

Creation's Praise of God

An Ecological Theology of Non-Human and Human Being

Submitted by Dominic John Coad to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology.

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Abstract

This thesis is the articulation of a doctrine of creation centred on the concept of creation's praise. It aims to make care for the environment a habitual expression of Christian faith by fostering a kinship between human and non-human. The thesis attempts to achieve this by developing the claim that non-humanity and humanity are united in a joint project of praise. This argument is developed through bringing biblical texts into conversation with voices from the Christian tradition and, in so doing, trusting that Scripture might allow us to know the presence of God in our own context.

Creation's praise consists in its ontological relationship to God, the source of all being and sustainer of the cosmos. In the diverse particularity of each thing the glory of God is actively displayed as an offering of praise and there is no created thing in the cosmos which does not participate in this symphonic worship. Yet suffering and death are intrinsic to the character of living things and God actively resists natural evil which God did not will. Creation joins God in this resistance and suffering and death are transfigured into ever-greater flourishing which deepens creation's praise.

Evil, however, remains a painful mystery and its final resolution awaits the Eschaton. Creation's praise, therefore, looks to a heavenly fulfilment. Such fulfilment will be found in Christ and be characterised by the final unity of all creation, a unity which will not dissolve its particularity. Anticipating this fulfilment, humanity act as priests of creation, summarising and uniting creation's praise in themselves and presenting it to God. Humanity's priesthood is a task of service which does not mask but rather highlights the particularity of non-human praise.

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Introduction

The Purpose of this Thesis

This thesis is broadly situated within the field of Christian responses to current environmental concerns. Theological responses to these problems have been made for some decades and earlier writers often understood one of their key tasks to be making a robust case for the reality of these problems.¹ It is an indication of how much general consciousness of environmental issues has grown that one feels that such a defence is no longer a prerequisite for work on ecological theology. What was, not very long ago, the concern of minority campaign groups is now the stuff of headline news and election manifesto pledges.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the strong focus on global warming in the media tends to reduce ecological discussion to a single issue. Whilst it is undoubtedly the issue which most threatens our planet I would simply wish to state that the understanding of ecological problems which lies behind this thesis encompasses a wider range of issues. Thus by 'environmental concerns' I refer, of course, to the phenomenon of global warming but also to pollution, habitat destruction, land degradation, resource depletion and many more problems which face our planet and its inhabitants.

The question with which this thesis is concerned is one of utmost importance for the Church today: can and, indeed, should Christianity be 'green'? I add 'should' to the question because the amount of time spent talking about green issues in British society today risks producing fatigue even amongst those who have never been global warming sceptics.

¹ See, for example, Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001); Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (London: SCM Press, 1993).

Christians may ask whether the Church is merely jumping on the band wagon, especially since it is, perhaps, still not indisputably clear that Christianity has anything distinctive to offer concerning the solution. As individuals we all need to recycle more and drive our cars less but it is not Christian teaching which identifies these as imperatives but scientific evidence about the effect of carbon emissions. It may seem Christian theology does nothing more than give its blessing to the real work that is done by scientific research.

The enormous increase in media coverage of ecological issues has succeeded in raising public awareness of environmental problems. This heightened awareness, I would argue, raises new questions. Although there is now good general awareness of the problems, this has led to a modest change in behaviour and not the wholesale social, political and economic change needed. The question, therefore, of just how people might be persuaded to take the necessary action remains open. This, I would argue, has important implications for Christian theological responses. Inextricably linked to questions of what must be done to prevent ecological damage are questions about why humanity might want to take action at all.

It seems to me that it is in this matter that Christian theology may have a unique contribution to make. The conviction driving this thesis is that Christian people will be motivated towards good environmental practice by reasons rooted in their lived faith. This is the challenge for theology in the present time: what about faith in Christ motivates us to care for the rest of creation? What distinctive claim upon the lives of Christian believers can compel them to greener living? A Christian ecological ethic may have much common ground with a secular ethic in terms of what kinds of actions it advocates. Where it differs will be in the reasoning behind that advocacy.

A Christian ecological ethic must begin with the Christian experience of the revelation of God in Christ. As such an ecological ethic, indeed any Christian ethic, ought to be fundamentally shaped by that experience. In the case of environmental problems we may note that much popular secular discussion of the problem focuses upon the terrible consequences of ecological damage. I propose that, whilst recognition of the consequences of our actions is vital to producing a change in practice, Christian theology should offer a distinctively positive motivation for good ecological living. That is to say that if Christian ethics is to be grounded in faith in Christ then its primary characteristics ought to be freedom and joy rather than burden and trouble.

How might this be achieved? I aim to do this by focusing the discussion upon the identity and character of creation and its relationship to God. Thus consideration of the non-human will begin with its status before God rather than the possibilities and responsibilities that it presents to human beings. In taking this approach my aim is that non-human creation will emerge not merely as a problem to be dealt with but as a community of beings with which humanity is in relation. In this way my thesis might be considered to be doctrine with an eye to ethics. This thesis will offer a dogmatic basis for environmental action and in doing so I hope it will show that care of creation is not merely a duty but may be a joy of Christian faith.

In this thesis I will propose a dogmatic basis for ecological ethics which centres on the concept of praise. It centres on praise because it unites all Christians, it has been present in all truly Christian communities, without exception, for all of Christian history. To thank God for God's goodness and to wonder at God's greatness is fundamental to Christian experience and identity. More than this, praise is the very purpose of life; we exist to enjoy God and, I will argue, so does the rest of creation. All of creation is bound together in a joint project of praise and it is my hope that

an understanding of this kinship has the power to inspire better living in such a way that our moral choices spring directly from our lived faith.

The Scope of this Thesis

I intend this thesis to be characterised by orthodox doctrinal theology. The term 'orthodox' is a problematic one and I should clarify what I mean by it. First, I mean a kind of theology that looks to the creeds as the central and significant Christian agreement upon the meaning of the coming of Christ and the testimony to that event written in scripture. As such this is a theology which understands the particular narrative of Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension as the heart of theological discourse. It also takes the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation to be the central affirmations of Christian belief. Beyond this the thesis has further commitments, such as an affirmation of the importance of ontological participation in God, which are drawn from the main streams of Christian tradition which flow from the affirmations of the creeds.

Secondly, it should be understood that I do not describe my theology as orthodox in order to claim authority for my argument. Rather it is intended to make the subjectivity of my commitments clearer. That is to say, there are certain ways of thinking and talking about God which will not be pursued in this thesis, not because they can objectively be shown to be inadequate or untrue, but because I believe that alternative ways of thinking are more satisfactory. In other words, to say that my position is orthodox is not to circumvent the work needed to support my claims. Rather it is to commit to a careful and thorough attempt to show that my arguments make good sense of the Christian experience of Christ and the Church's history of witness to him.

Thirdly, I intend that my thesis should appeal to the lived faith of a broad group of Christians. As such its orthodoxy, as well as its attention to doctrine in general, is an attempt to begin a conversation about ecological theology right at the heart of the beliefs which Christians already hold. As such, I hope that this thesis will resonate not only within the Anglican context that is my own but beyond it too. It is in a turn to doctrine that will resonate with a broad range of Christians that we might ensure that ecological concern becomes a habitual expression of faith.

It will also be helpful to highlight certain objectives that this thesis does not hold amongst its aims. First, this thesis does not attempt to survey the field of Christian theological responses to ecological issues. It is not my intention to summarise other theologians' work, critique it and then offer my own ideas in response. Rather, this thesis concerns itself with the articulation of a single idea: that creation praises God by being itself. This thesis begins with this idea and proceeds to consider how such an idea might be given substance, what questions it faces, and what its implications might be. This thesis, therefore, engages with other authors' work on the basis that it helps to advance this argument, through challenge or support, rather than because it is well known within the field of ecological theology.

My thesis, therefore, does not locate itself within any particular area of ecological theology. It should be noted, however, that the thesis does spend some time considering work that is concerned with the interaction between science and theology. This is not to say that this thesis itself is situated within this conversation; I have no scientific background and I have not developed my ideas with general reference to that discipline. Rather, because work undertaken in this area raises a question pertinent to my argument (that of evolutionary evil) some time is spent considering arguments from writers in theology and science.

As will become clear, however, my conclusions are quite different from many of those who write in this area. Whilst I do not feel that the sciences make claims which must necessarily determine what is and is not a possible theological argument, neither do I think that theology can make claims which render scientific understandings impossible to affirm. That is to say, I have attempted to attend to scientific observations of the world in their own terms. At the same time I will articulate theological claims about God and the world that may stand in their own particular integrity as alternative but not necessarily mutually exclusive ways of describing reality.

In reading this thesis it will also be evident that I have paid some attention to biblical studies. The Bible is the starting point for my work and the first chapter outlines my own understanding of the interpretive process which supports my readings of scripture. I have found historical critical readings of the Bible valuable in my attempt to appreciate the character of the particular texts I am reading and have used them to advance my interpretations. I do not believe, however, that historical critical readings of the biblical texts exhaust the process of interpretation. As such I have referred to the work of biblical scholars on occasions when it has helped to further my argument by support or critique.

It should also be noted that I have not engaged with the breadth of work in ecological ethics. Again, this is the result of my decision to pursue a particular idea rather than survey the field. It also fits with my conviction that a theological response to current environmental problems needs to connect directly into Christian faith and practice and, therefore, that it should begin with doctrine. Ethical concerns, however, cannot be entirely separated from doctrinal exposition and this thesis has been written with a purpose in mind which is intrinsically ethical. Thus, whilst there is no direct discussion of what sort of ethical action towards the earth may or may not be acceptable, it will be clear that a significantly

more environmentally sustainable lifestyle is implied by the doctrinal claims made in this thesis.

Finally, a reading of this thesis will reveal that I have not devoted a great deal of discussion to some issues that have been major concerns for ecological theology in the past. In particular, the reader will find references to, but not sustained discussion of, anthropocentrism and dualism. This is not because I believe these issues to be unimportant. Rather, I recognise that theological talk of the world has sometimes seen it as compromised and even depraved in relation to the heavenly realm. I also recognise that theological talk of humanity as God's chosen people has sometimes caused Christians to believe that they can treat the non-human as merely instrumental to their own ends.

Whilst I am aware of these problems, I nevertheless wish to commit to a theology which does understand God as distinct from and pre-existent to the universe which God created and also believes humanity to be uniquely created in God's image. In the context of this thesis I will not enter a debate upon the extent to which such beliefs are a problem in principle. Rather I will attempt to demonstrate that it is possible to construct a theology that affirms these beliefs, but which does not denigrate the non-human world in practice. For my part, therefore, the challenge is to see whether, when God is spoken of as the transcendent creator of all things and when humanity is spoken of as especially bearing the *imago Dei*, this can be done in such a way that it is not at the cost of the non-human and may even point to care and regard for the particular integrity of the non-human. It is for the reader to judge whether I have been successful in this endeavour.

An Outline of this Thesis

The first chapter of this thesis is a hermeneutical discussion of the ways in which the Bible might be read to inform environmental ethics, which focuses on three existing attempts to articulate an ecological hermeneutic. Through consideration of the merits and weaknesses of their arguments I begin to articulate my own view of how the Bible should be read. The chapter then proceeds by considering reading the Bible as an endeavour of Christian spirituality. I claim that Christian reading of the Bible is a fundamentally mystical experience which is rooted in the revelatory and salvific action of God and undertaken in the context of the traditions and lived experience of the Church.

The first chapter represents something of a journey through various possibilities for understanding the way in which the Bible should inform belief and practice. The chapter is not, therefore, part of the main argument of the thesis. It is, however, an essential preface since it describes the way in which the argument is formed and sustained. This thesis repeatedly takes particular biblical texts as its starting point and undertakes close readings of them. I then bring these texts into conversation with the work of thinkers from across the Christian tradition and with contemporary questions and concerns.

A word about the origins of this thesis is appropriate here: This thesis was undertaken in connection with the University of Exeter's project, *The Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics*. Although I was not an official member of the project, I began my study under the supervision of its leader and I have attended its meetings. Along with the other members of the project, I began with the awareness that ecological readings do not spring unmediated from the Bible but only from an interpreted Bible. It is this conviction that has driven the first chapter and its concern to ground

the biblical readings which underpin the thesis in a carefully considered methodology.

I began my study, therefore, by asking what conditions should determine an ecological reading of scripture and how such a reading might support an ecological ethic. Upon consideration of these questions, it became clear that I was interested in articulating an argument which was thoroughly rooted in Christian doctrinal tradition. Yet it remains my belief that the Bible must be the starting point of an ecological theology and the touchstone to which it repeatedly returns. This thesis aims to show that such readings need not be repetitious or simplistic but can represent a complex interaction of scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

The second chapter introduces the argument of this thesis: that creation praises God by being itself. This idea is introduced through readings of three Psalms which speak, in different ways, of the non-human world praising God. Amongst the various characteristics of the non-human world which each Psalm illuminates, it is particularly important to note that all of the psalms seem to envisage creation's praise as proper to its being, rather than an extension of its true nature. They also envision creation as sustained by God, held in all its diversity by God's power. The Psalms understand these two notions to be interrelated, there is an intrinsic connection between the fact that creation praises and the fact that its diverse existence is held in place by God. From this we may draw the conclusion that creation praises God by existing in the particular way that God has created it to exist.

Having made this suggestion the chapter proceeds to consider how this claim can be given a more distinctively Christian complexion through bringing the psalms into conversation with three Christian saints. St Denys contributes to our picture a vision of God as the mystical source of all created being. With his help we add the important conviction that our

theology of creation must strive towards our own ontological participation in the entire created order. St Maximus brings a stronger emphasis on the importance of the particularity and diversity of all the elements of the created order. We also begin to see, anticipating chapter four, that it is Christ who guarantees both the unity and diversity of the cosmos. Finally, St Thomas adds to our argument the conviction that all things have an inherent and natural movement towards God. This movement is not something which creation passively undergoes but a movement which is genuinely its own. In the context of the argument thus far and Thomas' own claims we may link this movement to the praise which creation gives by being itself, thus understanding creation's praise as genuinely its own activity.

In this way, chapter two sets out my argument to suggest that creation's praise both springs from and is expressed in creation's ontological connection to God. An understanding of creation's praise emerges which does not imagine that the non-human world undertakes praise as an activity that is outside of its nature. Yet it retains an understanding of praise as active and determined by the creation which praises. The chapter offers an understanding of praise which recognises each element of creation as giving its own particular and individual voice in praise. It therefore appeals to a shared sense of purpose, a kinship between all created things in praise. I argue that praise is the essential aspect of created existence and suggest that it should be the central concept of ecological theology.

The third chapter is concerned with a question which is raised by the argument of the second chapter. Since the second chapter claims that creation praises by being itself, this begs the question as to how those parts of a creature's particular existence that are characterised by suffering and death, which cannot be separated from that creature's flourishing, fit into this picture. The chapter considers how recent theodicies have dealt

with this problem and I decline to follow their lead. I do this because these arguments work by speaking of God in ways which are not compatible with my aspiration to orthodoxy, described above, and the character of the arguments of the first two chapters.

In particular, I question the reliance of evolutionary theodacists upon pictures of God's power and goodness which are conceived in human terms: understanding God's power as the ability to undertake any action which is not logically inconsistent and understanding God's goodness as the capacity to choose a world which is good on the whole, within certain given parameters. These ways of talking about God lead theodacists to defend the existence of evil in creation by claiming that God made the best of all possible worlds and accepted the necessary evil of suffering and death in order to do so.

As an alternative to the theodicy argument I suggest, with the assistance of the opening chapters of Genesis and Karl Barth, that suffering and death in nature are the presence of the nothingness that threatens the good creation which God has willed. I argue that this should in no way be considered an 'explanation' of the 'problem' of natural evil but a mystery which must ultimately be met by faith that God will ensure that 'all shall be well'. This should not imply, however, that such trust should be easy or that there will be no remaining questions or objections. Rather the argument of the third chapter redirects us to consider more critically the way in which the ontological scheme of creation's praise reaches eschatological consummation.

Although the third chapter responds to a problem raised by the second, it should not be considered as a detour. Rather, my understanding of creation's praise of God requires that the particular characteristics of the non-human world are made central to our understanding of what it means for them to praise. Consideration of suffering and death which characterise life does not merely serve to rescue my argument from a

potential pitfall, it furthers and deepens the claim that creation praises God by being itself. Thus chapter three argues that part of what it means for creation to praise God is that it participates in God's resistance of the nothingness which afflicts it. This is important for ensuring that our understanding of creation's praise is meaningful and can be said to genuinely describe creation's own activity.

The fourth chapter continues the argument by picking up elements of the scheme of chapter two and furthering their claims in the light of what has been learnt from chapter three. In particular, the chapter focuses on St Maximus and his Christological cosmology. This understands Christ as the one who creates and binds all things together in himself. This provides an eschatological consummation for our scheme and deepens our understanding of the significance of the interrelation of all things in creation's praise. My claim that creation is bound together in a joint project of praise is deepened by the conviction that the consummation of this praise is found in the drawing together of all created things in a great symphony of praise. In this symphonic existence the particular character of each thing is integral to the success of the whole.

This brings my account round to consider the role of humanity in creation's praise, understanding ourselves to be priests who gather creation's praise and present it to God. This priesthood is characterised by the discovery of new facets of the life of God which are revealed through contemplation of God's creation. This relies on a particular God-given capacity by which humanity discerns the unique character of each element of creation and understand this as displaying God's glory.

