RELIgIOUS Life After DARWIN:
SOME NOVEl SUGgESTIONS

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The central idea in this paper is that works of fiction can illuminate religious life in our post-Darwinian world. To this end I consider themes addressed by several novels of the last ten years or so. I hope that my reflections on these works, aided by some quotations, will "speak" to others as they do to me. Because we are dealing with literature I think it appropriate to present my case in this way rather than in formal arguments. Towards the end of the paper I will, however, present some reflections on how literature and theology are connected.

Although I am keen to elaborate the first theme, a few more preparatory comments will be helpful, not least some caveats about my use of novels. I do not claim to be doing justice to the selected works, certainly not as literary texts. My interpretations have a very specific and limited purpose. And even on this count I realize the texts are open to multiple interpretations. If my references to these texts move readers of this article to read one or more of these novels, I will judge my essay at least a partial success. For this reason I have tried not to reveal too much of the novels; my references are "teasers" rather than "spoilers."

The background to this paper is my belief that Darwin's ideas about evolution present a number of challenges for religious believers. This remains so a hundred and fifty years after they were first published. In that time there have been many attempts by religious believers to address the challenges. They have mostly been theological, philosophical or scientific in nature. There are many good works that do this.1 This paper proposes a different kind of response, inspired by works of fiction.

I would also like to explain why I use the term "religious life" rather than, say, "Christian life." It is partly because I think my reflections probably apply to religious believers more broadly. By this I mean both people of different

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religious faiths or pathways and people who no longer define their religious or spiritual beliefs in these terms. But I also use the term "religious life" because this paper is concerned with how one might actually live a "religious life" today, rather than with what beliefs and practices one can or should adhere to as a Christian (a Jew, a Muslim or whatever). I will say a little more about this later. For the moment we can explore this central idea of the paper by considering our first theme.

**The Journey of Life**

One of the dominant metaphors of religious life is the journey, variously conceived. Viewing life as a voyage around the world is the challenge faced by the central character in Roger McDonald’s *Mr Darwin’s Shooter.* A fictionalized account of the life of Symy Covington, Darwin’s “servant” on the voyage of the Beagle, the novel is a marvelous evocation of life in early nineteenth century rural England, at sea and in the early colony of New South Wales. But it is also a personalized account of the challenges posed by Darwin’s discoveries and theories for the life of religious faith.

Like many Christians, past and present, Covington was raised according to a different version of the journey of life metaphor, that of the pilgrimage. Born in Bedford, the birthplace of John Bunyan, Covington sees his life in terms of Bunyan’s great work, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). The hero of Bunyan’s book, and the image of him in a stained glass window in Covington’s village chapel, beckons the young “Covington to follow him to the Celestial City that shone from a cloud farther on.” The pilgrimage that this requires is full of obstacles, the danger of falling into an abyss, and vain and foolish strangers to be put to rights.

This life-metaphor of the pilgrimage remains strong for many religious people today. A common interpretation is that human life consists of a journey from earth to heaven. Heaven is our true home, and life on earth is seen variously as an obstacle, a distraction or at best a temporary sojourn. Expressions of this view are not hard to find. Consider the evocative title of a book by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Alien: Life in the Christian Colony.* A much older, and perhaps even bleaker, example

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3 McDonald, *Mr Darwin’s Shooter,* 9.
4 McDonald, *Mr Darwin’s Shooter,* 8.

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is the text of the eleventh century prayer/hymn Salve Regina: “To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears.”

I do not know the exact origin of this religious life-metaphor. Presumably there are some biblical texts that suggest it. But there are surely a range of influences leading to its historical formulations. Even a summary of them is beyond this paper. For example, it may have been influenced by Platonist dualism, especially in the realm of the Christian spiritual life; just as Cartesian dualism might well have had an impact in the modern era. And even more recently it may have been reinforced by Existentialism’s concern with the human experience of alienation and estrangement.

