

## An Extended Book Review:

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

Colin R Reeves  
Emeritus Professor of Operational Research  
Coventry University

#### Overview

McLeish was until recently Professor of Physics at Durham University; he is shortly to take up the Chair of Natural Philosophy at York University. He is also an Anglican Reader, and his book *Faith and Wisdom in Science* has been favourably (not to say effusively) received as “rich”, “insightful”, “superbly crafted”, “eloquent”, “inspiring”, “grand”, “profound”, etc. Sadly, and with a measure of reluctance, I feel compelled to rain on his parade.

Firstly, I should stress that there are some things in the book that are helpful. He recognizes that there is a problem with science and the contemporary viewpoint that it has removed religion from the arena of rational thought. He argues that, *contra* Atkins, Dawkins, Stenger, etc., science does not rule out religion or make theology irrelevant; indeed, scholarly investigations of the origins of science (by, for instance, Peter Harrison<sup>1</sup>) show that Reformed Christian theology was indispensable to its development. (True, McLeish has unearthed some interesting examples of pre-Reformation science, as have others—Rodney Stark<sup>2</sup>, for example. But this doesn’t undermine Harrison’s explanation for the scientific ‘explosion’ in post-Reformation Europe.)

He also faces up to the difficulty of relating the “two cultures” of the sciences and arts (as first noted by C.P.Snow). He is aware that some regard science as dangerous and dehumanizing, and is unhappy at the way science has been adopted by government and incorporated into political programs. McLeish’s intention is to bring forward proposals for a *rapprochement* between science and theology that might also purge science of some of its unwanted accoutrements and give it a more human face.

He provides a shrewd evaluation of the practice of science in modern culture—the emphasis on results, the “publish or perish” ethos in academia, the temptation to look for short-cuts and impatience over timescales, the inadequacies of the peer-review system, the futility of ‘research assessment exercises’ and so on. All these ring true to any thinking person who has been involved in scientific research: it is something over which I have lamented in conversation with colleagues in the UK and Europe, not many of whom are Christians. Yet McLeish urges us to maintain our “faith” in science, while arguing for a better way based on science as natural philosophy—a “love of wisdom of natural things.” The nexus of this approach is his interpretation of the OT wisdom literature, especially the book of Job. Perhaps rather grandly, he is sufficiently enamoured of his ideas that he has a blog<sup>3</sup> devoted to a discussion of them.

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1 Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

2 Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003)

3 <https://tcbmcleish.wordpress.com> It also includes a lengthy list of errata, which were a surprise to see in a book from a prestigious publisher.

His contention is that we live in a world that is out-of-joint, one that exhibits both order and chaos. Our task as scientists is to investigate the natural world and uncover some of its “wisdom.” His discussion of selected NT texts then leads him to propose a “theology of science” that entails a participation in God’s plan for reconciliation of the world. Science, he says, “becomes, within a Christian theology, the grounded outworking of the ministry of reconciliation.....mending our relationship with the creation.”

His description of some of the wonders that a scientist sees is engaging, and his account of how a scientist ‘works’ in practice is one that I recognize personally as authentic. As a Christian and a scientist, I share his delight in scientific research on the one hand, and his concerns with the nature of modern science and the merely utilitarian view of its purpose on the other. I agree that scientific investigation and discovery, the asking of questions and the forming of hypotheses, are all important elements of a Christian’s calling, whether we formally call the activity ‘science’ or not. After all, we are called upon to love the Lord our God with all our *mind*. We should all be eager, in the words of a contemporary hymn, “to see the hand of God in the light of creation’s grand design.”

But I think that McLeish considerably over-emphasizes the place of science in theology, to the detriment of other areas to which Scripture gives greater importance. And despite agreeing with some of his suggestions, I think he takes some very dangerous and unnecessary pathways in reaching them.

## General Problems

1. He dismisses too lightly historic Christian doctrine in several areas, but most obviously that which concerns Creation and the Fall. A brief look at the “traditional” approach to Genesis leads to a peremptory dismissal of the “deplorable literalism around Genesis 1.” In fact, McLeish sees it as unfortunate that Genesis is the first book of the Bible; I think he would rather relegate Gen.1 to a mere bit part in the story of creation. What we should really do, he says, is to

*distil the outlines of a reading from the perspective of ‘wisdom to do with natural things’, especially one made after reading the other major Old Testament creation narratives. (p.70)*

One of these “outlines” appears to be (p.73) “the idea that ‘in the beginning’ there was, not nothing, but chaos.” This seems clearly at odds with traditional Christian teaching<sup>4</sup>, yet there is no attempt to clear up any confusion.

When he comes to chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis, after initially describing in reasonably conventional terms the events of the “garden of temptation” he then warns (p.72) that “only a superficial reading sees in this...a simple dealing out of punishment.” No, it is more a “grounding of the present predicament of humankind within the history and fabric of the material world.” Later (p.197) he speaks of “the anguish of misunderstanding, disobedience and deception that wounds the created world.” Is that it? He tends to speak of the ‘fall’ (in quotation marks), as if it were a mere label for an event; the profound theological implications that Christians have customarily seen as flowing from it are bypassed.

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4 For example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, IV.1

Who was Adam? What is his doctrine of the Fall and the Curse? It's hard to say. Clearly something happened, but exactly what, to whom, and to what extent it affected the cosmos—none of this is clear. In his blog (Archives: March 2017) he says

*we need to think afresh about the Fall in a way consistent with the Genesis and NT narratives, as well as what we learn from science about the history of the universe.*  
(emphasis added)

so it appears that whatever it was, (our current understanding of) science must constrain our understanding of Genesis. This seems a rather unsatisfactory, and chronologically variable, view of what traditional Christian theology has seen as the momentous event of the Fall and its effects.

Later (p.154), he quotes (approvingly) James Dunn: “there is an out-of-sortness, a disjointedness about the created order which makes it a suitable habitation for man at odds with his creator.” This is an odd way of stating the case—one might dub it cart-before-the-horse-ism. Did Adam have to fall so he could fit in with the (created and already disordered) world? Surely the biblical emphasis is that the current state of the created order is a *consequence* of Adam's disobedience and God's ensuing curse.

2. Similar problems arise when he addresses NT passages on the subject of creation. In Romans, for example, he caricatures the conventional reading of Paul's well-known indictment of mankind (Rom.1:18-25). “Above all ‘what has been made’ cannot for Paul refer simply to a static backdrop of timeless nature”, he says (p.153). A little further on, “we need to avoid the urge to consider ‘what has been made’ as an argument for theism and against atheism.” But this is a straw man; who does interpret Romans 1 in such terms? Is this how he views an exposition such as that of Martyn Lloyd-Jones<sup>5</sup>, for example? Lloyd-Jones sees the passage not as an argument for theism, nor as a reference to timeless nature, but as the basis for God's wrath against mankind. God's judgement is just: we are truly without excuse, because we *suppress* the truth that is plain to us—the truth of God's *workmanship* (as Strong's ‘Greek 4161’ would suggest). It is far more than a mere “static backdrop”, but something that is ever-present to our minds—not only the evidence in creation, but also in providence and human history. It is an argument that applies to all men everywhere, culminating in the conclusion that the “whole world” is accountable to God. But sin, judgement and wrath are absent from McLeish's picture.