Thus we see that humanity has an important role in the consummation of creation's praise. Yet this is not achieved through human effort but ultimately in the action of Christ. In the Transfiguration we see that human being and, with it, non-human being will be transformed into the divine likeness. This is not an escape or

abandonment of created nature but a fulfilment and consummation of it. The Transfiguration of Christ shows us, ahead of time, that creation's praise can and will be fulfilled. As the human nature of Christ is transfigured, so the whole world is caught up into perfect and unending praise of God.

Conclusion

This thesis offers a theology of the non-human world which might inspire Christians to more environmentally sustainable living. This is done by emphasising not our stewardship of the non-human world but rather the extent to which we are bound to the non-human in mutual seeking of the same ends. We are all part of a cosmic symphony of praise and we find a kinship with the non-human which is more basic than its usefulness to provide for our material needs. This is an understanding of our relationship to creation which has roots in the biblical and theological tradition.

There have been many Christian responses to the current ecological crises. The distinctiveness of this thesis lies in its central focus on creation's praise of God and the way that this is explored. This idea is developed in the context of, and with attention to, orthodox doctrinal theology understood as reflection upon the revelation of God in Christ within a creedal tradition. It is undertaken with the conviction that the deep patterns of Christian imagination formed in worship can be the wellspring of a renewed Christian relationship with the non-human. This thesis, then, is directed towards a genuine development in human relationship with the non-human formed in the depths of Christian spirituality.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The question with which this thesis is concerned is whether and in what way Christianity can be 'green'. Does Christian belief provide reasons and motivation for some form of environmentally healthier living? More precisely, can there be a distinctively Christian approach to green living, an approach differing from those made outside the framework of Christian belief? To ask this question means to ask what relationship there might be between Christian thought and ecological concerns.

My first step in answering this question is to ask whether and to what extent the Bible connects to ecological concerns – but I am far from the first to do so. Many Christians writing on ecological issues have turned to the Bible for inspiration. This chapter will, therefore, begin by considering some recent uses of the Bible in discussions of environmental ethics, and ask what the particular problems and possibilities are in reading the Bible for ecological ends. It will carefully consider the hermeneutics employed and implied by these authors and specifically the ways in which they assess the Bible for its environmental credentials, or seek to extract environmental wisdom from it. Having examined their methods' strengths and weaknesses, I will argue that something more is needed. I will argue that interpretation of the Bible itself needs to be understood as discernment of, and participation in, the work of God.

This way of reading does not expect Scripture to speak to the current situation in a direct and uncomplicated way but understands that interpretive work is required for this to happen. This interpretive work is the discernment of God's work in the world. It therefore requires that one reads in the worshipping community, within the Christian tradition, and

in the light of current ecological problems; attempting to understand how God might be active in our time. In other words God's work and God's call to join in God's work are discerned through scripture, tradition, experience and reason.

In this context, fruitful reading of scripture cannot be achieved by adherence to a single interpretive strategy. Rather it is undertaken in the living interaction of Scripture with the other three resources. There is no external guarantee that this process will work other than faith in the one who initiated the process and to whom the process witnesses. Therefore, as we shall see below, my understanding of biblical hermeneutics is one which has no faith in the activity of the interpreter to ensure the fruitfulness of the process but complete faith in God to guarantee that this process provides real access to the nature and work of God. The task of the Christian reader, I shall argue, is not adherence to any particular hermeneutical framework or tool but is to be open to hearing the voice of God in the midst of a process which is unavoidably complex and irreducibly different in every undertaking.

This chapter will begin by critiquing three recent readings of the Bible for environmental ethics by theologians and biblical scholars. By comparing and contrasting their use of certain hermeneutical ideas with various theorists of hermeneutics, I will argue that they all have something to offer but also have certain shortcomings. I will then suggest that Christian reading of scripture begins with a turning of the reader toward God. This turning toward God is not at all a turning away from the world; in fact in turning to God the Christian reader discovers ever greater depths of responsibility and connection to the world. A reading of scripture which springs from such a turning to God will also desire deeper engagement with tradition, experience and reason.

Before turning to our three scholarly readings I will briefly consider a non-academic attempt to directly relate scripture and environment. This

will be instructive in that it will offer an illustration of a form of reading of scripture that is completely at odds with my own. The *Green Bible* is an edition of the NRSV text aimed at devotional readers concerned with the environmental issues. The *Green Bible* highlights passages which refer to the environment by printing them in green. The editors of the project make the following claim:

“Our role in creation’s care may be a new question unique to our place in history, but the Bible turns out to be amazingly relevant. In fact, it is almost as if it were waiting for this moment to speak to us. With over a thousand references to the earth and caring for creation in the Bible, the message is clear: all in God’s creation – nature, animals and humanity – are inextricably linked to one another. As God cares for all of creation, so we too cannot love one dimension without caring for all the others. We are called to care for all God has made.”²

David Horrell, however, in an article in the *Expository Times* has argued that the Green Bible’s confidence in the eco-friendly nature of scripture is misplaced. He points out that many of the passages which they have quoted have actually received criticism from writers who believe that they carry a damaging ecological message. He points out that Genesis 1.26-28 may be read as sanctioning humanity’s exploitation of the Earth, and that 2 Peter 3.7 seems to suggest that the whole Earth, except for its human inhabitants, will eventually be burned and destroyed.³ Similarly, Alan Jacobs is concerned by the hermeneutical logic of the *Green Bible*. He notes the editors’ excitement at the sheer number of references to the Earth in the Bible, which outweigh the number of references to love by more than 1,000 to 530, and points out that this rather strange basis for

² *The Green Bible*, (London: Collins, 2008), p. I.15.

³ David G. Horrell, ‘The Green Bible: A Timely Idea Deeply Flawed’, *The Expository Times* 121.4 (2010), pp. 180-186 (p. 182).

weighing up the importance of a biblical theme would lead to the conclusion that the Earth is 1.88 times more important than love.⁴

It seems then that the *Green Bible* has confused plain content with message. There is no doubt that there is much natural imagery in the Bible but this does not amount to a coherent theology or ethic concerning the environment. Rather, it seems to be the case that the editors have collected together the references to the non-human creation in the Bible and cast them in the light of contemporary concerns about the environment. Thus Jacobs wryly comments,

*“The Green Bible presents us with a curious kind of natural theology: We start with things we know to be true from trusted sources — Al Gore, perhaps? — and then we turn to Scripture to measure it against those pre-existing and reliable authorities. And what a relief to discover that God is green. Because we already know that it's good to be green — what we didn't know is whether God measures up to that standard.”*⁵

Thus Jacobs suspects the editors of the *Green Bible* of importing current concerns into the biblical text. What the *Green Bible* seems to lack is a distinctive theology of the environment, one which attempts to place the Earth and its fate in the context of Christian doctrine and the Christian narrative. Horrell concludes that

*“It is a shame that the core of the project does not reflect or convey what seems to me an inescapable truth: that constructive, imaginative, scientifically-informed, theological engagement is necessary to deal with the ambivalent material the Bible contains regarding the earth. A message — and certainly a pro-earth message — does not come direct from the Bible, but only from an interpreted Bible.”*⁶

⁴ Alan Jacobs, 'Blessed are the Green of Heart', <<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/04/blessed-are-the-green-of-heart-1243315303>>, accessed 10 Oct. 2009.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Horrell, 'The Green Bible', p. 186.

This provides a context for our hermeneutical discussions. The hermeneutic I will be careful to avoid is one which aims to mine the biblical text for deposits of ecological wisdom. The problem with such a strategy is that it cannot guarantee that it will bring anything distinctively Christian to the discourse. Our first task, then, is to consider how reading the Bible for ecological ethics can be a self-consciously interpretive endeavour. I turn now, then, to consider three scholarly projects which have undertaken this endeavour.

Three Recent Ecological Hermeneutics

Paul H. Santmire and Interpretive Horizons

In contrast to the compilers of the *Green Bible*, Paul H. Santmire explicitly discusses the way in which his reading of the Bible involves interpretive decision-making. The opening chapter of his book *Nature Reborn* is entitled 'Recovering the Story Biblically', and it is devoted not only to the possibility of a biblically inspired environmental ethic but a discussion of how the Bible might be read to achieve such an end. Rather than simply tapping the previously unnoticed springs of ecological wisdom, Santmire is interested in bringing the Bible to bear upon the current situation through the construction of a narrative.

Santmire, therefore, is searching for

“an interpretive framework that, together with the most rigorous forms of historical study, will help us hear the witness of the Scriptures... This framework cannot be justified in advance. It can only be justified in terms of its legitimate exegetical fruits. This is the interpretive framework (or hermeneutic) I propose, informed by the approach of the mature Augustine: from 'first things'

(protology) to 'last things' (eschatology), or, in more rhetorical terms, the future and the fullness thereof."⁷

Thus Santmire recognises the role of the interpreter in shaping disparate biblical texts into a reading for ecological ethics. The interpreter's task is to allow the text to speak in a way that we otherwise may not have heard. It is neither a case of simply seeing what would always have been obvious if only we had been looking in the right place nor of finding what is not really there. Rather it is in the construction of a particular way of reading that we are enabled to see truths which were previously obscure.

This interpretive framework, moreover, is not imposed upon the text from the outside but emerges from within the biblical texts themselves. Santmire draws upon Claus Westermann and Walter Brueggeman to argue for a narrative consisting of two elements, "the theology of deliverance and the theology of blessing". It focuses upon the way in which God's creative purposes initiate a good and fertile world, bring God's people liberation through the land, and continue to bless them in that land. It is a process which is seen in the specific history of Israel and is still underway in history today. This "two-dimensional horizon" is to be the basis for environmental interpretation of Scripture and ecological theology more generally. It is a narrative which expresses the hermeneutical framework adopted from Augustine; "the future and the fullness thereof".

Santmire does not engage in specific textual criticism to make this argument but instead appeals more generally to the entire Hebrew Bible, referring to Genesis, Deuteronomy, the Psalms and Isaiah, as well as referring to the "later prophets", "apocalyptic writers" and "the history of Israel in its classical period". The sum total of this is that Santmire claims that he has, "identified a universalizing interpretive horizon in the Old

⁷ Paul H. Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 31.

Testament texts themselves".⁸ In order to do this Santmire has called upon the resources of historical criticism and has aimed to create a theological framework which utilises "the most rigorous forms of historical study".⁹

Thus, whilst he has constructed this framework by his own exegetical work, he nevertheless locates the meaning of the text, and thus the truth of his narrative, somewhere 'behind' the text - in its historical reality and original authorial intention. He writes of the intentions of the Yahwist and Priestly narratives, of the way in which the authors present history, of motifs, of agendas. In short the texts of the Bible contain a theology (of the future and the fullness thereof); so much so that he is able to talk of a 'Hebraic mind' to which the text allows him access.

In pursuing this method Santmire, I believe, creates a serious difficulty for his hermeneutic. This difficulty is indicated by the fact that historical criticism has generally been suspicious of any claim that the text is a unified narrative which un-problematically coalesces into one theological perspective. In fact, scholars employing the method have usually found difference in the texts, not unity; voices within the text which differ from each other and from our own world views. Surely it is problematic that Santmire uses the methods and language of modernist historical criticism but comes to a conclusion at such variance to his predecessors and contemporaries in the field? If one were to point out the undoubtedly numerous texts which do not fit his thesis, Santmire would be undone by the very method which he seeks to utilise.

This problem directs us to a challenge to which I believe Santmire is vulnerable – whether he is right to attempt to access the mind of the author at all. Considering Santmire's argument in light of Poststructuralist and non-foundationalist thought we may be suspicious of his attempt to locate truth at a level of reality which exists behind the text. That is to say

⁸ Ibid. p. 42.

⁹ Ibid. p. 31.

that Santmire implies that the text gives us access to something which, in principle, exists apart from the text. Santmire envisions a 'Hebraic mind', a unified worldview from which the text issues and which has existence independent of the text. As such, when the text is brought to bear upon ecological issues it is not only the text which is applied but the Hebrew worldview itself. I would suggest that it is only the text, not anything which exists outside of the text, which may be brought into conversation with the contemporary context. It is, of course, true that particular authors lie behind the text – the text issues from them – however a text is not a time machine and these authors remain dead.

In his influential essay *The Death of the Author* Roland Barthes argued that the concept of the author was actually a means by which critics were able to privilege their own interpretations:

"To give the text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. This conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained,' – victory to the critic."¹⁰

Thus Barthes believes that the attempt to reconstruct the mind of the author from the text is unsuccessful; interpretation is not resurrection. If giving the text an author achieves anything then it is to disguise the interpretive decisions of the reader. This process may not be cynical, it may be a mistake made in good faith. However, the danger is that features of the text itself are overlooked or suppressed by the process of interpretation and that this result is unperceived.

Does Santmire's 'universalizing interpretive horizon' actually amount to the limitation of the text? Has Santmire overlooked the extent to which his own interpretive decisions define his interpretive framework,

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 147.

thus overlooking some characteristics and content of the texts? At first glance it may seem that Santmire has some awareness of his role as interpreter in the production of his narrative. He talks of 'interpretive horizons' and an 'interpretive framework'. These hints at the significance of his own interpretive activity show that Santmire is doing something more complicated than the Green Bible's uncovering of ecological wisdom. His claim that his interpretation is carried out within an interpretive framework seems to point to his own predeterminative role in finding meaning in the texts.

However, there is a problem with Santmire's interpretive framework. He claims that he has identified a framework within the texts themselves utilizing historical critical technique. Thus the framework is identified through the understanding of the culture, belief system and world view which lie behind the texts. In other words Santmire has furnished the text with what Barthes refers to as the author's hypostasis. This implicit claim to the voice of a dead author to act as control upon interpretive activity is only made worse by the fact that, even if one could resurrect the author, the biblical texts have many authors. As I have argued above, the historical critical texts which Santmire utilises do not allow one to construct a single author for the biblical text. Santmire is vulnerable to Barthes' critique in that the constructive work which has determined the shape of his framework has been obscured by his appeal to a set of controls existing behind the text.

That Santmire's interpretive framework does indeed predetermine his interpretations is made clear when he states that: "when we read Old Testament texts in this manner, in a certain sense we know, before we turn to the texts themselves, where their particular meanings will ultimately take us."¹¹ The correct way to interpret a particular passage has been, to some extent, decided in advance by the authoritative framework which

¹¹ Santmire, *Nature Reborn*, p. 34.

already exists. This framework is produced by historical critical labour and endorsed by the authors of the biblical text. What is obscured in this is the element of decision-making, on the part of Santmire, that is inherent to this task.

Santmire claims that he has “identified a universalizing interpretive horizon in the Old Testament texts themselves”.¹² What kind of activity is implied in this identification? Is it an identification that only someone with Santmire’s particular interpretive concerns would make? Would somebody with different concerns identify a different horizon? Furthermore, what does it mean for this horizon to be universalising? Does this imply that elements of difference within the text are smoothed out or that the distance between the text and our context is bridged, or does it imply both? Does this universalizing require Santmire to overlook elements of the text or our context which conflict with his interpretation? In short, is it not the case that Santmire has presented an interpretive proposal as a critical discovery?

In order to answer these questions I suggest that Santmire may find help from Hans-Georg Gadamer because his work allows us to complicate Santmire’s hermeneutic without having to entirely deny that the texts contain interpretive horizons which may be grasped. A central figure in the development of hermeneutics in the Twentieth Century, Gadamer had a particular interest in the importance of interpretive horizons. Though Gadamer was not the first to consider the role of horizons in the formation of human understanding, he made a lasting impact in his exploration of the role they play in the interpretation of texts.

Simply stated, ‘horizon’ describes the particular contexts and conditions that determine how things appear to us, the particular field of our own vision. A horizon is the necessary precondition for the “flow of experience” which characterises being. None of us can escape or see

¹² Ibid. p. 42.

beyond our own horizon which is why Gadamer insists that all interpreters come to texts with prejudices. Prejudice, however, “certainly does not mean a false judgment, but part of the idea is that it can either have a positive or a negative value”.¹³ Prejudice is what Heidegger referred to as ‘fore-understanding’; it is those elements of understanding which exist prior to our interpretation of a text. As such prejudice is the necessary condition for us finding any meaning in a text. Interpreters are not simply blank canvases onto which meaning is painted; rather interpreters are already works in progress, the meanings of which are enhanced and developed by the process of interpreting texts.

Thus, understanding the meaning of a text is impossible without the pre-existent framework of our own understanding. From the very first moment of interpretation, understanding involves a meeting between the text and our pre-existing prejudices. It is precisely because we cannot see beyond our horizons that it is only through them that we can understand a meaning which comes to us from outside of them. As such, prejudice is indispensable to the interpretation of texts; it cannot be discarded and it is not to be ignored. This, Gadamer argues, is the mistake of the post Enlightenment project of interpretation: that it believes that it is possible to lay prejudice aside and by doing so achieve objective understanding.

The Enlightenment brought us, “prejudice against prejudice itself”¹⁴ and so blinded us to the unavoidable influence of our prejudice. Gadamer is keen to expose this development and insist that there is no independent access to the meaning of a text. Quite simply, understanding the meaning of a text is impossible without a pre-existing idea of what that text might mean in which to situate one’s reading. Interpretation, therefore, is always a negotiation between the already formed interpreter and the text; meaning emerges as a product of both.

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London; New York: Continuum, 1975), p. 273.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Initially Gadamer's critique does not rescue Santmire. Rather it calls his hermeneutic into question, challenging the ease with which he identifies his interpretive framework as that which the text itself suggests. If he can understand where a text is going to take him before he turns to the text itself, then this is actually because of the prejudices which his own interpretive horizon brings to each reading. This is a slightly different critique to the one we put to him from Barthes. That argument was that to claim one's interpretation is governed by the intentions of the author, revealed in the text, is merely a smokescreen to cover one's own interpretive work. With Gadamer's help we both confirm the sense that interpretive work is being concealed but also affirm that such interpretive work may be a productive negotiation between the reader and the text.

