Creation and Evolution

A positive view of how the Theology of Creation can be informed by a scientific understanding of the world

by Rev Timothy Finigan

Author's Note
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Introduction

When I was a small boy, my parents bought me a chemistry set for one of my birthdays. This was not an attempt to educate me. It was a response to my eager interest in science, an interest that has stayed with me all my life. I studied physics, chemistry and biology at A-Level, then Experimental Psychology and Philosophy at university, gently moving across the spectrum of subjects, ending up studying Patristic Theology and Latin in Rome. However, I have never lost my eager fascination with science. This will account for my love-hate relationship with the writings of Richard Dawkins. His explanation of natural selection is elegant and compelling. Sadly, his knowledge of theology seems to be largely limited to information found on creationist or atheist websites, and from the leading lights of the Jesus seminar.

One of the greatest legacies of the Christian middle ages was the foundation of our great universities, and indeed of the university system, based on the idea that it was worthwhile for people to have the leisure to study not for economic or utilitarian considerations but because of the value in itself of increasing the sum of human knowledge and wisdom. Many of us involved in higher education realise that we are in the twilight of this great ideal. While there is still time, I am always happy to promote the union of those two great areas of human academic endeavour, science and theology. Therefore I am grateful for the opportunity to address you on the question of Creation and Evolution, or more broadly, the relationship between science and creation.

What science can't do…

Change the laws it discovers

The problem for science, or the advantage of it, depending on your point of view, is that science cannot change the universe it investigates. Of course in one sense it does. Our technology interferes with the environment and an observer affects the experiment he conducts. However, these too are observable phenomena. The thing about the discovery of Maxwell's equations or the matter-energy equation of Einstein is that we can't say that we don't like them and can we have a different equation, please.

From a Christian point of view, this is important. If we examine the relationship between science and Christianity, we are looking at a part of the relation between reason and faith – a very important part.[1]

It is so important that it is one of the principal reasons why people reject faith. Mistakenly, as I shall argue, people think that science has shown our faith to be false. Unless we counter this convincingly, we are left with the choice either of fideism – the abandonment of rational argument or empirical evidence; or an obscurantist denial of the empirical data of science. An example of this, in my view, is the idea that God made the fossil layers appear to look much older than they are in fact.[2]

Teach us what God has revealed

However, it is one thing to say that science can be brought into play. It is quite another to expect science to furnish us with all the data of faith. Christianity is a revealed religion. We are not concerned to show that science teaches us about the sacraments or the Trinity, or that God answers our prayers.

However, I wish to argue that we can expect more from science than simply that it does not fatally contradict our faith. I believe that in Christianity especially, science has an important place because we believe in creation and we believe that creation reveals God to us.

Questioning the idea of NOMA

Here I would also like to distance myself from the view that science and religion have their own separate fields and have nothing to say to each other. In a book which makes many excellent points, Alistair McGrath argues that natural science leads neither to atheism nor to Christianity, saying,

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[1] Cf Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter: *Fides et Ratio* 1998, and Pope Benedict XVI, Lecture: *Faith, Reason and the University. Memories and Reflections* (University of Regensburg, 12 September 2006)

[2] Cf Dawkins, R *The God Delusion*. London 2006 p.284-285 where Dawkins, characteristically, provides the extreme and embarrassing example of a Harvard Geologist whose reading of the Bible convinced him of "young earth creationism" whereupon he abandoned his scientific career.

> The scientific method is incapable of delivering a decisive adjudication of the God question.[3]

I find myself agreeing with Richard Dawkins here about the Stephen Jay Gould's idea of the "Non Overlapping Magisteria" or NOMA. Dawkins quotes Gould as saying that science covers the empirical realm, while religion covers questions of ultimate value and that "These two magisteria do not overlap." He also said "science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven."[4]

On the contrary, although science obviously cannot answer all our religious questions, we should certainly expect it to provide us with "a decisive adjudication of the God question" if the God in question is a Creator God.

… and what it can

Science shows us that the world makes sense
First it can show us that the universe is not simply a random and chaotic collectivity but that it has meaning. This is an important point, I think, because one surface impression that we can take is that everything is, in fact random. Many of the processes at a sub-microscopic level depend on probabilities. And at the level of astrophysics, it can seem as though it is a fairly random collection of galaxies.