Whatever its history, Covington is typically (if not universally) Christian in having a strong sense of this earthly life as a precursor to a life to come. And he is profoundly challenged by what appears to be an alternative view of life, suggested by Darwin. Indeed Covington’s own life experience suggests an alternative life-metaphor, namely, that of a voyage around the world – a voyage of exploration and discovery. On the one hand the journey is exciting, specially perhaps to a young innocent such as Covington. On the other hand it also makes him uneasy and even fearful. For Covington this seems to be primarily because it upsets his sense of what his purpose in life is, and even who he is. Unlike the Christian pilgrimage, the voyage of discovery ends where it began, in this earthly world, albeit on the opposite side of the earth. And the knowledge acquired during the course of the voyage seems to contradict his faith convictions. What if our destiny as individuals and as a species is not, as Covington’s preacher would have it, eternal life with God? What if it is limited to this earthly life? Even more starkly, the man who prepared so many specimens for Darwin’s study asks: what if there is no essential difference between a man and a rat?°

As I interpret it, McDonald’s novel suggests that, as a result of Darwin’s work, we face a choice between two very different views of the world, of life and of human life in particular. In my own experience this is indeed how many people, religious and non-religious, see things. My reflections on the novel, however, suggest that the life-metaphors of pilgrimage and voyage around the world share much in common. In both journeys what we see, experience and encounter in this life is shared by all human beings. And I am led to wonder whether a more mature religious person might be able to

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6 Traditional. Usually attributed to Hermannus Contractus (1013–1054).
7 McDonald, Mr Darwin’s Shooter, 60–64.

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reconcile the two metaphors. One of the many achievements of Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* is just this: to present us with a character who not only yearns for the life to come but who also deeply values this earthly life.8

For John Ames, the aging Congregational minister of Robinson’s account of a seemingly quiet and ordinary life, we are not forced to choose between life in a world to come and the rich and challenging life on this earth. Ames’s entire life and ministry are a testimony to the possibility of valuing and embracing both the natural world that we inhabit and the life of eternity offered to us by God. Throughout the course of Ames’s life there are many occasions when this reflective and down-to-earth Christian is inspired by his mundane experience to rejoice in its glories. So it comes as no surprise that when thinking about his death he exclaims, “Oh, I will miss this world!”9 There is no indication that I have noticed that the fictional Ames, living in a small rural American town of the 1950s, is aware of the Darwinian account of life. While some aspects of evolutionary theory as a doctrine might perhaps have challenged even this well-read pastor, there is reason to believe that the general evolutionary world view would add to his appreciation of the wonders of this life. It is worth quoting Ames at some length:

I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can’t believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. In certainty this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don’t imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.10

Where McDonald’s novel suggests that those of us living “after Darwin” are caught in a no-man’s land between two opposing views of the world and human nature, Robinson’s suggests the possibility of a more comfortable position for religious believers. The details of Ames’s account may not be

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convincing for all believers. But his overall outlook is certainly thoughtful and genuinely Christian. Ames is both a loyal citizen of life in this world and a true believer in the life to come.

**LIFE CYCLE**

A similar set of positions seems possible in relation to whether we view life in terms of linear progress or a series of life cycles. The former is often associated with the Christian religious tradition in particular; and the latter with a secular, post-Darwinian world view. Once again the exact origin and history of the pre-Darwinian metaphor of linear progress is obscure and complex. One might imagine that Christian views along these lines have been influenced by the Aristotelian and Scholastic scale of nature and great chain of being. It may also be that the Neo-Platonic notion of a ladder of spiritual ascent was influential. Nor is this life view limited to pre-modern, non-scientific and religious understandings of life. As philosopher Mary Midgley has shown, it is actually found in some accounts of evolution, notably those of Lamarck and Spencer. And, she argues, it continues to find expression in much more recent accounts of scientific progress, notably genetic engineering.  

So the notion of linear progress in life is still strong today. But it seems to have a rival in the notion of the life cycle. 

