WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PERSON?

The Constraints of Atheism versus the Abundance of Christian Faith

Keith Ravenscroft

IN THE CURRENT WAR OF IDEAS between atheism and Christianity over the guiding principles for human life much has been argued about the claims of a scientific atheism based on the materialist understanding of reality and of human beings as an unintentional by-product of meaningless evolutionary processes. There has also been a lot of argument (often with the feel of a rearguard action) about divine purpose as the only arbiter of what reality ultimately is and of why human beings exist.

The general positions on either side of the debate are already well developed and divided into three distinct perspectives. There are the contributions of academics: philosophers of religion such as David Bentley Hart, Keith Ward and Alvin Plantinga are typical of the theistic defence, and the polemical attack is most powerfully represented by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett. The confessional approach is harder to identify and characterize. It embraces those Christian apologists who have the confidence to engage with the debate rather than ignore it. Theologians such as Alister McGrath, John Lennox, David Bentley Hart (again) and David H. Glass are among the most energetic and convincing of these. Finally there are atheist thinkers who adopt a wider view of reality than do the new atheists, whose critique of this recent version of atheism can be quite scathing—and who have a salutary influence from the middle ground. I would include the philosopher Thomas Nagel, in particular, and also the Marxist cultural critic Terry Eagleton as foremost within this category.

Yet remarkably little is being said, overtly at least, about the contrasting understandings of what it is to be a human being that emerge from these positions, and about how they affect lived personal experience. I would like to help fill this gap by looking at the totally different models

The Way, 53/1 (January 2014), 21–33

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of human personality implied by each position and examining how they are legitimised and how it can feel to live them out.

Having spent most of my adult life as a hard-line atheist, and only having become a committed Christian within the last fifteen or so years, I have lived in both worlds. I shall attempt to explore and uncover from those conflicting perspectives some of the key assumptions that each way of thinking presupposes in building a model of human personality, and the impact that those assumptions have upon how people live their lives and how they see their position within the universe.

Both models relate very closely to how I have defined myself as two kinds of human being over the course of my own lifetime during my journey from atheism to Christian belief. I hope this may help to narrow the gap of incomprehension between those who hold on to an atheist model of the human person and those who espouse a very different Christian understanding. I shall conclude by presenting and analyzing the intellectual background that, I hope, helps to justify my view and gives it more general validity than that of personal experience alone.

The Experience of Emptiness versus the Experience of Presence

Atheism builds its models of human personality on the principles of accident, of randomness, on self-invention despite (or even because of) the absence of purpose or guidance from any outside force greater than we are. As a species we are determined by our evolutionary history, and limited by our genetic endowment. As individuals, we are what we are capable of creating ourselves to be, starting with the 'blank slate' propounded by Locke. All our moral codes, emotions and beliefs can be treated as no more than residues of impulses that at some time made us better adapted for survival. This is the bleak view of the discipline of sociobiology, also known as evolutionary psychology, especially evident in some sociobiological theories of altruism. Such a strictly scientific interpretation of life has no tools even to discuss, for instance, what it means to be a person, what consciousness might be or how what might be called moral evolution is possible, except in terms of crude biological drives.

Scientific atheism is a voluntarily self-limiting view of human existence. Nevertheless atheism, as a philosophy, can feel like a very worthwhile, even heroic, attitude to human life—and specifically to one's own life. I found it so for many years, until the nature of my questions about life changed. Atheism argues that the potential significance of individual human life exists in spite of the philosophical emptiness of existence in

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Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris

general. At its most extreme and bleak, atheism can therefore involve the need for a kind of constant self-reinvention from first principles and can, in the process, become desiccated and one-dimensional as a way of being. This is something I painfully experienced, day by day in my own life, during the time I was an atheist.

In contrast to this minimalist attitude, Christian faith looks at the intrinsic richness of human life and understands it as building upon pre-existent truths and values that come from the existence and the nature of God, and from our role in God's plans for the world. So how does reality according to Christian belief compare and conflict with the definition that hard-line atheism seems to offer?