However, the very enterprise of science itself depends on the search for meaning. We attempt to frame laws and to discover constants which can increase our overall understanding of what is going on. We try to reduce the apparently random to terms that can be understood. And crucially, we subject our theories to the test. It is of the nature of a useful hypothesis that it can be either true or false. If it is simply true whatever is actually out there, it is of no use to us. So if we find that our hypothesis is proved and it offers us a useful and productive description of how part of the universe works, we have found out something new. The ultimate test of this is in our technology where we put these discoveries to practical use.

Here is where the non-scientist can appreciate the whole process. Whether we understand electro-magnetism or not, the mobile telephone works. Whether we understand pressure and kinetic energy or not, the car can be driven. Whether world leaders understand atomic theory or not, they can threaten one another with a nuclear device.

Natural selection an important example
The operation of natural selection is an important example of how cumulative small changes result in what is a fundamentally non random process as Dawkins is at pains to point out:

> This belief, that Darwinian evolution is 'random', is not merely false. It is the exact opposite of the truth. Chance is a minor ingredient in the Darwinian recipe, but the most important ingredient is the cumulative selection which is quintessentially *non*-random.[5]

Dawkins uses the example of natural selection to make the point that design is not the only alternative to chance; this is a kingpin in his argument against the existence of God. However, natural selection is a process that happens within a context. For natural selection to work, it is necessary that the chemistry of DNA also works. For that to work, it is necessary for the laws of physics to operate.

What Dawkins achieves, and indeed hammers home, is that we cannot rely on a "God of the gaps." To say "I do not understand how such a process could arise by chance" is not a good argument for the existence of God: someone may later show us how the process could arise without the direct intervention of God. Dawkins shows this with many examples, most notably the evolution of the eye.

The laws of physics
Dawkins shows that the mechanism of natural selection can account for the wonderful variety of life that we observe on earth. Rightly in my view, he argues that we do not need any additional explanations. By way of analogy, we can describe what is happening when a kettle boils. We do not need to suppose that there is an angel who comes in and boils the water when it has been heated for a while.

But the laws of physics themselves cannot simply be left there without any further investigation. The mechanism of natural selection is a marvellous application in the world of the laws of physics when applied to the complex molecules of DNA. The simple statements of the constants and fundamental laws of the universe describe what is necessary for the process to work. They are a part of the description of the universe. We can test them out by applying them in our own technology or by observing how they work in the much more advanced applications that we observe in nature.

The account of the universe
We observe – and Dawkins agrees vehemently – that things in the universe do not simply happen "by chance." Whether we are speaking of the falling of a body to the earth under the law of gravity or the natural selection which results in the formation of the human eye, there is an explanation in terms of how the world works – ultimately in terms of the laws of physics.

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[3] McGrath, A Dawkins' God. Genes, memes, and the meaning of life. Oxford. 2005

[4] He converts the assertion of Cardinal Baronius at the time of Galileo that the Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.

[5] Dawkins, R The Blind Watchmaker. London (1991 edition) p.49

The study of the causes of things is the whole foundation of science. What Dawkins and Einstein and Stephen Hawking are doing is to look to the causes of things to explain how they come about. To say that things are "just there" is not an explanation and it is the end of science.

What we do when we explain things is to explain them in terms of other things. We explain the formation of the eye or the heart in terms of the DNA which gives rise to that particular organ. We can explain DNA in terms of the constituent nucleotides which make it up. And we can explain them ultimately in terms of the physics of the formation of molecules.

Each time, we are explaining one thing in terms of another thing that is not simply "just there." Even the universe itself can be described in terms of the laws of physics. This was the great achievement of Einstein's general theory of relativity in 1915 and Hubble's discovery in 1929 that the universe is expanding. (It is from this explanation that the theory of the "big bang" at the origin of the universe derives.)

Still some explaining to do

So with the universe itself, "there is still some explaining to do"[6] The universe cannot be its own explanation because it can be demonstrated that it is itself something that acts in an ordered way. It "obeys" the laws of physics. Why? It could have been otherwise. Simply to shrug one's shoulders and refuse to take up the question is not an explanation. It is not a "scientific" approach.

