

Appendix A

Methodological Naturalism and the Doctrine of the Resurrection

The National Academy of Sciences would have “science” restricted by definition to the search for “natural explanations of observable phenomena.”¹ In chapter one, we averred that this restriction is problematic for the Anglican tradition. This was our claim:

The National Academy’s line-in-the sand restriction of “science” to the “search for natural explanations,” is (indirectly, but demonstrably) inconsistent with at least one core Anglican commitment, the celebration of Easter as Christ’s victory over death. It can be shown that the way the NAS would have us define science would push the Christian down a logical path that would ultimately force her to a repugnant and otherwise unnecessary choice between commitment to science and commitment to a strong interpretation of the (core) doctrine of the Resurrection.²

The purpose of this appendix is to justify that claim. In making our case, we will have in mind this set of definitions, also found in chapter one.

Physicalism: The claim that “all living things are physical objects. If you take an organism, no matter how complex, and break it down into its constituents, you will find matter and only matter there.”³

Metaphysical Naturalism: A meta-theory about what ultimately exists. It is physicalism extended to the view that matter has no source beyond itself, because there is no Creator.

Christian Doctrine of Creation: An alternative meta-theory about what ultimately exists. There is a Creator, who is the source of all existence, and whose nature and purposes are manifest in Jesus Christ.

Methodological Naturalism: A strongly defended canon of modern science not to appeal to the Creator or any non-physical entity as “cause” for phenomena in nature.

We also remind readers of what we have said of Theistic Evolution: that it is

¹ National Academy of Sciences and National Science Teacher Association, “Joint Statement.”

² See chapter one, page 87.

³ Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 22.

marked by affirmation *both* of divine Creation, *and* of methodological naturalism.⁴ In chapter two, we saw Theistic Evolution’s theory of *Regina Scientiarium* as one important conceptual tool that can be applied to separate scientific methods that proceed “*etsi Deus non daretur* (as though God were not a factor)”⁵ from theological assertions that God is the ever-active Creator of the world. And, throughout the dissertation, we have seen that a theory of Double Agency also does much to reconcile naturalism in scientific method with the doctrine of Creation.

But the doctrine of the Resurrection is another matter. Here we mean to show that for Anglicans something will have to give: whether in our commitment to methodological naturalism as constitutive of science, or in our conception of the Resurrection as a core element of Christian faith and doctrine.

We will introduce some data to demonstrate this point: three modern studies of the origin of certain Christian beliefs pertaining to the divinity of Christ. For our purposes, the studies themselves constitute the data.

The first datum is a segment in John Macquarrie’s book *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*.⁶ In the third part of that book, Macquarrie takes up the question, “Who Really is Jesus Christ for Us Today?” Near the end of this discussion, he reviews “the Mysteries of Jesus,” considering in sequence the questions of Christ’s pre-existence, nativity,

⁴ Theistic evolutionists John Haught and Kenneth Miller have defended the latter in court. *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*. 400 F. Supp. 2d 707 (M.D. Penn. 2005), http://www.pamd.uscourts.gov/Kitzmiller/Kitzmiller_342.pdf (accessed January 16, 2006), 65.

⁵ Haught, *Deeper Than Darwin*, 17.

⁶ John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

baptism, temptation, sinlessness, transfiguration, passion, death and atonement. Then comes the point in his discussion that will be of concern to us: Macquarrie's offer to his readers of two alternative endings to this sequence. We may choose from "Ending A (The Happy Ending)" and "Ending B (The Austere Ending)."

Ending A, which Macquarrie terms the "commonly accepted" story, unfolds through the mysteries of Christ's descent into hell, resurrection, and ascension, culminating in the promise of the second coming. This happy ending, he says, "is supported by the majority of New Testament writers, it is incorporated into the catholic creeds, and it is re-enacted year by year in the liturgical calendar of the church."⁷ To Macquarrie, the goodness in this story is compelling. It beckons to us, for there is something deeply right about the happy ending. "If it is not the 'true' ending," as Macquarrie says, "surely it *deserves* to be."⁸ More to our point, he suggests that, even by light of modern historical-critical analysis, there is much to be said for the plausibility of this traditional account. "Very strong arguments," he says, can be marshaled in support of such an ending.⁹

But strong arguments can be made against it too. For there are other plausible explanations and interpretations of the same material. Macquarrie declares that he cannot hide this fact: "If there are strong arguments *for* the conventional ending, there are also serious question marks to place against it. . . . I think that some of the New Testament

⁷ Ibid., 403.

