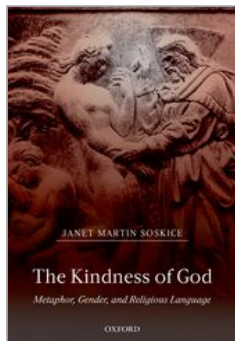


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The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language

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Creation and Relation

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses the theologies of creation and the relation of human beings to God. It first examines the topics of Genesis and cites. It considers that the concerns of Genesis are different from those of a modern physical and biological scientist. The early chapters of the Genesis provide an outline of the relation of humans to God, of man to woman, of humans to plants and animals, and to each other. The chapter examines the earliest examples of biblical commentary, such as the Hexaemera's account of the first six days of creation. It also explains the gap between Christian and agnostic moral assumptions using Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer's book, *Should the Baby Live?*, which deals with the problems of handicapped infants and the morality of infanticide.

Keywords: concerns of Genesis, Helga Kuhse, Peter Singer, *Should the Baby Live*, Hexaemera, morality of infanticide, handicapped infants

THE very title of the Book of Genesis means 'origins', but origins of what? Recent works on creation and theology have dealt extensively, sometimes almost exclusively, with questions about the origins of the physical universe and its life forms. The covers of the books produced bear pictures of swirling galaxies or DNA, the very large or the very

small. For quite a time, especially in its *rapprochement* with the world of science, this is what theology of creation meant—talk of big bangs and ‘fine tuning’ of the physical variables which make life possible.

The Book of Genesis seems to have little to do with these matters. Certainly Genesis is concerned in its first chapters with the creation of the physical order; but, as it proceeds, the book is even more concerned with the creation of the people, Israel, whose adventures, after the calling of Abram in Chapter 12, occupy the remaining thirty-eight chapters. Genesis is concerned, too, with order and right relation. Its first chapters provide a schematic outline of the relation of the human being to God, the relation of man to woman, of human beings to plants and animals and to each other. Throughout Christian history these chapters of Genesis have been plundered to provide pictures of the ideal humanity, the ideal marriage, even the ideal state. The concerns of Genesis are, then, both wider and (p.53) narrower, and different from those of the modern physical and biological scientist.

Some of the earliest examples of biblical commentary we possess are the Hexaemera, so called because they gave an account of the first six days of creation. One of their objects was to insist that ‘all that is’ was created freely by God. In posing their challenges to pagan creation narratives, they sought to do so in ways compatible with the received scientific knowledge of their own day, a feature of the Hexaemera which impressed the nineteenth-century philosopher of science Pierre Duhem. St Augustine, too, would have approved; for he thought that Christians made themselves ridiculous when they talked ‘utter nonsense’ about scientific matters while claiming to speak in accordance with Scripture. This makes Christian writers into laughing-stocks, he said, and does great harm; for when non-Christians hear a Christian making bizarre claims about the physical world and justifying them by appeal to Scripture, ‘how are they to believe the same writings on the resurrection of the dead and the hope of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven?’ According to Augustine, in a text much admired and appealed to by Galileo, ‘whatever they [scientists] themselves can demonstrate by true proof about the nature of things, we can show not to be contrary to our scriptures’.¹

This conciliatory attitude to natural science strikes us as modern on Augustine’s part, for in recent decades we have entered another period of amiable relations between science and religion. In one way or another, theology has come to terms with the challenges that our great-grandparents faced (p.54) in Darwinism—no longer do we find ourselves in the place of Ruskin, whose faith wavered with each tap of the geologists’ hammer. Indeed, in recent decades some theologians

have regarded science not as an enemy but as an ally, and have called attention to strategies of scientific theory construction and model building in defence of their own strategies of theory construction and model building. As modern science has become more eloquent about its own limitations and the difficulty and tentativeness of any truth-claims, theologians have been emboldened to make comparisons with their own tasks.² Advances in cosmology and evolutionary biology have even encouraged the more reckless among the philosophers of religion in the ever-elusive hope that one day science will prove that God exists. A number of conferences have been held on epistemology, metaphysics, theology, and astrophysics.