McLeish himself jumps straight from Romans 1 to Romans 8. He appears to have little interest in what Paul has to say regarding human sin and its condemnation, nor about justification, redemption and atonement, death in Adam and life in Christ, and so on. McLeish's emphasis is on the fact that “the ‘problem’ is not confined to the human condition, but runs through the veins of the whole world.” It does, of course, but why? He gives us little clarity on this point, seeming unwilling to accept that the (originally good) creation was *subjected* to frustration by God's will.

And how will the problem be healed? Well, “the present pain is not to be interpreted as the pain of decay, disease and dissolution, but rather...the **necessary process** by which new life comes into being” (p.154, emphasis added). A little later (p.156), he writes that creation will receive its freedom in the new creation when the “children of God...are in a right relationship with the world...[which]..within [Paul's] theology...only happens when they are also in a right relationship with God.” If McLeish shares “Paul's theology”, you might think, therefore, that how we can arrive at a right relationship with God would be a crucial part of his answer to the present plight of the creation. But, again, there is silence.

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5 D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Gospel of God* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 2012), Ch.28

3. His doctrine of Scripture is not clearly articulated, but he seems to regard the Bible as a compilation of human writings significantly influenced by other cultures. He assumes the “higher-critical” approach to Genesis, for example, with its allocation of portions of the text to “Yahwist” and “priestly” sources. In another place (p.56) he describes the biblical wisdom literature as “reflect[ing] the traditions of Babylonia and Egypt”, while “**add[ing]**...the voice...of a monotheistic people whose God had endowed their relationship with him with a special historical significance” (emphasis added). While recognizing that Scripture is indeed a human document, that is not all it is. The apostle Peter describes “men [speaking] from God as they were carried along (or *driven*) by the Holy Spirit.” McLeish’s view seems to fall some way short of that.

He tends to argue that the plain meaning of a text is too simple, naive—even “banal”; or to focus on a cultural context not accessible to the ordinary reader, or to prioritize our modern understanding of science. While scholarship has its uses, this is an approach that lacks the confidence of the Reformation emphasis on *claritas scripturae*. I am reminded of a classic piece of irony from the pen of Dale Ralph Davis, writing in his commentary on 1 Kings<sup>6</sup> (pertinently entitled *The Wisdom and the Folly*):

*You must **reconstruct** the text to get at the real truth; if you merely **read** the text you will obtain a completely naive and wrong impression.* (emphasis added)

McLeish also seems to favour divorcing the Old Testament from the New. In his blog (Archives, Sept.2017) he says of the result of some discussions on Job

*The main lessons seems to be **not** to project back New Testament notions into the thought world of Job or the writer of the book...* (emphasis added)

This is consistent with other theistic evolution writers such as John H.Walton, who has stated (in a radio debate) that we cannot interpret Genesis properly from the NT. This attitude is also true of N.T.Wright, who insists that Paul’s discussions of Adam and Eve have nothing to do with human origins<sup>7</sup>.

4. Given that his proposals are essentially for a new approach, it is unfortunate that he fails to engage with older and different views. Has he even considered his theological proposals from a historical perspective? Or is he just so convinced of the rightness of his own ideas that he sees no need to do so?

At the same time, he is happy to quote from non-Christian world-views in order to buttress his arguments. As far as I can understand it, what he means by “faith” is indistinguishable from “world-view.” (And what exactly in science is founded specifically on the Christian faith—the *faith once delivered to the saints*? To that extent, even the title of his book is somewhat misleading.)

Thus, he appears to approve of the Jewish view (p.219) of the creation that there was

*no ‘fall from grace’—people have always had the potential to disobey...there is a ‘deficiency in creation’ in which we participate, as creative partners with God, to make good*

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6 Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Kings: The Wisdom and the Folly* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2002), 135

7 For details, see Ch.24 of J.P.Moreland et al. (eds.), *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical and Theological Critique*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

To this McLeish appends a note that in considering the remedy for this “deficiency”, Christianity could point to the resurrection, but while “[this] might add to the Jewish vision...it certainly does not detract from it.” He therefore appears to approve of the idea of a ‘fall-free’ world.

He is also over-impressed by Islamic “wisdom,” and its “strong resonances” (p.220) to his notion of a “participative and creative narrative.” As Rodney Stark has noted<sup>8</sup>, the story of the Islamic contribution to science has been exaggerated<sup>9</sup>. In fact, a comprehensive study by Dario Fernandez Morera<sup>10</sup> has argued *inter alia* that the allegedly significant Muslim influences on the development of science (such as their “preservation” of classical Greek literature) were relatively minor, and far outweighed by the baleful effects of the Islamic destruction of existing civilizations in North Africa, the Middle East and Spain. I suspect McLeish is sadly naive in his hopes (p.221) for “exploring [science] together across the Abrahamic traditions.”

And what are we to make of the following (Blog Archives, Feb.2018)?

*Human beings live not only in a physical world but within historical narratives that give us values, purpose, and identity. Science sits on the branches and draws from the sap of many of those stories whose roots are anchored in the great themes of creation, redemption, and renewal that course through our religious traditions and endow us with humanity.*

This sounds like something from Pseuds Corner in *Private Eye*! And what stories? Which religious traditions? Does it matter (and particularly, does it matter for science) whether the stories are true, or the traditions well-grounded in space-time history? We seem to be moving a long way from Scripture and the Christian faith at this point.

5. As some of the quotations may already have indicated, McLeish favours a writing style of oblique grandiloquence. Consider, for instance, that the “development of natural form and structure rides upon the waves of random exploration with [*sic*] the space of possibilities (p.263).” Sounds impressive, but hardly a model of clarity! He likes long twisting sentences. The example above was from his blog; here is one from the book:

*If the narratives of ‘messing with sacred nature’ on the one hand and technological utopia on the other can propagate in such a way that they become controlling (and competing) narratives in real public debate and policy decisions, then so can this one (p.264).*

Or, from his blog again (September 2018):

*One consequence of the divorce of science from the humanities, its cult of expertise and its hegemony of epistemology is, paradoxically, its newly-suffered optionality.*

Surely there is a simpler way of conveying what he means?

He is enamoured of buzzwords such as *participation, engagement, nourishment, exploration, relational*; there are *journeys, narratives* (occasionally mere *stories*), *streams* and *strands*, etc. But he is less fond of unvarnished prose and sure-footed exposition. I

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8 Stark, *op.cit.*, 155-156.

9 The research on which this story is based has not occurred through impartial scholarship. Much of it has been sponsored by monarchs in wealthy Muslim countries who have poured money into Western universities and organisations such as the UK-based ‘Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation (FSTC).’

10 Dario Fernandez Morera, *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain*, (Wilmington, DE, ISI Books, 2015). This is clearly a polemical work, yet the author’s sources are nearly all primary ones, cited in many cases from their original language.

could not help but compare McLeish with an author who has also written extensively (but lucidly) on similar topics—Vern Poythress<sup>11</sup>, whose works I shall be citing in several places. The contrast between them reminds me of the words of Jean Sibelius, who spoke of other composers as being “engaged in manufacturing cocktails of every hue and description, [whereas] I offer the public cold spring water.” McLeish is definitely a cocktails man.

There is also a studied vagueness in his prose that allows him to say things that can be read as orthodox, while in other places disputing the understanding of historic Christianity. (His various references to the Fall in Gen.2 are a case in point.) From a scientist vagueness is rather strange—science needs to define things with precision!