This is because Gadamer believes in the capacity of texts, of other horizons, to influence an interpreter. He believes that human self understanding is historically formed; it is not formed in a void. All human being is unavoidably being within history and this means that "knowledge of oneself is never complete. All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven... because it underlies all subjective intentions and actions."¹⁵ There is no isolated horizon of the present; rather our perception of the world is formed by the past. The result of this is that horizons are constantly in flux, being moulded by the way we situate ourselves in relation to events and experiences which have passed. A horizon is not static, it is not a "rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further".¹⁶ The hermeneutical task, therefore, involves a constant assessing and reassessing of one's horizons, continual testing of our prejudices, allowing them to be transformed. Thus, "there is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired".¹⁷ And

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 301.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 238.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 305.

so follows Gadamer's famous phrase: "*Rather, understanding is the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.*"¹⁸

This then is where Gadamer may assist Santmire, in that whilst he refuses to allow the text meaning independent of the moment of its interpretation he nevertheless allows the text its own particular contribution to this moment. It is not possible to derive meaning from a text without interpreting it within the framework of one's own prejudices, yet precisely in doing so one allows the text to challenge and transform those prejudices. It is in this meeting that understanding takes place; it is only because a fusion of horizons occurs, only because a text is appropriated by a reader to shape their own framework of understanding, that the text has meaning at all. Here we find a place for Santmire's sense that he has taken the interpretive path which the text has demanded of him, since in the fusion of horizons we do, in a real sense, stand before the demands of the text. In fact, despite insisting that a text cannot be approached without one's own fore-understanding, Gadamer is convinced of the power of the text. "When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us. It has asserted itself and captivated us before we can come to ourselves and be in a position to test the claim to meaning that it makes."¹⁹

However, it has been argued that Gadamer's trust in the fusion of horizons is too naïve. Werner Jeanrond, for example, taking up Jürgen Habermas' critique of Gadamer, argues: "Gadamer's concept of the hermeneutical experience is over-optimistic. He always reckons with success in understanding."²⁰ In particular, Jeanrond argues that Gadamer is not aware enough of the possibility of interpreters' vested interests distorting the text for their own benefit. Thus he argues that

¹⁸ Ibid. Author's italics.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 484.

²⁰ Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1991), p. 68.

“without a critical discussion of what actually happens during the process of the fusion of horizons, this concept remains utterly idealist and open to all sorts of ideological distortions. For example, any fundamentalist reader of the Bible will happily claim that his or her particular fusion of horizons has revealed the truth of the scriptures and therefore urges all other readers to copy this particular material agreement with the text.”²¹

Perhaps there are resources within Gadamer for answering such a critique. He does, for example, argue that

“Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out.”²²

In any case, we do find a critique here which ought to be applied to Santmire. We may be able to use Gadamer’s philosophy of hermeneutics to justify his confidence that he has produced a reading which belongs both to him and the text but he nevertheless remains open to the charge that he does not bring out the tension between his own concerns and the particular character of the text. He wishes to find a foundational biblical narrative to underpin his own ecological theology but there are undoubtedly numerous texts which would not fit his thesis.

This can be illustrated by the reflections of Robert Allen Warrior upon the Exodus narrative (a narrative which plays a part in Santmire’s interpretive framework). Warrior writes against those who wish to appropriate the Exodus narrative as inspiration for poor and oppressed people seeking liberation today. He points out that whilst the Exodus to the Promised Land means liberation for the people of Israel it spells conquest for those who previously inhabit the land. As a Native American

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 305.

he feels that the obvious group for him to identify with is not Israel, fleeing an oppressive regime to start a new life, but the Canaanites, invaded, overwhelmed and oppressed by the Israelites. Thus he identifies pictures of two gods in the text: the god who liberates the Israelites and the god who subdues the Canaanites. When it comes to reading this narrative, therefore, he sees a problem: "I do not see what mechanism guarantees that... people who seek to be shaped and moulded by reading the text... will differentiate between the liberating god and the god of conquest."²³

Santmire wishes to read the biblical texts as liberating for the Earth, as focused on fullness and blessing. Yet there is no guarantee that in doing so he may not overlook the ways in which the text can be read as oppressive of the Earth. How can Santmire be sure that he is not committing the same kind of error as those well intentioned theologians who read the text as liberating for human beings but overlook elements of the text which do not so easily conform to such a reading? Warrior seems to have good cause to approach biblical interpretation with suspicion; suspicion both of the prejudices which have formed interpretations of it and of the text itself. May it not also be necessary to find a place for such suspicion when reading the text for ecological ethics?

The Earth Bible and the Hermeneutic of Suspicion

In order to consider the introduction of suspicion into the practice of reading the Bible for environmental ethics, I turn to the Earth Bible project. The Earth Bible is a series of five books containing articles covering Genesis, Wisdom, the Psalms, the Prophets and the New Testament. There

²³ Robert Allen Warrior, 'Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest and Liberation Theology Today' in David Jobling, Tina Pippin and Ronald Schleifer, *The Postmodern Bible Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 188-94 (p. 193).

is also an introductory volume describing the project's hermeneutical principles and illustrating their application. The series consists of essays by biblical scholars on various passages which they believe to be ecologically noteworthy. A collection of such breadth and depth is clearly an important resource for anyone wishing to read the Bible for ecological purposes. The writers are also, like Santmire, to be commended for beginning their study with an extended consideration of what it might mean to read the Bible for environmental ethics.

In contrast to Santmire, the Earth Bible series approaches the text with a significant degree of caution. As the project's leader, Norman Habel comments: "as Western readers we are heir to a long anthropocentric, patriarchal and androcentric approach to reading the text that has devalued Earth."²⁴ Thus, in order to combat this disadvantage, the Earth Bible team have agreed a set of 'guiding ecojustice principles' with which they intend to form a new way of reading biblical texts in solidarity with the Earth.

There are a total of six principles:²⁵ The first is the principle of 'intrinsic worth', that every part of the Earth has value independently of its usefulness for human beings. In fact, the Earth is a complex of ecological systems and each part of each system has worth in virtue of its place in the whole. This encourages the Earth Bible writers to think beyond the dualistic Western view of the world which they believe bears responsibility for the way in which humanity has viewed and exploited the Earth as an object.

The second principle is of 'interconnectedness'; that the planet is a community of living entities which are inextricably linked in both their

²⁴ Norman C. Habel, 'Introducing the Earth Bible', in id. (ed.) *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, The Earth Bible vol. 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 25-37 (p. 37).

²⁵ The Earth Bible Team, 'Guiding Ecojustice Principles' in Norman C. Habel (ed.), *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, The Earth Bible vol. 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 38-53. These principles were formulated over 'several years in dialogue with ecologists and their writings' before being refined in workshops and consultation. This was undertaken by the Earth Bible Team which consists of Vicky Balabanski, Norman Habel, Duncan Reid and Michael Trainor. The other writers in the series are encouraged to apply the principles to their work for the volumes.

existence and their fate. The series' writers are encouraged to see that other parts of the Earth are not inferior but that they share a kinship with all parts of the planet.

The third principle is that of 'voice'; that the Earth "is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice".²⁶ Drawing upon a trend amongst biologists and others to view the Earth as a single living entity, the team believe that the Earth has a voice to which they must attend. This voice does not take the form of a human voice but is expressed in ways that reflect the distinctive natures of the members of the earth community. The writers are encouraged to listen to this 'Earth language' and resist a history of Christian thought which has silenced the voice of the Earth. In doing so they may be able to mediate the voice of Earth for the rest of humanity.

The fourth principle is that of 'purpose'; that everything of which the Earth consists plays its particular part in achieving the ultimate goal of the Earth's design - the sustaining of life in all its diversity and beauty. This encourages the writers to view the Earth as indispensable, to view every part of it as participating in the whole and contributing to the planet's ultimate flourishing.

The fifth principle is that of 'mutual custodianship'; that the human and non-human parts of the Earth exist in a complex balance in which both can work in partnership to sustain a diverse planet. This encourages the Earth Bible writers to recognise not only their responsibility to be good custodians of the planet but also the way in which the Earth has been the custodian of humankind, and the necessity of the Earth for human flourishing.

The sixth principle is that of 'resistance'; that the members of the Earth community "not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans,

²⁶ Ibid. p. 46.

but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.”²⁷ This encourages the series’ writers not to view the Earth as a passive object but one with an amazing capacity for survival, to recognise its identity as oppressed victim with a claim to justice.

The Earth Bible team offer these principles to be adopted by the writers of the various essays in the project and those writers agree to apply them to their interpretation of the biblical texts. In doing so the Earth Bible aims to offer “a new way of reading the text”.²⁸ Central to this is the principle of voice and the importance of attending to that voice as it is heard in the text. Habel writes:

“Our approach in this series attempts to move beyond a focus on ecological *themes* to a process of listening to, and identifying with, Earth as a presence or voice in the text. Our task is to take up the cause of Earth and the non-human members of the Earth community by sensing their presence in the text – whether their presence is suppressed, oppressed or celebrated.”²⁹

The principle of voice seems to be particularly significant to the Earth Bible team’s vision for the series. In particular the possibility that the voice of Earth may have been suppressed within the text and the necessity of the attempt to recover it seems to be implicit in each of the other ecojustice principles. Thus when underlining the interconnectedness of the Earth they suspect that they will, in turning to the biblical text, discover that, “the biblical texts themselves exalt humans over other creatures”.³⁰ Further, when discussing the principle of resistance they ask: “is the Earth constructed by anthropocentric writers into a passive victim?” The writers suspect that in various biblical texts, “Earth is viewed as a passive object without feeling or voice”.³¹

²⁷ Ibid. p. 52.

²⁸ Habel, ‘Introducing the Earth Bible’, p. 33.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

³⁰ Earth Bible Team, ‘Guiding Ecojustice Principles’, p. 45.

³¹ Ibid. p. 52.

Central to the Earth Bible's hermeneutic, therefore, is the exercise of suspicion in the reading of biblical texts. The team write that "we may legitimately suspect that Biblical texts, written by human beings, reflect the primary interests of human beings – their human welfare, their human relationship to God and their personal salvation. In short we suspect that the biblical texts are anthropocentric."³² The Earth has an identity and voice which are suppressed within the biblical texts. The result of this is that the concerns of the Earth, the things which matter most for its survival and flourishing, are not reflected in those texts. The way in which the Earth Bible writers may overcome this shortcoming is to take the ecojustice principles and ask whether the text and traditional interpretations of it usefully meet the criteria which those principles set.

This is not to say that the Earth Bible is only interested in exposing those features of the text which are damaging to the Earth. Habel writes: "There is a strong possibility that biblical texts may be more sympathetic to the plight and potential of Earth than our previous interpretations have allowed."³³ Thus the series' writers must also apply the ecojustice principles in order to see past damaging traditions of reading and recover those passages which "celebrate Earth in a way that our contemporary anthropocentric eyes have not detected".³⁴ Thus the Earth Bible team describe their hermeneutic as one of 'suspicion and retrieval', a method which they have adopted from feminist hermeneutics, citing Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as a particular inspiration.

This hermeneutic is one which does not assume that reading a text will lead to a generative fusion of horizons, uncomplicatedly creating new meaning in the encounter between text and reader. Rather, both the text and its traditional interpretations are seen as potentially tainted by damaging human assumptions or even as potential oppressors. Thus the

³² Ibid. p. 39.

³³ Ibid. p. 41.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 42.

Earth Bible writers' task is to adjudicate the text and its interpretive traditions and decide whether it is, as it were, guilty of ecological crimes. Taking their lead from feminist interpretation they seek not to fuse their horizon with that of the text so much as to judge the text on the basis of their pre-given ecojustice principles.

Commenting on this sort of strategy, Garret Green raises a problem with such a hermeneutic. A hermeneutic of suspicion, he argues, relies upon a grounding trust in something other than the object of suspicion. He quotes Schüssler Fiorenza to the effect that a feminist critique of the Bible cannot be derived from the Bible itself but only from women's experience of struggle against patriarchy.³⁵ Green comments that, "at their worst, some liberationist and feminist hermeneutics subject theology and the church to alien criteria derived not from the gospel of Jesus Christ but from modern autonomous humanism."³⁶

Green's claim is not that they are wrong to resist the text but that they are wrong to introduce foreign criteria in order to do so: "If there are good Christian grounds for a critique of patriarchy – as there most surely are – they require a hermeneutics whose suspicion stems from an underlying trust in the crucified Messiah and the God who raised him from the dead."³⁷ Since all suspicion is grounded in trust and it is only Christ who is truly worthy of such trust, it can only finally undermine itself: "Like every parasite, suspicion ultimately depends on its host, and it can succeed in destroying its host only at the price of its own demise."³⁸ For those who make suspicion central to their hermeneutic the challenge will eventually come round to their own interpretations, asking what it is that guarantees the rightness of their judgments. A hermeneutic that

³⁵ Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 203.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 190.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 203.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 200.

cannot answer this question by pointing to the gospel of Christ will not have the strength to sustain itself.

Whether or not Green's critique of feminist hermeneutics is justified, I believe it offers a significant challenge to the hermeneutic of the Earth Bible team. This is particularly the case due to the trust in which their suspicious hermeneutic is grounded. They make no claim to have derived their ecojustice principles from the gospel and they have, indeed, chosen to eschew the terms 'God' and 'creation' in order to foster dialogue with those outside the Christian faith.³⁹ Instead their hermeneutic is evidently reliant upon their trust in their capacity to correctly hear the voice of Earth. It is this which provides the criteria and impetus to challenge the texts and their interpretation. The voice of the Earth, in fact, gives them the authority to condemn and reject certain texts and interpretations. Why should the Earth Bible writers place such confidence in their capacity to hear the voice of the Earth?

I do not suggest that the Earth has no voice (in fact the claim that it does will be important for my argument). However, the difficulty remains that there is no way of distinguishing between what may be the voice of the Earth and what is simply the particular assumptions of the interpreter. The Earth has a voice but how can we possibly be sure enough of what it is saying that we can use it as a criteria to judge the merit of biblical texts? In the final analysis the Earth Bible writers cannot escape their own humanity; their perspective is unavoidably *their* perspective, not the perspective of the Earth.

The Earth Bible writers' interpretations, therefore, cannot avoid subjectivity and are not unsusceptible to precisely the kinds of distortion that their interpretive principles seek to avoid. Following the logic of their own hermeneutic the Earth Bible writers should turn their suspicion towards their own interpretation and, indeed, their conviction that they

³⁹ The Earth Bible Team, 'Guiding Ecojustice Principles', p. 38.

have heard the voice of the Earth. There can be no certainty that their hearing of the Earth has not been tainted by the very anthropocentric tendencies they sought to combat and so it cannot provide an incorruptible foundation for their interpretation. In short, the Earth Bible's reading of suspicion and recovery no more guarantees an ecologically sound reading than Santmire's hermeneutical strategy, despite their careful attention to the possibility of damaging patterns within the text.

I believe that the Earth Bible team are mistaken to use their interpretive principles to make judgments about the text without demonstrating that those principles are themselves a plausible construal of the Christian gospel in response to environmental problems. Furthermore, the claim that they can provide an objective grounding to biblical interpretation which allows interpreters to escape their prejudices and guarantees a sound ecological reading, is flawed. Ultimately, their hermeneutic is undermined by the obvious reality that they cannot fulfil the wishes of the Earth in their interpretation of the Bible. In fact, their claim that they can hear the voice of the Earth and even mediate it to others seems to mask the fact that their interpretations are finally dependent on their own decisions. To claim that one's interpretations are sanctioned by the voice of the Earth seems to be a worrying forestalment of debate and diversity of interpretation. The Earth Bible team seem susceptible to the critique that we have previously adopted from Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author*. However, in the case of the Earth Bible, it is not to the text that they have assigned an author but to their judgment of it. That author is the Earth and it is an unimpeachable authority possessing both the power of omnipresence and the credentials of victimhood. With this weight of authority behind them it is likely to be rather difficult to disagree with their claims about the text. As Barthes says, 'victory to the critic'.

However, whilst I am concerned about the Earth Bible's practice of interpretation I do not think that it was their intention to forestall a diversity of interpretation. In fact their hermeneutic is constructed in response to their conviction that the tradition of the biblical texts and their interpretation has overlooked and silenced concerns which we now describe as ecological. It is not to their attempt to open new avenues of interpretation but to their positioning of their hermeneutic as the authoritative reading which I object. Nevertheless, their introduction of the notion of suspicion to the hermeneutical process is an important addition. Therefore, I propose that suspicion may be more constructively incorporated in an ecological hermeneutic with the assistance of another important figure in twentieth century philosophical hermeneutics, one who in particular raised the importance of suspicion to the interpretive process, Paul Ricœur.

Like Gadamer, Ricœur understands that there is no escape from hermeneutics, that all interpretation is a process of understanding reliant on the reader as much as upon the text. Ricœur differs from Gadamer, however, in his conviction that within this process suspicion plays an essential role. Jeanrond argues: "Unlike Gadamer... Ricœur acknowledges that there is no single interpretive move which could rescue the meaning of the text, but that there are conflicting aims, interests and methods which seek to appropriate the text."⁴⁰

Ricœur has a strong sense of the multiplicity of reading, of the conflict of interpretations. Thus, Jeanrond thinks, "over against Gadamer's uncritical concept of understanding as entering into a tradition, Ricœur advocates the introduction of a critical dimension into the very centre of hermeneutics."⁴¹ Suspicion, for Ricœur is central to the hermeneutical process. Where he differs from the Earth Bible team, however, is in his

⁴⁰ Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 71.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 75.

understanding of the hermeneutical instability of the human consciousness and the importance of suspicion of one's own interpretations which this instability necessitates. That is to say that Ricœur has a keen awareness of the difficulty that the interpreter has in knowing their own mind.