In summary, Christian belief sees the self as a 'given'—based on the belief that our lives, our selfhood and our purpose in being alive are literally gifted by God. The reality that the Christian experiences is seen to be bigger than the self, rather than created *by* the self. Christianity values knowledge as one of the main routes to truth, but the Christian definition of knowledge is wider and less formulaic than the version espoused by scientific atheism. And knowledge is not, for Christians, the only determinant and arbiter of truth (except notably in the special sense that John's Gospel treats of the pursuit of truth as a fight between the darkness of wilful ignorance of who God is, versus the enlightenment that comes from the knowledge of and obedience to that discovered God: 'the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it' [John 1:5]). Ultimately, to a Christian, truth is dependent on admitting

that we see only 'through a glass darkly', and that we should ultimately strive for knowledge of God, who is the source of all knowledge and all truth. Christian truths are not just intellectual propositions that require only assent. They are values that need to be lived out, both individually and in community.

The Christian view of life is totally orientated towards serving God, but (except where it degenerates into knowledge-resisting fundamentalism) it employs in productive balance all those capacities that make us the enquiring, learning organisms so passionately idealised in atheistic thinking. This balance is powerfully expressed in Anglicanism's 'Four Pillars', which exist to inform and enrich faith—scripture, human reason, tradition and experience.

Having suggested the true nature of the new sense of self that comes to Christians as the gift of God, arguing from a faith position that Christianity offers a more comprehensive explanation and model for human life, intellectually, psychologically and morally, than does the atheistic alternative, I should like to conclude by examining these and other approaches to the self from a more academic perspective.

The Self: Biological By-product or Child of God?

For the new atheist philosopher Daniel Dennett we are no more than meat that thinks it's soul or computer-like 'virtual machines'.[1] 'Not a single one of the cells that compose you knows who you are, or cares.'[2] We inhabit a world that has no centre from which things might be made to mean something. There is no question of what he describes as the illusory 'Cartesian Theatre', directed by an imaginary thing we call the mind:

> There is no single, definitive 'stream of consciousness', because there is no central Headquarters, no Cartesian Theatre where it all 'comes together' for the perusal of a Central Meaner. Instead … multiple channels … creating Multiple Drafts as they go.[3]

There is also no such thing as a person, according to any traditional definition. 'The idea that a self (or a person, or, for that matter, a soul) is

[1] Daniel Dennett, *Sweet Dreams: Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT, 2005), 172. For the brain as 'meat', see Daniel Dennett, 'The Role of the Computer Metaphor in Understanding the Mind', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 426/1 (November 1984), 266–275, at 268–269.

[2] Dennett, *Sweet Dreams*, 2.

[3] Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (London: Penguin, 1993), 253.

distinct from a brain or a body is deeply rooted in our ways of speaking, and hence in our ways of thinking.'[4] However,

> A self, according to my theory, is … an abstraction defined by the myriads of attributions and interpretations (including self-attributions and self-interpretations) that have composed the biography of the living body whose Center of Narrative Gravity it is.[5]

As a philosopher, Dennett has devoted his working life and his undoubtedly vast intelligence to the issue of what it means to be human within the world as he sees it. Our apparent mental capacities will be best served, he concludes, if we avoid reliance on what he calls 'Skyhooks'—overarching, often religious, generalities—and concentrate instead on using 'Cranes'—heuristic methods of discovery through which we build up tentative knowledge. His philosophical approach is driven by a Darwinian account of humanity, and is informed by a view of consciousness very much based on theories about artificial intelligence. Two of his major publications are entitled, unsurprisingly, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* and *Consciousness Explained*. Dennett is far and away the most intellectually rigorous of all the New Atheists and he and Richard Dawkins feed off each others' thinking. Dawkins' concept of 'memes' (units of cultural transmission), for instance, is heavily used by Dennett to support his Darwinian metaphysics.[6] His view of life is bleak—which does not mean it is necessarily inaccurate. But it is undoubtedly wildly incomplete and voluntarily restricted.