⁸ Ibid., 404.

⁹ Ibid.

writers themselves hint at another ending.”¹⁰ Macquarrie offers the original, short ending of the gospel of Mark in evidence. The critical consensus holds that, before a later redactor supplemented Mark’s gospel with a resurrection appearance, the story had ended with the women fleeing in astonishment from the empty tomb, saying “nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).¹¹ Perhaps what was true with Mark was true of the resurrection appearance tradition as a whole, and indeed of the very notion of Jesus’ resurrection: all of it was added later.

To color in this possibility, Macquarrie offers his alternative “Austere Ending” to the gospel message. The mysteries of Christ’s descent into hell, resurrection, ascension and second coming are elided. In their place, there is the one mystery of his “exaltation.” Macquarrie enters the fourth gospel (John) in evidence for this more austere account. “It could be claimed that . . . Ending B is not just a concession to modernity but has roots in John’s gospel.”¹² For, in John’s telling, “there is no series of mysteries spread over several weeks. . . . rather, everything is packed into one decisive happening.” That happening is the humiliation and exaltation of the Eternal Son upon the cross.

Of all the Johannine paradoxes, this one is surely the most striking. Jesus’ exaltation *is* the cross! His exaltation *is* his humiliation! After this, a separate ascension into heaven would be an anticlimax. And the other post-crucifixion mysteries are also collapsed into one another. It is true that John, like the other evangelists, tells of the resurrection, the empty tomb and appearances to the disciples. But the significance of a distinct resurrection is reduced in a gospel in which the Saviour from the beginning has been the mediator of the eternal life of God, and in which the disciples have already received eternal life.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 413.

¹³ Ibid.

Behind this austere ending, stands Rudolf Bultmann's reading of John, and his interpretation of the resurrection. According to Bultmann, says Macquarrie, "faith in resurrection is really the same thing as faith in the saving efficacy of the cross."¹⁴

It is not the substance of Macquarrie's analysis that should concern us here, but rather its form. This form is our datum, to use in making our point that something must give between a commitment to methodological naturalism and our conception of the doctrine of the Resurrection. To that end let us notice something about Macquarrie's alternatives. The Austere Ending is consistent with methodological naturalism. Nowhere does it require appeal to the Creator or non-physical causes or events in its account of the origins of Christian doctrine. At points where New Testament writers (including John!) invoke such causes or report such events, these are on this theory easily reinterpreted in naturalistic fashion, either as legendary accretions or intended symbolic expressions of non-physical realities. The Happy Ending, on the other hand, is clearly *inconsistent* with methodological naturalism. This is specifically true with regard to its account of Jesus' resurrection, for it does require appeal to the Creator to explain how Jesus, who had died, could be made to live again. According to the Happy Ending, that is just what happened.

Suppose we are resolute in our commitment to methodological naturalism. What then are we going to make of this? We have been presented with two alternatives, Ending A and Ending B. One of these is consistent with our principle and the other is not. We do have options.

¹⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H.W Bartsch, vol. 1, SPCK, 1957, 41, quoted in Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 413.

The strongest form of methodological naturalism is grounded in metaphysical naturalism, and would inform us that the Happy Ending simply cannot be true. For truth's sake, we will accept a theory that is consistent with our rule. On this basis we can therefore either accept an austere interpretation of the "resurrection" or, perhaps more reasonably, deny it outright. But as proponents of Theistic Evolution we reject metaphysical naturalism, so for us this first option has no firm basis.

A weaker form of methodological naturalism would not quite rule out the possibility of the Happy Ending, but would for all scientific purposes require us to ignore it. For to appeal to God as an explanation at soft points in our scientific understanding is to engage, as Haught warns, in "premature metaphysical gratification."¹⁵ This posture seems to suggest that the theistic evolutionist should be willing to engage in double-think. In worship, celebrate the Happy Ending—but disregard it for purposes of science.