Ricœur's awareness of the importance of suspicion of one's own understanding is developed in conversation with Sigmund Freud as Ricœur asks what implications psychoanalysis has for a philosophy of interpretation. "What emerges from this reflection," Ricœur writes, "is a wounded *cogito*, which posits but does not possess itself, which understands its originary truth only in and by the confession of the inadequation, the illusion, and the lie of existing consciousness."⁴² Since Freud's opening of the depths of the subconscious, Ricœur believes, it has become extremely difficult to place any certainty in the transparency of one's self-consciousness, it is no longer possible to imagine that there is any unmediated self-understanding. Thus Anthony Thiselton comments: "The Copernican revolution changed the notion that humankind constituted the centre of the universe; the psychoanalytic revolution likewise challenged the notion that the ego is master in its own house."⁴³

Ricœur identifies Freud as a 'master of suspicion', along with Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. Undoubtedly these masters of suspicion lie somewhere in the background of the Earth Bible's hermeneutic, particularly in its critique of ideology. It is certainly true that the Earth Bible's suspicion of the anthropocentric qualities of the text and its interpretive traditions is an important contribution to an ecological hermeneutic. However, it is Ricœur's Freudian suspicion that is, it seems to me, so lacking in the Earth Bible's hermeneutic. How can the project's

⁴² Paul Ricœur, 'A Philosophical Interpretation of Freud' in id. *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde, trans. Willis Domingo (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 157-73 (p. 169).

⁴³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 350.

writers distinguish, with even the slightest certainty, between the voice of Earth and the voices of their own subconscious?

Because the Earth Bible hermeneutic does not seek to turn its suspicion upon itself it is not incorporated into the hermeneutic to the extent that it is in Ricœur's thought. For the Earth Bible team, suspicion is a possible outcome of the interpretive task. A particular text may be placed under the judgment of suspicion, declared to be compromised and dangerous. For Ricœur suspicion is ultimately a tool which finds its full value in its role in bringing about understanding. Thus, although he differs from Gadamer in his hesitation in trusting to the fusion of horizons, he does not surrender the possibility of understanding altogether.

The implications for the interpretation of a text are significant. An interpretation must be critical, asking in what way a particular reading relates to the character of the text, including those parts which are oblique and hidden. Furthermore, after Freud, interpretation must be self-critical, asking in what ways a particular reading relates to the character of the reader, including those parts which are oblique and hidden. However, this critical procedure is not the end in itself. Rather, he believes interpretation to be a task of explanation, which involves both criticism of the object of interpretation and suspicion of one's self-consciousness, as well as understanding, the moment in which the interpretive process produces meaning.

Thus Ricœur writes,

"Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigour vow of obedience. In our time we have not finished with doing away with *idols* and we have barely begun to listen to *symbols*. It may be that this situation, in its apparent distress, is

instructive: it may be that extreme iconoclasm belongs to the restoration of meaning."⁴⁴

Suspicion, therefore, is necessary for the retrieval of meaning from the interpretive process. Suspicion aids the attempt to explain a text, to become, as Thiselton puts it, "critically aware of when we project our own wishes and constructs into a text, so that they no longer address us from beyond ourselves as 'other'".⁴⁵ Thus suspicion destroys idols, the false meanings which mask the truth and block understanding. Rather than the idols which we set up in their place, it is to symbols which we must attend.

The symbol expresses reality and is the true object of hermeneutics. Symbols are more basic than texts and express reality, mediating it to the consciousness of the interpreter. Ricœur is, then, finally optimistic about the possibility of understanding since symbols, freed from masking by idols, "stimulate an intellectual activity of deciphering, of finding a hidden meaning".⁴⁶ Thus, Ricœur believes, hermeneutics is finally an act of faith in the possibility of understanding and the power of the symbol. The hermeneutical task can achieve its goal, the generation of meaning and the discovery of truth.

Suspicion, therefore, is a process through which interpretation must pass in order to arrive at meaning. As Dan R. Stiver comments: "A contemporary philosophy of reflection therefore must pass through the night of suspicion, of illusion, and of guile if it is to be possible at all."⁴⁷ Yet this interpretive journey results not in cynicism but faith. "No longer, to be sure," Ricœur writes, "the first faith of the simple soul but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has

⁴⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 27, author's italics.

⁴⁵ Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p. 26.

⁴⁶ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 19.

⁴⁷ Dan R. Stiver, *Theology After Ricœur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 143.

undergone criticism, postcritical faith... It is rational faith, for it interprets; but it is a faith because it seeks, through interpretation, a second naïveté."⁴⁸

Interpretation, for Ricœur, is a process which passes through criticism and suspicion precisely to attain a strengthened credulity. The reader is first struck by the text, seized by meaning, and an initial, naïve understanding occurs. Following this initial moment of meaning making, the reader begins to address the text with critical tools, attempting an explanation of the text. This second moment of reading corrects and furthers the first and they exist in dialectical tension. Out of this dialectic a third moment of reading emerges, a post-critical understanding of the text. The first moment of understanding is a naïve reading which is then complicated by a critical reading.

The ultimate aim of this process, however, is not to secure an interpretation as ultimately justified and final. Rather it is to arrive at an appropriation of the text that is aware of the path that it has taken and the interpretive decisions involved. In doing so new ways of understanding a text are made available, new understandings which, whilst critically aware of the internal structure of the text are founded on a trust in the capacity of the text to generate new meaning in the encounter with the reader. The second moment of understanding is thus referred to as a 'second naïveté'. This is never a final understanding or an end to interpretation since the process may continue in a circular fashion as the post critical retrieval is submitted to further criticism.

Suspicion, for Ricœur, is not a way of judging the final worth of a text or interpretation but a critical tool to be employed on the way to a second understanding. The final goal is indeed a naïve reading but it is naïve in that it trusts the power of the encounter of reader and text to generate meaning, not in that it has ignored critical modes of textual

⁴⁸ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 28.

interpretation. Stiver comments: "He calls for a postcritical naïveté, not simply naïveté."⁴⁹ Thus Ricœur offers a way to the embracing of suspicion as central to the project of reading scripture but not as method for making a final judgment of the text but as a way of exposing and highlighting the particular contributions of the reader to the process.

Ernst Conradie and Doctrinal Constructs

With the help of Ricœur I have suggested that the Earth Bible's hermeneutic of suspicion fails because it sees suspicion as an *outcome* of a process of interpretation which judges the text rather than as a tool to foster greater transparency *within* a process of interpretation which seeks understanding. Turning from Ricœur's work we consider a third example of a recent discussion of ecological hermeneutics, Ernst Conradie. This final example is a hermeneutical discussion of the process of constructing an ecological reading rather than a proposal for any particular ecological reading. Conradie is particularly helpful because he is convinced that the interpreter's task is to identify and illuminate the various interpretive decisions that constitute an ecological way of reading the text. In Ricœur's language, then, Conradie is concerned with explanation, the interpretive activity which draws out the similarities and differences between the text and the context in which it is read, and seeks to make plain the various influences upon interpretation that help to construct these connections.

Thus Conradie assumes that the task of the interpreter is to appropriate the biblical text for their own context. An ecological reading of the Bible is determined, from the very beginning, by the fact that it is specifically an ecological reading. Thus, it is not simply the reading of the text that determines its meaning but the appropriation of the text, the

⁴⁹ Stiver, *Theology After Ricœur*, p. 64.

reading of the text for a particular context and purpose. It is in this process specifically that Conradie is interested:

“Indeed, one of the most intriguing aspects of theological interpretation is the very possibility of relating biblical texts in all their plurality and ambiguity with an equally complex contemporary context. It is quite remarkable that one would even dare to do that. Yet, that is precisely the task at hand, for example in any sermon, in Christian education and in moral instruction somehow derived from the Bible.”⁵⁰

Conradie’s hermeneutical investigations aim to make clear the assumptions and decisions involved in the relating of biblical texts to a contemporary context. To that end he offers this diagram of the elements which must be attended to in the process of interpretation and their relation to one another:

This diagram has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons. It may be found in:

Ernst Conradie, ‘What on Earth is an Ecological Hermeneutics? Some Broad Parameters’, in David G. Horrell et al, (eds.), *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), pp. 295-314 (p. 299).

Thus the interpretive process must attend to the context in which the text was written (a) and the various literary features of the text itself (b). It must then recognize that previous readings of the text have

⁵⁰ Ernst Conradie, ‘What on Earth is an Ecological Hermeneutics? Some Broad Parameters’, in David G. Horrell et al, (eds.), *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), pp. 295-314 (p. 300).

generated a complex tradition of interpretation, including creeds, confessions, liturgies and practices (c). The particular act of reading the text (d) is a circular movement of appropriation and re-appropriation (recalling Ricœur's continual cycle of naivety to second naivety). This appropriation of the text is influenced by the rhetorical context of the interpretation (e) and the contemporary context in which the act is undertaken (f). Finally, all of these factors are influenced by sets of embedded values which are not self evident but are hidden from the consciousness (g).

In the appropriation of the text the reader makes imaginative links between their context and the text. In order to facilitate this, Conradie argues, doctrinal constructs are employed. These are models for understanding the text, preexisting ways of reading the text and understanding its relevance to the present (Conradie gives examples of doctrinal constructs such as justification by faith, atonement, liberation, the teachings of the *magisterium* and the creeds). Conradie writes: "They are not derived directly from the Biblical texts or from the contemporary world, but are precisely the product of previous attempts to construct a relationship between text, tradition and context."⁵¹

Conradie believes that interpretation of scripture does not occur without the use of these constructs. They should not, therefore, be seen as distorting the text but rather as necessary to its appropriation and therefore to its conveying meaning at all. Doctrinal constructs are, however, susceptible to the ideological distortion that underlies all interpretation and, therefore, must be subject to suspicion. In this we see a reflection of the conclusions made in light of our consideration of Ricœur. Suspicion is necessary to ensure the transparency of the interpretive process, that doctrinal constructs are facilitating a productive moment of

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 301.

understanding rather than distorting the outcome towards hidden interests.

In the light of this understanding of the interpretive process, Conradie is critical of the Earth Bible team. He argues that their ecojustice principles amount to a set of doctrinal constructs and believes that they have created a 'small dogmatics'. Conradie recognises their desire to appeal to an audience wider than Jewish and Christian readers of scripture but believes that their approach is problematic: "However, in the hope to find a wider appeal, it curiously abandons the attempt to be persuasive within the traditions that have kept the reading of these texts alive."⁵²

Assuming that offering persuasive readings to Christians is central to an ecological hermeneutic, Conradie suggests that doctrinal constructs from within a broad and ecumenical Christian tradition should be employed. This would not result in a single master construct but a series of interacting constructs: "What is required here is perhaps not a single category but a cluster of such constructs, a box full of tools that may be used wherever helpful."⁵³ These constructs will achieve the relating of the biblical texts, the tradition to which they gave rise, the environmental context in which we are situated and the ethical questions that it raises. In this way Conradie believes an ecological hermeneutic can be constructed which will "do justice both to the rich plurality within the biblical texts and the contemporary demands of ecojustice and sustainability".⁵⁴

Conradie's pattern for ecological readings of scripture, it seems to me, incorporates the elements of reading that we have already discussed. He allows for a fusion of horizons, a generation of meaning which occurs in the encounter between text and reader. He also includes a hermeneutic of suspicion, a careful attempt to make evident all the factors influencing

⁵² Ibid. p. 309.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 311.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 309.

interpretation. He adds to this the concept of doctrinal constructs, the conviction that a meaningful reading is achieved with the aid of preexisting sets of understandings which are themselves formed in previous interactions between the text and the reader's context and concerns.

Thus Conradie encourages hermeneutical reflection upon ecological readings of the Bible which makes evident all of the factors involved and their relation to one another. Recalling both our discussion of interpretive horizons and the hermeneutic of suspicion we note Conradie's scheme both understands the importance of critical reflection upon the elements of an interpretation which influence its outcome and displays faith in the possibility of readings which generate meaning positive for ecological ethics. Doctrinal constructs help to bridge a gap between the text and the context in which they are read but this is not to say that they distort the text. Rather, if critical attention is paid to the way that they function they make the text able to speak to contemporary problems.

The critical awareness demanded by Conradie is, it seems to me, essential to a successful ecological hermeneutic and I share his conviction that it will help to create ecologically beneficial interpretations of scripture. The question which must now be asked, however, is whether rigorous and honest criticism is enough, in itself, to secure the outcome of interpretation. Can hermeneutical procedure guarantee the veracity and value of an interpretation?

The implication of Conradie's argument is that once one has become fully aware of the many and various factors influencing interpretation one can achieve a certain sense of objectivity in that all of the possible ways in which an interpretation can be distorted have been identified and dealt with. Against such certainty it is important to acknowledge the extent to which, in recent decades, Poststructuralist thought has challenged such confidence. In particular this movement has

understood that the meaning found in texts and readings of texts cannot be separated from the language which conveys those meanings. The ways in which language conveys meaning, and the extent to which this does and does not secure that meaning, has called into question the extent to which an interpretation can have any objective grounding.

Crucial for this development is the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure who criticised the idea that language worked by naming things, that signs named pre-existing ideas. Instead Saussure divided the sign into a signifier (the sound image) and the signified (the concept) and argued that “the two elements are intimately united, and each recalls the other”.⁵⁵ Therefore, since the sign does not refer to an external signified but is the unity of signifier and signified, the nature of the sign is arbitrary. There is no fixed or inevitable reason for any particular sign, any particular unity of signifier and signified, other than their being bound up together as used in language. Its meaning is found in its difference from other signs.

Saussure uses the example of a five Franc piece which can be understood in terms of its difference from a dissimilar item that it may be exchanged for, bread, for example, or in terms of its difference from a similar item that it may be compared to, a one Franc piece, for example. “In the same way a word may be exchanged for something dissimilar, an idea; besides, it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word.”⁵⁶ This leads Saussure to claim that

“in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds which existed before the

⁵⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Owen, 1960), p. 66.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 115.

linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences which have issued from the system.”⁵⁷

The concepts which sounds refer to can only be grasped within the linguistic system and that system is marked by difference.

This understanding of the sign was taken up and developed by Jacques Derrida as he argues that not only is language a system of differences but all reality is constituted by difference. He argues that Saussure is guilty of phonocentrism, of prioritising speech over writing. Saussure assumes that speaking is somehow more basic than writing and that writing represents the absence of the author, leaving the reader with the task of negotiating the text in order to discover the author, a task which is never complete. Derrida believes that the sense of direct access to the speaker’s mind, the sense of presence which speech grants, is itself an illusion.

This alternative view is a challenge to the notion that writing is dependent on speech and that speech is a direct expression of an idea, of the signified. Rather, the signified is as unstable as the signifier, as Saussure’s critique ought to show, and the signified is only comprehensible in terms of its difference from every other signified. This means that the signified is never finally present; we find that a signifier only defers the presence of the final signified. Interpretation is therefore an ongoing negotiation between reader and text in which every step towards a completed and secure reading only generates new instabilities. There is nothing built into the structure of the interpretive act which guarantees its final outcome since every move to take hold of the final signified generates further differences between that goal and the attempts to express it.

Therefore, there is only “a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 120.

a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the dominion and play of signification infinitely.”⁵⁸ Finally there is no real presence of a transcendental signified but only the trace of what it is not. Derrida calls this absence of the signified ‘writing’. “Discontinuity, delay, heterogeneity, and alterity already were working upon the voice, producing it from its first breath as a system of differential traces, that is as writing before the letter.”⁵⁹

If this is the case, then it calls into doubt the project of dissecting a text to find the reality behind it, a move we have already criticised in our discussion of Santmire. Thus we reaffirm the critique of Roland Barthes. Since Barthes would have us abandon the concept of the author he suggests that we instead understand a text as

“a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original; the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture... the writer can only imitate an ever anterior, never original gesture; his sole power is to mingle writings, to counter some by others, so as never to rely on just one; if he seeks to *express himself*, at least he knows that the interior ‘thing’ he claims to ‘translate’ is itself no more than a ready made lexicon, whose words can only be explained through other words, and this *ad infinitum*.”⁶⁰

The reader is in fact ever engaged in an ongoing play of multiple writings.

The endlessness of interpretation also calls into question the entire attempt to move through a critical phase of the interpretive act towards a final and secured generation of meaning. This challenges the extent to which a Ricœurian introduction of suspicion can purify an interpretation. Thus Conradie’s confidence in the interpreter’s capacity to identify and account for every influence upon interpretation is threatened. The ongoing multiplicity of interpretation undermines the movement from a naïve

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (eds.), *Critical Theory Since Plato*, 3rd edition (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2005), pp. 1206-15 (p. 1207).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 1209.

⁶⁰ Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, p. 151.

position, in which we do not know the influences upon our reading, toward an enlightened position, in which the outcome of interpretation is secured in our knowledge of the process by which it has arisen.

Thus John Milbank argues that such a secured process is illusory. In a discussion of Ricœur he argues that there is no ideal 'inner' moment where an act of interpretation may be completed. The condition of a written text is that the reality of the text exists only in the way in which the syntactic elements of the text behave towards one another and that the text therefore floats free of the 'reality' behind it.

