

Mark Roques Interview - Number Three

Frolicking whales, God's delight and the religion of private property

Mark Roques works for the West Yorkshire School of Christian Studies. WYSOCS sponsors "Thinking Space" a Gap-Year Programme in Leeds UK, helping students who take a year out to clarify their career and service goals for life. Mark is a storyteller who has spent many years in education. He has developed a unique Christian world view course that combines film, music, story telling and dramatic entertainment as well as presenting conferences for sixth form students. He is married to Anne and has 2 children, Hannah (12) and Emile (7).

In our first interview we explored Mark's ideas that went into his book *Fields of God: Football and the Kingdom of God*



In our second interview we looked at some ideas that we too easily take for granted and so we can miss the real challenge of God's Kingdom.

Interviewer: Mark, from what you have written you are excited about God's creation.

Mark: Yes the Bible tells us that God has created many different kinds of creatures. Lions are animals that roar and snooze in the sun. Crocodiles lurk by the side of the river-bank and pounce on unsuspecting zebras. Kangaroos are gifted hoppers. Walruses are toothy, fat and bloated. Each creature has been designed by God and the smells, colours and sounds given off by these wonderful beasts are there because of God's creative wisdom. God has also crammed the cosmos with astonishing potential. Humans can develop and enhance the creation in all kinds of ways. For example Beethoven and Mozart cracked out some great tunes!

Interviewer: You've no doubts about this?

Mark: It's what we confess when we say I believe in God the creator of heaven and earth. He gave us all these plants, trees and animals to enjoy and to look after.

Interviewer: And what do you say about evolution and intelligent design. As a Christian you can't believe it just happened by itself can you?

Mark: Without going into too much detail Bruce, it takes faith to believe that God created the world from nothing. But it takes far more faith to believe that the world has

come into being by an unintelligent process of random mutation and natural selection. Many scientists want to pretend that their naturalist worldview story is simply 'factual' and 'obvious'. I refuse to buy into that secular mythology.

Interviewer: Now what do you say to those readers who read what you've just said and who suspect you believe this because you want it to be true. You've drawn such an exciting picture of God's creation. Could you have just made it up?

Mark: Those who confess that billions of years ago there was almost nothing and now bingo this universe has evolved by chance into this marvelous creation are entitled to their belief. Personally I find it much easier to believe the Christian assertion that God has created this bobbydazzler and declared it to be very good. Just look at the duckbilled platypus and the truth of intelligent design hits you like an atomic bomb going off.

Interviewer: Can you develop that for us please?

Mark: Psalm 104 declares that God created the whale to frolic in the oceans. The biblical story assures us that God made the world in colour and not in black and white. God expressly made the rainbow as a sign of his covenant with the earth and every living creature (Genesis 9:12-16). God rejoices over the rich and fascinating world that He crafted with such care and artistic brilliance (Proverbs 8:30-31)

Now a secular thinker like Galileo would beg to differ. This is what he said in his famous book *The Assayer*.

To excite in us tastes, odours, and sounds I believe that nothing is required in external bodies except shapes, numbers, and slow or rapid movements. I think that if ears, tongues, and noses were removed, shapes and numbers would remain, but not odours or tastes or sounds.

Interviewer: So you are saying that God, according to Galileo, was so mathematical that he made a universe that was basically numbers and equations and distances and forces and impacts ...?

Mark: Bang on the nail you old wombat. Galileo, the Italian and Descartes, the Frenchman reduced the creation to the mathematical and the physical and they made the cosmos into a giant Meccano set. Let me be very frank Brucie. Men like that are in for a real hammering on the Day of Judgment. They turned something very wonderful into something very ugly, dreary and drab. They turned the Garden of Eden into a disenchanted wasteland.

Interviewer: And so to view the world like this is to miss some of its most endearing qualities?

Mark: In the words of Professor Whitehead, "Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly." The bright sparks

of the 17th century contended that the cosmos is a denuded, disenchanting and grim affair.

Interviewer: So you are telling us that much of what we believe we know about the creation is not as marvellous as it appears. What about the “human world”, society, economics, politics, history, art?

Mark: If you press home the implications of Galileo and Descartes the world becomes an awful place. No meaning. No colour. No significance. Just a stockpile for raw materials.

Interviewer: You say in one of your books that the religion of the New Testament is not the religion of private property, the religion of John Locke. Who was John Locke?

Mark: John Locke (1632-1704) was a 17th century writer who gave powerful expression to the new way of viewing ‘nature’ that Galileo and others like Newton had given expression to. Locke is a political writer and known as the father of liberalism. His political thought has had a profound impact upon the modern world.