As with my earlier discussion of life-metaphors, however, I want to suggest that a more mature view of life, one that is more complex and subtle, is available for religious believers (and for non-religious people too, I would argue). And here again a contemporary novel provides us with some clues to just such an alternative account of life, namely, Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*.  

It focuses on three groups of people, over the course of a single summer in rural Virginia: a reclusive wild life biologist, who is tracking a family of coyotes; a young widow, trained in biology who is trying to find a new way of farming for survival; and two aging neighbours, both deeply connected with the land, though with very different understandings of life. It is clear that these singular life-stories are but a few of the countless blossoms that the many-branched tree of evolution produces. Each of these people experiences life, death and rebirth in different ways. The cycle of life is crucial for each of them, evidenced by the importance of sexuality in their

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lives. Though I think it somewhat misleading to suggest, as one reviewer did, that the novel is "Charles Darwin in bed." 

For the retired teacher Garnett Walker, Darwin’s view of life threatens his belief that life has meaning and purpose. This is despite his good knowledge of plant breeding and personal mission to restore the chestnut tree to the American landscape, through crossing and backcrossing: "What I do has nothing to do with apes' turning helter-skelter into thinking men!" he declaims to his neighbor. He seems to share the view expressed by novelist John Updike in his memoir: "...religious also is our persistence, against all the powerful post-Copernican, post-Darwinian evidence that we are insignificant accidents within a vast uncaused churning, in feeling that our life is a story, with a pattern and a moral and an inevitability." Or even more starkly: "Perhaps there are two kinds of people, those for whom nothingness is no problem, and those for whom it is an insuperable problem." But what Kingsolver affirms through the lives and experiences of her characters is the prodigal character of the life cycle, as proposed by Darwin and his successors. This alternative to the linear view of life does not consist of a life that promises a future of nothingness, but rather its opposite. Under "prodigal," my thesaurus lists: generous, bountiful, copious, profuse, bounteous, lavish, liberal, luxuriant, sumptuous, abundant, abounding, rich, plentiful, plenteous, superabundant, thriving, swimming, teeming.

It is not at all clear why a person who seeks to live a religious life would be unable to embrace such a life. As Robinson’s pastor John Ames notes, for the religious person there is even more to life; there is the unimaginable life we hope and pray we will one day share with God. But for the present there is this prodigal life that God has given us; so wonderful it is hard imagine a life with God that does not share at least some of its joys.

AN ECOLOGICAL LIFE VIEW

Kingsolver’s novel also suggests the possibility of another feature of a post-Darwinian life view. It needs to be more ecological and organic; it needs to recognize the interconnectedness and interdependence of living things. An excellent illustration is found in an exchange between two of her major characters, the wildlife biologist and her lover (Eddie), a hunter. She says:

16 Kingsolver, Prodigal Summer, 279.
"When you get a coyote in your rifle sight and you're fixing to pull the trigger, what happens? Do you forget about everything else in the world until there is just you and your enemy?"

He thought about it. "Something like that. Hunting's like that. You focus."

"Focus," she said. "That's what you call it? The idea that there's just the two of you left, alone in the world?"

"I guess," he shrugged.

"But that's wrong. There's no such thing as alone. That animal was going to do something important in its time - eat a lot of things, or be eaten. There's all these connected things you're about to blow a hole in. They can't all be your enemy, because one of those connected things is you."

A bit later, the lover says ...

"You can't be crying over every single brown-eyed life in the world."

"I already told you, that's not my religion. I grew up on a farm. I've helped gut about any animal you can name, and I've watched enough harvest to know that cutting a wheat field amounts to more decapitated bunnies under the combine than you'd believe."