There is a third option. Most theistic evolutionists will agree that methodological naturalism is a prudent platform for the consideration of routine scientific matters, but more than a few might be prepared to suggest that with respect to the mysteries of Christ, especially the resurrection, we have to do with an exceptional problem. Perhaps here is an instance where some metaphysical gratification may be required to best account for all the evidence. So how can we maintain our commitment to methodological naturalism, and at the same time give a full and fair hearing to the theory of the Happy Ending? A possible answer: methodological naturalism, we could remind ourselves, is a rule for science, but not for theology. We could consider the Happy Ending as a theological

¹⁵ Haught, *Deeper Than Darwin*, 89.

possibility, but “not as science.” We will bracket this third option and hold it for consideration at the end.

Let us here establish the claim that on either of the first two options we have been led to that point where something must give between our commitment to methodological naturalism and our conception of the doctrine of the Resurrection. We can consider Macquarrie’s alternative of the Happy Ending at the price of disregarding the scientific canon. Or we can affirm methodological naturalism by ruling out the Happy Ending, turning our backs on an assertion that is attested in the Scriptures, established in the creeds, and celebrated Easter Sunday. Thus we conclude that unqualified naturalism in method constrains our understanding of crucial doctrines. It either forces us to double-think, or drives towards and finally compels naturalistic reinterpretations of these doctrines. It demonstrably eliminates very important traditional assertions of the nature and significance of the resurrection. It makes for a different kind of Easter.¹⁶

A second conclusion can also be established at this point. Not only does methodological naturalism require us to eliminate certain options respecting doctrine, it also restricts choices in our handling of evidence, eliminating certain explanatory options too. Indeed, when we consider Macquarrie’s presentation we realize that it is the canon of methodological naturalism that would “stop science.”¹⁷ For surely, on any acceptable

¹⁶ It also makes for a quite different kind of Christian funeral. According to the Book of Common Prayer, “the liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all its meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we, too, shall be raised.” The Book of Common Prayer, 507.

¹⁷ The allusion here is to John Haught’s warning against “science-stoppers,” i.e. “a dubious theological appeal to a god-of-the-gaps when there is still room for more scientific elucidation.” Haught, *Deeper Than Darwin*, 87.

definition, “science” must entail the careful parsing of the evidence in search of the better explanation. Macquarrie has identified a phenomenon that calls for explanation:

Unquestionably there is here a historical event that calls for a sufficient explanation. That is simply the rise of the Christian church. . . . For the rise of the Christian church is not easily explained. The gospels give the impression that after the crucifixion the Twelve scattered in fear. In spite of the respect felt for them, they were obviously a group of rather mediocre people, not one of them, not even Peter, remotely approaching Jesus in moral stature or able to take over leadership. The enemies of Jesus had calculated well in getting rid of the leader of the new movement. It ought to have faded out in a very short time. But instead it burst forth with tremendous energy and spread throughout the Mediterranean and elsewhere.¹⁸

For Macquarrie, the decision between Ending A and Ending B is a decision about which best accounts for the data in question. Macquarrie acknowledges reasonable arguments on both sides. Clearly for him this is an open question. But a commitment to methodological naturalism would “stop science” by ruling an otherwise plausible theory out of the realm of consideration.

To solidify this conclusion, let us consider another datum: the competing theories of N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg concerning Jesus’ resurrection. The two scholars lay out their arguments side by side in a single volume, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*.¹⁹ Wright’s essay, “The Transforming Reality of the Bodily Resurrection,” presents a case that Paul and the gospel writers tell a consistent story of “how the body of Jesus was neither resuscitated nor left to decay in the tomb but was rather *transformed* into a new mode of physicality, shocking and startling to the disciples.”²⁰ Marcus Borg, in “The Truth of Easter,” offers a very different historical account, together with an alternative

¹⁸ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 406.