Interviewer: So then tell us how he understood ‘nature’? Wouldn’t this have some relevance for South Pacific peoples who are concerned about retaining their traditional lands?

Mark: There is a revealing passage from his political masterpiece *Two Treatises of Government*.

Land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste; and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing.

Interviewer: And you are saying that this is not the biblical view.

Mark: The biblical mindset presents us with an altogether different view of the world around us. The world is immensely valuable. The whale that frolics in the ocean is not ‘waste’ or ‘worthless’. God allows humans to work the garden but the earth is valuable and in need of careful management and development. Locke radically rejected this biblical teaching.

Interviewer: So is this part of the story with the “work ethic”. To make your life meaningful you have to work, work the land, work to pass exams?

Mark: The mindset of Locke leads invariably to a radical form of consumerism. Life is all about maximizing my pleasure and my consumption. I work hard in order to play hard. If anyone or anything gets in my way – WATCH OUT!

Interviewer: And life is a matter of planning your life for a life of success?

Mark: Bruce me old chestnut you are beginning to crack this walnut. Pour me another cup of tea and I’ll continue. ‘Nature’, for Locke, is a barren wasteland. Land that is

uncultivated is almost worthless. Locke presents a radically secular view of work and 'nature'. He wrote as follows:

It is labour, then, which puts the greatest part of value upon land, without which it would scarcely be worth anything.... nature and the earth furnished only the almost worthless materials as in themselves.

Interviewer: So what other elements in his philosophy demanded that he see land like this?

Mark: The focus of Locke's political philosophy is the solitary, naked individual who conquers and masters nature. We need mathematics but we also need bulldozers. Locke adds that "of the products of the earth useful to the life of man, nine-tenths are the effects of labour." Notice how radically human-centred this view is. In his writings Locke pays lip-service to the Bible but Locke's worldview dwells exclusively upon man and his greedy economic activities.

Interviewer: So he does know about people across the seas with different customs and different views of life?

Mark: Yes Bruce, pass the cake please. Locke was very unhappy with native American people who refused to exploit nature for profit and gain. For Locke native people were 'losers' who were condemned to a life of poverty and scarcity.

Interviewer: And you're saying that this philosophy has some basic ideas that have legs in this contemporary, materialistic, consumerist society?

Mark: Right on the money, Bruce me old leg of lamb! Locke is famous for his teaching on private property. And this contrasts strongly with the biblical teaching, not only about property but about the purpose and meaning of life.

Interviewer: Before telling us more of Locke's view, remind us of the biblical teaching.

Mark: In biblical teaching humans are not autonomous owners of land. They are allowed to own plots of land but they must always allow widows, orphan and foreigners to benefit from the land. We could say that biblical teaching encourages a social mortgage. Other people can profit from your garden! One of the most intriguing laws in the book of Leviticus concerns the activity known as gleaning:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God. Leviticus 19:9-10

Interviewer: Well I can guess that the Lockean mindset is completely different from that!

Mark: The Lockean mindset takes umbrage with this biblical theme. Instead of welcoming a prospective gleaner with cups of tea and slices of cake, Lockean Man would take out his musket and command the trespasser to vacate the premises. “Get orff my land. Or else!” would be the firm advice. Locke believed that property was sacred. No-one has the right to property except the owner. Aggressive, pampered dogs that protect private property owe a debt to Locke.

Interviewer: But here again in a short paragraph you’ve identified the problem aboriginal people encountered in the Australasian and South Pacific colonies.

Mark: Bruce, me old bulldozer, this stuff isn’t just for clever boffins but concerns everyone who is concerned about justice, loving your neighbour, native people and the environment. Lockean man is a truly heroic individual who reminds one and all that he has rights and privileges. Locke declared that man has inalienable “rights to life, liberty, health and property”. Woe betide any criminal who should dare to deny or attack these sacred rights. So then, instead of loving our neighbour and God, we become preoccupied with consumption and our rights to enjoy perpetual pleasure and immediate gratification.

Interviewer: And the colonists, with the muskets, rounded up the indigenous people and taught them that having such rights, and being preoccupied with consumption was progress.

Mark: This worldview has not only had horrific consequences for Australian aboriginals, for Maoris, Fijians and other Pacific Islanders. Let’s imagine that you are working in a Soviet factory in the 1930’s Brucie me old sherbert dab. Suddenly the workers stop working and they start to sing a hymn. Not to God but to ‘electricity’. They sing as follows:

*Electricity can do anything. It can dispel darkness
and gloom. One push of a button and clickety-click
out comes a new man.*

Interviewer: Are you pulling my leg?

