

The Spyglass

Assuming that God is a human creation, David S. Lee reflects on certain biblical themes.

The purpose of this article is to examine certain Biblical themes through the spyglass of theological non-realism. The title is suggested by the Philip Pullman's novel *The Amber Spyglass*¹ in which Dr Mary Malone, a physicist and former nun who becomes an atheist, makes a spyglass enabling her to see deeply into the nature of that wonderfully complex and beautiful world created by the author. Part of the meaning of the story is that rational thinking has the power to set free the human race from the tyranny and pain of superstition and religious bigotry.

Theological non-realism is that branch of learning founded on the proposition that God has no objective existence. Among those who accept this proposition are those who eliminate all reference to God from their thinking and writing. They turn the spyglass away from the Bible and all religious texts and look at the secularised world. A good example is Don Cupitt's *The Meaning of it All in Everyday Speech* – this is brilliant but somehow it doesn't catch on among the masses of ordinary people and it cannot really be thought of as a branch of theology.

There are those who accept the proposition but think that the idea of God as a ubiquitous presence in human thought and language has value. Looking through the spyglass they see in the Bible what appears, at first glance, to be an image of God as a real person 'out there' looking down in love and pity upon the human race and intervening sometimes to sort out the mess. We shall examine some of these situations and subject them to the critique of non-realism. This exercise may truly be thought of as part of contemporary theology.

Creation

Most of our ancestors believed that God existed outside the universe and possessed almighty power. By his word he called into existence everything that is:

God said, 'Let the water under the earth be gathered together into one place, so that dry land may appear'; and so it was. (Gen 1: 9)

God is also believed to be unchangeable. So his command to humans to 'have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing that moves on the earth' (Gen 1: 28) gave rise to the sense of power over nature which has proved damaging, in the long run, to the sense of

responsibility for the earth and its conservation.

It is interesting to see how some tend to think about the universe in 'absolutist' terms, that is, as if there is someone out there controlling the whole thing; the very word creation implies a

creator. For example the story is told about a group of scientists who visited Pope John Paul II in the Vatican some years ago. As they left his presence he was heard to say to them: 'Remember – there was nothing before the Big Bang!'²

To some the story of creation in Genesis 1 is the foundation of Creationism. However the text of the story speaks of the Spirit of God hovering over the surface of the water:

The earth was a vast waste, darkness covered the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water. (Gen 1: 2)

In this version of the creation myth there was



something there before God came along. Creation meant sorting out the chaos and giving it comprehensible form and structure. If we believe in God as a human idea then the story tells us that this is how the writers thought of the world; it is their thinking about the way things are and especially about the relationship between the human race and the natural world. They use the idea of God as a method of communication and to give their ideas divine authority. When it is argued that this God is absolute and unchangeable then these ideas cannot be challenged, there is no room for adaptation and change; the relationship becomes inhuman.

Power

Looking though the Bible we see nothing to justify the absolute power of the human ruler. Indeed the rise of kings to rule Israel is greeted with suspicion and warning:

The people all said to Samuel, 'Pray for us your servants to the Lord your God, to save us from death; for we have added to all our other sins the great wickedness of asking for a king.'

(1 Sam 12: 19)

Throughout their ministry the prophets stand before the kings in judgement. In the New Testament there is a clear separation between God and earthly power:

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.

(Mt 22: 21)

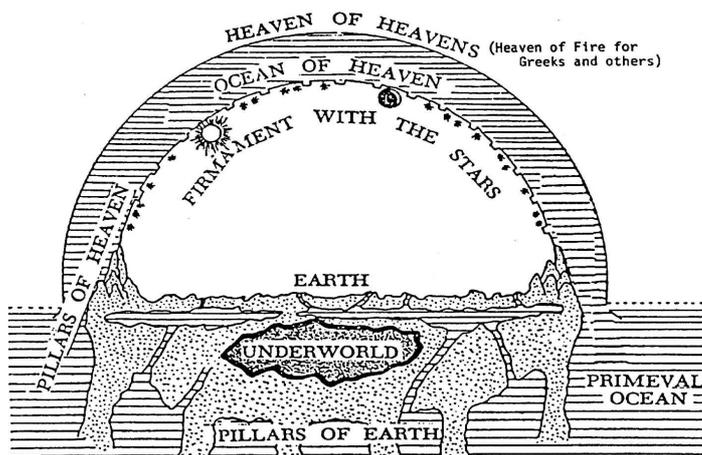
The disciples are urged to respect and obey the emperor for the sake of peace and order, but their focus is on God and his coming Kingdom. It is not until the fourth century that we see the emergence of absolutism in Christian thought. This is the result of the legitimating of the Church by Constantine, the sense of the magnificence and omnipotence of the imperial throne, and the accommodation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

with Greek philosophy.³ In the 17th century in this country we see the final flowering of the divine right of kings and its tragic and fatal results. In the last century the idea of absolute power survived, for example, in the ideologies of fascism and communism in the 20th century.