¹⁹ Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco / HarperCollins, 1999), Part IV.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

interpretation of the meaning of the resurrection. Both scholars marshal historical evidence to make their case. Borg's arguments are probably consistent with methodological naturalism, while Wright's definitely are not. Certainly, if Jesus' resurrection was as Wright describes, any investigation constrained by methodological naturalism is barking up the wrong tree. The question of whose arguments carry the greater historical plausibility is for our purposes beside the point. The point is that a rule of methodological naturalism would preclude our consideration of an otherwise plausible line of explanation. With respect to the resurrection, methodological naturalism begs the question that is of historical concern.

So our first conclusion about methodological naturalism was that it is theologically restrictive (and from our point of view, pernicious) inasmuch as it is inconsistent with important traditional interpretations of core elements of Christian doctrine. A second conclusion is that methodological naturalism is scientifically pernicious too, as inconsistent with science's core commitment to the unbiased search for the best explanation. Dispensing with methodological naturalism does *not* entail dispensing with probable judgments about what is likely to have in fact occurred, it simply allows us to apply inductive and abductive inference over a broader range of possibilities.

This will lead us towards a third conclusion: what should matter for science is, as Philip Kitcher has stated, "the character of the proposals and the ways in which they are articulated and defended," period.²¹ We make this point by reference to our third datum: Raymond Brown's short book: *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of*

²¹ Kitcher, *Abusing Science*, 125.

Jesus.²² Attention to Brown's study can show us that methodological naturalism is neither necessary nor helpful in sorting out claims regarding the historicity of reported events in the life of Jesus. Again, our concern is not with Brown's conclusions concerning Jesus' birth and afterlife, interesting though these may be, as much as with what his analysis suggests about "scientific" approaches to such issues.

First let us consider Brown's examination of the New Testament for evidence pertaining to the possibility of Jesus' bodily resurrection. Brown understands the resurrection as an eschatological event, "the beginning of the end time." That means, as he explains, that "the categories of space and time, and the categories of ordinary human experience such as 'seeing' and 'speaking' supply us with a language that is only analogous and approximate" for purposes of conceiving the events in question.²³

However, Brown explains why these considerations do *not* place the resurrection beyond the pale of historical consideration. Brown:

The eschatological character of the resurrection has prompted some modern scholars to refuse to speak of the resurrection as historical. This is an unhappy development because the statement that the resurrection was not historical will be misinterpreted to mean that the resurrection never happened. Moreover, it probably does not do justice to the mystery of the resurrection; for, while the risen Jesus stood outside the bounds of space and time, by his appearances he touched the lives of men who were in space and time, men who were in history. The interaction of the eschatological and the historical should not be lost sight of.²⁴

So Brown weighs the evidence of resurrection as an historical as well as eschatological event, in the end deciding in favor of something like Macquarrie's Happy Ending: "I

²² Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973).

²³ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 125–26.

have found that the biblical evidence, even when re-evaluated by current scientific methods, continues to favor the idea of a bodily resurrection.”²⁵

When the same rules of evidence and analytical tools are applied to the question of Jesus’ virginal conception, Brown arrives at a more cautious judgment. The evidence that requires an explanation is the existence of a relatively early tradition, independently utilized by Matthew and Luke, that Jesus had been born without benefit of human father. One theory that could account for the existence of this tradition is that this is in fact how Jesus was conceived. Brown weighs this possibility, happy to many, against a more austere theory: that the stories of Jesus’ conception and birth represent a “theologoumenon.” A theologoumenon is a narrative symbol, a fiction that translates a theological conviction into historical terms. In this instance, it would mean “that the belief that Jesus was God’s Son in a unique sense has been historicized (made *geschichtlich*) in the infancy narratives where he has no human father.”²⁶ On the theologoumenon theory, a generation or more after Jesus death “one or more Christian thinkers solved the christological problem by affirming symbolically that Jesus was God’s son from the moment of his conception.”²⁷ The symbolic character of the image of a virginal conception would have been clear to the story’s author and original audience. However, as the story was passed along and retold throughout the early churches, this was forgotten. The authors of Matthew and Luke would likely have assumed that they were reporting on actual events.

²⁵ Ibid., 132.

²⁶ Ibid., 24–25.

²⁷ Ibid., 61.