For those of us interested in science and religion all this is gratifying but also somewhat alarming. Why do our collections of essays always have that swirling galaxy on the cover, or a piece of electron-microscopical photography, and never a baby's foot, or a woman drawing water at a well, or—to use a biblical image of creation—a rainbow? As our essays on creation become ever more dense and theoretical, there is a danger that they become ever more remote not only from what (if anything) the biblical books say about such things, but also from what the Christian tradition ever wanted to say. Biblical scholars who somehow manage to 'gatecrash' science and religion symposia are often appalled at what passes for the Christian theology of creation. Is there not a danger that we are (p.55) engaged in an elaborate parlour game which, however fascinating, is one which very few indeed will ever be able to play? Is this just a new scholasticism which, despite real merits, is as destined as its late medieval predecessor for obsolescence?

As a contributor to some of these discussions, I want to say, 'No'. These discussions are important in an overall Christian apologetic, and their obscurity to the non-professional is neither here nor there. (Few lay people understand modern astrophysics, but they would understand well enough if someone claimed that modern astrophysics had demonstrated decisively that God could not exist.) But I wish to raise the spectre of the parlour game to highlight a kind of schizophrenia in the science and religion dialogue at present. For while doubt may be cast on the immediate impact of the lofty metaphysical discussions currently taking place between scientists and theologians, there is no room to doubt the immediate impact that science and scientific practice are having on all our everyday lives. One can scarcely even begin to list the areas of moral concern on which scientific theory and practice have some bearing: computer fraud, the disposal of industrial waste, new reproductive technology, the development and cost of armaments, the

allocation of medical resources, the generation and limitation of world famine, AIDS, pollution, antenatal diagnosis of genetic diseases. Wherever we turn, we see possibilities, but also dangers. Even well-intentioned efforts may have unfortunate, even disastrous, side-effects. The hardy, disease-resistant crops that we hope will transform the lives of people in poor countries may need expensive fertilizers which only the rich can buy. Thus the introduction of the crops may serve to concentrate land and wealth in the hands of those already landed and wealthy, rather than aid the subsistence farmer (p.56) who was originally supposed to benefit. These moral issues do not pose a threat to Christian belief *per se*, but they do represent a challenge to which Christianity, if it is to continue in its vision, must rise.

These issues are not issues for Christians alone—they are all citizens' problems, and indeed all nations' problems, since many extend beyond the scope of a personal ethics. A woman may independently decide when pregnant not to take the alpha-feta protein tests devised to indicate neurological disorders, but she cannot decide as an individual how to dispose of nuclear waste. However, even if these are not exclusively Christian problems, nonetheless, may we not hope for some guidance from our religious beliefs as we move cautiously forward?

This is the point at which the schizophrenia in science and religion bites. After some time doing research in the philosophy of religion and philosophy of science, I was a member of a working party in medical ethics. This group, composed in the main of medical doctors, philosophers, and theologians, was discussing 'Quality of Life in Medical Decision-Making'. The contrast with my former involvement with science and religion was sharp. Whereas the science and religion debate at the 'swirling galaxies' level was fizzing with ideas and happy meetings of mind, in the area of medical ethics one felt that one was entering a conceptual wasteland, one where the theological contribution was both peripheral and impoverished. Who was to blame? Not the scientists. They were simply coming with problems, one of the biggest of which was, 'On what basis do I make judgements about or between human lives?' One doctor said, 'I can't tell you exactly when a patient has died: I can tell you when her heart stops beating, or when she stops (p.57) breathing independently, or when there's no pulse or no brain activity, but to say exactly when she has died—that's no longer a medical judgement.' The scientific contribution was, one could say, morally neutral. Blame, if there is blame, must be laid at the doors of the moral theologians (amongst whom for these purposes I place myself) for the signal failure to match with theologically compelling

arguments the self-confident and increasingly aggressive views of moral atheism.

