



## Dialogue: Response

Can We Reclaim One of the “Stolen Words”?

# Can We Reclaim One of the “Stolen Words”?

**Creaturely existence need not imply that the trajectory of coming to this understanding necessarily begins with theology.**

### Stolen words<sup>1</sup>

“*Creationist*” was the self-designation used by a Calvinist professor of biology, J. Lever, in the Netherlands in the 1950s. He intended to communicate to the reformed constituency that he understood as “creation” in the scriptural sense the reality he studied as a biologist—even while accepting the best available biological knowledge of his time, including evolution and genetics. Those who would take the same reconciliatory attitude in our time cannot use the label “creationist” anymore. The word has become so tightly linked with a particular cluster of views opposing biblical faith and mainstream biology, that it no longer communicates that one believes this world, partly but reliably known through the sciences, to be God’s creation.

“*Humanist*” may be another such word. Among the wider constituency of the churches, who would be aware of a tradition of “biblical humanism” (e.g., Erasmus) in the late Renaissance and early modern period, and even more, who could use that label for himself or herself without being misunderstood? “*Evangelical*” may be one more such term, which is in the process of losing the wider meanings it had (and, for instance, in the designation of Lutheran churches still has), becoming more and more a label for a particular style within the Protestantism.

### Naturalism and Theology—Top-down or bottom-up?

“*Naturalism*” is again another such term, which religious communities were in the process of losing—in this case, by associating it with outspoken atheist interpreters of modern science. Thus, I appreciate highly Walter Thorson’s attempt to reclaim the right to use

the word “naturalism”—both in opposition to those outspoken atheistic interpreters and in opposition to those within the Christian community who have accepted the atheistic claim on “naturalism.” Thorson seeks to appropriate “naturalism” for the Christian community, not as an unavoidable evil, a fate that has come over us, a need to accept the “status quo,” but positively, as a theologically justified and valuable insight regarding the human vocation.

I appreciate Thorson’s insights in this respect. I find important the observation that naturalism became identified with the idea that the world would be *self-sufficient* (p. 3). I would like to add and emphasize that self-sufficiency is not to be identified with *integrity*—a coherent world well described by laws of nature has integrity, without thereby being self-sufficient.

However, I do wonder whether Thorson does not claim too much when he places this theological justification of naturalism in an epistemic top-down setting, as if theological ideas (and philosophical alternatives) precede and determine the sciences. For instance, he writes: “Such limited, ‘naturalistic’ enterprises are necessarily sustained and informed by some broader, essentially religious/philosophical understanding” (p. 2). The header on page 3 indicates that naturalism in science *requires* a theological foundation. Is it not the case that our naturalism is, at least in part, a lesson we have learned from reality? We could have lived in a world which would not have been amenable to a naturalistic treatment even in the realm of physics, say a world with physically effective demons and ghosts—and this world might still have been God’s creation and a world which would call for a Christian way of life. If it is the case, as I surmise, that we have learned our “naturalism” also from reality, and not from theology alone, that itself should not be a problem for Christians who accept that one can learn something

**Willem B. Drees** is professor of philosophy of religion and ethics at Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands. He is the author of various publications, including *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and *Creation: From Nothing until Now* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002). He can be contacted by email at: [w.b.drees@let.teidenuniv.nl](mailto:w.b.drees@let.teidenuniv.nl).

practically and theologically significant from “the Book of Nature.” Of course, whatever the world is like, the Christian will understand this world as sustained by God, ontologically speaking. However, this creaturely existence need not imply that the trajectory of coming to this understanding necessarily begins with theology. Many elements of our current understanding of reality, including our self-understanding regarding the nature and implications of faith, have been influenced by secular understanding—and thus seem to be more *a posteriori* than Thorson’s paper seems to indicate.

