

JEREMIAD AGAINST THE MODERN MIND

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A recent paper⁽¹⁾ by Chris Fleming and John O'Carroll has rekindled old fires in my soul. For over forty years Sir Isaac Newton might be said to have paid my fortnightly salary. The science I taught was firmly based on his fundamental laws and their developments. One day, however, I had a strange experience. I seemed to see the laws as if for the first time and they seemed very strange indeed. As T.S. Eliot remarked in his poem "To Walter de la Mare", "the familiar scene is suddenly strange and what you know is what you have yet to learn, and two worlds meet and intersect and change".

It was something like the discovery of that boy who saw that "the emperor had no clothes". How did these laws come into the world? The answer is that nobody knows! Arthur Koestler has written a fascinating history of the great scientific innovators of the Western world in his book "The Sleepwalkers". Some describe themselves as 'being led by the hand' to chance upon their discoveries. Even Einstein felt a strange phenomenon in his forearms which alerted him to the fact that 'he was on to something big'. Sir Fred Hoyle spoke of a sudden enlightenment while holidaying on Bowes Moor. It was an insight into a complex area of theoretical physics and for ten days he did not need to make a note in order to remember the proof perfectly. Such incidents could be multiplied beyond counting.

What is true of Newton's Laws is also true of the entire scientific enterprise; it cannot explain itself. As Fleming and O'Connell point out, the defining feature of modernity is its lack of self-understanding.

However there are some fundamentalist scientists, true believers in scientism, who seem to believe that Newton's Laws and their like were given, as it were, to Moses on Mt. Sinai, just as the Bible came down from heaven at the time of King James, already bound in leather.

The whole point is that science can tell us nothing about truth (as Henri Poincaré says) but can only give us a plan for action. Science depends on pragmatic sanction. It is about 'what can be done'.

I saw that Newton's Laws were a fortuitous interaction of conceptual models at two levels of abstraction; a physical model on the one hand and a recently discovered mathematical concept of differential calculus. One can still get an argument as to whether Leibnitz or Newton discovered the calculus—but it is just an illustration of new ideas emerging at the same time in different parts of the world. Hence the modern scientific anxieties as to whether “the other mob will beat us to the Nobel Prize”.

These days, if you can't give your physical or biological models an incrustation of mathematics, either abstract or numerically measurable, you cannot be said to be practicing science. There is much mathematics, of course, which hasn't succeeded in finding an application. As Professor G.H. Hardy at Cambridge one remarked: “Here's to Pure Mathematics, may it never be of use to anyone”. Even so, there are some physicists who take a Pure Mathematical System, like Quantum Mechanics and try to interpret it as physics; a fatal thing for them to do. This simply leaves everyone confused, except those with a special pleading, particularly if they invest science with a truth value it does not possess. I say this notwithstanding the fact that some quite accurate predictions can be imputed to quantum mechanics. There are many theories which offer predictions but Karl Popper has suggested that verifications are a weakness of a theory. To really pass the test the theory must be open to falsification. This is not to deny that abductive inferences to the best explanation may have good scientific standing. And, if your mathematics is limited to statistics you don't have to fear falsification so much.

The same mathematical formalism can yield a variety of physical interpretations, even without consistency. However, what is to my mind, the most diabolical aspect of scientism is the subtle substitution of elaborated entities into paradigms of metaphysical reality. A simple example will suffice. We have all heard of the holographic universe. This thought is based on nothing more than a technological

trick performed with laser beams and mirrors. The point is that if one 'knows', along with Julian of Norwich, that the universe is 'like a hazelnut in the hand of God,' or with Blake, 'the universe in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour' it might be legitimate to use the example of a hologram to aid one's understanding of a higher truth. This is not to deny that the hologram has important technological applications. I am only concerned with the values we assign to technology.

Technological innovations like systems of electronic circuitry can be lifted from the engineer's bench to become paradigms of philosophical analysis. Hence we have Systems Theory. Quantum universes abound everywhere, even an infinite number of them can emerge from some really weird mathematical equations. We are rapidly approaching the situation whereby theories of physics can have reality value in scientific minds without any possibility of them being falsified. On this most important criterion honest empirical science depends. Incidentally, Darwinian evolution cannot satisfy this criterion, and to my mind, it is rather far from being an inference to the best explanation.