In such circumstances the cry goes up for the 'Christian opinion'—that is why theologians are asked to serve on medical ethics working parties in the first place. But 'Christian opinion' does not amount to theological argument; for example, a Catholic theologian might be expected to express the 'opinion' that experimenting on embryos is wrong, but with no scope or opportunity to explain on what rational basis, in the light of their religious belief, Catholics might hold such a conviction. Rather, this is seen as just one, dogmatic view thrown in by an interest group.

If the theologian should defend the opinion, she or he would be expected to do so on what was assumed to be the neutral ground of secular moral philosophy. From there these debates always proceed in a predictable way. The same questions perennially occur and perennially fail to be resolved: When does life begin? Is the embryo a 'person'? What weight should be given to potential?, etc., with scarcely a glance at what bearing Christian doctrine might have on such matters.

In such circumstances the theologian usually colludes in playing on ground which, far from being neutral, is home ground to secular moral philosophy and a wasteland for moral theology. No wonder, then, the impoverishment almost to the point of extinction of a distinctive theological voice. All (p.58) the Christian can do in such circumstances is to offer their 'opinion' in a louder voice; but since there is no real conversation, no meeting of minds, the voice is unlikely to be heard.

Even in the Christian press today the discussion of controversial moral issues often takes the form of raised voices and embattled opinions, with little reference to the theological and biblical roots which give rise to, and make sense of, these views. This shouting technique is unlikely to persuade non-Christians who do not share one's views; but, even worse, it is increasingly unlikely to convince rank-and-file believers either, especially when the milieu in which they (for the most part) move is one increasingly alienated from Christian moral assumptions.

An example which to me demonstrates the gap opening up between Christian and agnostic moral assumptions comes from Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer's book *Should the Baby Live?*, a book which deals with the problems of handicapped infants and the morality of infanticide. Kuhse and Singer go far beyond simply ignoring Christian views; they attack Christianity as the dominating, restrictive ideology which has, for so many centuries, curtailed human freedoms in the West. For more than

1,500 years, they state, Christianity has dominated Western moral thought. Those who rejected it were persecuted. 'During this long era of totalitarian enforcement, Christian moral views gained an almost unshakeable grip on our moral thinking.'³ We must detach ourselves from them if we are to address the moral issue of severely handicapped infants. In particular, we must detach ourselves from the idea that human life has a special sanctity, a belief which may be defensible (p.59) within certain religions, but which cannot carry conviction in a pluralist state.

Let me remind you that Kuhse and Singer's argument is directed not towards abortion but towards infanticide—the killing of newborns who might otherwise live. If one includes in the definition of 'human' such indicators as self-awareness, self-control, sense of future and past, then Kuhse and Singer are content. But simply to be a member of the species *homo sapiens* is not enough to make a being 'human' in the sense necessary for life to be preserved. Many disabled babies will never be 'human' in this more rigorous sense. Why, their argument continues, should being a *homo sapiens* be so overridingly important? Is not this just species-ism, and much analogous to a racism wherein killing a black is less morally significant than killing a white? Species, like race and sex, Kuhse and Singer argue, is a morally irrelevant distinction.

They blame Christianity for the dominance in our culture of this morally irrelevant distinction, and in particular the doctrine that man (*sic*) is made in the image of God, licensed to kill other creatures but not his or her own kind. But according to Kuhse and Singer, 'an inquiring sceptic would wonder why an anencephalic infant (one born with little or no brain) more closely resembles God than, say, a pig'. Their conclusion is that 'to allow infanticide before the onset of self-awareness...cannot threaten anyone who is in a position to worry about it'.⁴

One should not dismiss their argument summarily. Singer's earlier book, *Animal Liberation*, was a considerable success amongst anti-species-ists, some of whom—one imagines—had (p.60) little idea that advancing the cause of animals could have such radical implications for the claims of disabled human babies. But the striking feature of Kuhse and Singer's argument is the seriousness with which they take theology, albeit in their opinion as a negative and reactionary force. Specifically, it is the ancient idea of 'imago Dei', originating in Genesis, with which they take issue. While Christian ethics has been at pains to play on the ground of secular philosophy, tossing away its myths of origin as

outmoded vehicles, here we find two secular writers throwing the ball firmly into the court of the Book of Genesis.

