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# Refashioning the Clay

Jeremiah 18.1-11

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 5, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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Not long after my sister began life as an undergraduate, she had a high-noon meeting with her roommate and the dorm housekeeper. My sister had been on a couple of dates, and had seen just about enough. "Men!" she expostulated. Her roommate shared my sister's exasperation and bewilderment. "We should shoot them all, and have done with it," she concluded. The housekeeper interjected, in a kindly but experienced tone, "Don't waste your energy, my lovelies. They're not worth the bullets."

The last six years have witnessed the publication of a series of books, from a variety of authors, attacking religion with a virulence not seen for a long time. This movement has been called "The New Atheism." It believes religion should no longer be tolerated but should be exposed, challenged and refuted at every opportunity, with a conviction founded on scientific certainty. I haven't referred to these antagonists in sermons from this pulpit because I've taken the advice of my sister's housekeeper, and reckoned that the work of Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and others, was not worth the bullets. The New Atheists have said many new things and many true things, but the new things they've said are not true, and the true things they've said are not new.<sup>1</sup>

I'm making an exception this morning for three reasons. One is that in almost every Christian who's been around a university like ours, there's a lingering anxiety, maybe even dread, that perhaps science really has disproved it all. Maybe I'm talking about you. A second is that the most famous of the New Atheists, Richard Dawkins, will be giving a lecture at Duke in a month's time. The third reason is that it's been my habit each year on Opening Sunday to reflect with you on a major question in the life of the university. Today I want to dwell on the place of science in our common life.

The prophet Jeremiah describes God as a potter, handling and cherishing the clay, and making something beautiful out of clay that has been deformed or damaged. The Christian life begins when we realize that we are that clay. But today I want to see how Jeremiah's picture of God as a potter might inspire us to handle precious things the same way God cherishes us. The relationship between science and theology is like clay: it's moist and full of potential, and if cherished should become something beautiful. But currently this clay is spoiled in our hands. The relationship between science and theology seems less about understanding and more about bullets. I want to suggest a refashioning of the relationship of science and theology, and in doing so to explain why I believe each being part of the one university is a blessing that we can all celebrate.

To understand the backlash of some prominent intellectuals against religion, one has to scroll back a few decades. The New Atheists came to adulthood in a world where it was assumed that an atheism inspired by the discoveries of science would soon fill the earth as surely as the waters cover the sea. 23 years ago the movie-going public was captivated by *Fatal Attraction*, which portrays a professional woman having a wild weekend affair with a man while the man's wife is out of town, and then obsessively stalking him for months afterwards. Her activities become increasingly alarming, until finally she breaks into the man's house in murderous mood. The man fights her off and forces her into the bathroom, where she becomes submerged beneath the surface of the bathwater for several minutes. Her body goes limp, blood rises from the corner of her mouth, and the man and his wife finally relax. But the stalker defies apparent death and, in a scene rated #59 on *Bravo's* scariest movie moments, she rises up from the bathwater to mount one final, deranged, but ultimately unsuccessful attack.

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<sup>1</sup> To paraphrase Samuel Johnson.

This is how the New Atheism sees religion. Given up for dead 40 years ago, it's rising anew from the bathtub like a scary scene from a movie. Reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated, and it's not only alive but unhinged and eager to fight. The dismay of making such a baffling discovery in large part accounts for the almost hysterical tone adopted by some of the New Atheist arguments.

The first thing to say in response to these assaults is that Christianity has only itself to blame for being criticized in such a way. Most people who reject faith as vehemently as this do so not on scientific grounds but on moral ones. While the portrayal of Christianity offered by the New Atheists is an absurd caricature to most Christians, there are undoubtedly some who sincerely hold the lurid views Dr. Dawkins and his friends take to be the norm. We Christians have often propounded an impoverished faith, and have even more frequently failed to live up to the faith we profess, so we are bound to invite criticism from those who scrutinize our lives and convictions. At the same time, just because we are often poor witnesses to our beliefs, that doesn't thereby mean our beliefs are untrue. The novelist Evelyn Waugh used to ask, "D'you think I'm not much of a person, given that I claim to be a Christian?" Then he'd chuckle, and add, "Imagine what I'd be like if I *weren't* a Christian."

The relationship between theology and science can't be left to extremists, who believe that only one or the other can make legitimate claims. Instead it must begin with respect and awe. Natural science has plausibly been called "the most successful enterprise human beings have ever engaged upon."<sup>2</sup> The more that science discovers about life, about the universe, about the tiniest detail and the mightiest power, the more one can only be amazed and enthralled. Yet if one has awe towards the known, one must have at least equal awe towards the unknown. That awe is not always in high profile. In 1928 the German Nobel physicist Max Born announced that "Physics, as we know it, will be over in six months."<sup>3</sup> It turned out not to be so. The only trustworthy science is a humble science, which acknowledges the tentativeness of the known and the vast extent of the unknown. But the same is true of theology. There is so much that remains unknown, and claiming to know more than we do, especially if it's done with a hectoring tone and without a listening ear, substitutes arrogance and ignorance for true faith, and attracts the antagonism it deserves.

And that's why it's such a blessing for science and theology to belong in a university alongside one another. Some believe universities are all about natural science and there should be no place for literature or philosophy, let alone religion, because they have no testable data and refuse to play by the rules. Some few believe that theology is the queen of the sciences, and that the findings of science should be filtered through the truths of faith, because theological questions of *why* always precede scientific questions of *how*. But the privilege of being a university community means that students and faculty can enjoy and benefit from the different methodologies of the respective disciplines, valuing each for what only it can do, while relishing the interaction and the challenge of the moments when the disciplines overlap and spark fascinating parallels and tensions.