I may be mistaken, but the ghost of N.T.Wright seems to hover over many of McLeish’s arguments<sup>12</sup>. Anyone familiar with Wright will find the same desire to forge a new path; the same easy dismissal of traditional views; the same “patronizing disdain” (R.C.Sroul’s assessment) for those who disagree with him; the same fondness for straw men; the same antagonism<sup>13</sup> towards “creationism.” What J.I.Packer reportedly<sup>14</sup> has said of Wright applies also to McLeish: “He foregrounds what the Bible backgrounds, and backgrounds what the Bible foregrounds.”

I now turn to a deeper discussion of more specific problems.

## Wisdom

It is far from clear what McLeish means by the “wisdom of natural things”—what does the ‘of’ entail? Does he *really* believe that “natural things” have wisdom? Elsewhere we have the phrase “wisdom to do with natural things,” which could be interpreted differently. But several passages suggest that he does think natural things possess “wisdom.” He certainly believes (p.173) there is a “**nature wisdom** tradition in the Bible” (emphasis added). But perhaps this simply means (p.172) “engaging our minds with nature.” This ambiguity is pervasive. Can impersonal objects possess a personal quality—for that is surely what “wisdom” is in Scripture?

It should be noted that the idea of biblical wisdom literature has become problematic to some theologians. Under the initial influence of the German theologian Gerhard von Rad (though his own position was more complicated, or *nuanced*, as theologians love to say), a movement developed that saw in Scripture a distinct ‘wisdom literature,’ strongly linked to creation, that appealed to a different basis for man’s relationship to God. In Richard Belcher’s stimulating survey of these developments he notes<sup>15</sup> that from this viewpoint

*Salvation was not brought about by Yahweh’s activity in history or by any kind of human agency...but by specific factors inherent in creation itself.*

This is a somewhat risky proposition—it leads to a focus on human experience rather than divine revelation, and tends to drive a wedge between creation and salvation history. Is it

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11 *His Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006) in particular covers very similar ground, but Poythress is unambiguously committed to orthodox Reformed theology. Not only does he purvey ‘cold spring water’ in the clarity of his language and biblical exegesis, but he is also clear-eyed about the nature and limits of science, seen in biblical perspective.

12 In fairness, while Wright is certainly loquacious, he is much easier to read than McLeish.

13 N.T.Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging with Contemporary Issues* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2014), 31.

14 In <https://christiantheology.wordpress.com/2016/02/24/is-n-t-wright-a-christian/>

15 R.P.Belcher Jr, *Finding Favour in the Sight of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 5.

this rather recent tradition that has influenced McLeish in his own focus on the ‘wisdom tradition?’ More recently, Kynes in particular has argued strongly against it as a scholarly category, as owing more to 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany than to Old Testament Israel or New Testament Christianity. In fact, he wishes to bury it<sup>16</sup>. Belcher is more judicious, but argues that any discussion of the wisdom literature, as with the rest of Scripture, should be seen in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Wisdom does have a prominent place in the OT: it is firstly a characteristic of God, but as persons made in His image, it is something we are also urged to ‘get’, as in Prov.4:5, with the parallel advice to gain ‘understanding’ or ‘insight.’ Other passages in Proverbs tell us that wisdom may be found on the lips or dwell in the heart or mind. Moses tells Israel (Deut.4:6) that it consists of keeping God’s commandments. But McLeish seems to want to interpret wisdom passages according to a different principle. It is not clear, however, why the texts just cited should be construed as “participating in a creator’s deep insight into the structure of what he has made” (p.256)! That is not to say that wisdom may not include practical issues of skill and knowledge, such as we observe in the case of Solomon, for example. And in the sense of ‘understanding’ it is certainly an intellectual pursuit. But the primary sense in Scripture seems to be a moral one.

McLeish’s discussion comes to a head in his treatment of the great “Poem” or “Song” of Wisdom in Job 28. The first 11 verses describe a search for wisdom in terms of human ingenuity and artifice: mining for metals and precious stones in the darkness underground, decorated with considerable detail as to shafts, underground canals, etc. It at least describes the application of technology, and it is a reasonable inference that it covers science as well—the exploration and discovery of order within the created world. With verse 12, however, there appears to be a decisive change in outlook: *But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?*, Job asks. It seems like a rhetorical question, inviting the answer: *Nowhere!* (or, at least, *Somewhere else!*). And that is how it has almost always been regarded in the commentaries. Matthew Henry comments:

*Job will not own [the search of vv.1-11] to be wisdom...their way is their folly. We must therefore seek it somewhere else.*

Ellicott’s *Old Testament Commentary for English Readers* is a good example from the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

*notwithstanding [man’s] industry, science, and skill, he is altogether ignorant of true wisdom.*

More recently, Meredith Kline<sup>17</sup> observes that

*In spite of amazing achievements in scientific enterprise, men are unable by the techniques or treasures of science to attain wisdom.*

Wisdom is not for sale or exchange, Job continues; it cannot be found in *the land of the living or the realm of the dead*. Wisdom comes from God (v.23), and from a human viewpoint, wisdom means fearing the Lord and avoiding evil (v.28). Other passages in Job and in Proverbs reiterate this message. Although there is an intellectual or epistemological dimension to wisdom, in Scripture it belongs more to a moral category. As Kline says,

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16 W.Kynes, The "Wisdom Literature" Category: An Obituary. *Journal of Theological Studies* 69 (2018): 1–24.

17 Meredith Kline: *Job*, in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, Charles F.Pfeiffer and Everett F.Harrison (Eds.) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1968), 480

*Apart from a true recognition of divine revelation, whether in the natural creation or in the Word, man's meditation and investigation produce not wisdom but folly.*

Again, this has been the almost universal conviction of commentators over the last 500 years. Calvin, for example, preached 159 sermons on Job (and 3 on chapter 28 alone). This was his prescription<sup>18</sup>:

*The fear of God means that we must be minded to suffer ourselves to be governed by God's hand, and above all things know what his goodness and mercy are, and yield him such reverence that we may be truly joined unto him.*

For a comprehensive picture of Calvin's view on Job, Derek Thomas's *Calvin's Teaching on Job*<sup>19</sup>—based on his doctoral dissertation—is invaluable. Calvin, Thomas avers, saw Job as a revelation of God's sovereignty, summing it up in the statement that “submission to God and his ways **is the best course of wisdom**” (emphasis added).

But McLeish turns all this on its head. In a long discussion on his blog (Archives, October 2017) he objects to interpreting God's questions to Job in chs.38-42 as “pejorative.” But have commentators actually read God's words to Job as pejorative (whose synonyms include *disparaging, insulting, contemptuous*)? They may speak of the questions as *challenging, humbling, chastising, chiding, rebuking, even overwhelming*, but they believe the focus of the questions is the Creator/creature distinction, and that Job's presumption in ignoring it merits a sharp challenge. When he realizes this, Job's own response (42:6) appears to endorse this understanding—he acknowledges his sinfulness and “abhors himself and repents in dust and ashes.” His reaction mirrors Isaiah's in *his* vision of the Almighty King (Is.6:5), and Simon Peter's (Lk.5:8). McLeish, however, thinks even this is a mistake; what it really means is that Job “simply retracts his case and moves on.” It's as if neither Job's own sinfulness, nor the distinction between Creator and creature, is a big deal. Job just needs to start figuring out the answers, so that he can “participate in the continuity of creation's story.” This is what wisdom means in McLeish's eyes. In contrast, David Atkinson's summing up of the book of Job<sup>20</sup> argues that it stands in opposition to

*[our culture's obsession] with the sort of scientific world-view which sees everything in terms of questions which need answering and problems which need solving,*

an obsession he sees as exemplified by Job's friends.