What it means to be human within the world

Other leading atheists propound equally bleak, but less well-examined, views of existence. They are often just as academically illustrious as Dennett, but their areas of expertise are scientific rather than philosophical. As non-philosophers, these thinkers tend to be more trenchant in expressing their opinions, though their pronouncements are predicated on the narrow view of reality offered by physicalism and scientific naturalism.

For the celebrated physicist Stephen Weinberg all that is real are the basic laws of physics and anything more nuanced must, by definition, be illusory. 'The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.'[7] It is as if he has arrived at an existential nihilism without

[4] Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 29.
[5] Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 426–427.
[6] Dawkins defines the concept in *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: OUP, 2006 [1976]), 192.
[7] Stephen Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 154.

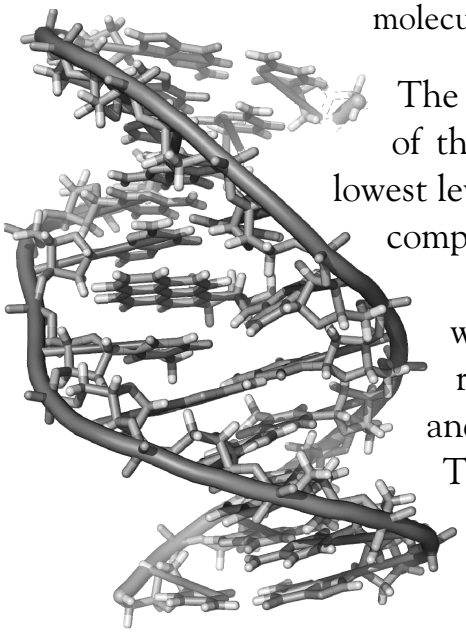
making the kind of taxing intellectual journey so subtly and agonizingly experienced by a Sartre or a Camus before he could authentically reach the same conclusion.

By the time we get to evolutionary biologists such as Richard Dawkins, conclusions of this kind are presented as self-evident: 'The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference'.[8] Notice how metaphysical interpolations and moral inferences are creeping in, almost unobserved. Dawkins would not admit it, but he is stepping beyond science and into the realm of philosophy, for which task he is sorely ill equipped. A similar abandonment of intellectual rigour enables the sociobiologist E. O. Wilson to claim that:

> Precepts and religious faith are entirely material products of the mind. For more than a thousand generations they have increased the survival and reproductive success of those who conformed to tribal faiths.[9]

Francis Crick, a molecular biologist and co-discoverer of the double helix structure of DNA, is less nuanced than Dennett in his rejection of the idea of personhood:

> 'You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.[10]



The key words here are 'no more than': the phrase is typical of the way in which reductionist thinking operates at the lowest level of description. We certainly contain all those simple components, but to say that that is *all* we are is naïve.

It is as if to the new atheists the existence of God would be an intellectual inconvenience, entailing the raising of questions that science is incapable of answering and the consideration of entities that it cannot explain. Therefore the idea of the existence of God must be treated as a hypothesis that is *de facto* illegitimate, leading as it

[8] Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 133.
[9] Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 269.
[10] Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 3.

does to conclusions and possibilities that cannot be fitted into a convenient and tidy reductionist framework.

What seems to be passed over without acknowledgement is the possibility that if life is without consistency or purpose, then it makes no logical or moral sense to value or protect it. Paul Copan describes forensically the inherent logical and moral difficulties with which naturalists (materialists) have to contend, before they can assert that:

> … (quasi-) physicalism (rooted in the big bang and the universe's evolution) is sufficient to account for the emergence of subjective awareness, which has no physical properties (colour, shape, size, spatial location, and the like). There is a metaphysical canyon that one finds difficult to bridge.
>
> Similarly one must deny that instantiated moral properties—unlike grey matter—are, say, orange, approximately two inches across, of an oblong shape, rough to the touch, and somewhat elastic. But how do we move from a universe, which inexplicably originates and produces matter and energy, to objective moral values or human dignity (which have no colour, shape, size spatial location, and the like)? Again the gap is great for the naturalist, but there is none for the theist. For the naturalist, it seems difficult to insist that from one set of (subvening) properties emerges another set of (subvening) properties even though each set does not come close to approximating the other.[11]

The only philosophical hiding place available is exceptionalism: nothing is valid, with the exception of what I am claiming about general lack of validity.