Therefore, we must seek outside the universe for an explanation of the universe itself. The universe is the sort of thing that is caused to be in a particular way. We still have some explaining to do.

And if we are looking for an explanation outside of the material universe. We will be asking why the universe exists and why it exists as it does. And, as Stephen Hawking himself points out, if we answer that question, we

> It would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God.[7]

Hawking was probably trying to be provocative with this statement. However, Christian thinkers have beaten him to this point. That is exactly what we want to do when asking questions about the fundamental cause of the universe. We are searching for God.

Fundamental to this is the positive appreciation of science in our argument for the existence of God. The "God of the gaps" argument overturns our reasoning. In brief, we do not say "Science cannot explain this, therefore there is a God." On the contrary, we can say "Science *can* explain this, therefore there is a God."

Lead us to see God's wisdom in creation

The continuing discovery that the universe is not simply random but is subject to our understanding is an important point in itself. It is something that fits very well with a Christian understanding of the human person and the wisdom of God. If the universe is indeed "good" as described in the first chapter of the book of Genesis, then we may expect it to be ordered, not the chaos of the Babylonian myth. If we are made to the image and likeness of God, with a share in his wisdom, we would expect that we can penetrate to some degree the wisdom through which the universe is framed.

The Faith Movement

From science we can show that God exists

In fact, we can rediscover something important from St Thomas Aquinas and his "five ways" of answering the question "Whether God is".[8] His five ways were not like St Anselm's ontological argument, based purely on the ability of the human mind. They were based on the data of creation. We would not necessarily go along with the Aristotelian manner of speaking but we certainly can understand the idea that if things are caused, there must be a first cause, and if things are designed, there must be a mind that designs them.

Who made God?

At one point, Dawkins refers to the question with which Bertrand Russell plagued his nanny: "Who made God?" In fact, you do not have to be Bertrand Russell to ask this question. Very many parents and teachers have heard this natural question from children. Like many children's questions, it gets to the heart of an important philosophical question.

Remember that we were speaking of how the scientist will explain one thing in terms of another. This is the way that science operates within the universe. The point that we got to was how we might explain the universe itself. We would not succeed in our quest if the explanation was in terms of something else that needed explaining, something that had another cause. Stephen Hawking quotes the amusing example of the lady who said that the world was standing on a turtle. When asked what that turtle was standing on, she relied that it was another turtle. When quizzed about this turtle, she said that she was not going to be fooled by this sort of argument and triumphantly proclaimed "It's turtles all the way down."[9]

[6] Faith Pamphlet *Can we be sure that God exists?*

[7] Stephen Hawking in *A Brief History of Time*.

[8] St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* 1a.2.3

[9] I read this anecdote in Stephen Hawkins's *A Brief History of Time*. London. 1988. Searching for a reference, I find that there is a Wikipedia article "Turtles all the way down" devoted to the matter. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turtles_all_the_way_down

Precisely what we are looking for is something that does not need a further explanation or a further cause. We cannot have an infinite chain of causes because that too does not have to exist as it does. It still requires an explanation. All that we have accomplished is to bring in a further inexplicable and unevidenced infinite chain. Why it is there is still a question that needs answering.

Nor can we say that the universe was simply "always there." The most important corollary of Hubble's discovery of the expanding universe is that the universe had a beginning, precisely that it was not "always there."

When we speak of God, it is precisely of a being who is "always there," a being who is not caused and does not admit of further explanation. To ask "Who made God?" is to mistake God for some kind of thing or person who needs a cause, who might not have been there. God is the one who is not made but who always is. This theological statement finds new relevance when we are faced with a universe that itself obeys the laws of physics and needs to be grounded itself, as the universe, in an uncaused cause which exists necessarily and which admits of no explanation outside of itself. As the penny Catechism put it "God exists alone of himself."

Making sense of science itself

The rational approach to the origins of the universe and to the universe itself is, I think, is the important basis upon which we can draw on science today. This is the approach taken in the Faith Movement[10] to which I belong and have been part of for many years. It is an idea that is full of hope, not an exercise in medieval logic-chopping as the work of Aquinas is so often unfairly characterised. If we can look with confidence at the discoveries of science and see *there* that there is evidence for the existence and wisdom of God, we are free indeed.