And what about the fear of the Lord (28:28)? On p.134 of the book McLeish roundly denounces any idea of wisdom in the sense of “a simple and resigned moral obeisance” as “banal.” No, wisdom means “participating in a deep understanding of the world, its structure and dynamics.” The fear of the Lord carries a “**higher** meaning of engagement, following and exploration” (emphasis added).

Just to ensure we haven't misunderstood, he reiterates at the end of the book (p.256) that

*the 'beginning of Wisdom' is not to double-lock the casket of our ignorance, but to seek the 'fear of the Lord', **where this is understood** to be a participation in a creator's deep insight into the structure of what he has made... (emphasis added).*

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18 My paraphrase of the archaic English in Arthur Golding's translation of 1574; Sermon 103, p.531. Available online at the University of Michigan library:

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A69056.0001.001/1:6.25.7?rgn=div3;view=fulltext>

19 Derek Thomas, *Calvin's Teaching on Job: Proclaiming the Incomprehensible God* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2004).

20 David Atkinson, *The Message of Job* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 1991), 155.

A little earlier (p.210) he remarks that “God is wise because his perception reaches to the ends of the universe.” As in his formula “the wisdom of natural things,” speaking of God’s “insight into [their] structure” or “his perception” seems to me to place the emphasis in the wrong place. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *insight* as “the capacity to gain an accurate and deep understanding of something”. Similarly, perception is “the ability to become aware of something.” But God has no need to *become* aware of His creation, or to *gain* understanding; He already possesses understanding, in infinite measure. It is at least a rather maladroit use of language.

It is certainly true that scientific research and discovery can lead to an awe-inspiring appreciation of the complexity and intricacy of God’s works, even for unbelievers<sup>21</sup>; for the Christian there is also an enhanced sense of wonder and praise to God for the wisdom that underlies it all. But our knowledge is limited—even that which we obtain from science; while we may know things truly (or *substantially*, as Francis Schaeffer often said), only God knows things exhaustively. Moreover, God is the origin of this wisdom, not his creatures, and even the wisdom that humans can acquire has God as its source.

Pre-eminently it comes, not from studying science, but from his Word. As Charles Haddon Spurgeon puts it, commenting on Luke 24:27<sup>22</sup>:

*Although able to reveal fresh truth, [Jesus] preferred to expound the old. He knew by His omniscience what was the most instructive way of teaching, and by turning at once to Moses and the prophets, He showed us that the surest road to wisdom is not speculation, reasoning, or reading human books, but meditation upon the Word of God.*

Vern Poythress<sup>23</sup> also has a lengthy discussion of true and false paths to wisdom, wherein he considers wisdom texts in the context of the NT. In Agur’s lament (Prov.30:1-4), for example (curiously ignored by McLeish), the statement “I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One...” is answered by v.5: “Every word of God proves true...”.

Wisdom comes from Christ himself, the eternal Word who is made to us the wisdom of God (1 Cor.1:30). It comes as we are instructed by the Holy Spirit (Jn.14:25; 16:13) when we read the Word or hear it expounded. It comes from communion or fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But for all this we first need our minds transformed, not by a human quest for wisdom but by what Paul calls God’s foolishness (!)—Christ crucified. It is by the cross that Christ becomes to us the wisdom of God (1 Cor.1:18-24).

Such wisdom is by no means irrelevant to science, but as wellspring rather than goal—a desire to “think God’s thoughts after Him” (Johannes Kepler). As Dale Ralph Davis remarks<sup>24</sup>,

*[Biblical] wisdom...is incurably and rightly curious—it ranges over the whole domain of God’s realm, joyfully investigating and describing all God’s works. Hence biblical wisdom is the root and womb of true science.*

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21 An interesting recent example is that of the astronaut Tim Peake; though an agnostic, his experience of being on the International Space Station led him to wonder whether the universe was the result of an intelligent design. See <http://www.theweek.co.uk/95791/tim-peake-and-intelligent-design-why-do-astronauts-have-spiritual-experiences-in-space>

22 C.H.Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening: Daily Readings* (Evening, Jan 18). Retrieved from online source at [http://archive.spurgeon.org/morn\\_eve/m\\_e.html#06/11/PM](http://archive.spurgeon.org/morn_eve/m_e.html#06/11/PM)

23 *The Quest for Wisdom: in Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B.Gaffin, Jr., Lane G.Tipton and Jeffrey C.Waddington* (Eds.), (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 86-114

24 Davis, *op.cit.*, 49.

This surely puts the emphasis where it should be. As Harrison has shown<sup>25</sup>, it was men who believed in the “literal truth” of the Bible who were (humanly speaking) the “root and womb” of science.

McLeish also makes a cardinal error in failing to note that biblical references to wisdom are not univocal; rather, they fall into two distinct categories. It is patently obvious that the NT especially speaks of two kinds of wisdom. Not that the OT fails to make the distinction, but in the NT it is much sharper. The first (Belcher calls it ‘revelatory wisdom’—something not discoverable by mankind) was discussed above, and is denoted by phrases such as the “wisdom of God” (1 Cor.1:20), “spiritual wisdom” (Col.1:9), “the wisdom from above” (Jas.3:17), for example. This is contrasted with the wisdom “of the world” or “according to the flesh” (1 Cor.1:19, 26). Oddly, such ideas do not appear in McLeish’s book, which thus leaves the impression that the “wisdom of natural things” may be the same thing as biblical, revelatory wisdom.

In reality, we must recognize that science is a human activity—one not necessarily carried out by persons who have come to God via his revelation in Scripture. In fact, all of us remain actively in rebellion against God unless and until we trust in Christ and his work on the cross. The wisdom of God is indeed made manifest by his creation (Rom.1:18-23), and the operation of what is generally called ‘common grace’ in scientific work produces an increased knowledge and understanding of the cosmos. But such knowledge does not by itself convince mankind to turn to Him and recognize His wisdom. We prefer our own wisdom. As Poythress observes, this wisdom can appear in many guises:

*Because people are alienated from God, the quest for wisdom takes strange, distorted forms. It takes counterfeit forms, and leads to counterfeit wisdom.*

He proceeds to evaluate some of these counterfeits, one of which, interestingly, is evolutionary naturalism and its use of science. Although Poythress’s article was written 6 years before McLeish’s book, it appears almost designed as an antidote to his naive confidence that science is a pathway to God’s wisdom. McLeish completely fails to reckon with the reality of sinful human nature.

## **Wisdom and Design**

It is not just Reformed theologians and commentators whom McLeish ignores. He also fails to mention some rather similar ideas from the physicist Gerald Schroeder, which are promoted in his book *The Hidden Face of God*<sup>26</sup>. I cannot endorse everything Schroeder writes, but consider the following:

*Every...being...seems to have within it a level of information, of conscious wisdom.*  
(Preface, p.xi)

*wisdom is the building-block, the substrate, from which all the time and space and matter of the universe were created... [but it] is not weighable, nor is it easily stained and seen under a microscope. (p.88)*

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<sup>25</sup> Harrison, *op.cit.*, 122.

<sup>26</sup> Gerald L.Schroeder, *The Hidden Face of God* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 2001).