To respond to the accusation that the 'the traditional principle of the sanctity of human life is the outcome of some seventeen centuries of Christian domination of western thought and cannot rationally be defended'⁵ brings us back to the theology of creation.

The theologies of creation which can be traced in the Old and New Testaments are not primarily interested in cosmology, and throughout Christian history, although theologians have occasionally pondered such questions as whether or not the universe had a beginning in time, these were never the central theological questions. Thomas Aquinas could suppose either possibility to be compatible with the Christian doctrine that God is Creator, although he believed, as a matter of fact, that the universe did have a beginning.

The biblical discussions of creation seem concerned not so much with where the world came from as with who it came from, not so much with what kind of creation it was in the first (p.61) place as with what kind of creation it was and is *now*.⁶ Creation in the Old Testament is, above all, order, and it comes from God, exclusively from God. God is sovereign in creation and does not tinker with pre-existing matter like some demiurge. In Genesis, God creates the universe from nothing and effortlessly. God pushes back the waters and creates the dry land. Creation is the triumph of order over chaos, and because creation is order, it is law-abiding and, according to the Genesis story, it is initially both peaceable and just.

Later theologies posited that God, as Creator of all that is, is both mysteriously Other (for God is not a creature) and also totally intimate to everything. God is both ultimate and intimate. God is mystery, and the mystery by which all is held in being: the 'You that in accordance with its nature cannot become an it'.⁷ Christians believe that in Jesus of Nazareth the Word became flesh, but not, as Karl Barth ceaselessly pointed out, that the God who is mystery becomes unmysterious in Jesus Christ. If we do not see Jesus Christ as mystery, we see not God incarnate, but a great man.

Human beings have a privileged role to play in God's creative love because, according to this story, they are made in the image of God. This is anthropocentric, but not necessarily malevolently so. One can distinguish two versions of Christian anthropocentrism, both of which have had their (p.62) advocates. In what we might call 'divine hamster cage' anthropocentrism, God is the hamster-owner, and we human

beings are the hamsters. God creates the world as a kind of vivarium for human beings. The rest of the created order is our lettuce leaves and clean sawdust, completely at our disposal—quite literally, the world is our ‘environment’. (This, by the way, is a very good reason for never, when doing theology, speaking about ‘the environment’ but always speaking instead of ‘creation’.) In what we might call ‘divine servant’ or ‘divine regent’ anthropocentrism, on the other hand, human beings are integrally part of the whole of the created order, but they have a privileged responsibility within it; rights are attended by responsibility. Women and men are made ‘in the image of God’ not to ravage God's creation but to attend to it, both by caring for it and by praising it.

The idea that the human person, like the Deity, is in some sense holy mystery is implicit in the doctrine of the *imago Dei* and is what, for us, as for the Church Fathers, keeps the human being from ‘being finally dissected by reason’.⁸ When we meet another person, however poor, lowly, diseased, or dumb, we stand before something which holds the divine—we stand before someone who is mystery and must be revered as such, someone who, like Buber's God, is a ‘You that in accordance with its nature cannot become an it’. Of course, we can, and do, treat other people like ‘its’, as mere objects, but always to the loss of our own humanity. We do this in pornography, in harmful (p.63) experiments on unwitting human victims, in indiscriminate killing in war. Ironically, we can treat our neighbours as so many ‘its’ precisely in our eagerness to understand how they work. We are often, as Andrew Louth has said, bewildered by mysteries that remain mysterious even when disclosed. But, he continues:

if in our encounter with others we come to control and dominate them, and are not content to allow them their freedom in which they ultimately escape our understanding and control, then we have ceased to treat them as persons. In dominating them we depersonalize them, and ourselves. As Simone Weil put it, might's ‘power to transform a man into a thing is double and it cuts both ways’; it petrifies differently but equally the souls of those who suffer it, and of those who wield it.⁹