... She could never explain to Eddie how it was, the undercurrent of tragedy that went with farming. And the hallelujahs of it, too: the straight abundant rows, the corn tassels raised up like children who all knew the answer. The calves born slick and clean into their leggy black and white perfection. Life and death always right there in your line of sight. Most people lived so far from it, they thought you could just choose, carnivore or vegetarian, without knowing that the chemicals on grain and cotton killed far more butterflies and bees and bluebirds and whippoorwills than the mortal cost of a steak or a leatherjacket. Just clearing the land to grow soybeans and corn had killed about everything on half the world. Every cup of coffee equaled one dead songbird in the jungle somewhere, she'd read.

He was watching her, waiting for whatever was inside to come out, and she did the best she could. "Even if you never touch meat, you're costing something its blood," she said. "Don't patronize me. I know that. Living takes life."

A fierce hiss came from inside the pot, inspiring her to listen for a minute to this turkey's last lament.

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“Good, we agree on that,” he said. “Living takes life.”

She answers: "But it can be thoughtful. A little bit humble about the necessity, maybe. You can consider the cost of your various choices. Or you can blow big holes in the world for no better reason than simple fear."16

I do not think that Kingsolver herself is a religious person, at least not conventionally (as the expression has it). Certainly neither of these characters is. Yet the references to religion here are unmistakable and, I think, appropriate. I am inclined to think that the life view proposed here by the biologist is at heart religious, or at least spiritual. It surely is not in conflict with religious life today. According to this view, we are to be thoughtful, humble, conscious of our freedom and the responsibility that must accompany it; not just concerned with asserting our selves, not quick to violence, and not motivated simply by fear; and above all, to recognize the social and communal nature of the life of all living things – as if, I would add, they share a common source, a single creator.

A BIO-DIVERSE LIFE VIEW

Recognition of the diversity of life, in all its aspects, is another major feature of our post-Darwinian world. Coming to terms with it is not always easy. The prodigality of life forms that we rightly celebrate includes individuals who do not flourish. This profound challenge is well identified and considered by Kingsolver in a conversation between two characters, Nannie Rawley and her de facto daughter. The latter wonders how her friend Rachel, Nannie’s natural daughter, has come to be so afflicted, mentally and physically:

Nannie answered, “Her genes. You know about genes.”

Deanna was an adolescent girl who loved science and read more books than anyone she knew, so she said yes, she did.

“I know,” Nannie said quietly, “you want a better answer than that, and so do I. For a long time I blamed the world. The chemicals and stuff in our food. I was reading about that when I was carrying her, and it scared me to death. But there’s other ways of looking at Rachel.”

“I love her how she is,” Deanna said. “I’m not saying I don’t.”

“I know. But we all wish she did not have so many things wrong with her, besides her mind.”

16 Kingsolver, Prodigal Summer, 320, 322–23.
Nannie then talks about the two different ways of making life – crossing and cloning – leading her to say:

"Sexual reproduction is a little bit riskier. When the genes of one parent combine with the genes of the other, there's more chances for something to go wrong. Sometimes a whole piece can drop out by mistake, or get doubled up. That's what happened with Rachel." Nannie stopped walking and turned around to face Deanna. "But just think what this world would be if we didn't have the crossing type of reproduction."

Deanna found that she couldn't picture the difference, and said so.

"Well," Nannie said, pondering this, "probably for just millions of years there were little blobs of things in the sea, all just alike, splitting in two and making more of themselves. Same, same, same. Nothing much cooking. And then, some way, they got to where they'd cross their genes with one another and turn out a little variety from mutations and such. Then starts the hullabaloo."

"Then there'd start to be different kinds of things?" Deanna guessed.

"More and more, that's right. Some of the kids turned out a little nicer than the parents, and some, not so hot. But the better ones could make even a little better. Things could change. They could branch out."

"And that was good, right?"