On the evidence of his novel Philip Pullman's atheism appears to rest on his belief in the moral corruption of the Catholic Church. He gives us a good example of the mind-set of those who hold to the existence of an absolutist God to whom they claim a direct line:

The President held up his hand. Pre-emptive penance and absolution were doctrines researched and developed by the Consistorial Court, but not known to the wider church. They involved doing penance for a sin not yet committed, intense and fervent penance accompanied by scourging and flagellation, so

as to build up, as it were, a store of credit. When penance had reached the appropriate level for a particular sin, the penitent was granted absolution in advance, though he might never be called on to commit the sin. It was sometimes necessary to kill people, for example, and it was so much less troubling for the assassin if he could do so in a state of grace.⁴



Old Testament cosmology

Death and Eternal Life

The Psalmist speaks about death with uncompromising realism:

It is not the dead who praise the Lord, not those who go down to the silent grave: but we, the living, shall bless the Lord now and for evermore. (Ps 115: 17, 18)

Isaiah makes the same point:

Sheol cannot confess you, Death cannot praise you, nor can those who go down into the abyss hope for your truth. The living, only the living can confess you... (Is 38: 18,19)

The Old Testament says nothing about personal immortality; its focus is on the tribes of Israel. They shall survive into the future if they continue to obey the Lord God. In the New Testament most scholars understand the term eternal life as referring to a quality of life to be experienced in the here and now as a result of faith in the risen Christ. Pullman is also uncompromising in his view of death so in *The Amber Spyglass* when Lyra proposes to visit the Land of the Dead the author leaves us in no doubt what he believes:

The two spies were looking at her with open-mouthed incredulity. Then Salmakia blinked and said, 'What you say doesn't make sense. The dead are dead, that's all. There is no world of the dead'...
'Child,' said Tialys, 'when we die, everything is over. There is no other life. You have seen death. You've seen dead bodies, and you've seen what happens to a daemon when death comes. It vanishes. What else can there be to live on after that?' (p.242 in the 2005 paperback edition)

In fact it is clear that human beings cannot tolerate too much of this realism. Popular culture speaks about dying and going to heaven. Indeed all language about death and life after death functions as a means of enabling us to face our end with courage and hope. We evoke the judgement and mercy of God and we understand that this has its place in our experience of mortality. Nevertheless belief in the existence of a supernatural God causes us to believe in the reality of life after death, of meeting again our loved ones, and so on. The extreme of this position is the example of those who blow themselves up as suicide bombers.

The examination of these themes through the spyglass of theological non-realism suggests that dogmatic faith is conditioned by social circumstances. Those who hold to the existence of a supernatural God do so because they need certainty in their moral attitudes, and to feel that they have a direct line to their God and that they share in his power. The problem with this position is that it leads to impossible and inhuman choices and it negates the Gospel principle that the righteous person lives by faith.

The spyglass of theological non-realism is not a negative concept saying simply 'There is no God'. Rather it says: 'The idea of God in the human

mind is a creative and critical force, purging us from the prison of ideological and theological absolutism, and setting us free to meet the challenges of our situation with clarity and purpose.'

NOTES

1. Quotations from this book are taken from the paperback edition 2002.
2. This encounter with the Pope is described in *A Short History of Time* by Stephen Hawkin (paperback edition Bantam Books 1988 page 128).
3. This thesis is well argued in *The Closing of the Western Mind* by Charles Freeman (William Heinemann 2002).
4. *The Amber Spyglass* p.72. On the evidence of this book Pullman's atheism is founded on his deep revulsion to the corruption of the Catholic Church. The situation here is, of course, complete fantasy, although it touches a nerve as I remember the times in history when the Church has been complicit in mass murder. The situation Pullman describes is, of course, incompatible with the Doctrine of Grace central to the Church's moral teaching.

The Venerable David S. Lee was Archdeacon of Llandaff until his retirement in 1997.

Underground Poem

I can't stand it.
The only thing I thought of at that moment
was to tell my wife and children I miss them,
them anxiously waiting for me to come to that door.
Down in here I began to cry.
A few days passed and we knew nothing.
Then in the small hours came a sounding
and you know the rest my friends.
They were Chilean voices we could hear.

Victor Zamora

From among their number, as well as a leader the 33 trapped Chilean miners appointed a poet – Victor Zamora.
Translated by Dinah Livingstone.