We often speak of a law within the universe which is a unified law or wisdom of God. Rather than contradicting science, it helps to provide a context in which to make sense of science itself.

Approaching the Unity Law

The cosmic equation

In his chapter on "Creation through Evolution", Holloway says:

> "What is essential to the theme of this chapter, and of much else in this book, is the vision of the perspective of the universe as the unfolding of a cosmic equation of energies, numbers, valued, natures and individual entities. This equation of elements and of existents in mutual play one on another is poised in the beginning of the history of the universe as we know it, in the beginning too of its history as it has *made us*, much as the pride and prime of life is poised in organisation and potency in that initial equation of energies which is the fertilised seed of any form of life."[11]

This is a most powerful idea. We have all heard of the "Big Bang" and many people presume that the very concept is opposed to the existence of God. What the idea of the "cosmic equation" shows is that the very "big bang" itself is *not* a random explosion such as that caused by a suicide bomber. Although, of course, even that is not random – if we knew every detail of the explosives, the position of the "martyr", their clothing and all the surrounding circumstances including the buildings, the air pressure and the other climactic variables, we could, in theory, predict exactly what would happen.

The fact that we cannot predict all the consequences is due to a limitation of our knowledge and ability to calculate. It is not because the laws of physics are suspended. The destruction caused speaks of transgression of the law of good. In the cosmic equation of the "big bang", the far more complex interactions over a vast interval of space and time teach us of the wisdom of the mind in which this equation is framed. They tell us of the *Logos* through whom all things are created.

In *Philosophical Perspectives* Volume III[12] Fr Holloway alludes to Dr Habgood's use of the Mandelbrot set. It is founded on

> "the absurdly simple equation" $Z = Z^2 + C$ where C is a constant number, Z starts out as zero and the equation is constantly iterated. As the equation is iterated, the value of Z changes and so does its magnitude or difference from zero. Interestingly, the magnitude of Z will either surpass 2 and go on increasing for ever, or it will remain forever equal to or less than 2. Where the magnitude of Z remains equal to or less than 2, it is part of the Mandelbrot set. If many complex numbers are graphed, we can colour those that are not part of the Mandelbrot set according to how many iterations were required before the magnitude surpassed 2. Those that are part of the Mandelbrot set remain black.
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> If the graph this generated is detailed enough, it is possible to zoom in on it without limit. "We can zoom in to the trillionth power in a few hours if we use a small image size. This is like zooming in on the United States of America and seeing details that are the size of single cells. As we zoom in deeply, we can see parts of the Mandelbrot that no one has seen before!"

This is an illustration of how an "absurdly simple equation" can produce results of amazing complexity. Of course, the complexity of the Mandelbrot set is nothing compared to the

Accessed 18/10/06) Apparently, the anecdote is used as an argument against the idea of a first cause. It seems to me to work quite well as an argument in favour of one.

[10] Information about the Faith Movement can be found at www.faith.org.uk.

[11] Holloway, E. *Catholicism: A New Synthesis* Wallington. 1976 p.43

[12] p.39

complexity of the entire universe. Yet the illustration shows us that if we manage to find a unifying theory of the universe, the much sought-after equation of physicists, this does not make the universe simple in itself. It may be an amazingly simple equation to account for the incredible subsequent complexities of matter.

It will also mean that the fact that our universe is complex does not mean that it is random or disordered. We could, in theory, work out exactly what would happen to all the matter in the universe as a result of a suicide bomber's explosion. We could work it out because the universe is not random but ordered. And at heart, the equation may be simple and the most fundamental particles may be few.

The question that arises is not whether the universe is ordered thus but how and why. It is an obvious question for anyone who comes close to these things and it is a question that has struck some apprehension at least into the hearts of many physicists. The man on the street or the child in Year 8 may think glibly that science has disproved God. But science itself faces a much deeper reality.

Analogy of being

The next key idea takes us a good step away from the Mandelbrot set. In that graph, there is no real "higher" and "lower". There is no "more simple" and "more complex". However, we zoom in, we are looking at the same equation, the same graph, the same set.