"There only exist formal, structural means for the generation of sense and therefore to understand it is to encounter and recognize a formal structure. It is always a matter of 'articulation', or of showing which element acts on which other and in what way. Therefore 'meaning' is not a precious pearl snatched from levels beneath the swirling flux of causal motion."⁶¹

To talk of meaning, he therefore argues, is to talk of movement, of the way in which the significance of things exist in their relationship to other things. This relating of textual elements is not a process which can be completed, it is not possible to retrieve and separate the product of interpretation from the process itself. Rather, there is no bird's-eye view of interpretation; there is no hovering above the process and no snatching of meaning from its troubled waters. Once begun reading never ends and is never finally secured. No amount of suspicion can purge interpretation of the unknown quantities which afflict it since these unknowns are the conditions of language itself and there is no meaning outside of them.

Milbank may not give enough credit to the extent to which interpretation is, for Ricœur too, always a continuing process, demanding constant critical attention. For Conradie also, the appropriation and re-appropriation of a text is a continuing spiral. Yet Milbank's argument

⁶¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 266.

makes plain the way that the question of the foundation of interpretation presses upon Conradie's scheme. If meaning is, due to its linguistic conditions, always insecure then no ultimate security is to be found in the discovery and positioning of the factors which affect interpretation.

Conradie does not sufficiently acknowledge the impossibility of the task. Rather he trusts the capacity of the reader to remain in control of interpretation. He ascribes far sightedness to the enlightened interpreter, illustrated by his bird's-eye view diagram of the entire interpretive process. Though there is an emphasis upon the hidden influences upon interpretation, this emphasis is directed towards exposing such influences. Once fully observed and described the interpreter may regain their authority as master of the process.

This is a view of interpreter as a discrete sovereign entity. More than this, since this particular interpretive operation is directed towards ethics and since it involves the purging of the interpretive process – since it seeks to identify and eliminate those influences upon interpretation which are deemed to be detrimental – the act of interpretation itself becomes virtuous. Thus the interpreter is not only far sighted but good and powerful as this act of self aware interpretation overcomes all negative and destructive influences at every stage of the interpretive process and achieves a pure and generative appropriation of the text. The key to the interpreter's power to achieve this is their capacity to employ their hermeneutical skills and secure the interpretive process against misdirection.

In contrast to this, attention to the way in which language functions to convey meaning suggests that there can be no foundational trust in the power of the process to secure interpretation. There can be no human power, of any magnitude, strong enough to guarantee truth. We seem to have come, therefore, to the point of abandoning any attempt to ground our interpretation in any kind of certainty whatever. We are unable to

achieve the ideal post-critical moment. Meaning may be produced but it will not be secured and final. Must we therefore conclude that critical attempts to improve the process of interpretation are altogether worthless?

I do not believe this to be the case. The critical appreciation of recent ecological hermeneutics which I have undertaken has suggested a complex and nuanced way of deducing what may be happening in any particular act of interpretation. This is important because it allows us to begin to discuss how our interpretations are formed. We have also concluded, however, that we cannot place any faith in these critical methods to secure the outcome. This does not mean that they are worthless but it does mean that their worth must be grounded in some other foundation of truth. So long as critical method is our sole ground for the certainty of the truth of our interpretations they will collapse under the weight of that responsibility. If, however, we can find some other ground to take that weight then they can be freed to do the work that they are capable of – the work of making the interpretive process transparent. Method cannot be the ground of truth but it can clear the way to make the truth easier to behold.

Mysticism and Meta-hermeneutics

Foundation

Our discussion of recent ecological strategies for reading scripture has led us to conclude that hermeneutics cannot, in itself, secure interpretation. The question we must now turn to concerns whether one can make any positive claims at all about the texts and, more importantly, the reality to which they refer (or defer); can there be only deconstruction? It seems that it is *reconstruction* that is so badly needed: a reconstruction of our way of

thinking about the Earth, a reconstruction of faith, a social and political reconstruction, a reconstruction, ultimately, of the physical structures and tools through which we exploit the Earth's resources. If, then, it is the case that a poststructuralist understanding of the text removes any foundation for an instructive ecological reading, my entire project will be in serious trouble.

It is crucial therefore that though I would accept a Poststructuralist criticism of the attempt to secure the validity of an interpretation in the interpretive process itself I do not accept its claim that there can be no security of interpretation at all. Before outlining how I believe it is possible to ground interpretation it is first necessary to deny the ultimate force of the poststructuralist argument. This is possible, as John Milbank argues, because the non-foundationalism in which Poststructuralism results is, in the final analysis, profoundly nihilistic. That is to say that, although Poststructuralism denies that there can be any sustaining *mythos* in which meaning is secured, Poststructuralism itself is grounded in a pessimistic *mythos*. If we may criticise Conradie for his trust in the certainty of critical method then we may also criticise Poststructuralism for its trust in the uncertainty of the linguistic conditions of meaning.

This point is succinctly put by Gerard Loughlin, following Milbank: "The chief problem with textualist theology is that it is not textualist enough. It tells us that there are only stories, but it tends to obscure the fact that in that case, textualism is also only a story; and it tends to obscure the fact that it is a nihilist and not a Christian story."⁶² In this nihilist story, Milbank argues, "no universals are ascribed to human society save one: that it is always a field of warfare. And yet this universal history of military manoeuvres is also to be regarded as in some sense liberating."⁶³

⁶² Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 17.

⁶³ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 282.

This requires nihilism to explain the presence of Christianity because Christianity, as Nietzsche himself understood, “is the total inversion of any heroic identity of virtue with strength, achievement or conquest. It celebrates dependency and claims to refuse violence.”⁶⁴ It is not possible, Milbank believes, to dismiss the significance of this realisation, and Christianity offers the genuine possibility of a peaceable kingdom and the possibility that violence is an intrusion. Thus, the prospect of a transcendent reality other than difference, the prospect of God, beyond the text of Scripture and beyond all the various readings and writings involved in its interpretation, opens up.

Common to the thinkers who have thus far assisted me in my attempt to construct a biblical hermeneutic is a sense that human understanding requires movement, involves the orientation of the self towards new possibilities of understanding. This may occur in the meeting of one’s own horizon with a new horizon, in the passing of one’s interpretations through the rigours of critical suspicion or through the constant appropriation and re-appropriation of texts as they are brought into conversation with doctrinal constructs. Even a poststructuralist understanding of interpretation is characterised by movement, albeit a chaotic and disordered movement.

Within the Christian tradition it has also been understood that to read the Bible is to engage in movement. This movement, however, is not primarily a movement of human understanding. Rather the Bible itself is a witness to the movement of divine will, to God’s movement towards God’s world. Thus Christian theology understands the Bible primarily as revelation and this means that the task of reading scripture is to do with responding to meaning which is living and directed towards us. It is not a construction of meaning from interaction with a source which is ultimately inert. Revelation is not something which we construct or even

⁶⁴ Ibid, 286

discover by virtue of our own interpretive process or hermeneutical practice. Rather, it is God's presentation of God's self to us in the way in which God wills to reveal God's self. Thus revelation is not an object, it is not a commodity which can be discovered and possessed.

Yet this does not mean that revelation is something which we passively undergo, a *fait accompli* in which information about God is presented for our acceptance. Rather, revelation must be actively grasped; it must be taken hold of in living reception. Revelation is a gift which requires both the initiative of God and the participation, by grace, of the human person. As John Montag argues,

“[revelation] is not a supplementary packet of information about ‘facts’ which are around the bend, as it were, from rational comprehension or physical observation – but which none the less factor into our ultimate happiness. Revelation is received as a gift; but it does not help to imagine a ‘revelation’ prior to the reception, as if already set aside by God before his giving it and our taking it in.”⁶⁵

Montag is, in fact, referring to the concept of revelation as it appears in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. For Thomas, revelation must be understood in the context of the ‘double movement’, the movement of God towards us and the reciprocal movement which we are given towards God. This is not simply the passing of some item of information from God's possession to ours; rather, to receive revelation is to begin to participate in the life of God. The purpose of scripture, then, is to enable knowledge of God which is not objective or subjective but is a participation in God's knowledge of God's self which is given by grace.

Scripture leads the reader into a beatific union with God, which is the *telos* of not only human beings but, as I shall later argue, all created things. Thus we are beginning to speak of a reading of scripture which

⁶⁵ John Montag SJ. ‘Revelation: The False Legacy of Suárez’ in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.) *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 38-63 (p. 43).

aims for something which is beyond the capacity of mere hermeneutics. The revelation of God is not guaranteed by method of any kind, even a method which has abandoned any claim to objectivity. Self-awareness is undoubtedly an essential quality in any interpreter of Scripture yet self-awareness and intellectual honesty, no matter how rigorous, cannot of themselves achieve the communication of God's self to God's people. Rather, God's revelation is guaranteed by and grounded in God's will.

This understanding of reading Scripture, then, is not Poststructuralist; there really is an object of enquiry independent of the reader. Yet the God who is the object of enquiry for the reader of Scripture is not the measured and catalogued object of modern criticism. It is precisely because God is completely other that the post-modern suspicion of objectivism is so crucial. Yet the reader is not left simply to fill the role of the passive subject of the divine author's address since God's revelation is given by grace. It is not the case that the reader of Scripture has no role to play in the process of understanding. As I have said it is a double movement – both of God towards God's world and of the person towards God.

How should the human part of this movement be characterised? Rowan Williams argues that

“precisely because understanding involves a relation and a *movement* of the subject towards something – involves what modern Thomists usually call ‘intentionality’ – it belongs with will; and will has to do essentially with desire, approbation, valuation, all elements comprised in the idea of love.”⁶⁶

It is in desire for God that our own movement towards God, our response to God's movement towards us, begins. Thus Christian reception of revelation is something rather different to a simple apprehension of

⁶⁶ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), p. 125.

meaning. It involves the surrender of the self to the mystery which confronts it in the revelation of God.

The Christian reader of Scripture is captivated by the possibility which it presents, by the opportunity to root one's understanding not in the achievements of human thought but in the infinite mystery of God's being. Thus Williams argues, "It has been rightly said that the notion of love, *caritas*, is the great unifying theme of the *Summa Theologiae*; and it is so because it is a theme that makes possible the bridging of that gulf between the Creator and finite reality which is Aquinas' purpose."⁶⁷ The Christian reader of Scripture is a reader who is confronted by love and finds that their desires are being reshaped by that love. To speak of this reshaping of desire is to speak of something more than the making of meaning or achievement of understanding. God's revelation has a purpose; it seeks to unite humanity with God. For the Christian, to read Scripture is to respond to revelation and is, therefore, to find one's self turned toward God in love. Scripture's true purpose, therefore, is to play its part in the salvation of the world.

Yet this drawing of the self into the depths of God's love is emphatically not an abandoning of the faculties of the human mind. This movement towards God, which is an act of human will, drawn by love, is made possible by virtue of the intellect. Aquinas' understanding of *intellectus* however should not be understood as referring to a capacity to know in a detached and objective fashion. We are not dealing here with the Cartesian discrete self, free to approach its object in the confidence of its own independence. Rather, to know an object is to have some participation in that object. "*Intellectus*, then, means 'understanding' in a very comprehensive sense; and it involves a genuine union of knower and known correlative to the union of lover and beloved."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid. 124.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 125.

For Thomas, *intellectus* is the God-given capacity of our rational souls to be turned actively toward the God who created them. It is our uniquely human way of being turned actively in our particularity towards the universal God in such a way that particularity is not lost but fulfilled in the knowledge of God. Understanding is intellectual because it is not only physical but involves our experiences and our desires, intellectual because it does not find us overwhelmed by these particularities but occurs through our capacity to cohere them into meaning.

This is a radically optimistic notion of reading. It is optimistic in that it trusts in God as the final guarantor of interpretation but also optimistic in that it trusts that the final outcome of reading will be union with God. Thus we boldly claim that Christian reading of Scripture can finally achieve that for which hermeneutics strives, not just an understanding of how meaning is made but a confidence that that meaning really is utterly and finally meaningful. With Thomas, we trust that God makes possible the journey of our particular being into universal being. Ultimately we are not alone because, as Williams states, "understanding culminates in the union of knower and object, and this is an occasion of 'delight'; and it begins because of a willed search, a 'feeling around' for an adequate object, an *appetito*, a desire to be completed by an *other*".⁶⁹ Thus understanding is truly an ecstatic experience, it comprises being drawn out of one's self, and understanding is finally and fundamentally mystical.

It follows from this, from the mystical character of understanding, that the usual categories of certainty and uncertainty in which hermeneutics trades ultimately lose their currency, or at least their centrality. Though the process of understanding moves through the realm of the intellect, and thus finds a place for all of the hermeneutical strategy discussed above, it ultimately surpasses itself. The end of understanding is

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 127.

what Denys Turner calls 'the darkness of God'. Christian mystical writers, Turner argues, from Augustine to John of the Cross, describe a practice that is both inward, as the mind meditates upon the things of God, and one of ascent, as the soul journeys into God. "And it was commonly agreed that as the soul ascended to God it would approach a source of light which, being too bright for its powers of reception, would cause in it profound darkness."⁷⁰

This image of a light so bright that it blinds is derived from Plato's allegory of the cave but it was also widely applied to Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai, thus reading that narrative as an allegory of the soul's ascent to God. Turner quotes an illustrative passage from Gregory of Nyssa: "when, therefore, Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that is when he had then come to know what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension, for the text says, *Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.*"⁷¹ Thus the soul is simply overwhelmed by the knowledge of God and confronted with darkness, "a darkness of knowledge deeper than any which is the darkness of ignorance. The price of the pure contemplation of the light is therefore darkness... but not the darkness of the absence of light, rather of its excess – therefore a 'luminous darkness'."⁷²

Thus Christian reading of Scripture does not desire certainty in a critical, foundational sense. Yet neither can it involve uncertainty in a post-modern, non-foundationalist sense. Rather it strains towards the certainty of the complete loss of any certainty grounded in human faculties. Criticism finally gives way to acceptance of the knowledge that God's ways are not our ways and that God's thoughts are not our thoughts. And yet God invites us to participate in God's self in such a way that we are granted the most radical kind of certainty, a certainty in the

⁷⁰ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

infinite goodness, the unshakable ground, the complete healing and the captivating beauty of God.

What this means for ecological ethics is that Scripture does not contain answers to environmental questions; it doesn't even contain 'resources' for a positive Christian attitude towards the environment. Our objective in turning to the Bible is not to comb this ancient text for forgotten wisdom or even to construct a new way of reading that will allow the Bible to speak afresh today. To read the Bible as Christian Scripture is to stand before, and be drawn into, the overwhelming darkness of God. We must therefore abandon the idea that interpretation can be secured by our critical methods. Finally, whatever hermeneutical observations need to be made concerning the way in which reading appropriates meaning of texts, we do not shape Scripture by our own will but in our attempt to respond to the will of God the meaning of Scripture is appropriated. Hopefully it is clear that this is to say something more complicated than 'we ought to believe what the Bible tells us'. The Scripture confronts us with the possibility of mystical union with God; it challenges us to ecstasy, to step out of our selves.

The argument I am making, therefore, is not for hermeneutics. Rather I suggest that hermeneutics must be grounded in a deeper theological understanding of the way that God reveals Godself to the world. I am not proposing a way of reading or a theory of how the biblical text works but rather what might be called meta-hermeneutics. This meta-hermeneutics understands understanding as movement. This movement begins with God's own movement towards the world and continues as the world is caught up in a corresponding movement towards God. The reader is caught up in this movement by will and desire but this is also to say that they are caught up in an intellectual movement. This intellectual movement, however, is not a movement that leads from question to answer but a movement of the rational soul towards God.

What is at stake, therefore, is the ultimate ground in which interpretation of Scripture is based. It must come from a confidence in the possibility of encountering God and allowing ourselves to be shaped by God's will. Yet this should not lead us to imagine that the interpretive process is fixed and finalised, that we now have a map to follow to get us from our own context to the truth of God. Our interpretations are secure in as much as they rest in God's truth. Since this truth cannot be contained or owned, however, Christian interpretation is marked by a kind of holy insecurity. To interpret is to trust God but to trust God is to know that the task of self-reflection and humble reappraisal of one's own understanding is never complete. Thus we have an understanding of reading which is entirely foundationalist, in that it secures interpretation upon the work of God, and yet non-foundationalist in the sense that the reader is continually called to recognise that their footing is not as sure as they thought it was.

Negotiation

Having outlined what I believe to be the mystical foundation of Christian reading of Scripture, we may proceed to consider the particular practical characteristics that a reading of this nature will display. The first point which must be made is that that a mystical understanding of reading implies a reading which takes place within and is affected by the context of the reader. That is to say that a mystical reading is not a reading which has abandoned the various responsibilities discussed above. The movement which God grants us towards Godself is not a movement away from the material world; it is not a journey into the sacred heavens retreating from the secular earth. A mystical understanding of Scripture is not one which abandons responsibility to the world.

Mark A. McIntosh argues that mysticism was originally concerned with the whole community and that the modern understanding of mysticism as an individualistic journey into the self has its roots in the late medieval period. Thus, McIntosh writes, “spirituality as the transformation and discovery of the self always happens in encounter, it is an activity stirred up and sustained by the other who calls one out of one’s ‘self’ and into the truth of one’s mission in life, out of provisionality and into the adventure of incarnation”.⁷³ Thus, to orient oneself towards God is to orient oneself toward that to which God is oriented, God’s creation.

The possibility which is discerned within Scripture is not an individualistic union with God but a participation in all of creation’s union with God. This means that there is something fundamentally communal about mystical reading:

“What is mystical is not the inner experience of the Christian but the hidden meaning and transformative understanding discovered in Christ...The hidden mystery of God’s plan to re-unite creation with God’s own existence is embodied in Christ, discerned in the Scriptures and sacramentally enacted in the Eucharistic community.”⁷⁴

The transformation of the reader that good interpretation of Scripture requires involves an opening of the self which originates from God but occurs through all that is other to the self.