On the face of it, Schroeder seems to be saying much the same as McLeish, except he said it 12 years earlier<sup>27</sup>. But what does Schroeder mean by wisdom? The first quotation hints at the answer, which later becomes rather more explicit:

*We see the consistent emergence of wisdom, the **ordered complex information** that is nowhere hinted at in the governing laws of nature or in the particles of matter that form the brain... (p.46, emphasis added)*

*...the information stored in the genetic code ... is not implied by the biological building blocks of DNA, neither in the nucleotide letters, nor in the...bonds along which those letters are strung... [but] by a wisdom that precedes matter...and energy....This ubiquitous emergence of wisdom, of information, cries out for explanation. (p.178)*

Schroeder is an Orthodox Jew, but here he is making a similar argument to that of the Christian mathematician and philosopher William Dembski. It is also noteworthy, that like Dembski, Schroeder understands that this complexity has serious implications for the Darwinian theory of evolution, whose explanation is entirely inadequate (p.91): “A careful look at the current theory of evolution reveals not a theory, but merely a description.” McLeish, as will be seen shortly, appears completely oblivious to this problem.

For myself, I don't think the identification of wisdom with information can really be sustained. But there is certainly a connection, as Schroeder hints—when we observe the information in the genome, for example, the obvious explanation is that there was a prior wisdom. At any rate, despite problems with his phrasing, Schroeder is certainly pointing in a more biblical direction than McLeish. Scripture tells us in many places (most noticeably, of course, in Genesis 1), that the world is the result of God speaking, imparting information. Dembski argues that this is fundamental: ordered (or specified) complex information is prior to matter<sup>28</sup>. But even before that there was wisdom—for the only source of such information of which we have experience is a mind, an intelligence. Wisdom is evidenced by a *design*.

The connection between wisdom and design is one that should be familiar from orthodox Christianity. Vern Poythress<sup>29</sup> quotes this example from Spurgeon<sup>30</sup>, commenting on Eph.1:11:

*Our belief in God's **wisdom** supposes and necessitates that He has a settled purpose and plan in the work of salvation. What would creation have been without His **design**? Is there a fish in the sea, or a fowl in the air, which was left to chance for its formation? Nay, in every bone, joint, and muscle, sinew, gland, and blood-vessel, you mark the presence of a God working everything according to the **design** of infinite **wisdom** (emphasis added)*

Nothing McLeish has written suggests that he wishes to go down this route—unlike Dembski (or even Schroeder) it is likely that he wants at all costs to avoid the implication of *intelligent design* (ID)! The word “Information” appears in his sub-heading for the section on John 1, but the idea isn't really treated. Neither information nor design appears in the index to his book; no ID literature is cited or discussed. On the other hand, he cites the writings of several theistic evolutionists approvingly, and he has contributed to the

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27 This is not a suggestion of plagiarism, although Schroeder's work has been widely discussed both by creationists and anti-creationists, and was reportedly instrumental in Antony Flew's change of mind regarding God's existence. But on McLeish's part it does suggest a surprisingly narrow interest in the literature.

28 W.Dembski, *Being as Communion* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2014).

29 V.Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), p.72. See also the same author's *The Quest for Wisdom*, cited at note 23 above.

30 C.H.Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening: Daily Readings* (Morning, August 2). Retrieved from online source at [http://archive.spurgeon.org/morn\\_eve/m\\_e.html#06/11/PM](http://archive.spurgeon.org/morn_eve/m_e.html#06/11/PM)

BioLogos website—and BioLogos is well-known for its antipathy towards ID. Incidentally, I think he is missing a trick here: he has expressed a concern that science has become divorced from other human activities, like poetry and music, yet as Wiker and Witt have shown<sup>31</sup>, it is the motif of *design* that connects them.

## Creationism

While there is vagueness and ambiguity at several points, McLeish's reticence does not extend to "creationism." In his first chapter he pours scorn on those churches that "reject an ancient origin for our world, and the gradual evolution of life on our planet for a literal interpretation of [Genesis]." It is, he says, "impossible for anyone informed about the way we have arrived at our present view of the cosmos, let alone professional scientists, to take this view seriously." In his blog for August 2018, he attacks the

*late-modern, socially-determined, anti-scientific and theologically flawed (to say the least) teachings of so-called 'Creationism'*

In fact, of course, many people who really *are* informed about that "way we have arrived at our present view of the cosmos" tend to have significant doubts about it, such as Gerald Schroeder, quoted above. The doubters include many professional scientists, of whom more than 1000 (as of February 2019) have been brave enough publicly to sign the Discovery Institute's statement of *Scientific Dissent from Darwinism*<sup>32</sup>. Even within the evolutionary biology community, there are many who—while making a dutiful public deference to neo-Darwinism—worry about its explanatory deficits, many of which were voiced at a Royal Society meeting in November 2016. As Gerd Müller observed in his keynote address to that meeting<sup>33</sup>, the neo-Darwinian model cannot account for "novelty, modularity, homology, homoplasy or the origin of lineage-defining body plans." In fact,

*the theory largely avoids the question of how the complex organizations of organismal structure, physiology, development or behaviour—whose variation it describes—actually arise...(emphasis added)*

In other words, as Schroeder pointed out, Darwinism is merely a description. To "take it seriously," we need to see an adequate mechanism—**and it doesn't have one.**

McLeish, however, has no such worries. He is utterly convinced that "demonising" evolution is a terrible sin. The "literalist" approach to Genesis is "distorted" and "betrays a shallow disrespect for the Bible." It "imprisons the minds of...honest believers...into dark cells of ignorance." In fact, "the church has a word for this sort of wrong teaching...it is called a 'heresy'." Hmm. Is Ken Ham of *Answers in Genesis* (for example) really on the same level as Arius or Pelagius?

Given this broadside, it might be expected that McLeish would take the trouble to check the facts. The canard—and it is a canard—that creationism is a recent development has been answered before, and not just in creationist literature<sup>34</sup>, but apparently McLeish is

31 B.Wiker and J.Witt, *A Meaningful World: How the Arts and Sciences Reveal the Genius of Nature* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006)

32 See <https://dissentfromdarwin.org/>. Note that the focus of this list is on Darwinian evolution; doubtless a variety of ideas about the detailed interpretation of Genesis 1-3 are represented.

33 See G.B.Müller (2017), Why an extended evolutionary synthesis is necessary. *Interface Focus* 7: 20170015. Available for download at <http://rsfs.royalsocietypublishing.org/>.

34 See, for example (i) J.P.Lewis (1989). The days of Creation: an historical survey of interpretation. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 32(4), 433-455. Lewis shows that 'literal' readings of Gen.1 go back at least as far as Basil and Gregory of Nyssa; (ii) the review in <https://creation.com/orthodoxy-and-genesis-what-the-fathers->

ignorant of the fact. He also believes that creationism “insists that **all** species were created **fully formed** by special fiat of God, and are not connected by any evolutionary tree” (p.240, emphasis added). Really? From what source did he obtain this information? Perhaps he might find someone on the wider fringes of creationism to support it, but it is certainly not mainstream. One widely respected chronicler of creationism is the historian Ronald Numbers (no creationist himself): that creationists believe in species fixity is one of the myths he debunked in a recent article<sup>35</sup>—one that predates McLeish’s book by 3 years.