Nannie put her hands on her knees and looked Deanna earnestly in the eye. "That was the world, honey. That's what we live in. That is God Almighty. There is nothing so important as having variety. That's how life can still go on when the world changes. But variety means strong and not so strong, and that's just how it is. You throw the dice. There's Deannas and there's Rachels, that's what comes of sex, that's the miracle of it. It's the greatest invention life ever made."17

It seems to me that anyone considering the problem of evil and suffering, from a religious viewpoint, could benefit from reflecting on this life view that is deeply informed by both modern biology and by our common human experience.

Different expressions of bio-diversity and issues connected with it are found in other tensions experienced by Kingsolver's cast of characters: to


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hunt or conserve, to spray or cultivate more thoughtfully, to stay or go, to become attached or detached, to change or hold your ground. Although particular to these characters, similar challenges are faced by all of us, religious or not.

They are found more dramatically and comically, in another recent novel, Ruth L. Ozeki's *All Over Creation* (2003). It focuses on generational responses to the challenge of living in the world today. In their old age, Lloyd and Momoko move from potato farming to organic seed propagation. Their daughter Yumi, a child of the 60s, returns to the family's Idaho farm which she fled in her teens, equally concerned with the future of the planet, her parents, her three children (each with a different father) and herself. And a troupe of young eco-revolutionaries, determined to save the world and who see the old man and his wife as visionaries.

Despite their differences, of which they are painfully aware, all of these people (these generations) have much in common. All of them are more or less conscious of the ceaseless cycle of creation that permeates their lives and their world. All of them are trying to make a life that is consistent with it. They also share a common foe: those who seek to exploit the life cycle and the world for their own short-term profit. In this instance, the multinational agribusinesses, that would trade on the struggling existence of the local potato farmers. They have managed to exceed the accomplishments of the young Lloyd's hero, Luther Burbank (1849–1926). This celebrated horticulturist introduced more than 800 varieties of new plants, the most famous of which was the Russet Burbank or Idaho Potato in 1871. It remains the ideal choice for farmers and fast food outlets alike. But times change. Burbank is quoted as having held that, "Science, unlike theology, never leads to insanity." Although it is baldly stated, I see his point. As the novel shows, however, this is an overly optimistic account of science. A major plot development concerns a corporation that intends to apply "terminator technology" to the potato business:

"Terminator?" Lloyd shook his head.

"It's like a death gene, sir. A self-destruct mechanism. They splice it into the DNA of a plant and trigger it. The plant kills its own embryo.

"But that's madness! Why on earth ...?"

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14 Ozeki, *All Over Creation*, 369.
"To protect the corporation’s intellectual property rights over the plant. To keep farmers from saving and replanting seeds. To force them to buy new seed every year."

"But to develop a trait like that. On purpose?" 

Geek nodded. "Crosses the line between genius and insanity. Think of what could happen if that gene escapes."

Clearly science too is capable of leading us to insanity. Is recognition of and respect for biodiversity an essential feature of religious life today? Certainly what might be thought of as the opposite approach to life – one focused on identity, sameness, uniformity – is not essential. In fact for many of us, while the term "biodiversity" may be new, it would be difficult not to include it in a contemporary theology of creation.

STORIES AND (RELIGIOUS) LIFE

Why should we look to stories for clues about how to live? Because religious life is not, and should not be, limited to doctrine and philosophy. The narrative, experiential and emotional dimensions of our faith life are also vital. For many of us, certainly for me, the temptation to privilege the intellect over the rest of our experience is great.

The story of Adam and Eve, for example, is one of the core stories of what sociologist John Carroll has recently called the "Western dreaming."

Even though they contain considerable wisdom, the novels that I refer to here are not of that order. Any story, however, about women and men facing the challenges of life is at least a partial re-telling of that foundational story. Does our age have its own creation myth? Mary Midgley believes that it is:

By telling us our origins it shapes our views of what we are. It influences not just our thought, but our feelings and actions too, in a way which goes far beyond its official function as a biological theory. To call it a myth does not of course mean that it is a false story. It means that it has great symbolic power, which is independent of its truth. How far the word "religion" is appropriate to it will of course depend on the sense we finally give to that

20 Ozeki, All Over Creation, 266.

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very elastic word. In any case, however, it seems worth while to notice the remarkable variety of elements which it covers, and their present strange behaviour. While traditional Christianity held those elements together in an apparently changeless and inevitable grouping, we did not notice how diverse they were. But now that the violent changes of modern life have shaken them apart, they are drifting about and cropping up in unexpected places.  