Mark: Brucie pass me the ham and cheese sandwiches, listen and learn me old china. I am a font of knowledge and wisdom and you need to be enlightened. Almost all of us use electricity. I do, particularly when I’m making toast, or coffee but singing in praise of it sounds odd. Doesn’t it?

Interviewer: The famous Russian revolutionary Trotsky wrote that “Such is the power of science, that the average human-being will become an Aristotle, a Goethe, a Marx. And beyond this new peaks will rise.”

Mark: Spot on Brucie me old chocolate chicken. Trotsky certainly had faith in technology to make a new man, the new soviet man. But how exactly can electricity and

science make people perfect? To understand this bizarre phenomenon we need to understand the Enlightenment worldview.

Interviewer: The Enlightenment was an 18th century movement that believed that Reason with a capital “R“ would bring harmony, progress and happiness to a world full of ignorance and superstition. In general Enlightenment people hated Christianity and treated it with amazing contempt.

Mark: Indeed. You’re right on my wave length here Bruce me old possum. You may be Aussie but you do seem to have some understanding. The Dutch economist Bob Goudzwaard has explained the intimate link between Enlightenment thought and the ideology of revolution in his book *Capitalism and Progress*.

Interviewer: We heard from him in three interviews last year. How does an ideology of revolution come into being?

Mark: Well, such an ideology starts from the general assumption that man by nature is not evil but good, and that consequently the evil that does exist in the world should not be attributed to man himself but to the social order and its structures which force him to do wrong.

Interviewer: Are you saying that ideologists are living in denial?

Mark: In a sense yes. They completely reject Christian teaching that humans are fallen and in need of God’s grace and mercy. They contend that most people are inherently decent and kind.

Interviewer: What is the next step?

Mark: When evil is placed outside of ourselves, outside our circle of responsibility then the following step is readily taken - the most dangerous enemies of man and his happiness are those persons who have identified themselves with the existing social order and who make every effort to preserve it

Interviewer: They are the enemy because in defending the present order that become the basic obstacle to the future happiness of the whole of mankind.

Mark: Exactly. The conclusion of the argument is simple: the enemy of the people must be eliminated, no matter how painful the elimination, since salvation can break through in society only if this barrier is removed. Their shed blood can even be looked upon as a kind of guarantee that the world’s redemption will indeed be forthcoming. They are the scapegoats whose lives must be sacrificed so that all humankind can have freedom and life in abundance.

Interviewer: This reminds me of that Chief Priest who said “It is necessary for one man to die ...”

Mark: Well yes there is a kind of twisted “salvation” being proclaimed here. The spirit of the French Revolution has spawned many other revolutions in the two centuries which separate us from that bloody time. We have witnessed the Russian revolution which declared that the death of all capitalists would herald a new and perfect order. Hitler and Himmler informed us that the death of Jews and other ‘undesirables’ would guarantee a Germanic paradise (Third Reich). Under the terrifying revolutionary programme of the Cambodian dictator Pol Pot, anyone who was considered to be a member of the educated classes was brutally murdered. In all these scenarios we find a common theme. Reform the society by eliminating the enemy and a golden age will be born. So often secular people in England argue that religion is the source of all the world’s evil. Probe this assumption aggressively and you will discover that secular regimes have murdered hundreds of millions of people!

Interviewer: So let’s wind this up but first you have to tell us about the Christian antidote to that kind of scapegoating.

Mark: The fantastic good news of the gospel is that we must never scapegoat any human or group of humans. On the cross Jesus Christ became the supreme scapegoat. He died so that we can be forgiven of our sins and so that the entire creation can be delivered from death, disease and demonic tyranny. This is the perfect antidote to secular mythology which so often locates evil in a hated minority.

Interviewer: This has been a marvellous exercise. First Football and God’s Kingdom, then how we have been fooled by the Greek Brainy Boffin, and finally a discussion of the biblical view of creation and society in contrast to liberalism and revolution. We must continue this encounter ...

Mark: That would be great but I prefer cheese and pickle sandwiches me old gherkin. I hope you don’t mind me being so frank about the sandwich scenario.

Interviewer: Not at all. But next time you bring the drinks OK? Readers who wish to do so can contact Mark at

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As well students who want to explore a Christian world-view might like to take a peep at www.markroques.com