He could also have gone straight to the horse’s mouth. Even a cursory reading of current creationist literature or a perusal of prominent creationist websites would have shown McLeish that he is very wide of the mark. He could have found this web-page from *Answers in Genesis*, for example:

<https://answersingenesis.org/natural-selection/speciation/do-species-change/>

Or this, from *Creation Ministries International*:

<https://creation.com/speciation-is-not-evolution>

Or he could read Nathaniel Jeanson’s book *Replacing Darwin*<sup>36</sup>—replete with drawings of evolutionary trees, which he uses to argue that creationist models fit the actual data on the *rate* of speciation events in mitochondrial DNA better than Darwinian ones. There does seem to be a pattern here: McLeish consistently ignores relevant literature that might challenge his views, citing only that which supports his argument.

## Order and Chaos

Christianity has traditionally asserted that God created *ex nihilo*—out of nothing or, as Cornelius van Til preferred to say, *into* nothing<sup>37</sup>. As already noted above, McLeish *appears* to believe otherwise—‘in the beginning’ (p.73) “there was, not nothing, but chaos.” This is potentially dangerous—it leaves open the possibility that something else is eternal, and independent of God.

Of course, it depends what he means by ‘in the beginning’. Perhaps he merely means to make a distinction between the original creation of all matter, energy, time and space—sometimes called ‘absolute creation’—and the formation, structuring and filling of the visible creation which followed the initial creative act (‘mediate creation’). Such a distinction would remove the possibility of misunderstanding. But then again he says (p.183) that “the central creative act [is] not so much the summoning of matter from nowhere and nothing but...the ordering of the elemental deeps”, and that *ordering* is the “**fundamental** creative act” (emphasis added). It is true that the emphasis in Gen.1:2-2:3 is on God’s ordering of the cosmos, but the foundation (Lat., *fundamentum*) is surely in Gen.1:1. It is after that we read the statement that the earth was *tohu wabohu*—‘formless and empty’ (NIV), which prepares the ground for the divine speech of the next 6 days that progressively orders the cosmos.

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[really-taught](#) of a comprehensive study from the Eastern Orthodox tradition; (iii) the argument in N.M.de S.Cameron, *Evolution and the Authority of the Bible* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1983). Cameron, writing as a conservative evangelical, has shown that it is the accommodationist reading of Genesis that is a recent development, dating from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

35 R.L.Numbers (2011), Clarifying Creationism: Five Common Myths, *Hist.Phil.Life Sci.* 33, 129-139.

36 N.T.Jeanson, *Replacing Darwin: The New Origin of Species*, (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2017)

37 Cornelius van Til, *The Defence of the Faith* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2012), 49-50. By this phrasing he wished to emphasize that there really was *nothing* outside of God until He brought it *into* existence.

Does McLeish believe matter was *not* summoned from nowhere and nothing? What exactly does he mean by “elemental deeps?” Once more there is an imprecision of language which is both unfortunate in a scientist and unhelpful to the reader.

Genesis is also clear that God’s ordering came to an end—on the 6<sup>th</sup> day “He looked at all He had made and it was very good...Thus the heavens and earth were completed...” But in McLeish’s story “chaos” remains even after the ordering. And chaos, he says, “has no other source than the creator himself.” If he means the initial ‘formless’ creation of Gen.1:2, true enough. But he places this statement in the context of pain and destruction, of the “thorns and briars” of Gen.3. Again, there is a sense in which this is also true—as Vern Poythress argues<sup>38</sup>, God is sovereign, the foundation of all events—the ordered regular ones, and those we cannot predict. And some are a judgement for sin. But is that what McLeish means?

I ask this because what he then describes are the sort of observations that scientists investigate in the area of statistical mechanics, where underlying randomness supports a predictability of macroscopic phenomena; or in chaos theory, where ‘random’ trajectories in low dimensions turn out to exhibit regularities when embedded in higher dimensions. Nature, he says (p.101), “operates on a statistical foundation.” It is true that we have come to understand that what we call ‘random’ events are at the heart of many natural phenomena. And, of course, scientific discoveries such as these should cause us to marvel at our Creator’s wisdom, but does this sort of “chaos” account for the thorns and thistles?

What McLeish fails to make clear is that the initial creation has been spoiled as a consequence of the Fall and the Curse. The magisterial study of the Atonement by Steve Jeffrey *et al.* puts it like this<sup>39</sup>:

*[Genesis 3 describes] an act of ‘decreation’...the reversal of many of God’s plans for the original creation, the unravelling of what was once very good*

It is “out-of-joint” now, but it has not always been so. At least some of the “chaos” in the present world is a result of God’s judgement against sin. None of this features in McLeish’s discussion. In fact, as observed above, he thinks that describing the events of Gen.3 as “punishment” is a “superficial” understanding. Pain and suffering are “the **necessary process** by which new life comes into being” (p.154, emphasis added). This is straight from the theistic evolution play-book: Denis Alexander, for example, says<sup>40</sup> that “God created a tough world...[one] in which there is pain and death”.

Instead of clarifying such matters, McLeish moves on to his “theology of science.”

## Science and Theology

The relationship between science and religion has been characterized in various ways. The more militant atheists view it as a battleground, where religion must vacate the field and leave science victorious. Others take a dualistic approach (“non-overlapping magisteria” in Stephen Jay Gould’s terminology) so religion is allowed to speak of religious things, but has no relevance to the physical world. The standard theistic evolution

38 Poythress, *Chance*, Ch.10. Anyone interested in the themes of ‘random’ events and God’s sovereignty will find Poythress’s book a much more balanced and considered account than McLeish’s.

39 S.Jeffrey, M.Ovey and A.Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, (Nottingham, UK: IVP, 2007), 110,

40 D.Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (Oxford, UK: Monarch, 2008), 288.

argument for the relationship between science and theology is ‘complementarity’ (“religion tells us why, but science tells us how”); in practice this collapses into a view where theology is subservient to science, as I have argued elsewhere<sup>41</sup>.

McLeish’s solution (p.171) is to replace the word ‘and’ with the word ‘of’:

*We need just as much a theology of science as we do a science of theology...whether or not one chooses to explore life from a theistic, atheistic or agnostic point of view...We need to know...where science belongs in the stories we tell of our history, hopes and values, and ultimately of our purpose. Those are the theological stories.*

Sadly and gently, I have to say that, as well as being another Pseuds Corner moment, this is pretty incoherent. What sort of ‘*theological*’ story is it that emanates from an *atheistic* point of view? McLeish disavows complementarity; both science and theology, he says, must speak of everything. In fact, he says, “neither science nor theology can be authentic unless they can be universal” (p.209). A little later (p.213): “each, by its nature, demands to speak of everything...in particular, we must not avoid the conclusion that each needs to speak authoritatively about the other.”

Again, he leaves undefined what is the scope of “everything.” Does he really mean science can speak (and authoritatively!) of God, of angels, of the soul of man, of eternity? Perhaps not, as he goes on to say (p.214),

*But science is blind to purpose—it has no ‘teleological’ methodology or goals. It shines light on what happens in the universe and how it happens...but it cannot articulate stories with goals and values...*

Theology, however, “observes and construes stories...[and] **is** able to discuss purposes and values” (emphasis added). So his concept of “theology of science/science of theology” looks remarkably like the offerings of the complementarians. It appears to be a distinction without a difference. Furthermore, what if science and theology say conflicting things? When a conflict arises, McLeish appears to give science the priority. As already alluded to above, he is firmly convinced that no interpretation of Gen. 1-3 is admissible if it disagrees with Darwinism. This is another mark of theistic evolution’s ‘complementary’ scheme. With the greatest will in the world, I cannot see his approach as anything but a reformulation of it. The language is perhaps more exalted (even, I’m afraid, sometimes impenetrable), but that is about the only difference. And when we reach a concrete application of his “theology of science”, it appears to be no more than a plea that we should act according to the original creation mandate.

