

Outline Notes for a Teaching Block on a Theology of science

Length: 1 contact hour Level: 5

Resources include: teaching notes, a videoed interview, assessment suggestions, reading lists.

Aim: to introduce the idea of a theology *of* science, a framing of the human relationship with nature, of science as God's gift, and in continuity with the Biblical Wisdom tradition.

Source: Tom McLeish, Professor of Natural Philosophy, University of York



Objectives: by the end of the block students will be able to:

- a) Articulate the difference between opposing theology and science, and developing a theology of science
- b) Demonstrate a wider Biblical awareness of textual resource for thinking theologically about science
- c) Understand how a theology of science can inform pastoral and political work in which the church is active.

(1) 5-min Introductory Discussion: *What does 'theology of...' mean?*

Raise the question in the light of examples such as art, politics, music warfare, agriculture, and medicine to tease out issues of purpose, teleological narrative, salvation-history, ethics and just practice.

Here, for example, is Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Art in Action* on 'Towards a Christian Aesthetic', which might be introduced to get the short initial discussion going:

'Man's *embeddedness* in the physical creation, and his creaturely *vocation* and creaturely *end* within that creation, are where we must begin if we are to describe how the Christian

sees the arts, provided, in turn, that the arts are seen as instruments and objects of action'.
Nicholas Wolterstorff

To draw out: the difference between an oppositional stance ('Theology *and* Science') and a comprehensive stance (Theology *of* Science).

(2) 5-min video material(CPX interview with Tom McLeish) and 5-minute response

Watch: <https://publicchristianity.org/library/the-wise-scientist#.VrYFP7fcvIU>

The video deals with the idea of the degree of faith (in the common sense) required in the active perusal of science, and the idea of a Theology of Science.

Discussion in the response-session: What does the metaphor of the 'book' do to help reframe the relationship between theology and science:

'Science is the name of the current chapter in a book that humanity has been writing since the dawn of humankind, in continuity with other chapters that bear titles such as *Natural Philosophy* ("Love of wisdom to do with natural things") and, in ancient times, simply *Wisdom*.' *Tom McLeish*

(3) 5-min read of section adapted from *Towards a Theology of Science in Faith and Wisdom in Science*

A Theology of Science: Participation in Reconciliation

To formulate a theology of science, we need to draw together some threads together from a double reading of wisdom and of science. Through the lenses of our experience of science on the one hand, and of the biblical theological story on the other we can trace how themes they both share have shaped and responded to these two deeply human endeavours.

Seven aspects of the long story of science emerge:

- long and linear history,
- surprising human aptitude for reimagining nature,
- search for wisdom as well as knowledge,
- ambiguity and experience of pain,
- delicate balance of order and chaos,
- centrality of the question and the questioning mind,
- the experience of love,

are the lines that draw us to a larger narrative in which science can be framed. Within all these themes the pattern of relationship dogs us constantly. Science experiences the negotiation of a new relationship between human minds and the physical world. The nature-language of the Bible is consistently employed to describe and develop the relationship of care and of understanding between humans and a world that is both our home and also potentially a frightening field of bewilderingly complexity. Although fraught with ambiguity, experiencing pain and joy in equal measure, knowing terror before the phenomenon of chaos as well as experiencing joy before its resplendent order, bewildered by ignorance yet granted hard-won understanding, the Biblical theology of nature is consistently relational. St Paul invested to a deeply personal degree in the nascent Christian communities with which he worked. None of these relationships was more turbulent than that with the small church in Corinth, to which he probably wrote at least three major epistles, two of which are

found within the New Testament. The pain of rejection at one point seems to have caused him a nervous breakdown, yet it is also within his dealings with this church that he composed one of the most sublime writings on love ever penned (I refer to the passage often chosen for wedding readings from 1Cor 13). So it is perhaps not surprising that it is also within this correspondence that he re-thinks the entire project of God's creation in relational terms, working around and towards the central idea of reconciliation. The argument begins with the fifth chapter of his second letter to the Corinthians, recapitulating briefly his picture of a 'groaning' creation, from the letter to the Romans, in longing for a more permanent form, which he calls *clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life*. Arguing that those who have been baptised into the life with Christ can already view the world from the perspective of its future re-creation, he writes (2Cor v17):

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ – new creation;

The old has gone, the new has come!

All this is from God, who reconciled himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:

That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ

The *ministry of reconciliation* is a stunningly brief encapsulation of the Biblical story of the purpose to which God calls people. I don't know a better three-word definition of Christianity, and it does very well as an entry point for Old Testament temple-based Judaism as well. It acknowledges that there is work to do: relationships on all scales are damaged. Nation against nation, communities against communities, families, marriages, even the vital self-worth that describes people's relationship with themselves is often damaged. The biblical analysis of the reason for relational suffering is that an underpinning relationship, that between created humans and their Creator, is itself in need of repair. Now is not the place to recapitulate the theology of incarnation, death and resurrection that explores the New Testament Christian *kerygma*, the 'good news' that a way to healing this broken relationship has been opened by God. Those wonders have been explained by others far better than I could. But the Christian hope is just this - that mending that great relationship, voicing an answer to God's "*Adam, where are you?*" call in the garden, and Jesus' agonised "*My God why have you forsaken me?*" in his dying moments, releases the potential to heal so much more.

