Booknotes, January 2010

'Saving Creation' is an ambiguous title, intentionally so, we would wager, given that Christopher J. Preston's book charts the intellectual and personal odyssey of Holmes Rolston lll. (Trinity University Press, San Antonio, Texas, 2009) As readers of *Philosophy* will be aware, Holmes Rolston is one of the fathers of environmental philosophy, particularly noted for his eloquence in establishing the importance of wildernesses. What might be less well-known is that the third Holmes Rolston follows in the clerical footsteps of both father and grandfather, just as does the subject of Marilynne Robinson's superb novel *Gilead*. For those inclined to scoff at the intellectual and moral substance of American Protestantism – no doubt swayed by the depradations of tele-evangelism and media stereotypes of American religion – Rolston and Robinson should provide a healthy corrective.

Of course, like all environmentalists, Rolston thinks that we humans should do what we can to save creation (saving creation in that sense). Rolston is emphatic that the natural world has a value over and above its value for us, even to the extent of arguing that at the extreme this could be at the expense of (some) human life. But, as becomes clear in Preston's book, Rolston's position is both wider and deeper than what might be suggested by any distinctions to be drawn between biocentrism and anthropocentrism. For there is in Rolston a strong sense of creation or the natural world as having in itself a salvific role; hence the second sense of 'saving creation'.

In his more recent work, as Preston points out, Rolston has been speaking of the three big bangs: the creation of the universe itself, the emergence of life, and finally the appearance of self-conscious, reflective beings – human beings, in other words. Each big bang marks a step change; each marks the emergence of something radically new, something more complex and valuable in its own right. Rolston sees the whole process as guided by a drive towards complexity and biodiversity, and against disorder, death and entropy. But in his still developing account of this process, Rolston distances himself both from the anthropic principle and from intelligent design creationism. The former gives too little weight to the significance of unpredictable events, and is too deterministic (just as Rolston in theological mode objected to Calvin's double predestination); the other makes the divine force too remote and the material worked on

doi:10.1017/S0031819109990568
© The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2010

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819109990568 Published online by Cambridge University Press

too passive. By contrast Rolston sees in creation, and particularly in the living world, an atmosphere of endless possibility, in which when those possibilities arise, the opportunity is taken for some sort of hitherto unsuspected ascent to something higher (as when the development of pressure-sensitive skin cells in aquatic veterbrates led in due course to hearing and thus in the long term to the possibility of human communication,which is itself a key element in the third big bang).

It is in this sense of an ascent to states of higher value – something not demanded by Darwinism in the strict sense – that Rolston would find an element of salvation in creation. But there is cost too, in the suffering, waste and endless death in the creative process. Here Rolston wants to develop an Irenaean approach, whereby we might come to see life, death, adversity, beauty, suffering, ascent as all intrinsically bound up. As self-conscious we human beings are faced with the dilemma this poses, and in a way we will speak and feel for and through creation. Rolston applies the Irenaean approach of traditional theodicy to the biosphere as a whole. In his own words, 'so far from making the world absurd, suffering is a key to the whole... (in) the whole evolutionary upslope... life is gathered up in the midst of its throes, a blessed tragedy, lived in grace through a besetting storm.'

Rolston writes as a Christian, in which the divine itself suffers unto death, which is perhaps the only way any such vision could become bearable. He is thus able to say 'the capacity to suffer through to joy is a supreme emergent and an essence of Christianity'. Affliction itself is not just unavoidable, but necessary, even to be welcomed. In this sense 'saving creation' contains a hard message, encapsulated in Rolston's use of the term 'cruciform nature'. It is a message which will be hard for many to contemplate, let alone to accept, though the alternative may well be to the sense of despair and disgust Darwin himself felt at times when contemplating nature's apparent waste and cruelty. But even for those to whom Rolston's deeper thinking is alien, it cannot be denied that the synthesis of environmentalism and religion towards which he is working is both original and suggestive in the way it transcends both its points of origin. Having read Preston, we now await Rolston's own forthcoming book on the three big bangs with considerable interest.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819109990568 Published online by Cambridge University Press