In the universe, however, we can see that there is a difference between the quark-gluon plasma and the star. We find a further degree of advance and complexity with the planet with atmosphere. Then we come to the planet with cells, plants and animals. As I have suggested, Dawkins' explanation of natural selection is another powerful example of how a simple concept can explain the development of an awe-inspiring complexity.[13]

Here we may introduce a useful concept from the scholastic philosophers, that of the "analogy of being". That is to say things participate in being to a greater or lesser degree – or in shorthand, we might say, with caution, are more or less "real". This is shown in their degree of intelligibility and certainty. Thus we find that in Quantum physics, it is easiest to suppose that some entities behave sometimes as waves and sometimes as particles in different situations.

The idea of the analogy of being, stated more carefully, is that things participate in being to a greater or lesser degree by analogy with the perfect being who is God. We can perhaps make this clearer by looking at a corollary notion.

The ascent of being (evolution)

The very division of our scientific areas of study looks at macroscopic and microscopic levels of being. We understand the difference between nuclear or high-energy physics and astrophysics. Even more, we understand that there is a difference between nuclear physics and biology.

And we know that there is an ascent of being which is shown from the time immediately after the big bang, microseconds studied intensively at CERN, and the time of the formation of the earth studied by geologists, and the time studied by paleontologists, botanists and zoologists.

This helps us to understand better the concept of the "analogy of being" away from the brain-splitting concepts of quantum physics. We can see the sense of the notion that at the quantum level, being is less intelligible, less "actualised" than at the level of the tree or the rabbit.

At the same time, we know that the same laws of physics hold good even today! What was true a short time after the big bang is still true now and because of that, we can exploit our knowledge of physics in the production of the cathode ray tube for our televisions[14] and the properties of semi-conductors for our computers.

The equation of matter, together with the observed ascent of being, can be harmonised by the use of the idea of the analogy of being as a unifying key idea or hermeneutic.

However, there still remains a fundamental problem which we must try to solve.

Co-relativity

In all of this discussion, we have so far neglected the observer. He was important to Heisenberg on account of the interference with the phenomena which he inevitably introduced.

Heisenberg showed that one cannot know both the position *and* the momentum of a particle *at the same time* because when you measure one quantity you randomise the value of the other. We might say that the intelligibility of such a particle is limited.

However, the intelligibility of many things is limited by the observer – and this is a fundamental point for us. The old Church History professor at Wonersh seminary, Fr Broomfield, famously said (very many times!) that he could not see the point of 22 grown men kicking a bag of leather across a muddy field trying to get it to go between two wooden posts. Such

[13] Dawkins himself writes about the power of a scientific view of the world to inspire wonder and awe in his book *Unweaving the Rainbow*. Unfortunately, as ever, he spends time refuting a weak argument for the existence of God. This time, it is the "argument" that the universe is more mysterious when endowed with "ad hoc magic".

[14] I do not have a television myself. Visiting the houses of parishioners recently, I realise that I should now perhaps drop the old-fashioned cathode ray tube in favour of the "plasma screen."

was football to him! To others, it is the beautiful game. For Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, Cézanne's *Grandes Baigneuses* was "those fat nude ladies with their bottoms towards you."

In these examples, we can see that the human person has imposed upon the elements of nature a "meaning" or intelligibility beyond what those things have in themselves considered as the simply the building-blocks from which they are made up. When our society has collapsed under the weight of its own moral decadence, perhaps our computers will be used for fuel.

The unity of all being in the universe
Considering the fundamental particles of the universe, we can suggest that all the being in the universe is relative. Things participate to a greater or lesser degree in the fullness of being. They are relative to other matter.

To put it more simply and perhaps accommodate this to more fashionable terminology, we can say that everything in the universe is understood only in relation to its environment, to other matter.

Our own creative work is a true analogy of God's work of creation. We put things together to make something else, higher, with a greater meaning, with reference to ourselves. We become a particular sort of environment, a particular sort of "other thing" because our creative power can bring something new from various component parts.

This is an analogy of God's creative work in the universe which puts things together to make something higher, with greater meaning, with reference to himself.

The human person
In the case of the human person, we can suggest that the creation of the spiritual soul is not an arbitrary jump away from the rest of the process of the universe but is something called for within the wisdom of God.

For the human person, other material things alone cannot be our only frame of reference, nor our only environment. St Paul put it very simply when he said "In him we live and move and have our being."