The questions new atheism avoids are, however, addressed by an eminent (atheist) philosopher who is rigorous, but who demonstrates an intellectual humility that the new atheism often lacks. In his seminal work *The View from Nowhere* and much of his later writing, Thomas Nagel wrestles with the issues of what self and personhood might be. Nagel's key premise is that the world contains more than just material things—primarily thought, the sense of self and subjectivity, each of which is as inherent a part of reality as that which can be measured. And so Nagel concludes that reductionism cannot, by definition, give any complete account of what the world contains, and is falsifying the nature of the world when it attempts to do so.

[11] Paul Copan, 'The Moral Argument', in *The Rationality of Theism*, edited by Paul Copan and Paul Moser (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 163.

Nagel attacks scientism:

> Scientism … puts one type of human understanding in charge of the universe and what can be said about it. At its most myopic it assumes that everything there is must be understandable by the employment of scientific theories like those we have developed to date—physics and evolutionary biology are the current paradigms—as if the present age were not just another in the series.[12]

He is equally persuasive, to my mind, in his delineation of the relation between objectivity and subjectivity, which avoids the default assumption of so many thinkers that the first is self-evidently superior to the second:

> An objective conception of mind acknowledges that the features of our own minds that cannot be objectively grasped are examples of a more general subjectivity, of which other examples lie beyond our subjective grasp as well …. Objectivity of whatever kind is not the test of reality. It is just one way of understanding reality.

Nagel offers his own precise definition of what it is to be a 'self': 'I am whatever persisting individual in the objective order underlies the subjective continuities of that mental life that I call mine'.[13] Later he adds:

> We remain, as pursuers of knowledge, creatures inside the world who have not created ourselves, and some of whose processes of thought have simply been given to us …. [Science] may explain why creatures with vision and reason will survive, but it does not explain how vision or reasoning are possible.[14]

I am not trying to enlist Nagel as some kind of incipiently Christian philosopher; he is nothing of the kind. But his words are a perfect crossing-point into consideration of those thinkers whose contributions come directly out of their faith position. Likewise the words of the cultural critic and philosopher Terry Eagleton, himself a Marxist atheist, prepare the ground for consideration of other writers who describe what it is to be not just a by-product of the universe, but an intended and beloved part of God's creation:

> At the peak of his assurance, Enlightenment Man finds himself frighteningly alone in the universe, with nothing to authenticate

[12] Nagel, *View from Nowhere*, 9.
[13] Nagel, *View from Nowhere*, 40.
[14] Nagel, *View from Nowhere*, 118.

> himself but himself …. What is the point of extracting from the world with one hand values which the other hand has just put in? What is it for the human subject to stand on a foundation which is itself?'[15]

How can personal formation, a concept that is central to Christianity and alien to atheism, ever take place in this predicament? There is nothing into which we may transform ourselves! For Christians, however, other foundations than the self are available, and this possibility serves to amplify and enrich our understanding of who and what we are in the light of faith and in the sight of the God in whom Christians believe.