We do not read alone, therefore, but in communion with others. As we shall see in the following chapters, the whole world is characterised by a continual and active orientation towards God. Our own attempt to turn to God, therefore, occurs not merely alongside but within creation’s movement. A mystical understanding of Scripture points towards acts of reading which are open to, challenged by and positioned within the life of

⁷³ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 43.

the whole creation. In other words, a Christian reading of Scripture is a negotiation which involves the non-human world and this is already the case *before* we have begun to consider the ways in which readings of Scripture may relate to ecological issues.

Thus the task of interpretation is to respond to the movement of God towards God's creation, within the movement of the whole creation towards God. This is an act of faith which requires a constant attempt to position all of the elements of our context, our own experiences, traditions and ideas, such that they find their meaning in the movement of God towards God's creation. We might call this ongoing task of interpretation 'negotiation' in that it seeks to situate and continually resituate all the aspects of interpretation in relation to God and, in doing so, in relation to one another. What is created by this negotiation is referred to by Mike Higton as a 'settlement'.⁷⁵ This term is particularly useful since it allows Higton to use it both in reference to the process and the result.

A process of settlement is one in which the various elements which press and make claims upon reading must be attended to and situated. It is also a process which always begins in the middle of the readings and commitments that have already been made. It is, therefore, "a process of *ongoing, iterative negotiation*, and nothing can tell you in advance how deep the reworking of what exists of your layout so far will need to be, in pursuit of full coherence".⁷⁶ A finished settlement is the placing of the elements pressing upon one's interpretation. Such a reading relates these elements to one another so as to form a coherent whole. It is a "workable arrangement in which all the presently available pieces have been placed together."⁷⁷ This arrangement is not a final form. Rather, it is contingent and temporary, remaining in place until it is shown to be failing to do justice to one of its elements or to have overlooked something.

⁷⁵ Mike Higton, 'Response to Dan Hardy', paper given to the American Academy of Religion, 2008, author's italics.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

This process of negotiation which characterises the reading of Scripture is complex and extensive. In the case of an ecological reading of Scripture it will include the various commitments and responsibilities and, naturally, each of these elements will be positioned differently in different readings. I have, in my introduction, outlined some of the commitments which will be central to my ecological readings of Scripture and the following chapters will show how these commitments are placed in relation to one another. For the present, however, it is important to provide a few words on what I believe to be the overarching characteristics of a good negotiation of the meaning of Scripture, of what general commitments are likely to produce a satisfactory settlement.

The first point to be made is that the negotiation which characterises interpretation must have a fundamentally narrative characteristic. As we have argued, there is no interpretation of reality that can be guaranteed by a method which exists independent of that reality. No purifying suspicion or mediating construct can account for the fact that we have no possibility of stepping away from what we encounter to judge it independently. For this reason John Milbank argues that narration is the fundamental category for human meaning making. It is in placing experiences in relationship to one another, such that they cohere into a narrative, that sense is made out of them.

This means, according to Milbank, that there are not “meanings” which “hover like ectoplasm over the surface of material reality”.⁷⁸ Rather, the narrative ordering of reality that generates meaning ensures that meaning cannot be separated from reality. Thus reading Scripture requires a narrative negotiation in which the various elements of text and context must be related to one another despite their frequent strangeness and lack of coherence. To read a text, Milbank argues, is to observe the “loose and complex knot of resistance” to reading which the text offers and to begin

⁷⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 267.

to unpick this knot. This is a task which can never be completed and one never reaches the end of the process of unpicking.

Thus the process of reading is an attempt to position all the elements of interpretation such that they form a coherent narrative. This includes finding a place for the critical suspicion which was discussed above. Milbank argues that

“dealing with suspicion now becomes a matter of complex narrative negotiations (retelling the ecclesial story so as to accept some external criticisms, now made into self-criticisms, and to rebut others) rather than of concessions made at one level to a source of critique which remains external to theology, but made to allow us better to man the impregnable citadel of ‘religious meaning’, poised precariously upon the granite outcrop of ‘the secular’.”⁷⁹

The second point I wish to make is that, as well as understanding that the negotiation of reading Scripture has a narrative form. We should understand this narrative reading to be about Christ. This is important because it explains how the complex process of negotiating settlements relates to the fact that reading Scripture draws us into union with God. God’s movement towards the world culminates and is fulfilled in Christ, thus to be drawn into God is to be drawn in through Christ. This means that our access to God is through the particular history of the living person of Christ and his life and death in first century Palestine. Thus to read the Scriptures mystically is to be drawn into the narrative of God’s self revelation in the person of Christ. Each interpretation, then, is a narrative settlement in which the story of Christ is told again for the context in which the reading takes place.

Such a reading assumes that Christ is, in fact, the centre of Scripture and that the Bible should be read as, primarily, a narrative about Christ. So George Lindbeck comments: “The stories in their narrative function

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 268.

unsubstitutably identify and characterise a particular person as the summation of Israel's history and as the unsurpassable and irreplaceable clue to who and what the God of Israel and the universe is."⁸⁰ Thus the whole process of narrative negotiation and settlement seeks to read Scripture such that the gospel accounts of Christ's life become the central factor in the construction of interpretations.

To read for the Christ-narrative in the text, however, is not to abandon all responsibility to the text. In fact, Hans Frei believed that it was in the 'eclipse of biblical narrative' that theology had lost sight of its responsibility to the text. He argued that, through the development of hermeneutics during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, "the confusion of history-likeness (literal meaning) and history (ostensive reference), and the hermeneutical reduction of the former to an aspect of the latter, meant that one lacked the distinctive category and the appropriate interpretive procedure for understanding... the high significance of the literal, narrative shape of the stories for their meaning".⁸¹

Thus Frei called for greater attention to the narrative character of the gospels. The gospel narratives should stand as that which cannot be simply systematised or organised. A Christian reading of Scripture makes Christ the irreducible centre and culmination of the narrative. The gospel narratives have a resilience which requires the Christian reader to pay close attention to their particular narrative character. A reading of Scripture which seeks to do justice to this narrative can claim to be responsible to the text.

Thus there is a sense in which the story of Christ calls us to tell our own narratives in relation to it, rather than the other way round. We cannot, therefore, overstate the extent to which the negotiation of

⁸⁰ George Lindbeck, 'The Story-Shaped Church', in Stephen Fowl (ed.) *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 39-52 (p. 41).

⁸¹ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 12.

interpretation, the making of settlements, carries implications for the entire breadth and depth of created existence; every story must be encompassed in Christ's story. Thus Gerard Loughlin argues that the story of Christ is an all encompassing narrative, the narrative which consumes the world. As such, it is not simply our individual stories which must be told in the light of Christ's story, but our corporate story, the Church's story.

The third point to be made, then, is that retelling of Christ's story is an unavoidably ecclesial activity, undertaken within the context of the Church and the Church's context in the world. The Christian community reads the narrative but that narrative also initiates and sustains the community. "The Church *is* its story but that story is shaped by the story of Christ."⁸² It is God's coming in Christ which institutes the community and the community's reading of Scripture. Loughlin discerns Christ's hand held out to the reader through Scripture offering participation in a narrative. A Christian reading of Scripture is not only one which reads the text as a narrative about Christ but it is a reading with and through Christ and so a participation in that narrative. This calls for Christian reading to be radically open to Christ and to the world to which Christ is given.

Thus, reading of scripture is responsible to the context and community in which it is read. This responsibility in reading, however, should not be understood as a responsibility to a voice or perspective outside of the story of Christ. Following Milbank's rejection of the secular, there are no authorities outside of the Christ narrative which must be deferred to or placated. Rather, it is Christ to whom the readings must be responsible. Yet Christ is marked by his abandonment of himself for the sake of others. He is, as Bonhoeffer said, "the man for others". The reader who situates themselves within the Christ narrative finds themselves drawn out of themselves toward the other and a Christian reading of

⁸² Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, p. 85.

Scripture is responsible to the voices of others because it is in those voices that the voice of Christ is heard.

Christ identifies with the outsider and this being the case, and Scripture being a narrative in which Christ is found, then reading Scripture ought to be a journey to the margins. Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones consider this at length in their book *Reading in Communion* and argue that scripture itself should be understood to be an outsider.

“To read Scripture over-against ourselves is to allow it to challenge our presuppositions and established interpretations. To allow Scripture to be an outsider is to recognise that this side of the Kingdom our interpretations are provisional, always open to revision... The goal of seeing Scripture as an outsider is the maintenance of interpretive humility and openness to the voice of hearing Scripture afresh.”⁸³

This is not simply to say that we ought to be open to the possibility of revising our interpretations but that we should expect it to happen. Our flawed and sinful characters will inevitably cause misunderstandings and misuse of Scripture and a failure to hear what God is saying to us. On the other hand the presence of Christ is such a disruption of the status quo, such a fundamental challenge to the way things are, that if individuals and community are not constantly moved to revise their readings of Scripture we might wonder to what extent Christ is really present. Despite the criticisms made above, I believe that Habel and the other writers in the Earth Bible team have made an important move in pressing the importance of listening to and reading for the voice of Earth. I do not believe that this need be in tension with the way of reading that I have been outlining, for a Christian reading of Scripture will always propel the reader to the edges of the human community and, as is so important for the present challenge, beyond it.

⁸³ Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion* (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 112.

It may seem dangerous to suggest that Christian readings have no ultimate responsibility to any claim other than Christ's and it could lead – and, in the past, certainly has led – to terrible acts of discrimination and violence towards others. However, if Christ's presence in the other is taken seriously it will mean that the voices of others are not merely accommodated but become important elements of reading. Thus the very narrative that situates the Christian practice of reading is one that calls us to look beyond our immediate context. A narrative negotiation is set in motion that will take us beyond ourselves and our expectations even as we follow the story of Christ.

The final point to be made is that the Church's narrative settlements retelling the story of Christ cannot be made outside of the stream of Christian tradition and without the help of Christian doctrine. That is to say that doctrinal tradition, diverse and conflicting as it may be, provides the inescapable framework of Christian interpretation even in cases when that interpretation is largely directed towards critique of the doctrinal tradition. Retellings of Christ's story, therefore, take place with the help of the 'deep grammar' of doctrinal tradition, as Lindbeck puts it.⁸⁴ Thus interpretations ought to be made with reference to doctrine and understanding their implications for doctrine.

It is important to understand, however, that this recognition of doctrinal tradition does not serve as the foundational certainty which I have argued should never characterise Christian reading of scripture. Thus Loughlin argues that a narrative understanding of interpretation does not require

“a third, ontological narrative which underwrites or legitimates the Church's story and contradicts nihilism. For that would not only ground theology in ontology (an absurdity). It would be unnecessary. The story that legitimates God's story – that says how

⁸⁴ Lindbeck, 'The Story Shaped Church', p. 47.

the world must be for God's story to be true – is, for faith, simply God's story."⁸⁵

We see again, then, the sense of uncertain certainty in God for which I argued above. It is, therefore, a way of reading that cannot be justified by the kind of arguments employed by modern criticism but also does not accept the nihilism which is the mark of non foundationalist criticism. Nevertheless, our narrative negotiations and settlements occur within our doctrinal tradition. This tradition is, therefore, not only the indispensable prejudices which give context to interpretation but also the points of stability which make a negotiation possible. In my case, these points of stability are the commitments outlined in the introduction. Thus I will not offer a reading, for example, which abandons the conviction that the world is created by God in freedom.

These stable points, of course, can function to the detriment of interpretation; we may become overly attached to unhealthy ideas which ultimately prevent our connection to God. Yet without them there can be no starting point for interpretation. It is, therefore, at this point that the hermeneutical strategies discussed above are important. We must approach interpretation with as much awareness as possible of these points of stability and how they function in our negotiations. We must also be open to the challenges which critical suspicion will present to these points.

Conclusion

The reading of scripture which follows in this thesis will, I hope, have four characteristics. It will have a narrative quality, in that it will attempt to place the claims it makes within a telling of the story of God's

⁸⁵ Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, p. 79.

redemption of the world; it will be Christological, in that it will understand God's story as culminating in Christ and assume that no theological claim has real content until it is situated within the story of Christ; it will be responsible to its context, in particular it will try to remain responsible to the non-human elements of God's creation; and it will be negotiated and articulated in terms of the doctrinal traditions in which I situate myself, in that my readings of the texts will seek to bring them into conversation with figures and elements of that tradition.

This last point is particularly significant for this thesis. It is my conviction that readings of scripture must be consummated in doctrinal claims and a corresponding belief that doctrine must not be cut loose from its responsibility to Scripture, that this thesis develops its particular characteristics. Thus the ideas which follow are generated in the encounter between Scripture and doctrine. However, I do not intend to lose sight of my claim that reading scripture is fundamentally a mystical journey into union with God.

If hermeneutics is concerned with the question of how human beings understand, then to read scripture is to transcend hermeneutics. For the final end of Christian reading is union with the very being of God, a union which is granted through the rational movement of the soul toward God but which opens into the abandonment of the self in God. Yet this abandonment of self is never the dissolution of self, it is not the loss of the particular combination of lived experience and reflection that constitute our self-understanding. Rather, it is the discovery that one's particularity is secured in God and the realization that this security means that the turning of one's self towards God ends in a broadening of vision and understanding which, though achieved entirely by the grace of God, is effected in and through one's own self.

Thus I would claim that the ultimate goal of Christian hermeneutics is to pass through understanding to a greater ignorance, to pursue

meaning until meaning itself gives way to mystical knowledge of God. The endless striving of human language, the frustration of our inability to adequately conceptualise and describe the complexity and intractability of our experience, is redeemed in the absolute communicativeness of God's Word. Thus the Christian reader is called and challenged to respond, not, finally, to understand or make meaning but to continually make God's story our story.

It is at this moment that our individual act of reading extends into an act of living in community. At this moment we are connected to every person who has ever read scripture and heard the same call, we must study their responses, attend to their successes and failures. At this moment we are connected to every person who is attempting to make their own response alongside us in the present, we must attend to their attempts and their ways of telling the story. And at this moment we are sent into the world, challenged to make our response in the midst of God's creation in all its beauty and pain. This is the final outcome of Christian reading of scripture: We take a journey beyond ourselves into the depths of the mystery of God and in doing so discover that it is only in God's self revelation in Christ that our identity can make sense. This discovery can only become real as it is lived in the context of the Church and the Church's constant struggle to maintain its identity and communicate its message in the world in which it finds itself.

It is my belief that the communal aspect of reading has implications wider than the human community. As I shall argue in the following chapters, we are intimately connected to God's entire creation. This being the case our readings take place within the entire created community. Our narrative negotiations and our settlements are already made in the context of the non-human world before we have considered problems of ecological ethics. The following three chapters, therefore, offer a reading of Scripture and a telling of a particular aspect of God's story which focuses

on the life and identity of the non-human world. In doing so I hope to show that the whole creation, human and non-human, are called to union with God.

Chapter 2

Introduction

As I stated in the introduction to this thesis, I am pursuing a doctrine of creation which is responsive to and supportive of action against environmental crisis, and I am doing so by drawing inspiration from scripture and by engaging in conversation with the Christian tradition. The previous chapter outlined my approach to reading biblical texts for this end. We may now proceed in the attempt to offer fruitful readings and construct such a doctrine of creation.⁸⁶ I undertake these readings as a particular person of Christian faith among many who have read the texts. In the context of these particular readings of the text the metaphor of conversation becomes central.

I intend to stage, as it were, a conversation between various texts or, rather, a series of conversations. This interpretive process begins with the biblical text itself and involves a conversation between that text and other texts contemporary to it; it is also carried out in consultation with the texts of modern commentators upon the ancient writings. The interpretive process then proceeds by bringing certain texts from the Christian tradition into the conversation. I describe my role in this process as the one 'staging' the conversation. That is to say that the texts do not belong to me and they are not mine to interpret however I wish. Part of my task as interpreter is to allow the texts to 'speak', to read in an open way that allows the texts to make their own particular impression upon my thoughts.

Yet it is not the case that I am simply an observer of this conversation. There is no access to the texts which bypasses my own

⁸⁶ Some of the ideas in this chapter appeared in an earlier form in Dominic Coad, 'Creation's Praise of God: A Proposal for a Theology of the Non-Human Creation', *Theology* 112: 867 (2009), pp. 181-189.

prejudices and assumptions. The conversation is, therefore, one in which my own ideas participate. This means that many other texts, many other ideas, desires, narratives and ideological constructions which are contained knowingly or unwittingly in my ideas colour the conversation from the start. In the conversation being started in this chapter I am making a deliberate decision to allow a certain set of ideas and understandings to play a particularly important function. These are my knowledge and understanding of the importance of good ecological practice in our current environmental context.

These concerns gain importance as the conversation proceeds until the conversation comes round to directly consider the situation in which I am writing. At this point the conversation becomes situated in the context for which it was initiated. It is in the interaction with the present situation that we may begin to see whether the conversation has produced anything of value. This process of interpretation does not, therefore, result in a claim to the discovery of a single true meaning of the biblical text. Rather, it is an imaginative and ongoing process of deepening thought. The relative success of this process is not judged against an independent standard of accuracy but in terms of the ability of the reading produced to stimulate rich new patterns of thought and action. Thus the final success or failure of the arguments of this thesis rests in the extent to which the Christian reader finds it to be a good and encouraging basis for faithful living within their environment.