After carefully considering the two theories—“Fact” and “Theologoumenon”—Brown decides that the evidence “is not one-sided.” Granted, the near consensus in some academic quarters is that the birth narratives are a theologoumenon, but that theory still leaves some major problems unsolved.²⁸ Against the consensus, Brown concludes “it is harder to explain the tradition about the virginal conception by positing [the theologoumenon theory] than by positing fact.”²⁹ However, Brown offers this as a qualified judgment, based on relatively scant evidence. In the final analysis, “the totality of the *scientifically controllable* evidence leaves an unresolved problem.”³⁰ By comparison with the question of the resurrection, “the situation here is more ambiguous because of the very limited NT evidence and the need of more examination in the context of ecumenical scholarship.”³¹

We note that Brown has labeled his analysis “scientific.” Our contention is that the label fits, notwithstanding the fact that both his conclusions—bodily resurrection *and* virginal conception—trespass the canon of methodological naturalism, appealing as they both do to the action of the divine Creator. If upon further review Brown were to reverse his conclusions, now deciding in both cases in favor of “theologoumenon” over “fact,” this would not necessarily represent a change in method. The same standards of evidence and forms of argumentation and analysis would still be in play. Nothing would have changed concerning the character of the proposals or the way they are defended. There is

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 132.

³⁰ Ibid., 66.

³¹ Ibid., 132.

no good reason then to represent such a change of mind as a change from a “theological” explanation to a “scientific” one.

Readers are asked to recall our suggestion above of a “third option” for maintaining a commitment to methodological naturalism by parsing a certain kind of distinction between scientific and theological explanations. On this option, one might accept Macquarrie’s Ending A, Wright and Brown’s theory of Jesus’ bodily resurrection, and Brown’s theory of his virginal conception, while still stipulating that “science as science” cannot invoke the Creator in an explanation. Theology is not constrained in the same way, and on this distinction these theories would therefore be considered “theological.” Nancey Murphy appears to rest her case on such a distinction in an exchange with Phillip Johnson. Johnson renounces methodological naturalism in strident terms. Murphy rejoins that it simply is “a fact of history (perhaps an accident of history)” that this is how the institution of *natural* science is understood in our era.”³² On this basis Murphy defends what she calls “methodological atheism” against Johnson’s challenge. Her defense is carefully nuanced, advising deference to the kind of scientific and historical investigation that restricts inquiry along naturalistic lines, as long as we remain mindful of the limits of a science that operates under such a restriction. Writes Murphy:

So, for better or worse, we have inherited a view of science as *methodologically* atheistic — meaning that science *qua* science, seeks naturalistic explanations for all natural processes. Christians and atheists alike must pursue scientific questions in our era without invoking a creator. The conflict between Christianity and evolutionary thought only arises when scientists conclude that if the only *scientific* explanation that can be given is a chance happening, then there is no other explanation at all. Such a conclusion constitutes an invalid inference from a

³² Murphy, “Phillip Johnson on Trial: A Critique of His Critique of Darwin,” in Pennock, *Intelligent Design*, 464.

statement expressing the limits of scientific knowledge to a metaphysical (or a-religious or anti-religious) claim about the ultimate nature of reality.³³

Murphy grants that she is making a subtle point, one that at times appears “beyond the grasp of some outspoken scientific naturalists.” But this only means that we should “help educators make the distinction, not to cooperate in blurring it as Johnson has done.”³⁴

We trust that our respect for Murphy has been obvious throughout this study. On this point though we have to disagree. We have seen that methodological naturalism is philosophically superfluous—even when not theologically and scientifically pernicious. Why should we not pare a superfluous and otherwise problematic stipulation with Occam’s razor? Granted to be sure, that long experience shows that science is well advised to restrict itself, in most contexts of discovery, to the search for natural explanations. Even so, we find no good grounds for discriminating between the arguments of a Wright and Borg; between Macquarrie’s “Austere” and “Happy” endings; or between Brown’s “theologoumenon” and “fact,” on the basis that one set of these theories is “scientific,” and the other “theological.” The kinds of evidence and forms argumentation are the same. In these unusual contexts, it becomes clear that it is the “character of the proposals” that is constitutive of science, period, without regard to the “nature” of a purported cause or explanation. And if this is the case in even one context, it should be the case in all.

³³ Ibid., 464.

³⁴ Ibid., 464–65.