about intelligent design. He said, *I find it as hard to believe that the universe came into being by accident as I would find it to believe that this banquet – with all the plates, glasses, knives and forks, food and wine – just appeared out of nothing.*

This is a subject deserving more attention. And it gets it in an exciting book by scientist and believer Gerald Schroeder: *The Hidden Face of God*. It's clear, readable, intelligent and I thoroughly commend it to you. Schroeder points out that the fact we are here at all is a miracle requiring the divine initiative. If the strong and weak nuclear forces had been ever so slightly different, if electromagnetism were not just exactly what it is, and if gravity were not as we experience it – then there would be no life at all. As he says, when the scientist looks around, he is led to conclude that it seems as if the world was designed for us.

But of course the atheist would argue that, though it was one chance in billions, that conditions for life would be just right, nevertheless that chance *must have been* the one which occurred – because here we are. In fact many scientists believe that our universe is but one of millions of universes and given perhaps an infinite number of universes, you will find life in one of them. This argument appears in the current edition of *New Scientist*.

But it is not new. We have heard this argument before many times: it was familiar to the classical Greek philosophers and it was repudiated by William of Occam in the Middle Ages in that wonderful put down that's on the tips of all our tongues: *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*. To translate roughly: don't make things more complicated than you need. It is more implausible that there should be an infinite number of universes than that there should be one universe which was designed.

But there are larger misconceptions of the nature of science even than these. All the mass media talks as if science were a solid body of certain knowledge. It isn't. Science is a method. And it proceeds by verifying hypotheses. That means, you will notice at once, falsifying earlier hypotheses. Science itself is a series of endless corrections: Kepler to Newton; Newton to Einstein. Contrary to popular imagining, science does not ask of anything, *Is this true?* But *Does this theory help us account for the way things appear? Can we work with it?*

And science has its own paradoxes and contradictions. For example, Dawkins and the neo-Darwinists do not believe in freedom of the will: it's all determined by our genes, they say. In fact you can't even call the genes *our* genes because in no sense do they belong to us. But biologists such as Dawkins also believe what their brother scientists the particle physicists tell them: that at the sub-atomic level, reality is unpredictable

and indeterminate. But you see there are many philosophers who would say it's nonsense to believe there is a deterministic system which in its most basic particulars is indeterminate.

In short, if there were no purpose and design in creation, we would not base our whole lives – as we do – on the notions of purpose, meaning and design. Most of what we do is purposeful. The cosmos everywhere discloses signs of intelligent activity, of things being *for* something. It would be strange indeed to think that purpose and design themselves arose by accident.

As Francis Bacon puts it in his essay *On Atheism*: *I had rather believe all the fables in the Legend and the Talmud and the Koran than that this universal frame is without a mind.*

Look around you: *The world is charged with the grandeur of God*