For example, for a lot of the last 150 years there's been a lively debate about the question, "Where do we come from?" One branch of science goes a very long way back and dwells on the nanoseconds surrounding the Big Bang; another branch goes back to the beginning of life on earth and to the processes of evolution. These are gripping investigations. It's useless for theologians to claim they have an inside track on the truth or falsity of scientists' findings in such areas. Instead theologians interrogate the scriptures to ask a related, but different set of questions. One is, "Was it always in the mind and heart of God to be in relationship with creation, and for that relationship to be focused by entering creation as a co-participant at some stage in the story?" That's not a question science can answer, but it's hard to deny it's an exhilarating question to set alongside the others. Just imagine the attentiveness and absorption of God in beholding the evolution of creation, and awaiting the right time to enter it in order to be a co-participant with that part of it that could

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Medawar, quoted in A. McGrath and J. McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion*, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 156.

show some conscience and awareness in return. That's not a manipulative picture. That's a picture of astounding, patient, devoted, indescribable love.

Here's a parallel question. It's fascinating to ask, "Where do we come from?" – but isn't it at least as interesting, and perhaps more urgent, to ask, "Where are we *going*?" Theologians at this point hold no naïve optimism that as a species or as a universe we're intrinsically heading for candyland. We're sinners, as much as we've ever been, and we're no better or worse than our forebears or descendants. But Christian theology is committed to the notion of sudden, final intervention of God in history that brings time to an end and inaugurates an era of glory and fulfilment. Most scientists keep a respectful silence on the question of where we're all going. But some of the New Atheists fuse the theory of evolution with a notion of progress that suggests humans are heading for a happy place all on our own. That's why the New Atheists are so cross with religion, because it's inhibiting our species' free ride to happiness. It's hard to fathom how you could live through the era of the gulags and the gas chambers and still believe in such a notion of progress. But that just shows how important the question of where we're going is. Scientists may disagree with the answers some theologians give, but the point is, you can't avoid the question, and any answer to the question is going to depend on information science alone can't provide.

Once you put these two questions together, where are we coming from, and where are we going, you're into territory where science and theology can have a really interesting conversation. *Now* the question is, "What, if anything, is the *logic* at the heart of the universe?" The Big Bang and evolution are huge contributions to science and philosophy. But here's the danger. Once you turn them uncritically into theology, as the New Atheists tend to do, you get a single-word answer: *survival*. Survival of each creature, because death is the end, and survival of each species, because extinction is forever. The whole dynamic of history mutates into survival, and adaptation that enables survival is what's known as progress. Conflict is the dynamic at the heart of every encounter, and survival is the reward for those who win the battle.

But theology has a very different answer. Christians believe the logic, the *logos*, or word, at the heart of the universe, is not about survival. It's about death and resurrection. The ultimate future doesn't belong to those who have fought and prevailed; it belongs to those who've laid down their lives for others. This timeless logic is exemplified not in the species that survives, but in the single human being who accepted brutal execution and yet was raised to new life. The real big bang that dominates the Christian imagination is not the detonation that inaugurated the universe, but the rolling-away of the stone that signalled the death of death. The real evolutionary pattern that baffles and amazes the Christian imagination is the history of humanity's extraordinarily elaborate hide-and-seek, and somersaulting attempts, to escape the logic of God's relentless, humble, sacrificial and limitless love, and the constant adaptation God makes to be present to us and in relationship with us anyway.

Constant adaptation. That's a fascinating theme in evolutionary biology. That's a fascinating theme in ecology. That's a fascinating theme in climate studies. That's a fascinating theme in civil engineering. Constant adaptation. That's also a fascinating theme in the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah portrays God as a figure making constant adaptations. The vessel, observes Jeremiah, was spoiled in the potter's hands; *and he reworked it into another vessel*. This is the story of Israel: the vessel was broken, the covenant was spoiled, and God made something beautiful by fashioning it into a pot shaped around the Jew named Jesus. This is the story of the church over and over; our common life is spoiled and broken, and God refashions it into something old but new. This is your story. Your life was spoiled, your pot was cracked, your hopes were broken, your plans were ruined; and God the potter made something that could never have been out of something that should never have been. Constant adaptation. That's not a disputed scientific theory. That's what Christians call the Holy Spirit.

And this is why Christians honor and cherish and study natural science. Not just because science can solve things and find things and prove things and make things. All these are true, but they are simply to *use* science as a means to an end. If Christians are fully to embrace science they must learn to *enjoy* science as an end in

itself. In science Christians can find a pattern, and a logic, with analogies and parallels to the very purpose of God. They can see depth, and complexity, and diversity, and simplicity, that together reflect the activity and character of God. They can see energy, and creativity, and adaptation, that portray the dynamism of God. The study of science, understood this way, is nothing less than a form of prayer. It's an attempt to enter the presence and be enthralled by the mystery of the form and logic and wonder of all that is.

Scientists of Duke, be humble. Remember that science is an art, and that what you study is clay, being constantly fashioned and refashioned. Christians of Duke, be humbler still, and remember that science is a form of wonder, and that these scientists, if you let them, will teach you to wonder, to love, and to pray.