This relativity of the whole universe to God is described by St Paul:

> For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible […] all things were created through him and in him and he is before all and all things hold together in him[15]

The Unity Law of Control and Direction

Now we may summarise the sweep of this idea if we call it the "unity law of control and direction". It will be helpful to consider it under these headings

Law
When we consider the cosmic equation at the heart of matter, we meditate upon the supreme mind which framed this equation which we may be able to glimpse in the "Grand Unified Theory" which is the current (and more hopeful) version of the "philosopher's stone".

Here, I wish to comment on an objection raised by Dawkins to the existence of God. He argues that if God is the designer of the universe, he must be incredibly complex. He comments on the famous argument of Fred Hoyle that the probability of life originating on the earth is the same as the probability that a tornado, blowing through a scrap yard, would produce a Boeing 747.[16]

Now I do not think this is an argument that helps us much in demonstrating the existence of God. Dawkins and others do not believe that everything in the universe happens "by chance". The scientific enterprise itself is all about formulating hypotheses and proving laws that show the universe is anything but random. Natural selection is an important example of this. However, we do need to ask why the universe operates according to law in the first place, and indeed (a question that Dawkins despises) why there is something rather than nothing.

Dawkins' argument against God as the designer of the universe is that he would have to be extremely complex and would therefore be "the Ultimate Boeing 747."

However, the amazing truth about the fundamental laws of the universe is precisely that they are not complex but simple. The thesis of Dawkins' *Climbing Mount Improbable* is that a simple theory (natural selection) can explain a complex reality by cumulative change over a large number of small steps. The search for the Grand Unified Theory takes us to the "threshold of the mind of God" because it is simple, not complex. To say with St Thomas Aquinas that God is simple is in accord with this understanding of the universe, not contrary to it.

The ascent of law
Along with the ascent of being, we may consider the ascent of law by which the human person also participates in the cosmic provision of God. The same wisdom which we glimpse in the study of particle physics, provides the true environment for the human person.

[15] Colossians 1.16-17

[16] Dawkins (2006) p.113-114

It is the same mind of God, the same wisdom, the same absolute in relation to that which is co-relative. For the human person, the co-relativity is now not with other matter only but with the living God. We become more real insofar as we grow in the sunshine of the soul, the living nourishment of God's grace. We are not defined in terms of ourselves alone, we are defined in and through our relationship with God.

Therefore, the moral law, given by God and made explicit in all its depth by Jesus Christ, is not a "shackle" of "do's and don'ts" but the law of life for us.

Unity

We call it a "Unity" law because it is the one wisdom of God that frames the cosmos in the equation of matter at the big bang, that controls and directs the ascent of being through evolution, the ascent of law through the primordial revelation and the evocation of the word through priest and prophet to Jesus Christ and brings it to fulfilment when Christ will lay all at the feet of the Father.

Control

Essentially, this takes us again to the idea of co-relativity in God. The tornado blowing through a junkyard needs a further clarification – even if it could happen by chance, it would not be a Boeing 747 without man to give it meaning, context, and definition. When the cuneiform scripts were discovered, they needed man to define them before they become more than scratches on stone.

So with the universe itself. Its very intelligibility points us to the existence of God who did not make it as a "blind watchmaker" but who made it "in the beginning", that is to say in *wisdom* who said:

> The Lord created me as the beginning of his ways.[17]

and *in* that wisdom, that is to say:

> all things were created through him and in him[18]

in him who is spoken of thus as the beginning:

> He is before all, and all things hold together I him and he is the head of the body of the Church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that in all things, he should hold the primacy[19]

Direction

Under this heading is the rest of our faith. If God is the true environment of the spiritual human person, then we must expect him to reveal himself to us. We could talk about the disaster of the spiritual person contradicting the law of God for the first time in the history of the universe and the devastating effects of that.

But we may keep a positive vision for the time being because we can still see the place of the incarnation of Christ as part of the overall plan of God's wisdom to bring the universe to its fulfilment.

We can, in other words, vindicate the vision of Pope John Paul II who speaks of Christ as the Lord of the Universe and Lord of History. In him indeed do all things hold together.

[17] Proverbs 8.22

[18] Colossians 1.16

[19] Colossians 1.17-18