For myself, I am also learning to apply the teaching of Proust and other great storytellers: that Life is more important than Art. For example, living a moral life is more important than being able to theorize about it. Similarly, being able to live a fully human life, a life that is faithful to creation, is more important than being able to philosophize or theologize about it. Notwithstanding the relation between Life and Art, stories can enable us to get out of ourselves, to find out how other people see the world and live in it. Paradoxically, by doing this, stories help us to see our own lives more clearly.

My point here is that stories like those considered in this paper help us to see how we might actually live and relate in a post-Darwinian world, beyond thinking and theorizing about it. Even in the brief outlines and highlights that I have provided I think we can get a sense that a view of life that responds to Darwin's scientific insights is not necessarily in conflict with one that responds to the faith insights of the great religious traditions. The life challenges faced by these characters, and the ways they respond to them, speak to us. While we may not share them all or exactly, their experiences resonate with us as fellow human beings, as fellow creatures. This is especially so when the stories acknowledge the complexities, diversities and ambiguities of human experience. My proposal is that knowing (of) these kinds of experiences is helpful for us, just as knowing our beliefs to be rational and reasonable is helpful for us.

**Some Final Theological Thoughts**

The philosophical or theological position suggested by the foregoing reflections may be considered a form of religious naturalism. Certainly it insists that the world of our experience is one. For people today this is a

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legacy of Darwinian thought. I am not, however, advocating the kind of naturalism supposed by McDonald's Syme Covington and John Updike, that holds the world, history and humanity to be all that there is. For me, and many others, the ground of this world, its order and the source of its meaning, is God. This is the legacy and expression of religious faith. While it is no longer possible, after Darwin, to hold that religion can explain with scientific certainty the nature of the world, it can still provide us with a vision for understanding the meaning of the world. Similarly while we can no longer accept the "supernatural" in the sense of modern religious fundamentalism and authoritarianism, it may still be a useful term for understanding our concrete religious life.

The position suggested here is also moving away from the anthropocentrism favored by elements of religious tradition and modern worldviews alike. This notion too may still be useful – as a reminder that we necessarily see the world from our human perspective. But an anthropocentric attitude is not tenable if it means, in Mary Midgley's words, "that anything that we don't do or experience can't have any value."24 This development – away from anthropocentrism – is a legacy of both Darwinian thought and religious traditions. Clearly humans do not occupy a special place in Darwin's theory. But it is also true that in the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition (at least) God created all the creatures not for humans but for God's own purposes. Both the practitioners and opponents of religious life often forget that the genuinely religious view is not anthropocentric but theocentric.

Although they may challenge some current religious attitudes, the ideas suggested by these novels at least to this reader are quite in keeping with the widely (though not universally) regarded sacramental view of life. Very simply put, rituals such as Baptism and Eucharist are sacramental in that they are occasions of divine-human encounter. Similarly Jesus is a sacrament, and the church too. I am not alone in proposing that we recover the old doctrine of sacramentum mundi – the belief that the earth/world is a place where we can and do encounter God.

These suggestions are also consonant with mystical/spiritual forms of religious life. That is, with life views that are more conscious of God's presence and involvement in our lives, in our world. They recognize that such distinctions as natural/supernatural and finite/infinite, while sometimes unavoidable, are ultimately artificial. The most obvious metaphor for God.


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that follows from this approach is both old and new – God as Life. Our faith
is in the Living God, in God the Life-Giver. Through religious faith we can
come to affirm both this God and the life that God gives as trustworthy,
purposeful and loving.