The conversation which follows will focus upon a particular idea, a particular topic of discussion. The idea under discussion will be that creation praises God. The theme of creation's praise is a biblical one and is particularly prominent, as we shall see, in certain psalms. The theme of creation's praise is chosen to be the central conversation topic of this thesis because I believe that it can be developed in a number of ways which fulfil the aims outlined in my introduction. Firstly, it allows us to think in some

depth about the doctrine of creation before turning to its ethical implications. This discussion, therefore, will not aim to fashion an ethic as such but a dogmatic basis for an ethic. Secondly, it allows us to think in some depth about the non-human creation without immediately beginning a discussion about its relationship to humans. The theme of creation's praise encourages us to realise that the rest of creation exists, in a particular relationship to God, with or without our interference and help. Finally, and most importantly, it allows us to talk about God from the very beginning. Theology is, after all, discourse about God and, whilst the immediate focus of this thesis is the non-human world, any theology will quickly founder if it forgets that God is its true object.

These features of the topic are not presented as reasons which can show, in advance of the discussion, that the theme is a fruitful one. Rather, they are characteristics of the idea which will develop throughout the thesis. It is the exploration of the idea that will demonstrate that an approach of this kind works and can provide a rich basis for an environmental ethic. This is to say that the idea has potential but needs careful exploration and refinement. Thus the purpose of this chapter will be to develop this claim, testing and refining it in the belief that it can become a way of articulating a Christian doctrine of creation that can be a good basis for Christian practice towards the non-human world.

Important to this task is to find a way of talking of creation's praise that is not liable to be disregarded as simple anthropomorphism. My first refinement of the claim that creation praises God is to state that it does so by being itself – following authors like Hardy and Ford who, in a discussion of praise, make this argument: “Since God's blessing is given by letting each creature, animate or not, be itself, and by enabling it, with infinite respect for its nature, to participate in the drama of the universe,

then creation's response is primarily in its very existence."⁸⁷ Richard Bauckham, too, has insisted that biblical passages which talk of non-human creation praising God are more than "mere poetic fancy" and, following Hardy and Ford, argues that "all creatures bring glory to God simply by being themselves and fulfilling their God-given role in God's creation".⁸⁸ A. A. Anderson had previously made this point in his commentary on Psalm 148:

"It may be slightly odd to think of the varied meteorological phenomena as praising God, yet it may not be too much of a rationalization to say that the creature or created phenomenon renders the highest praise to its creator by fulfilling the task for which it was created."⁸⁹

This is a good beginning which allows us to understand praise as integral to non-human creation's identity. As Hardy and Ford contend, "Creation's praise is not an extra, an addition to what it is, but is the shining of its being, the overflowing significance it has in pointing to its creator simply by being itself".⁹⁰ However, it is not clear what it means for non-human creation to 'be itself', nor how God would allow it to be so or give it such a role. Creation is not static and creatures do not have an obvious constant identity. Even the mightiest cliff face is undergoing a constant transformation into sand under the assault of wind and water. Is God controlling this process, in which case we might ask to what extent is the cliff allowed to be itself? Or is this process left to the random interplay of the many forces and factors involved in erosion? The problem becomes more acute when we consider the animal kingdom. What is it for a field mouse to 'be itself'? Is it to be prey for the barn owl or is it to survive and live to old age, in which case the barn owl's being itself presumably

⁸⁷ Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), p. 82.

⁸⁸ Richard Bauckham, 'Joining Creation's Praise of God', *Ecotbeology* 7.1 (2002), p. 45-59 (p. 47).

⁸⁹ A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 2 vol. (London: Oliphants, 1972), ii, p. 950.

⁹⁰ Hardy and Ford, *Praising and Knowing God*, p. 47.

involves starving to death? The problem is that the whole of creation is constantly in process and has no obvious 'self' which God can allow it to be.

This, then, highlights the next refinement of the theme which will be necessary. A Christian theology of creation must carefully observe the complex, interrelated and dynamic nature of the Earth, an understanding which the natural sciences have been constantly confirming and deepening. There are also far reaching consequences when we consider that, as well as the pain of predation, creation is what it is and will be what it will be through the process of evolution, a process which, as Christopher Southgate notes, requires not only the loss of individuals but of entire species.⁹¹

I will consider the pain and loss which are an essential characteristic of life on Earth in the next chapter. However, I raise it here to emphasise how important it is that theological conceptions of creation be realistic about the complex reality of nature – including its 'redness in tooth and claw'. This is not to suggest, however, that we cannot take delight in nature and I hope to show that the beautiful and lyrical vision of the psalms is a truthful revelation of creation's identity and its genuine praise of God. I will try to show how such a vision may acknowledge, indeed be grounded in, the complexities of creation and steer a course between cynicism and sentimentalism.

I believe that the theme of creation's praise, then, will be a fruitful and advantageous central theme for this thesis. The work which must now be done is to explore it, question it, refine it and develop it. In short my task is to show that it is sustainable as a central idea and as a locus for a Christian doctrine of creation which can ultimately support robust

⁹¹ Christopher Southgate, 'God and Evolutionary Evil: Theodicy in the Light of Darwinism', *Zygon* 37.4 (2002), p. 803-824 (p. 805).

Christian responses to ecological crises. To do so we turn to the psalms, beginning with a closer look at Psalm 148.

Three Psalms

Creation's Praise: Psalm 148

The most extensive and cohesive example of the theme is found in Psalm 148 in which the psalmist calls the entire created order to praise Yahweh. I will, therefore, quote the psalm in full:

¹Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him from the heights!
²Praise him, all his angels; praise him all his host!
³Praise him, sun and moon; praise him all you shining stars!
⁴Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!
⁵Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.
⁶He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds which cannot be passed.
⁷Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
⁸fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!
⁹Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
¹⁰Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!"
¹¹Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!
¹²Young men and women alike, old and young together!
¹³Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.
¹⁴He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the Lord!

The hymn splits into two sections, the first of which, verses 1-6, calls for the praise of Yahweh from the heavens and the second of which, verses 7-

14, calls the earth to praise. Each section concludes with the phrase “let them praise the name of the Lord” and then makes a statement about God’s work. The first statement, in verses 5-6, speaks of Yahweh’s creating and sustaining acts which hold the ordered world in place. The second statement, in verses 13-14, is concerned with Yahweh’s kingship and provision for his people. The psalm reflects the Ancient Near Eastern understanding of a three tiered universe in which the Earth was bounded by waters above and below.⁹² As the psalm moves from the heavens down to the earth, eventually arriving at human beings, it lists a great company of heavenly and earthly elements and creatures. Creation therefore appears as an ordered whole and, indeed, as ordered by Yahweh.

This procession from the heavens down to the earth encompasses the breadth of creation. It seems that the psalmist is striving for totality in his praise of Yahweh. As Hans-Joachim Kraus notes, “The peculiarity of Psalm 148 consists of the fact that here the total inventory of the created world is invited to praise God.”⁹³ Similarly, Allen observes: “Only with the concentrated voices of all [Yahweh’s] creatures can a significant attempt be made to reflect his majesty back to him. The exuberant word כָּל ‘all’ rings out in a striving for totality of praise.”⁹⁴ Thus it seems that the entire cosmos, in its particular order, praises Yahweh.

The psalm’s two statements about Yahweh’s acts seem to conclude the two sections calling heaven and earth to praise. What is the function of these statements? The most obvious purpose would be that they conclude the sections by giving reasons for creation’s praise of Yahweh. The heavens are to praise Yahweh because he has fixed their bounds; the earth is to praise Yahweh because he has blessed his people. Yet these statements could also be read as giving the reasons that creation is able to

⁹² It should be noted that the psalm in fact speaks only of two tiers suggesting that there was not, perhaps, a single generic ancient near eastern picture of the cosmos. However, it is sufficient for our purposes to note that the Psalmist’s picture is one of a structured cosmos.

⁹³ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988-89), ii, p. 562.

⁹⁴ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, (Waco, TX: World Books, 1983), p. 316.

praise Yahweh. Perhaps it is because it is ordered that creation is able to praise; perhaps it is because Yahweh has made the earth fruitful and provided for his people that it is able to praise. Finally, the psalm could be read as suggesting that it is in being ordered and fruitful that creation's praise consists. We must bear these three readings in mind as we proceed in our appraisal of the psalm.

Many commentators find in the psalm traces of various Ancient Near Eastern myths and beliefs and the personification of the elements seems to suggest this. For example, the sun and moon were both considered to be divine within Mesopotamian religion and the moon was thought to govern a great celestial army.⁹⁵ Being a late hymn it is unlikely that the psalmist intended to suggest that these were other gods but it does suggest the memory of various cults which had been subsumed into Israelite religion. Furthermore, Kraus notes the presence of the *Chaoskampf* motif (which will be discussed further in reference to Psalm 104 below), common to contemporary cosmogonies which tell of a deity defeating a watery chaos monster and setting boundaries to prevent the seas from engulfing the Earth.⁹⁶ This motif seems to be reflected in the psalm's conviction that Yahweh has set boundaries which the waters of heaven cannot pass, and in the inclusion of sea monsters.

Watson, however, argues that the inclusion of sea monsters refers to large marine animals in general and that the reference to the deeps is simply a counterpart to the waters above the Earth and need have no particular implications for the psalm's cosmogony. Thus the *Chaoskampf* motif is "excluded from the conscious agenda of the psalmist".⁹⁷ Instead she claims the 'bounds which cannot be passed' (verse 6) suggest that all fears of the infringement of chaos upon the world have been forgotten.

⁹⁵ B. B. Schmidt, 'Moon' in Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible: DDD*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 585-93.

⁹⁶ Kraus, *Psalms*, ii p. 563.

⁹⁷ Rebecca Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of 'Chaos' in the Hebrew Bible* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), p. 210.

“Anxieties regarding the shakeable aspect of the cosmos ... seem so fully to have been resolved into a unified and joyful vision for the entire universe, that this composition fully and willingly embraces ‘all peoples’, even the formerly threatening ‘rulers of the earth’.”⁹⁸

Thus the motif’s importance is overstated by commentators. However, it may be that the remark about nature’s boundaries is an expression of faith in God over and against the dangers of the natural world rather than evidence that such worries no longer existed. The *Chaoskampf* motif and the extent to which we may envision the cosmos as sustained against chaos will be discussed further below. In relation to Psalm 148, however, we may note that the psalmist seems to consider nature to be other and beyond the control of the people but at the same time has a deeper confidence that Yahweh ultimately guarantees the security of the world’s delicate balance.

The psalm has also been compared, by Hans Joachim Kraus, to Egyptian Onomastica. Von Rad first noted the similarities between these long lists, which enumerate everything in the Heavens, on the Earth and under the Earth, and God’s lengthy questioning of Job (Job 38). However, Allen agrees with Hilliers that Kraus goes too far in his estimation of the influence of these sources, suggesting instead that the psalm is following traditional hymnic forms. Nevertheless, Allen does think that the tradition of listing nature has had a general influence and it certainly seems that the psalmist is attempting to encompass creation in its entirety within the hymn. As Anderson notes, ‘mountains and all hills’ and ‘fruit trees and all cedars’ are meant to stand for the whole earth and all its vegetation; similarly, ‘beasts and all cattle’ and ‘creeping things’ stand for wild and domesticated animals, and reptiles, worms and insects respectively.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 212.

⁹⁹ Anderson, *Psalms*, ii p. 950.

Thus the preceding discussions suggest that the psalmist's picture of the world is an ordered whole, with each part sustained in its place. The praise that creation gives seems to have integrity, seems to be the work of the whole. I would argue that the holistic nature of this praise comes more clearly into view if we consider the psalm as the text of a cultic act. Mowinkel states: "The core of the hymn of praise is the consciousness of the poet and the congregation that they are standing face to face with the Lord himself, meeting the almighty, holy and merciful God in his own place, and worshiping him with praise and adoration."¹⁰⁰ Thus the psalmist does not only call the whole creation to praise but calls it to participate in the ritual taking place in the temple.

How are we to interpret this call to praise? To what extent can we read the psalm as a genuine entreaty to the cosmos? A number of commentators have read the psalmist's call as rhetorical and not representing a belief that creation will really worship God. Leslie Allen, for example, despite writing that "only with the concerted voices of all [Yahweh's] creatures can a significant attempt be made to reflect his majesty back to him", nevertheless considers the hymn's calls to creation to be 'rhetorical': "God's people need helpers, as it were, in their own praise. Their loudest and longest praise cannot match his own work and status."¹⁰¹

Such a reading is a plausible interpretation of the text; it is possible that the psalmist is simply attempting to increase the force of his own rhetoric by calling all creation to join in support. Yet the psalm does not require that its calls to creation be regarded as metaphor, and it is equally possible to read the psalmist's call as a genuine expectation of worship in the created order, and as revealing the psalmist's understanding of the real nature of the cosmos. Reading it in such a way does not necessarily

¹⁰⁰ Sigmund Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 81.

¹⁰¹ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, p. 316.

support our own attempt to outline a theology of creation's praise. Hermann Gunkel, for example, described this psalm as "primeval vivification of nature," suggesting that the Psalm evidences a form of animism which mistakenly imagines non-humans capable of deliberate praise in a way similar to humans.¹⁰² There seems to be an air of primitivism surrounding this which assumes that the psalmist's world view is inferior to a modern understanding of the natural world.

In response to this we may state that there is no reason to assume that the psalmist's ancient view of the cosmos allowed him to vivify it, to give it agency and intelligence that it clearly does not possess. In comparison to modern understandings of the non-human world the psalmist may initially appear naïve but it is worth allowing him to challenge our conceptions. His view of the world is not a stop-gap solution which he was forced to employ in the absence of a scientific account. Rather his apprehension of Nature is born of thoughtful interaction with the world.

Our discussion of the psalm above has argued that it represents an attempt to present the world in its entirety with each aspect of creation mentioned in its proper place. Whilst it may be rather different from a modern view of the natural world it is not naïve, it is an intelligent and observant engagement with the non-human. It is difficult for us to imagine what form nature's response to the psalmist's call might take. However, we must remember the point made above, that the psalm is written to be used in a cultic setting.

For human beings praise involves self-expression, intelligible (to some extent) to other human beings. The psalmist does not necessarily expect such a response from nature any more than we would. Rather the psalmist's call includes creation in his praise not because creation will respond to him, but because creation responds to Yahweh. Yahweh, as

¹⁰² Quoted in Kraus, *Psalms*, ii p. 562.

Mowinkel explains, “is the mighty Lord of nature ... who governs the whole course of nature,”¹⁰³ and creation’s very order is its submission to Yahweh, responding to his governance. It is, thus, precisely in being ordered by God that creation praises God. By displaying in his psalm the ordered nature of creation, the psalmist echoes and highlights its real, independent praise.

This conclusion is supported by the psalm’s bipartite structure, which treats first of the Heavens and waters above the Earth and second of the Earth and the waters below it.¹⁰⁴ This represents a progression through the different elements of the cosmos, each in its place. Their being ordered is specifically given as a reason for their praise (verses 5 & 6). The particular logic with which the writer categorises and describes the world is inseparable from his understanding of this order as giving praise.

This is further supported by the fact that, for the Israelites, the temple was the centre and the symbol of Yahweh’s sustaining and ordering power on Earth.¹⁰⁵ Thus it is of particular significance that the psalmist invites the non-human creation to participate in the temple’s liturgy. The psalmist is inviting the whole creation both to praise Yahweh for his goodness in sustaining the world and to ensure the future of that sustenance through the continual worship and ritual of the temple cult.

Thus to read the psalm as calling creation to praise God by being itself, by existing in the particular order in which Yahweh created it, is the reading that most fully integrates the different elements of the text. The psalm, I believe, really does refer to a scheme of praise in which human worship takes place in a much larger context of praise.

This, therefore, is the primary concern of the psalmist, to draw together the whole created order, sustained by Yahweh and centred in the

¹⁰³ Mowinkel, *Psalms*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁴ There has been some disagreement over whether the Psalm is structured in two or three parts. I find Allen’s bipartite argument more convincing. See Allen, *Psalms* p. 313.

¹⁰⁵ See John Walton, *Ancient near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament : Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*(Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), p. 196.

temple, and to dedicate it to God in praise. I would argue that other influences, such as lists of nature wisdom and *Chaoskampf* myths are only employed, consciously or subconsciously, to achieve this end. Thus Anderson gets to the heart of the psalmist vision when stating, “the creature or created phenomenon renders the highest praise to its creator by fulfilling the task for which it was created.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, we find here biblical warrant or believing that creation praises God by being itself. More than this we begin to see that being itself means existing in the order and integrity in which it was created by God.

I listed above three possible understandings of the ordering of creation in the psalm. First, I suggested that this ordering gives it a reason for praise, secondly that it gives it the capacity to praise and thirdly that it is, in fact, the form of creation’s praise. The arguments I have made suggest that all three are in fact true. Creation praises because of, by and in its ordered and sustained nature. In other words, we may read this psalm as speaking of creation praising God by being itself.

This ebullient psalm not only witnesses the glory of Yahweh displayed in his creation but is also full of the joyful praise which the entire creation gives to him. Thus the call of praise runs in two directions: first, the psalmist calls upon the rest of creation to join his song of praise to Yahweh. Secondly, the psalmist seems to be inspired in his praise by the glory of God displayed in the non-human world. Thus there is an implicit call of non-human creation to the psalmist, challenging him to pay due honour to Yahweh.

Thus we have begun to see what it might mean for creation to praise God by being itself. The psalm envisions a complex and fruitful created order which owes its continued existence to the work of Yahweh, the King who establishes and keeps it in balance. The Christian theological account I offer argues that creation’s ‘self’ consists in its being ordered by

¹⁰⁶ Anderson, *Psalms*, ii p. 950.

and towards the creative and sustaining act of God. This ordering of creation is centred on the temple and the worship which takes place there. I have not, as yet, considered what the particular role of the human being might be in this scheme of praise. Nor have I considered why the psalmist might need to call creation to praise when it is, in fact, already praising God.