In *The Face of God*, the Christian philosopher Roger Scruton argues movingly that we are persons by virtue of having faces—faces that are a reflection of the image of God in us. He writes:

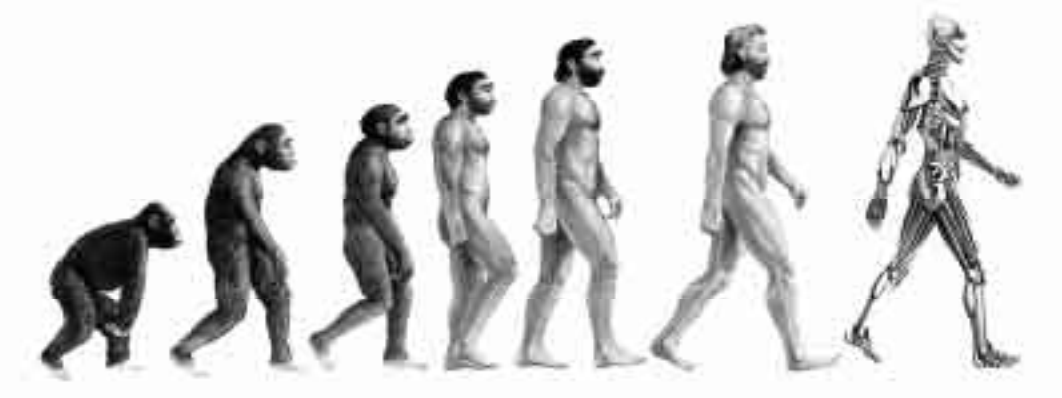
> It is, I hope, not too fanciful to extend this phenomenology of the face a little further, and to see the face as a symbol of the individual and a display of his individuality …. Being a person has something to do with the ability to remember the past and intend the future, while holding oneself accountable for both. And this connection between personality and the first person case has in turn something to do with our sense that human beings are individuals of a special kind and in a special sense that distinguishes them from other spatio-temporal particulars. The knowledge that I have of my own individuality, which derives from my direct and criterionless awareness of the unity that binds my mental states, gives substance to the view that I am maintained in being as an individual, through all conceivable change.[16]

Scruton then deals with the crucial implication of his definition:

> Take away religion, however; take away philosophy, take away the higher aims of art, and you deprive ordinary people of the ways in which they can represent their apartness. Human nature, once something to live up to, becomes something to live down to instead. Biological reductionism nurtures this 'living down', which is why people so readily fall for it. It makes cynicism respectable and degeneracy chic. It abolishes our kind and with it our kindness.[17]

It becomes clear how a succession of factors, including Newtonian science, the deification of purely mental processes by the followers of Descartes,

[15] Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009), 82–83.
[16] Roger Scruton, *The Face of God: The Gifford Lectures* (London: Continuum, 2012), 88.
[17] Scruton, *Face of God*, 72.



the retreat from fully formed Christian faith into deism, Darwinian evolutionary theory, behaviourism in psychology, and the study of artificial intelligence and cognitive science more generally, have made it easier for us to see ourselves as no more than machines, of an admittedly unusual kind, rather than as persons. The result has been a general acceptance of instrumental reason and an overwhelming reverence for technology, tending to challenge the values of judgment and morality. This process can lead to the emptying and impoverishment of our sense of inner life, and the narrowing of any moral landscape.

Fortunately there are many voices remaining to remind us that a central part of any sense of self does indeed come from a moral sense that is God-given:

> Because we humans are uniquely made in the divine image, we are capable of recognising or discovering moral principles; we do not invent them.
>
> We have been uniquely made by God as personal, relational, volitional, moral, rational, self-aware, and spiritual beings—attributes that God has to a maximal degree.[18]
>
> Knowledge of God—whether naturally or specially revealed—is a gift to be received by humans, not an object to be mastered. Divine grace thus operates even in the cognitive domain.[19]

Contrast this view of divine grace with the way in which, for atheists, the limitations of knowledge become confused with the supposed limitations of reality in so far as the self (if there even is such an entity) can apprehend it. It is a form of human narcissism that decides that if our

[18] Copan, 'The Moral Argument', 149, 152.
[19] Paul Copan and Paul Moser, introduction, in *Rationality of Theism*, 7.

intellectual tools do not equip us to think our way through something, it is because that something does not exist. 'If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.'[20] Even Bertrand Russell, one of the greatest minds of the twentieth century, was content to say: 'The universe is just there, and that's all'.[21]

