



## Dialogue: Response

*Is God Transcendent or Immanent in Creation?*

# Is God Transcendent or Immanent in Creation?

**Science based on a theological postulate of God's total transcendence, I believe, leads ineluctably to deism and atheism.**

Walter Thorson attempts to carve out a theoretical working space for Christians to pursue naturalistic science. He grounds his view in theological doctrine in Part I and extends the parameters of science toward a new model of biology in Part II. According to Thorson, science operates legitimately using the creaturely reason to query the domain of creation. Recent scientific activity indicates that life is too complex to permit adequate explanation by models and principles originating in mechanistic physics. Hence, Thorson offers a scientific naturalism superior to previous versions because it places scientific activity under the appropriate theological constraint and, simultaneously, offers a more robust biology. In his two-part article, he provides science a theological basis and outlines the scope of new scientific paradigms in biology. Surely naturalism that gets God and the complexities of life right holds promise for Christians engaged in scientific inquiry. Due to this promise, Thorson's ambitious project warrants careful reflection.

I focus my reflection on three issues and possible differences with Thorson's project. These issues indicate no discomfort with the end project of achieving a naturalism open and available to Christians practicing science. Such a naturalism is a most worthy goal. My questions concern whether such a naturalism is the likely outcome of Thorson's specific claims about (1) God's transcendence, (2) reason's capacities, and (3) the adequacy of mechanistic explanations in science.

*Must God be so transcendent?* Classic Christian theology affirms God's trans-

science. Thorson makes God's transcendence the bedrock theological assertion grounding naturalism. However, there are differing conceptualizations of God's transcendence. Thorson attempts to remove God totally from creation leaving creation, not God, open to scientific investigation. With God totally out of the scientific picture, reason, limited though it be, moves freely across the face of creation. By positing God's absolute transcendence, Thorson both frees God of the irritant of human rational scrutiny known as science and frees science of the limit of the immanent mysteries of the divine. But are these actual gains? Put another way, is creation so distanced from God good for science? And is it good theology?

Science based on a theological postulate of God's total transcendence, I believe, leads ineluctably to deism and atheism. The history of modern science offers evidence for this claim. Thorson's assertion of God's transcendence seems to force God so far out of the picture as to make God scientifically irrelevant. Presumably, scientists who are Christian are free to practice personal piety. They may conduct scientific research as if God did not exist yet speak worship of God. Any attempt, however, they make to live the union of knowing and faith will run up against difficulties similar to those experienced today when scientists attempt to integrate their scientific work with theistic belief.

I propose that Christians engaged in science risk a different approach—that of making God immanent in nature. Instead of seeing creation as an alienation of God's activity—God created the universe as something totally other than God's self—scientists need to view nature as God's expression, creation as being intricately connected to God's nature and activities. This may mean that scientific inquiry encounters mysteries it cannot comprehend. Transcendence, on this understanding, finds its place in mystery in

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creation. Viewing God as immanent in creation differently shapes the tenets and character of science while foreclosing an easy deism.

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Practicing Christians in science may suffer simplistic and mistaken charges of pantheism when affirming God's immanence in nature. However, to bear the risk of these charges may be the cost of a more integrated theology and scientific practice. Also, some additional benefits may come in preserving ecosystems, controlling destructive practices and living more harmonious lives by coming to see God expressed *in* creation.

*Must reason be "creaturely"?* Thorson's affirmation of God's transcendence isolates God from being subjected to "mundane rational scrutiny." However, it is one thing to claim that God is such a being that reason cannot completely comprehend God. It is another, to claim that reason has serious limitations that make it ill-equipped for comprehending God. The difference is more than one of emphasis. Is the problem the epistemological vehicle or is it the nature of the being? I believe that God's nature alone proves sufficient to hang classical theological claims of God's mystery upon. There is no compelling reason to raise questions about the capability of reason itself. Reason is, after all, the means by which scientific enquiry will be pursued. To make reason suspect is to implicitly undermine the project of science. I believe that Thorson need not downplay reason in order to protect God from mundane rational scrutiny. The mysteries of the nature and character of God prove a sufficient challenge to even the most hearty rational investigation.

*Must nature be mechanistic?* My final question challenges the implications of accepting mechanistic models of nature. Thorson basically accepts a mechanistic model. He hopes to overcome the shortcomings of mechanism by introducing complexity in nature that is so robust, that mechanistic understanding necessarily falls short—at least with respect to biology. His new paradigm introduces the notion of a functional analysis of life, a bio-logic that is not itself reducible to principles of mechanistic physics.

The mechanistic understanding of creation which Thorson accepts for physics, I believe, leads inevitably to materialism. Materialism supports and is supported by the deism and atheism that comes, I contend, from asserting God's radical transcendence. Thorson's supplement of a new bio-logic will, I fear, always remain an outlier in the aspirations of a unified science. Until the underlying mechanism/materialism is challenged, a universe without God will remain the unstated assumption of science.

My point simply is that mechanistic models imply materialist metaphysics and materialist metaphysics implies an atheistic ontology. To challenge atheistic materialism, it is not enough to point to it as a biased assumption, something functionally equivalent to religion. To challenge atheistic materialism, one must renounce its operational expression which is mechanistic explanation.

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*An ontology that affirms God's immanence, as well as transcendence, an epistemology that affirms reason as not congenitally defective, and a metaphysics that challenges mechanistic explanatory models offer another alternative.*

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I applaud the direction of Thorson's work—to reaffirm the practices and findings of science while maintaining a theistic cosmology. This has been the chief ambition of believing scientists since the Enlightenment. My questions arise when it seems that Thorson provides an insufficient remedy for the unwelcome outcomes of the Enlightenment scientific project. God's transcendence, reason's defects, and mechanism's descriptive accuracy are the underpinnings of today's atheistic materialism. An ontology that affirms God's immanence, as well as transcendence, an epistemology that affirms reason as not congenitally defective, and a metaphysics that challenges mechanistic explanatory models offer another alternative. When linked with theistic belief there may be in process thinking, current studies of dynamical systems, and new investigations into quantum physics, models of naturalism that offer greater predictive and explanatory power than the mechanistic models of the previous three centuries. Or perhaps Thorson can demonstrate that his notion of transcendence does not lead to deism, mechanism does not imply materialism and questions can be raised about reason's adequacy without undermining the scientific agenda he wishes to advance. If he answers these questions, his version of naturalism may be satisfactory. ◇