In order to carry out empiricist investigations, the first step is to violate the natural order. Through this violence a conceptual model of an aspect of nature is devised—a slice cut off from the whole—and idealized into an experimental design. It is on this artifice that experiments are carried out. The error is to suppose that an observation arising from this artificial representation of the real world is true of the real world. A.N. Whitehead called this the "error of misplaced concreteness". Representations should not be confused with their referents. At best it can give us a strategy for action, but interpreted as an aspect of "what is", does nothing to dispel the darkness of the mystery of creation. A plan of action may be at loggerheads with a principle of ethics. The world is much bigger than any scientist can imagine.

{I begin to get a glimmer of what Michel Serres meant when he said that the sacred is projected onto nature and beneath the sacred there is violence]
Men clothed with the *habitus* of the scientific mind find it impossible to conceive any question of ultimate meaning. Everything falls under the rubric of progress,

but for what purpose? In a conversation with an eminent scientist I found that we are all just bundles of energy (whatever that is) and when our operating system crumbles into dust, that will be our stone end. I asked: "Then why are you working in medical research"? The answer was just, "To help people live longer". Some might say, "To foster the next evolutionary development", but surely this will also result in a handful of dust.

A taxi driver in London, on recognizing his fare as the famous philosopher Bertrand Russell, asked him, in conversation, "Well, boss, what's it all about"? Not unexpectedly no answer was forthcoming.

We are faced with minds which cannot even ask the questions which every common man, not de-educated by the Enlightenment, wants to ask. This is modernity, and the next logical step is post-modernity, which abandons the notion of objective truth altogether—or rather, there are as many truths as there are people.

What the scientist does, however, is still construed under the adage of 'the search for truth', possibly in the sense of the philosophical idea of truth. If the search leads to cognitive nihilism, then so be it. This cannot be construed as irrationality, rather it is best described as rationalization rather than rationality. Rationalization is the use of reason in the service of surface phenomena and practical outcomes. The service of flatland!

The Fall into modernism and post-modernism has a clear historical development. Having read Dr. Carmel Davis' book⁽²⁾ on "Mysticism and Space", devoted to the late medieval mystics, I can appreciate how disastrous were the premises of the sixteenth and seventeenth Reformers who rejected outright the insights of the mystics, as well as all the ecclesial liturgical and ritual celebrations, calling them superstitions. The destruction of this rich symbolic life which had re-presented the Paschal Mysteries of Christ, removed the only bastion against arbitrary violence inherent in human mimetic rivalry. This is René Girard's most startling thesis and I must say I agree wholeheartedly with it. It can be truly said that the modern malaise began with the *sola scriptura* thesis.

Of course we know that the mystical light was not completely extinguished. The Counter-Reformation preserved it and even now it is making inroads into strongholds of the Reformation.

The modern malaise was reinforced by the so-called Enlightenment which proscribed belief of any kind. Fleming and O'Carroll draw attention to the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor who pointed out that for the Enlightenment *philosophes*, unbelief became the mark of the adult. It was heroic, even morally praiseworthy to 'stand on one's own two feet' in the face of perceived obscurantism. The rejection of ancient Greek metaphysical insights by the Reformers sowed the seeds of our current experience of a completely disenchanted world. The repression of mystical insights has carried right through to the current crop of evolutionary atheists. Ernst Haeckel, the German embryologist, whose eugenic views emboldened Hitler, noted that it was not only Jews who polluted the German genetic superiority, but also the weak, the ill-formed, the handicapped and those with an 'hereditary bias towards mysticism'. Similar views have been expressed by the modern evolutionary materialist philosopher, Dan Dennett.

We haven't even begun to *chronicle* the many anti-human implications of the modernist Enlightenment folly. We mention the feelings of disorientation and disconnection known as *anomie*. To me the name suggests a nameless fear- a seemingly invincible loneliness and loss of identity. Others talk of *acedie*, a seemingly ineradicable itch for something to happen to get one out of the dull daily round of sameness. Perhaps violence will fill the bill; paranoia is just the other side of depression. How can we live without enemies to hate?

I feel that the worst feature is the presumption that skin-deep rationalization can be used to manipulate the kind of life we should live; a pervasive political correctness calculated to reduce us to mindless zombies.

Something must be done!

Like Martin Luther King I have a dream! I call it a Jeremiad. This is something entirely different.

A JEREMIAD: TONGUES ARE TOP GUNS.

In preparing an article on the use and value of the charismatic gift of tongues in the community context I suddenly came up against a “snag”: an apparent contradiction in the statements of St. Paul in relation to tongue-speaking.