## **Reconciliation**

The principal ingredient of this “theology of science” is the idea of *reconciliation*, but his use of this biblical word is idiosyncratic, to say the least. Quoting 2 Cor.5:18, he is excited by the term “the ministry of reconciliation” (p.208). Thus, he says (p.209):

*Science becomes, within a Christian theology, the grounded outworking of the ministry of reconciliation between humankind and the world....[It] is the name we give to the...task of...participating in the mending our relationship with nature.*

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41 See J.P.Moreland *et al.*, *op.cit.*, Ch.24.

But this flies in the face of the actual context of v.18. As Moises Silva has argued—persuasively and in great detail—failing to consider words in their context can be at least uninformative, and often misleading. For example<sup>42</sup>

*We learn much more about the doctrine of sin by John's statement "Sin is the transgression of the law" than by a word-study of ἁμαρτία...*

This example is highly relevant, as the Greek word *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία) is also central to understanding the biblical doctrine of *reconciliation* (καταλλαγή), and Silva's principle holds here too. McLeish conceives of this word as principally meaning "healing" or "mending" a broken relationship. But what does the context tell us?

In the succeeding verses Paul says that God has "committed to us the word (or message) of reconciliation" so that we appeal to mankind to be reconciled to God. The ministry is intimately connected to the message. And what is the content of the message? The death of the sinless Christ who became sin for us—his substitutionary atonement. The appeal is not to nature, but to men and women, who can hear the message, and for whom He died. Moreover, it is not a process (unlike, say, sanctification)—reconciliation was *achieved* at the cross. The wider context of the NT tells us that we ourselves are incapable of "mending our relationship with God," whatever means we might try to use. To quote Jeffrey *et al.* again<sup>43</sup>, "Reconciliation is inseparably connected to the issue of justice." It takes place within a moral framework; to speak of "healing a broken relationship" is true, but it is much more than that. Apart from an understanding of the doctrine of sin, we cannot understand the doctrine of reconciliation<sup>44</sup>.

Moreover, this applies to nature as much as to humanity<sup>45</sup>,

*...it is impossible to understand how the atoning death of Jesus could usher in the new creation and bring new life to the corrupt and degenerating cosmos if he did not endure and exhaust the divine curse on the old creation.*

Just so. Other than the death of Christ, nothing has the power to effect reconciliation. Granted, the creation is still groaning at this time—we live in the "not yet," but Christ has *already* borne the curse, and it is on that basis that the creation will be restored in the future. Exactly how this will take place is not given us in detail, but the Apostle Peter (2 Pet.3:7-13) tells us that it will first entail a fiery destruction. Commenting on this passage, Packer says<sup>46</sup>,

*It will be sudden and catastrophic, as every familiar thing vanishes and each individual is conscious only of being set before the Lord Jesus Christ for judgment.*

It certainly sounds nothing like a progressive improvement brought about by science<sup>47</sup>. Unfortunately, McLeish glosses over such considerations. It is thus a rather bizarre exegesis that sees the major focus of 2 Cor.5 as a process in which we "mend our relationship with nature," and an even more bizarre application that makes science *the* name for this process.

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42 M.Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 28.

43 Jeffrey et al., *op.cit.*, 143.

44 See J.I.Packer, *God's Words* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 1981), 121-127, for one of the best condensed introductions to the meaning of reconciliation.

45 Jeffrey et al., *op.cit.*, 211.

46 Packer, *op.cit.*, 67.

47 Some, like Packer, have actually speculated that the *destruction* is brought about by science!

McLeish adduces other scriptures in support of his thesis (Job, of course, Isaiah, John 15), but in the main his handling of them is highly impressionistic. The application of a grammatical-historical hermeneutic is not his forte. I think he has found a small patch of firmer ground in his discussion of 1 Peter 2 and the priesthood of believers. The primary emphasis of our priestly task is on sharing the gospel (as McLeish acknowledges). Yet it is also true that we can “proclaim the excellencies of God” in what we call secular callings, of which science is an important example.

In passing, it is important to note that science is not unique. Is not wisdom needed, and sometimes shown, in non-scientific aspects of human life? Are lawyers, bus drivers, care workers, accountants, bricklayers, engineers—to name but a few—not expected to exercise wisdom in their callings? Can politics, economics, education, the administration of justice, etc., not help to mend broken relationships? Perhaps one might argue that some of these areas of human life are more known for exhibiting *unwisdom*, but science doesn’t get a free pass here either.

Furthermore, the support from the idea of priesthood is limited. Firstly, Peter’s call is to *believers*—those who have received mercy, who have been called out of darkness. It is at most a theology of (some) scientists, not a theology of science. Secondly, believers are still sinners; we remain unprofitable servants. Our good works are those which God prepared in advance for us to do. To grant ourselves the status of “God’s co-agents in the process of bringing nature into a right relationship with its creator and its human inhabitants” (p.215) without any consideration of such factors is somewhat lacking in humility. And does this extend to non-believers doing science? God’s ‘common grace’ to mankind might have been introduced here, but McLeish does not seem interested. (He is aware of the concept, however; it gets a brief mention in his blog for May 2018.)

Moreover, what is entailed even in this limited “reconciliation” seems to fall considerably short of what a traditional reading of Scripture suggests. McLeish opines (p.172) that

*Both a long narrative of science and the biblical story of our relationship with nature agree that we start from a position of ignorance and...work to achieve a deeper understanding....The task of eroding ignorance about the world becomes a project that humanity is compelled to adopt.*

Is “ignorance about the world” really what Paul had in mind in 2 Cor.5? Or, even more pointedly, in Rom.1—where the Apostle argues that far from being ignorant, mankind knows the truth about God from what is made, but *suppresses* it? This was a major emphasis of the Reformation, *contra* Aquinas, for example, who spoke of the Fall as a “wound of ignorance.”

That science is an instrument, (let alone *the* instrument) for “bringing nature into a right relationship” with humanity (let alone with God) is also hard to justify from history. McLeish is actually aware of this, providing several examples of what he calls “troubled technologies.” Such examples could be multiplied: for instance, the electric vehicles that are going to ‘save the planet’ (at least in the West) will have huge environmental and health costs (conveniently, often outside the West), and the wind turbines that produce the electricity require vast quantities of ‘bad’ fossil fuels for their manufacture, transport and installation. Looking back over scientific history (indeed, human history in general) we see that some things have got better, but others have got worse. Science has given us antibiotics—but also medicated abortion; anaesthetics—but also nerve gases; plastics—but also pollution.

Underlying McLeish's view of science seems to be the Enlightenment idea of progress. He prefers the phrase "linear history"<sup>48</sup> but the concept is clearly similar (p.173)—a "direction from ignorance and puzzlement towards dawning understanding." Yet philosophers of science are hardly unanimous that science necessarily proceeds in this way; indeed there is no consensus on what actually constitutes progress, or even how we could measure it<sup>49</sup>. Nor is science immune from the danger of obsessively exploring dead-ends; I would argue that the fixation on neo-Darwinian 'science' in the last century and a half has led scientific investigation into a *cul-de-sac* of 'unwisdom', from which it is only now (and only very tentatively) beginning to escape<sup>50</sup>.