The prominent philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga is robust and, to me, very persuasive in his attitude to the possibility of knowing and following God, as God's people in a literal sense. He debates the issue with the atheist philosopher Michael Tooley in their book *Knowledge of God*, following the same logic about personhood as Roger Scruton, but in a tone more analytical than fervent. He writes:

> Perhaps the central focus here is personhood: we human beings resemble God in being persons. Like God, we human beings have knowledge and affections; we too form intentions and are able to act on the basis of what we know in order to accomplish ends we seek …. the properties that make us persons—intellect, will, and affection, to use an old triumvirate—are ones we share with God.[22]

Plantinga affirms the view that:

> God created human beings originally with something like what John Calvin called a 'Sensus Divinitatis'—a sense of divinity, a faculty, a set of cognitive processes whereby … human beings could know of the presence and properties of God. More important, by way of this faculty we could have the sort of relationship with God that we have with other persons … communication and conversation, closeness, mutual love, and affection.[23]

He despises the literal-mindedness of those who see beliefs as no more than events in the human nervous system: 'If a belief is a neuronal event, where does its content come from? How does it get to be associated in that way with a given proposition?'[24]

Plantinga's explanation of the possibility of disembodied thought is a forceful restatement of an ancient philosophical position—that of substance dualism, the belief that we are composed of both mind and body:

[20] This saying has been variously attributed to Abraham Kaplan, Abraham Maslow and Bernard Baruch.
[21] Bertrand Russell and Frederick Copleston, 'A Debate on the Existence of God', in *Betrand Russell on God and Religion*, edited by Al Seckel (Amherst: Prometheus, 1986), 123–146, here 131.
[22] Alvin Plantinga 'Against Naturalism', in Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 1–69, here 4.
[23] Plantinga, 'Against Naturalism', 7–8.
[24] Plantinga, 'Against Naturalism', 46.

> The simplest view here is substance dualism. This is the view that a human being is an immaterial object, a thing that can think, joined in a special way to a material body. I am an immaterial substance standing in a peculiarly intimate relation to a certain material thing, the thing I call my body.[25]

The Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart is masterly at exposing the fallacies of new atheism, such as Christianity's supposed suppression of human potential. Here he asserts that, far from limiting that potential through rules, strictures and unquestioning faith, Christianity gave the world the very idea of what a 'person' actually is:

> We see something emerge from darkness into full visibility, arguably for the first time in our history: the human person as such, invested with an intrinsic and inviolable dignity and possessed of an infinite value. It would not even be implausible to argue that our very ability to speak of 'persons' as we do is a consequence of the revolution in moral sensibility that Christianity brought about.[26]

> Seen thus, Christ's supposed descent from the 'form of God' into the 'form of a slave' is not so much a paradox as a perfect confirmation of the indwelling of the divine image in each soul. And, once the world has been seen in this way, it can never again be what it formerly was.[27]

The understanding of what it is to be a 'self' is insecure and threadbare for atheists, in comparison to the Christian model. Both intellectually and experientially, we can construct for ourselves a life that is so spiritually undernourished that it is hardly worth living. Or we can accept the gift that promises that we 'may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10).

Christ, the Son of Man, is the apogee of what it means to be a person; the Triune God is seen as a Trinity of mutually indwelling Persons. Moreover, our Christian faith stresses the centrality of a person-to-person relationship with Jesus, and that as Christians we become new and different persons, not just new and different sets of doctrines and behaviours.

This is the God by whom 'even the hairs of your head are all counted' (Matthew 10:30) and in whose love we can feel ourselves 'strengthened

[25] Plantinga, 'Against Naturalism', 56.
[26] David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009), 167.
[27] Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 174.

in [our] inner being' (Ephesians 3:16). The Bible, our liturgy and our prayer are all suffused with the idea of our being God's people; p*eople* not things, *selves* not machines, those who belong to and are precious to God, who promises us Person to person: 'I have called you by name, you are mine' (Isaiah 43:1).

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