

How does God Interact with the World?

Paul A. Roberts, University of Oxford

How does God interact with the world? This question, or rather its answer, is as complex as it is significant, touching all areas of theology, science and life. It is a question that has occupied Christian scholars for the last two millennia, leading to intense (and frequently divisive) debate.¹

In seeking to explore this issue we must draw upon all the resources available to us, using both reason and revelation, looking to both the 'book of God's word' and the 'book of God's works'.² As we do so, revelation must be given priority, recognising that God's ways are not our ways,³ and that our mental faculties, whilst a remarkable gift, are both finite and fallen. We must have the humility to let God tell us what he is like and how he acts, rather than imposing our own framework upon the data. Having said this, God's word must be interpreted, and whilst it is true, it is not exhaustive. Therefore, we must use reason to make sense of God's word and to relate it to our experience of the world around us. In particular, we may use science to help us to interpret God's word and scripture to make sense of our scientific discoveries.

Starting with the book of God's word, we are told that God freely created the universe out of nothing⁴ (*ex nihilo*) and that it is entirely separate from him (contra pantheism).⁵ Having created the universe, God interacts with it through providence and miracles. In his providence God sustains all things in existence, maintaining their properties (preservation),⁶ works through the properties of each created object, causing it to act in accordance with his will (concurrence)⁷ and directs creation in such a way that his purposes are fulfilled (government).⁸ In thinking about concurrence it is helpful to use the language of primary and secondary causes. God works behind-the-scenes as the invisible, primary cause, whilst, at the same time, each object behaves according to its intrinsic properties, the secondary cause.⁹ It is the job of science to discover and understand these secondary causes.

Whilst God usually interacts with creation through providence, he also acts, though less frequently, through miracles. Scripture mainly uses three terms when referring to miracles: signs, wonders and miracles or mighty works.¹⁰ Both the terms used and the contexts in which they occur, suggest that we should think of miracles as any action by which God 'arouses people's awe and wonder and bears witness to himself'.¹¹ Having surveyed the Bible's teaching on God's interaction with the world, we turn now to the book of God's works.

It was in the context of a Christian worldview, in particular the belief that the universe was created and is sustained by a faithful, law-giving God, that modern science developed. It led scientists to believe that nature is governed by universal laws, and that these laws can be captured and encoded in mathematical language.¹² Scientists attempted to do just this through the development of what is now called classical mechanics (CM). Many of its most famous proponents, including Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle and Gottfried Leibniz, were committed Christians who sought to formulate and interpret this new science in such a way as to be compatible with divine action. Newton, for instance, did this by combining the idea of the passivity of matter, from the school of mechanistic physics, with that of active principles, from the Neo-Platonist tradition.¹³ However, his later interpreters reduced these active principles to mechanistic phenomena, resulting in what is known as the 'Newtonian Worldview': a clockwork universe with a deist God, who either will not or cannot 'interfere'.¹⁴ It is a supreme irony then, that despite its metaphysical underpinnings and the beliefs of those who developed it, CM was used to write God out of the picture.

But God is not so easily eliminated. Firstly, CM describes reality only at the level of secondary causes. Therefore, the possibility (or necessity) of God acting as the primary cause, to sustain and direct these causes, remains. Secondly, the laws of CM apply only to systems which are causally closed; however, this assumption is no part of CM, its being metaphysical, not scientific, in nature.¹⁵ Therefore, if God acts in the world in such a way that is not consistent with the laws of CM, he does not violate these laws, since, at this point, the system is open.¹⁶ It might be argued that by performing miracles, God would destroy the regularity upon which science is based; however, the rarity of miracles, together with the fact that they are not the acts of a capricious deity, but rather have a purpose, as discussed above, argue against this.

The picture is further complicated when we consider quantum mechanics (QM). Even in a closed system, QM is non-deterministic, so that we can only assign probabilities to the state of a system at any given time. Its implications for the present discussion depend heavily upon our interpretation. If we take an antirealist or 'soft realism' approach,¹⁷ then the indeterminacy may exist only at the level of the mathematical models, whilst the underlying reality remains deterministic. In this case, the above discussion concerning CM applies. However, if we take a realist interpretation, then reality itself is non-deterministic. In this case, intriguing possibilities arise. As before, QM only applies when the system is closed; however, God may interact in a special way even when the system is closed, choosing the state to which a system collapses from amongst the possible states predicted by QM.¹⁸ God's action at the nanoscopic scale may then be amplified to the macroscopic scale by chaotic effects.

Whilst science has enriched the debate concerning God's interaction with the world, we are unlikely to reach a definitive conclusion in this life. Perhaps the most important thing is not that we reach a conclusion, but the way we go about our investigation, honouring God with our minds¹⁹ and responding in awe and worship as his mystery unfolds.

1: Gundry, S.N. & Jowers, D.W. (eds) (2011), *Four Views on Divine Providence*, 7 - 23, Zondervan.

2: Bacon, F. (1605), *Advancement of Learning*, quoted in: McGrath, A.E. (2011), *Christian Theology: An Introduction (5th edition)*, 162, Wiley-Blackwell.

3: Is. 55:8.

4: E.g. Gen. 1:1; Ps. 33:6, 9; Jn. 1:3. Grudem, W. (1994), *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 262 - 267, IVP.

5: E.g. Eph. 4:6. Grudem, W. (1994), 267 - 271.

6: E.g. Col. 1:17; Heb.1:3. Grudem, W. (1994), 316 - 317.

7: E.g. Eph. 1:11. Grudem, W. (1994), 317 - 331.

8: E.g. Ps. 103:19; Dan. 4:35; Rom 11:36. Grudem, W. (1994), 331 - 332.

9: Grudem, W. (1994), 319.

10: E.g. Ex. 7:3; Acts 2:22; 2 Cor. 12:12. Grudem, W. (1994), 355 - 375.

11: Grudem, W. (1994), 355.

12: Pearcey, N.R. & Thaxton, C.B. (1994), *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy*, 21 - 37, Crossway.

13: Pearcey, N.R. & Thaxton, C.B. (1994), 79 - 95.

14: Pearcey, N.R. & Thaxton, C.B. (1994), 79 - 95.

15: Plantinga, A. (2011), *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, 65 - 90, OUP.

16: Plantinga, A. (2011), 65 - 90.

17: Ratzsch, D. (1986), *Philosophy of Science: The Natural Sciences in Christian Perspective*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, quoted in: Pearcey, N.R. & Thaxton, C.B. (1994), 211.

18: Plantinga, A. (2011), 91 - 125.

19: Mk. 12:30.