God is mystery, and woman and man in God's image are mystery. The death of God will not, as Nietzsche thought, result in the glorification of man, but rather will take from women and men any claim they may have to be revered as participating in the divine economy. Without God, and without the sanctity of the person made in the image of God, women and men will become not gods but mere objects to manipulate in a world of manipulable objects; thus Kuhse and Singer.

It is both salutary and confusing that the Genesis story should tell us that it is this same creature, made in the image of God, through whom sin and violence disrupt the created order. Adam and Eve disobey God; Cain slays Abel. In the story, violence spreads from the human realm to that of the animals. In the Garden of Eden the animals live peaceably with Adam and Eve and with each other. After the Flood, we are told, they (p.64) dread them. The point of these stories is that sin keeps us not only from right relation to other people but also from right relation to the whole created order. But the earth and all its life are not, after all, destroyed in the Flood, for the God who creates is also the God who saves—a strong theme in both Testaments. The God who saves Noah and the animals can save his people Israel, and—so Christians assert—save humanity in Christ. A God who creates can save. ‘Our help is in the name of the Lord’, says the Psalmist, ‘who made heaven and earth’ (Ps. 124: 8).

The prophet Isaiah prayed for a just king who, as God's regent over creation, would be a saviour to his people, who would bring order and banish chaos. This king would judge the poor with justice and strike down the ruthless; and then, when there was justice, there would be peace. Then, only then, says Isaiah, lapsing into visionary language, ‘The wolf shall live with the lamb...and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them’ (Isa. 11: 6-7). This is a vision of Paradise, the New Creation, the Kingdom of God. We should not let the visionary nature of language distract us from the reality of the call to right relation. The biblical picture is one in which reverence for and right relation with God entail reverence for and right relation with other people made in the image of God, and furthermore right relation with the rest of the created order.¹⁰

Consideration of our human nature and destiny must be consonant with good science and the understanding it can (p.65) bring to our biology, our psychology, and our natural genesis. Yet this scientific understanding is framed, for the Christian, by the understanding that we are not just ‘natural phenomena’, but creatures in the literal sense—we have been created. Science agrees with Scripture in this much: we are made of dust, trillion-year-old carbon. But we are dust that has come to know itself as dust, to know that dust can do right and commit wrongs. We are dust that sees the possibility, in God's grace, of glorifying God along with the rest of the created order.

Notes:

(1) Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, ed. John Hammond Taylor, SJ (New York: Newman Press, 1982), I. xix. 39.

(2) See J. M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), for a more detailed account.

(3) H. Kuhse, and P. Singer, *Should the Baby Live? The Problem of Handicapped Infants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 117.

(4) Ibid. 124, 138.

(5) Ibid. 125.

(6) It would be misleading, of course, to say that the Old and/or New Testaments have one unified 'theology of creation'. The reader must forgive me if I speak rather loosely here. See R. Murray, 'The Bible on God's World and Our Place in It', *The Month*, 21 (1988), 798-803. and also the essays in B. W. Anderson, *Creation in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SPCK, 1984).

(7) Martin Buber, quoted by N. Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1988), 232.

(8) Andrew Louth, 'The Mysterious Leap of Faith', in T. Sutcliffe, P. Moore, *etal.*, *In vitro veritas — More Tracts for our Time: St Mary's Annual for 1984/5* (London, St Mary's, Bourne Street, 1984), 89.

(9) Ibid. 91.

(10) Robert Murray puts it this way: 'The Bible teaches us that neither sin nor salvation are affairs merely between us humans and God; sin entails alienation from our nature which relates us to God's other creatures, while salvation entails our re-integration in a vaster order and harmony which embraces the whole cosmos' ('The Bible on God's World', 799).