There is one relationship that tends to be overlooked in expositions of Christian theology – perhaps humbler than the human ones listed above, but just as profound. It is the relationship between humankind and nature itself. It is a relationship characterised by ignorance and fear in the past and to a great extent in the present also. It is often a damaging one: we exploit rather than care for the world, inadvertently tearing away vital components of the atmosphere, or replacing them with harmful ones; it can hurt us also with storm, earthquake and tsunami, with rising sea levels. But, like all hurt, it we do not need to shrug our shoulders and give up hope. As for all the human relationships, the consequence of the healing of the great relationship is that the covenant between humanity and the natural world can also be healed. A theology of science, consistent with the stories we have told up to this point, situates our exploration of nature within that greater task. Science becomes, within a Christian theology, the grounded outworking of the 'ministry of reconciliation' between humankind and the world. Far from being a task that threatens to derail the narrative of salvation, it actually participates within it. Science is the name we now give to the deeply human, theological task of participating in the mending of our relationship with nature.

It is an extraordinary idea at first, especially if we have been used to negotiating ground between 'science' and 'religion'; as if there were a disputed frontier requiring some sort of disciplinary peacekeeping force to hold the line. It also makes little sense within a view of history that sees science as an exclusively modern and secular development, replacing outworn cultural practices of ignorance and dogmatic authoritarianism with

'scientific method' and evidence-based logic. But neither of these assumptions stands up to disciplinary analysis on the one hand or history on the other.

Neither science nor theology can be authentic unless they can be universal. There can be no boundary delineating territory between them that does not immediately nullify their essence. We need a 'theology of science' because we need a theology of everything. If we fail, then we have a theology of nothing. Such a theology has to bear in mind the tension that the same is true for science – it has never worked to claim that science can speak of some, but not of other topics. Science and theology are not complementary, they are not in combat, they are not just consistent - they are "of each other". This is the first ingredient of a theology of science. Just as there is no boundary to be drawn across the domain of subject, there is no boundary within time that demarks successive reigns of theology and science. It is just not possible to define a moment in the history of thought that marks a temporal boundary between the 'pre-scientific' and 'scientific'. The questioning longing to understand, to go beneath the superficialities of the world in thought, to reconstruct the workings of the universe in our minds, is a cultural activity as old as any other. Furthermore, it is a human endeavour deeply and continually rooted in theological tradition. The conclusion is still surprising: far from being necessarily contradictory or threatening to a religious worldview in general, or to Christianity in particular, science turns out to be an intensely theological activity. When we do science, we participate in the healing work of the Creator. When we understand a little more of nature, we take a step further in the reconciliation of a broken relationship.

(4) 15-min response to the main issues raised.

Possible questions to lead with are:

- Does Wisdom plausibly constitute the OT roots of relationship with the natural world?
- Might the 'creative tension of order and chaos' offer an approach to theodicy (see, for example, the 'free-process defence' in module on natural evil)?
- How can we define or explain science with a long cultural perspective that also does justice to the enlightenment?
- Discuss/critique this summary statement of a possible 'theology of science'

Science is the participative, relational, co-creative work of healing the fallen relationship of humans with nature.

(5) 5-min reading of an 800 word piece of journalistic reporting on a science-based 'hot topic'

This section begins to draw out the application that theological thinking about science has in the role that the church is called-on to assume in informing public debate. The number of possible topics is large, and one might choose a global issue (e.g. climate action) or a local one (e.g. fracking)

Example resources:

Global rainforests <https://theconversation.com/tropical-forests-will-still-exist-in-2100-but-they-will-be-a-sorry-sight-46437>

Fracking debate <http://theconversation.com/can-you-convince-people-that-the-risks-of-fracking-are-worth-it-51781>

Human gene therapy <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/feb/01/human-embryo-genetic-modify-regulator-green-light-research>

(6) 15-min group discussion of the application of a Theology of Science to the exemplar

Guide questions:

- What are the contentious issues of fact and interpretation?
- What are the contentious issues of proposed action and response?
- How do two possible 'Theologies of Science' guide the process of public decision-making and choice:
 - (a mandate to dominate nature
 - an invitation to reconcile nature
- Are there tactics or narratives employed in the debate that the church should discourage or encourage?
- What role might the church, and church leadership play in the debate and the decision?

(7) 5-min Questions and Reflections

References

Tom McLeish, *Faith and Wisdom in Science*, OUP (2014)

George Steiner, *Real Presences*, London: Faber (1989)

John Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief; Theological reflections of a bottom-up thinker*, SPCK (1994)