---

*By placing too much weight on assumptions and ideology, Thorson fails to distinguish authors who ... use evolutionary biology also as an ideology ... and others who do accept evolutionary biology as scientifically adequate ...*

---

If he had allowed more mutual interaction between science and religious or philosophical commitments, Thorson would have been able to maintain a more flexible view of the rise of modern science. There is, certainly, some influence of religious ideas and values, including some highlighted by the Reformation, on the rise of modern science, but those influences are part of a vastly wider and more complex network of “causes” of the Scientific Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

If one grants that there is also some role for a bottom-up approach from our experiences with the world to religious reflections, one might also be more appreciative of authors who think in terms of “the mystery behind creation” (p. 6). By the way, the word “behind” seems an unhappy choice, as most authors in this vein would rather speak of “mystery” *in, of, or underlying* creation, and avoid too strong reminiscences of dualisms indebted to earlier views of reality. But even more do I have concerns regarding Thorson’s next sentence: “Religious ideas of nature fill the vacuum left when we deny God as the Author of creation” (p. 6). Thinking in creative ways about nature and its religious significance is not automatically denying “God as the Author.” It may be more a matter of humility, of awareness that as creatures we do have the “Book of Nature” at hand, and thus may seek to discern meanings there. Besides, it may be attempts at exploring other images—speaking of “Author” is just as metaphorical and human as other articulations of “the Ground of our being.” The strong opposition which some theologians (with Karl Barth as a prime example in the twentieth century) have made between religion and Christian faith, seems to result in an unnecessary opposition between the multitude of serious quests for understanding and articulation appropriate and significant views of faith and of reality.<sup>3</sup>

### The Dismissal of “Extreme Darwinism”

Last but not least, the second part of Thorson’s contribution is devoted to a discussion of biology. The main suggestion seems to be that the functionality of biological phenomena undermines expectations regarding a complete physicalist understanding. It is suggested that “extreme Darwinists” are led by *a priori* assumptions (e.g., p. 13), whereas they might well present their work as *a posteriori*, emerging out of increased knowledge of the traces of evolutionary history in fossils and in living organisms, with its explanatory schemes justified in a hypothetic-deductive fashion. By placing too much weight on assumptions and ideology, Thorson fails to distinguish authors who indeed use evolutionary biology also as an ideology, whether socially or metaphysically, and others who do accept evolutionary biology as scientifically adequate without attaching these ideological consequences to it. In this respect, the second part confuses what the first part of Thorson’s contribution helpfully disentangled, and thereby seeks support for faith in marginal if not even mistaken science.<sup>4</sup> It is a pity that by choosing this contested territory as his prime example, Thorson’s valuable insights regarding naturalism and theology risk being lost.



### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The reflections on “stolen words” were triggered by a comment by Ernan McMullin on such words during one of a series of consultations at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, 1993–1996; consultations at which I also had the pleasure to meet Walter Thorson.
- <sup>2</sup> A rich survey of the variety of historical views on the emergence of early modern science in Europe, and its non-emergence in China and the Islamic world, has been given by H. Floris Cohen, *The Scientific Revolution: A Historiographical Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); I offered some similar observations, far less extensive, in W. B. Drees, *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 77–88.
- <sup>3</sup> For some reflections on contemporary “religious naturalism,” see W. B. Drees, “Thick naturalism: Comments on *Zygon* 2000,” *Zygon* 35 (4 December 2000): 849–60.
- <sup>4</sup> A good example of careful analysis without the exaggerated social or metaphysical claims of the “extreme Darwinists” may well be the work of Philip Kitcher. In his *The Advancement of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), he analyses extensively and carefully the standing of biological understanding. His criticisms of sociobiology, *Vaulting Ambition* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985) and of genetic determinism, *The Lives to Come: The Genetic Revolution and Human Possibilities* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996; Penguin Books 1997), illustrate well that appreciating evolutionary biology as a scientific understanding need not imply accepting it as an ideology. “Function” does play a major role in evolutionary understanding for example, for one particular analysis of functional language in relation to a physicalist view, introducing history as an additional major ingredient, see A. R. Millikan, “Proper function,” *Philosophy of Science* 56 (1989), 288–302; reprinted in Millikan, *White Queen Psychology and Other Essays for Alice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).