

*A Review of The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God's Gift. A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England. London: Church House Publishing, 1995. 225 pp.*

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Only one sentence of this latest report from the Church of England's Doctrine Commission is likely to be remembered. "Hell is not eternal torment, but it is the final and irrevocable choosing of that which is opposed to God so completely and so absolutely that the only end is total non-being." [p.199] Although the subject of eternal punishment is extremely important, it represents less than one page of the report. Hardly anything else mentioned in the book has so far been picked up by either the secular or religious Press. It might therefore surprise many creationists to learn how much it has to say about the doctrine of creation.

Man, we are told is a psychosomatic unity, the result of four billion years of evolutionary progress. In essence there is no difference between the *Homo sapiens* and the rest of the physical world [10]. The universe that began with a Big Bang fifteen billion years ago [10] will come to an end either by collapsing back in or by continuing to expand and cool, a process that is expected to take tens of billions of years. "But it is as certain as it can be that within the unfolding history of the present universe, humanity will ultimately prove to have been a transient episode." [13] This bleak future (it is argued) strikes a death-blow to any notions of evolutionary optimism and the writers conclude that "Only God can release the universe from its 'bondage to decay' (Rom. 8.21)." [13]. Mankind's history may be cut short, if it is supplanted by a more evolved hominid, just as *Homo sapiens* replaced earlier species [14].

On page 52 the Report describes the creation as being originally good before it was corrupted by an external evil. The creation is therefore still fundamentally good and capable of being redeemed by God. Genesis 3 is not a literal account, but rather describes the personal fall that every human being repeats. Apparently Paul was wrong to think of Adam as a historical character (Romans 5-6) [53, 135]. Any idea of a state of perfection before the fall of the first *Homo sapiens* is dismissed [53]. Death was a fundamental part of the physical creation for millions of years before dawn of consciousness in the first human beings. So, "...death cannot be the wages of sin in the sense that physical death would not have happened apart from human sin." [53]. Earthquakes, floods and some forms of disease were also part of the original "good" creation [54]. Moral evil, on the other hand, is the result of sin [54].

I find it remarkable that after rejecting the traditional view of creation that the writers should revert to using phrases that are proved meaningless by their evolutionary assumptions. An prime example of this is the statement that: "The sorrows and pains of the world will not be healed finally, to be sure, until the creation of the new heavens and the new earth." [84].

What kind of “creation” is this process to be? If we are to be consistent with the argument presented in the Report then the “new heavens and the new earth” will take another fifteen billion years to evolve. Instead, we learn later that the “new creation” is the old creation transformed, not remade [195]. While the present creation is subject to disease and decay as part of God’s original plan the new creation will not be [194].

Commenting on the growing ecological crisis, the Report laments that the modern church has stressed saving people at the expense of concern for the created world. The writers then make what is in my view a remarkable statement: “To the extent that the Church has responded to this situation by accepting it and focusing its message exclusively on God as saviour, it has made a serious mistake, since it is dubious whether belief in God as saviour can long retain its existential reality where belief in God as creator is weak.” [51-52]. I find remarkable because this is in effect exactly what the Report does. The writers, having comprehensively dismissed the traditional doctrine of creation, replace it with one that has no need for a Creator at all. The Almighty Creator of the Universe is reduced to no more than a projection of an over active imagination. The unbeliever could not be blamed for rejecting the idea of God liberating the world from its bondage to decay as being mere wishful thinking. Perhaps believers don’t even have this to look forward to, if a more highly evolved species replaces us! Creationists would wholeheartedly agree that “...it is dubious whether belief in God as saviour can long retain its existential reality where belief in God as creator is weak.” If this Report accurately represents the new doctrine of creation of the established church in England then it would appear by its own admission that this church’s days are numbered. It is fortunate that not everyone in the Church of England believes what the Doctrine Committee says!

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