Philosophical questions aside, how does McLeish's approach find practical solutions to the problem of our troubled relationship with nature? Well, he has some nice sound-bites: "to love the world, to be engaged to it, covenanted to it, entangled with it...is at the heart of what it means to be human." In case we don't see how this is meant to work out in practice, he draws on various "strands" or "threads" of his "theology of science." Wisdom tells us, he says, that human aptitude needs to be re-directed away from "the modernist narrative of dominance towards a balanced and humble 'mastery' in the truly participative sense."

I'm not entirely sure how to interpret this—it sounds like yet another escapee from Pseuds Corner—but I think it means that we need to think of 'having dominion' over, or 'subduing' the earth not as conquest, but in terms of stewardship. This of course, is hardly novel. The Lynn White thesis<sup>51</sup> which claimed that Christian theology was at the root of the irresponsible exploitation of natural resources is over 50 years old, and many evangelicals (and others) have firmly answered White's critique. One influential book of the time was Francis Schaeffer's *Pollution and the Death of Man*<sup>52</sup>, which argued that White's concept of exploitation and dominance was a misreading of Scripture, and that his proposed solutions were doomed to fail. Only the historic doctrines of Christianity, Schaeffer argued, provided a true answer to the big problems of our relationship to the environment.

Sadly, the big "narrative" of *this* age—"the way we have arrived at our present view of the cosmos" was what McLeish called it in his castigation of creationists—is of course evolutionary naturalism, or Darwinism. And given the tenets of Darwinism, there is no rationale for *not* behaving in an exploitative way. As even T.H.Huxley admitted (in his Romanes Lecture of 1893<sup>53</sup>), "Evolution...in itself...is incompetent to furnish any better reason why what we call good is preferable to what we call evil." Now McLeish is a Christian who claims to furnish a better reason, but are the non-believers who read this book likely to find his "theology of science" persuasive?

Ironically, it is the despised creationists who frequently argue that Christians have a duty of care for creation, not merely in a superficial way, but also in terms of a deep understanding of processes within nature<sup>54</sup>. But this has nothing to do with a convoluted argument about "wisdom" and "reconciliation." Rather, its basis is the original creation mandate given by God, and our obedience to His moral law. Mankind has the intellectual and moral duty to

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48 The mathematician in me wonders what non-linear history might look like! Quadratic? Exponential?

49 The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy has a comprehensive discussion on these problems. See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-progress/#SciPro>

50 A prime example of this issue is the unravelling of the 'junk DNA' narrative.

51 Lynn White, The historical roots of our ecological crisis. *Science*, 155 (1967), 1203–1207.

52 Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, (Wheaton, IL:Tyndale House, 1970).

53 Thomas Henry Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, (London, UK: Macmillan, 1893)

54 See, for example <https://creation.com/caring-for-creation> for a discussion of the value of research into dung beetles in Australia.

act responsibly towards nature, and as Christians to do so is part of our calling. As Calvin said nearly 500 years ago<sup>55</sup>, so much more clearly than McLeish:

*the custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam...on the condition, that being content with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain....That this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us, let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses.*

And, as Francis Schaeffer has said, this is not trivial—the church is meant to have a real, substantial, impact. At the same time, it will not be perfect and complete—that awaits the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For McLeish himself—who thinks unbelief in Darwinism is heresy—there is a huge problem of incoherence. His case for “a balanced and humble mastery” of nature is fundamentally at odds with his belief in Darwinian evolution, as Huxley well understood. Not only has he built a house of cards, but he has built it on quicksand. More alarming still, from a theological perspective, is the implication—which McLeish carefully avoids stating explicitly—that God is responsible for evil. But it is implicit in his acceptance of Darwinism—that the “out-of-joint” world is what God created, with death and destruction His method of creation<sup>56</sup>.

## Summary

McLeish has put forward a ‘new’ approach to connecting science to theology, but—I say this as gently as I can—his attempt to produce a convincing argument for his “theology of science” is a resounding failure on many levels.

In practice, he **fails** to provide a clear and fresh functional prescription for the relationship between science and theology. His advice seems to go little further, if at all, than many other writers advocating the need for responsible stewardship or ‘creation care’ in the way human beings interact with God’s creation, as an application of biblical ethics. Nor do I imagine his ideas will cut much ice in the corridors of political power.

He **fails** to explain why science can be considered uniquely suited to “mend our relationship with nature,” or why its practice is apparently immune from the noetic consequences of the Fall of man. His description<sup>57</sup> of science as “one of the most holy Christian ministries one could imagine” is weirdly hyperbolic. Which Christian ministries would he place lower in the scales of “holiness?”

He **fails** to ground his ideas firmly in Scripture, and in many places he is at odds with a reading based on standard principles of biblical interpretation. He **fails** to explain why he rejects the traditional readings of many of the texts he cites, discounting them with terse, dismissive comments. Unless all previous evangelical commentators on Genesis, Job, Romans, 2 Corinthians etc. have been completely misguided, his expositions of many well-known texts cannot be safely endorsed.

He **fails** to clarify his understanding of key Christian doctrines relating to Creation, the Fall, the Curse, or how he sees their effects on (a) nature and (b) mankind. He at least appears

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55 John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis 2:15*; available at <https://www.biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/genesis/2.htm>

56 This problem (along with many others) is laid bare in great detail in J.P. Moreland *et al.*, *op.cit.*

57 <https://www.uccfleadershipnetwork.org/resource/what-is-science-for>

to make God responsible for evil. His treatment of the biblical notion of wisdom is seriously imbalanced, and his idea of reconciliation owes more to the Enlightenment dream of progress than biblical exegesis.

Most fundamentally, for what is supposed to be a Christian theology, there is very little of Christ in it. (There is a chasm between McLeish and Poythress at this point; the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ are fundamental to Poythress's understanding of science.) Given the prominence of wisdom and reconciliation in the book, and the NT emphasis on Christ as the wisdom of God, and as the One whose death is the basis for our reconciliation, this is a significant omission. McLeish does acknowledge the role of Christ as Creator in his discussion of John 1, but it is entangled with opaque references to the Word as an "ordering principle." Thus the first of the 'signs' of John's gospel (at Cana) signifies (p.162) that "Jesus is standing in a balanced and healthy relation to the physical world." Well, perhaps, but surely John recorded it primarily *so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in his name.*

His ideas about reconciliation between God, mankind and nature seem to stand outside of a moral framework—one that required the death of the Son of God. While McLeish also has much to say about the future hope of the cosmos, Christ is conspicuous by his absence in his description of the new creation, as is the church. In McLeish's Bible, it seems the foreground indeed becomes the background, and the background becomes the foreground.

## **Postscript**

If this book were merely the musings of a scientist with a penchant for theological speculation, something unlikely to be widely read, it might be less serious. His ideas, however, are being promoted by BioLogos and the Faraday Institute, and McLeish's speaking engagements are taking him into unexpected places. The blog speaks of a warm welcome from the Elim theological college, for example, and McLeish is part of the Science Network of UCCF and ran the 'Science track' at the 2018 *Word Alive* conference.

Given that his doctrinal positions are nowhere clearly stated, and at least appear to be seriously at odds with the biblical doctrinal statements associated with such organizations, it suggests that they should be informed. There are much surer guides to the relationship between science and Christian theology—of whom Vern Poythress is the outstanding example in our generation.

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