Let me say, at the outset, that such ‘snags’ are to be welcomed. When the Christian heart understands the unity of God’s word in scripture, one takes the very opposite path to those atheists who delight in pointing out contradictions in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. They are thereby encouraged to say, “Ha! Ha! - Christians are irrational”. But this is far from the truth. I have a saying, due to the Irish poet W.B. Yeats, that “Tradesmen see contradictions but geniuses see unity” In our case the genius is the Holy Spirit of Jesus and when He leads us out of a seeming paradox we can be sure that something very important is to hand. Well, briefly, the stopping point I reached is expressed by two statements of St. Paul on the same page:⁽³⁾

“You see then, that the strange languages are meant to be a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while on the other hand prophesy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers”

(1Cor.14:22)

In the very next sentence he says:

“So that any uninitiated people or unbelievers coming into a meeting of the whole church where everybody was speaking in tongues, would say you were all mad;.....”

(1 Cor. 14:23(a))

We would also think that, of course, but ‘singing in tongues’, that’s different!

So St. Paul seems to be saying “Use tongues for unbelievers” and “Don’t use tongues for unbelievers”.

How do we resolve this seeming dilemma?

The key to it is the word “sign”. A ‘sign’ is a prophetic action. The prophet Jeremiah is famous for his “signs” which, in his weird gestures, encapsulated

what was going to happen to the people to whom he was prophesying. In the name of the Lord, he was asking them to change their behaviour, or else!

To see that this is what St. Paul is saying we look to the verse 1Cor.14:21:

“In the written Law it says: ‘Through men speaking in strange languages and through the lips of foreigners I shall speak to the nation, and still they will not listen to me, says the Lord’”.

This verse is a free translation of Isaiah 28:11-12. Isaiah was a prophet who spoke in tongues as we understand it. To see this we must look at the context of Isaiah’s oracle against Samaria before “the Assyrians came down like a wolf on the fold”, in 721bc. Samaria was enjoying what we would call today an affluent lifestyle, drinking and carousing. Maybe drugs other than alcohol had not been invented yet. Isaiah, in speaking in tongues, was giving them a prophetic sign that their invaders sent by the Lord would be men of a foreign tongue. Isaiah’s oracle was directed in particular to the participants in sacred banquets who ridiculed and mimicked Isaiah. They were wayward priests and false prophets, similar to the high priests of this, our disenchanted, nihilistic world and it’s secular prophets claiming superior knowledge. I liken them to the inhabitants of our secular ‘flatland’ in which there are no transcendent realities, no God to worry anybody, no angels, no understanding of grace. Perhaps I’m forgetting that there are gods aplenty, like money, economics and intoxicating power, not to mention celebrities and their ‘botoxed’ body images. These gods (our world political leaders?) have made lies their refuge and falsehood their shelter; Isaiah 28:15. Isaiah’s description of them as proud ‘know-alls’ is very apt. They see themselves as vastly more learned than the *simple* prophet:

‘Who does he think he is lecturing?

Who does he think his message is for?

Babies just weaned?

Babies just taken from the breast ?

With his

Sav lasav, sav lasav,

Kav lakav, kav lakav

Zeer sham, zeer sham!

(Is.28:9-10)

They see this as the babbling of a child, an affront to their superior knowledge. They would not listen to Isaiah's message concerning the Lord of Glory with His peace and justice.

'That is why Yahweh now says:

kav lakav, kav lakav,

sav lasav, sav lasav,

zeer sham, zeer sham

So that when they walk they may fall over backwards and be broken, snared and made captive'.

(Is.28:13)

So tongues is a prophetic sign for unbelievers, a prelude to the establishment of a precious cornerstone, a foundation stone;(Isaiah 28:16). This prophesy is fulfilled by our Lord Jesus the Christ (see Mt. 21:42,43) The kingdom of God will be taken from those imposters in the Lord's vineyard and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

The moral of this saga is that by using our gift of tongues we will be co-operating with our Lord in producing His Kingdom. When there are huge numbers of tongue speakers (this is a metaphor for a vast cohort of witnesses with living faith in Jesus) "the world will seem to be as Christian as today it seems scientific"; (René Girard).

The only sign Jesus gave to the scribes and Pharisees was the sign of the prophet Jonah: (Mt.12:38,39). It may be that the only sign He will give to the priests and prophets of the secular world will be the sign of the prophet Isaiah, namely Pentecost-The New Pentecost. (Isaiah 61)

References:

(1) Chris Fleming & John O'Carroll: "A Modern Itinerary", Compass 42-Winter 2008.

(2) Carmel Bendon Davis: "Mysticism and Space", Catholic University of America Press, 2008

(3) Jerusalem Bible, Darton ,Longman and Todd,1966