Both of these questions will be addressed in the fourth chapter. For the present we note that, for those who empathise with the faith of the psalmists, there are important reasons to take the notion of creation praising God seriously. In my case, as one reading these texts as Christian scriptures, the psalmist's vision of the non-human creation is compelling. It opens the possibility of a human relationship with non-human creation which consists of a new-found kinship in the mutual project of the praise of God.

I will, therefore, continue to develop this understanding of what it means for the non-human creation to praise God by turning to two further psalms. With attention to Psalm 104 we will further consider what it may mean for creation to respond to praise God and, with attention to Psalm 19, we will consider what it may mean for creation to call humanity to the praise of God.

Order and Chaos: Psalm 104

As we have seen, the Earth envisioned by Psalm 148 is marked by order. This order is sustained by God who sets boundaries for the different elements of his creation and protects it from chaos. Scholars have argued that psalms such as 104, which describe the cosmos in this way, contain traces of the Ancient Near Eastern *Chaoskampf* pattern. The term refers to narrative elements common to Ancient Near Eastern cosmogony myths in

which a deity battles and defeats another deity or monster which symbolises chaos, thus bringing about order and creating the world. In particular this primordial chaos is associated with the sea, which is held in place, above and beneath the Earth, after its defeat. It is a motif identified in various psalms and also in Deutero-Isaiah and in God's address to Job.

The motif is identified by commentators in Psalm 104, a hymn to Yahweh which, like Psalm 148, breaks down into a series of elements within creation which move the psalmist to praise Yahweh. Kraus breaks the psalm down as follows: vv. 1-4 concern the praise of God who is above all worlds; 10-12 the springs and brooks; 13-18 the refreshment which proceeds from Yahweh's rains to all lands; 19-24 the night and daybreak; 25-26 the sea; 27-30 the dependence of all life upon Yahweh; and 31-35 provide a hymnic conclusion. Verses 5-9 refer to Yahweh's separating of the waters and setting of their boundaries:

- ⁵You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.
- ⁶You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
- ⁷At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
- ⁸They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.
- ⁹You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

Here we find strong elements of the *Chaoskampf* pattern, as the psalmist praises God for his taming and holding back of dangerous flood waters. Furthermore, as well as the *Chaoskampf* motif, Psalm 104 also bears the marks of the Egyptian nature lists which have already been discussed. Thus, Kraus argues, "Psalm 104 is saturated with conceptions of the encyclopaedic science of lists that can be documented in the natural

science of the Egyptians".¹⁰⁷ So the Psalm fits into the scheme that I have already outlined, with its vision of a world created and sustained in order by God.

In Psalm 104 we have no full *Chaoskampf* narrative, only references and allusions, but if we consider it in the light of other passages from the psalms and wisdom literature we may make some careful observations concerning the way the authors seem to have regarded the natural world. An important point to note is that Psalm 104 seems to consider Yahweh's victory to be final. This does not mean that nature is not recognised as being a threat but the psalm does show a fundamental confidence in the basic order of the world. This suggests that neither sea nor river nor any other part of the natural world are finally understood as opposed to Yahweh and his people.

Not only the sea but even Leviathan has its own particular place in God's order which is actually one of play: "Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it." (Psalm 104:25-26). Of course this passage more or less flatly contradicts Psalm 74's reference to Yahweh's defeat of Leviathan but these two passages were placed together by the Psalter's editors. As Christians reading the psalms in canon we may associate Yahweh's ordering of the universe and its ability to praise him. We might say that, in its being ordered against chaos, creation is freed to praise God.

However, Earth Bible writer Peter L. Trudinger takes exception to a *Chaoskampf* reading of the psalms believing it to "clash with all the guiding principles of the Earth Bible project".¹⁰⁸ His argument is that a creation in which chaos is subdued by God is, far from being freed for praise, a creation in which part of its identity is suppressed. If Trudinger is correct

¹⁰⁷ Kraus, *Psalms*, ii p. 98.

¹⁰⁸ Peter L. Trudinger, 'Friend or Foe? Earth, Sea and *Chaoskampf* in the Psalms' in Norman C. Habel, *The Earth Story in the Psalms and Prophets*, The Earth Bible vol. 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 29-41 (p. 30).

then this important part of my argument will be undermined. We will, therefore, depart briefly from psalm 104 to consider Trudinger's argument and set the psalm in a wider context of *Chaoskampf* influenced passages in the Hebrew Bible.

Trudinger focuses on Psalms 24, 74 and 93, arguing that the *Chaoskampf* motif is not as strong as other commentators have supposed. He gives three reasons: first, he believes that it is an inadequate reading of the psalms in question, secondly, he believes that a more comprehensive reading is possible; and thirdly he argues that his alternative reading "allows for recognition of the intrinsic value of Earth and its community and opens the way for them to respond to God, rather than prejudging their value and thereby silencing their voice".¹⁰⁹

As far as Trudinger's first reason is concerned, I have some sympathy with his suggestion that the psalmist's reliance on other Ancient Near Eastern myths should not be overemphasised. The motif is clearly present within surrounding cultures and Trudinger himself does not dismiss it entirely. However, as I will argue in the next chapter, there is reason to believe, at least, that not all of the Hebrew authors took up the motif uncritically. Trudinger's second objection is that there are more persuasive interpretative horizons available for the psalms. He offers an alternative which challenges the dominant 'regime' of interpretation, arguing that 'Zion traditions' offer a better 'matrix for the thought' of Psalm 74.

Trudinger argues that the psalm pairs temple and land and that "the damage to the temple epitomizes the damage to the land and the ordering of the cosmos the ordering of the temple".¹¹⁰ This is the context in which the appeal to Yahweh's conflict with Leviathan is to be understood.

¹⁰⁹ Trudinger, 'Friend or Foe?' p. 31.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 34.

“The motif of order is interlaced with the motif of conflict. Together they set up a pair of homologous relations in the psalm: between the paradigmatic ordering of the world and the need for order in the present, and between the paradigmatic victory of the divine warrior and the need for victory now.”¹¹¹

This is, perhaps, a little curious. It seems to me that Trudinger does not so much provide an entirely different interpretation as offer a more nuanced reading of the way in which conflict images function in the psalms. *Chaoskampf* myths often envision the building of the Earth as a resting place for the victor after the battle with chaos.¹¹² Thus it was common to pair cosmos and temple in Ancient Near Eastern Religion: According to John Walton,

“Cosmological texts provide accounts of order and security being established, and the temple is where that order and security are maintained and enjoyed. In Mesopotamia this rest is often achieved through conflict (theomachy) and is enabled by the organization of the cosmos through the means of the control attributes and the decree of destinies.”¹¹³

This is constituted in a particularly Hebrew way in the psalms which closely associate the building of the cosmos with the building of the nation, both of which are identified with the temple. Clifford notes that the Israelite nation was also brought out of water and argues that “the privileged moment can be narrated from a suprahistoric or historic viewpoint or from a mix of both. The reason that a cosmogony can function as the national story is that ancient cosmogonies customarily included society in the origin of the universe”.¹¹⁴ Thus Trudinger reminds us that the *Chaoskampf* motif is bound up with concerns of national identity and security.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Susan Niditch, *Ancient Israelite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 52.

¹¹³ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, p. 198.

¹¹⁴ Richard J. Clifford, ‘Creation in the Psalms’, in Richard J. Clifford and John J. Collins (eds.) *Creation in the Biblical Traditions* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992), pp. 57-69 (p. 69).

Upon considering his third argument, however, I wish to offer a stronger critique. As I have argued in Chapter 1, I am unconvinced of the Earth Bible's strategy of suspicion and retrieval. In this case, Trudinger has applied the Earth Bible's interpretive principles to the text and has become rather suspicious of the text's apparent will to power. He believes that the *Chaoskampf* pattern makes an enemy of the rivers and seas:

“For those who would wish to associate themselves with a good God, it underwrites objectification of Earth, Sea and its large denizens, and warrants, at best, pragmatic use of their components in the name of divine order, or, at worst, an *imitatio dei* in programmes of ecological slaughter and geographical destruction. For those who are located in a tradition which privileges the biblical writings, it is a stumbling block in the path of attempts at understanding of and reconciliation with traditions that place a more positive valuation upon the Earth and Sea.”¹¹⁵

Having argued that *Chaoskampf* is an incorrect reading of the psalms, Trudinger now proceeds to show that it is also a damaging one. There are, it seems to me, two problems with this conclusion. The first is simply that knowledge of the *Chaoskampf* motif is not widespread amongst Christians – one cannot imagine it being discussed from very many pulpits. It may be appropriate within the context of academia to discuss whether the *Chaoskampf* necessarily implies a negative understanding of the ocean but it should be remembered that its presence in the text is unlikely to influence Christians to think in such a way.

Secondly, and more importantly, I also wish to argue against Trudinger's belief that *Chaoskampf* must mean God's aggressive domination of the sea. It should be remembered that these Ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies rose in cultures significantly different to our own. Cosmogonies exist to “ground or explain something experienced here and now – the sacredness of a temple, the status of a god, the authority of a

¹¹⁵ Trudinger, 'Friend or Foe?' p. 30.

king. Cosmogonies are not told for their own sakes, out of a modern scientific interest, to explain 'exactly how it happened'."¹¹⁶

Cosmogonies, then, must also exist to describe and explain the natural world as experienced by the peoples who inhabited it. For Ancient Near Easterners, as for us today, water was an essential source of life. A small amount of control, particularly of rivers, was eventually established but on the whole life was marked by submissiveness to the uncertainties of nature. In this context the Earth's seas, rivers and rains were simply not available for exploitation. This being the case, the use of water to symbolise chaos is entirely understandable and an important function of the cosmogonies is to provide a sense of security in the face of such unpredictability and trust in the deity's power and inclination to protect their people. Therefore, even the triumphant Canaanite claim that, due to the victory of Baal, "Prince Sea is our captive, Judge River is our captive,"¹¹⁷ need not be interpreted as an impulse to exploitation.

Furthermore, we should note that the cosmic battle takes place before the foundation of the universe and an unqualified identification of the chaos enemy with the waters and water creatures of the world is problematic. In *Enuma Elish*, for example, Marduk defeats Tiamat and creates the world from her body; the waters above and below the Earth are formed from the waters inside her. While this does not remove the fact that water is identified with the chaos enemy in these myths it ought to be noted that the Earth's waters are found in the form that they now exist because of the battle against chaos. Thus the sea does not necessarily represent an enemy who must be subdued but is the result of a battle against an enemy who has already been defeated before the sea came to exist. This may imply a picture in which the sea is not identical with

¹¹⁶ Richard J. Clifford and John J. Collins, 'Introduction', in Clifford and Collins, *Creation in the Biblical Traditions*, p. 7.

¹¹⁷ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 39.

deadly chaos but is nevertheless something which points to the chaos which once threatened creation.

Rather than requiring the suppression of parts of the Earth, *Chaoskampf* as it appears in the Hebrew Bible may be read as highlighting the independence and otherness of the non-human world. To develop this claim I wish to pick up two important observations on the book of Job from another essay for the Earth Bible project by Dale Patrick. Patrick's essay considers another passage in which commentators have traced the *Chaoskampf* motif, Yahweh's addresses to Job in chapters 38-42. Firstly, he notes that the addresses evoke a sense of wonder at Yahweh rooted in the mystery of the life of non-human creation.

“One can see this in its celebration of the ‘wildness’ of nature – forces not only outside of human control, but without value to humans. Nothing in this address speaks of the good of creation for humans. Nor does it conform to the human moral order. This is a world that is good in a non-moral sense, each being existing for itself and participating in the community of being. Such a world has intrinsic worth apart from any human valuation.”¹¹⁸

Patrick's second observation is a subtle one. He notes the creative power of God in the final chapters of Job and argues for an important distinction between a kind of divine power which conquers and subdues the world and the kind displayed in Job, which does not see the natural world as a rival to God's power but an expression of it. “The poet portrays the creator's activity as endowing creatures with the capacity to participate in and contribute to the community of being. There is ordering, but no suppression of counter power; the ordering enhances the good of all, including the beings limited”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Dale Patrick, 'Divine Creative Power and the Decentering of Creation: The Subtext of the Lord's Address to Job' in Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (eds.) *The Earth Story in the Wisdom Traditions*, The Earth Bible vol. 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 103-115 (p. 112).

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p. 115

Thus we may note in Job, in a passage in which the *Chaoskampf* motif is also traced, a tendency to the suppression of nature in the name of order is resisted. In the address to Job nature is seen to have a private and secret life. It is not a life that is lived alone but one that is lived rooted in the sustaining power of Yahweh and it is described in terms which suggest an intimate relationship between Yahweh and nature. Again, we may understand this life as praise, as each creature and process of the natural world exists in the sustaining and ordering power of Yahweh for Yahweh's glory and praise is Job's response upon observing it.

Returning to Psalm 104 we may note a fundamental trust in the foundation and order of the world which does not preclude a strong sense of the wild mystery of nature's workings. I believe that it would be an interpretive mistake to imagine that the wildness and the order of the natural world which surrounded the Hebrew writers were opposing notions. We may also note that the author of Psalm 104 does not display a strong inclination to control and ownership of non-human creation. In fact, the theocentric stance of the psalm produces precisely the opposite effect. Yahweh's work of founding and sustaining of the world is praised and this produces a sense of the unfathomable mystery of the workings of the natural world. It is also clear that the natural world offers certain dangers, not only from the unpredictability of weather but also from the violence of wild animals.

It is my belief that we may speak of a wild order of creation in Psalm 104 and other passages, exemplified by Psalm 84:3: "Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my king and my God." As we have already noted, the temple, in Ancient Near Eastern thought, was the location which the deity set up as a dwelling and resting place upon Earth, and as such it was a symbol of order and stability both for the nation and the world as a whole. By contrast, birds surely impress upon

human beings a particularly strong sense of the wildness of nature. They fly into our presence and perception and we have no idea from where they have come or what their purpose might be, the meaning of their flitting movements are a mystery to us. We may observe them for a moment, perhaps reflecting on how different their perception of the world must be and, despite the invention of air travel, wondering what it must be like to have the freedom of the sky, before they disappear to continue their tasks. Yet in this psalm these wild birds penetrate the order of the temple and, rather than threaten that order, find rest. Wildness is integral to God's creative order.

There are a handful of passages which talk directly and specifically of nature's praise of God but in the talk of nature in Psalm 104 we see that passages which are not directly calling creation to praise still display a sense of the life of praise which penetrates the existence of non-human creation. Non-human creation is seen to have the foundation and sustenance of its being in God, this wild order gives nature the freedom to praise God by being itself. Reflecting on this we might contrast the wild order of God with a human fantasy of controlling order. Many of the questions which God asks Job can now be answered by human knowledge and science has given us new ways of observing the natural world. Much of this observation has been motivated by a simple desire to find out more about the world around us and this, in itself, should surely be understood as a good and natural desire.

Yet when such a desire has not been educated by a respectful sense of the independence and mystery of non-human creation, and particularly when it has been pressed into the service of profit, it has led to disaster. Human attitudes towards the environment are all too often marked by the expression of power which Patrick argues God rejects in Job. The attempts of human beings to impose order and control upon the natural world have only led to chaos as pollution, exploitation of resources and global

warming lead to major disruptions of the planet's delicate balance. It is ironic that this chaos is now manifest in precisely the threat that the Hebrew Bible writers thought had been permanently defeated; in storm and flood the Earth's waters once again cause rampant destruction and, in the melting of the ice caps and the rising of the seas, the boundaries which were set are beginning to break apart. Human beings have perversely proven that they are indeed made in the image of God by achieving what no other member of the Earth community could: the resurrection of the chaos monster.

Thus, by setting Psalm 104 in the context of other passages which draw upon *Chaoskampf* we have seen that the whole creation is ordered by God and centred in the work of the temple. Thus praise of God seems to be essential to the maintenance of this order. Not only this but the non-human is also called to participate in this praise. The order of which this praise consists and which this praise helps maintain is secured, by God, against the threat of chaos. I have argued that God's ordering of creation compels us to take heed of our own place within the universe and to retain a certain sense of respectful mystery in regards to the non-human world; we have our own part to play in this symphony of praise and we ought not to jeopardise the parts of others. But a symphony cannot be played by a disparate and unconnected group of musicians; creation also calls to us and draws us in to join it as kin in this project of praise. This call to praise comes from the very depths of creation's order and I turn now to Psalm 19 to see how this mysterious call may be heard.

The Call of Creation: Psalm 19

Psalm 19 gives a clear indication that creation has a message for humanity:

¹The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
²Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
³There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

Thus the psalm begins, joyfully describing the mysterious glorifying of God in which the heavens are engaged, before giving the reasons for this praise in verses 5-6 which, familiarly, consist of Yahweh's ordering and sustaining of the world. The psalm divides into two parts and the following part, verses 7-14, revel in the perfect surety of the law of the Lord.

The speech of the heavens is clearly jubilant. Kraus claims that 'declaring' has the sense of 'bubbling forth', and commentators have interpreted this as praise: "The glory which God has granted to creation as an image of his own glory is reflected back and, as it were, given back to God as a confession"¹²⁰; "Personified nature raises the chorus of praise to the only Creator and only deity, the one true God."¹²¹ Kraus believes that the psalm is in fact constructed of two separate hymns whilst Craigie argues that the psalm was composed as one hymn using elements of other hymns. However, commentators agree that the effect is for the second part to qualify the first: the Torah is necessary for the speech of the heavens to be perceived for it is incomprehensible to those who do not know the perfect law of the Lord.

The psalm seems to describe a creation which raises its voice in an unintelligible manner. We must now consider two questions. Firstly we must ask what the nature of creation's voice may be, whether it

¹²⁰ Franz Delitzsch, quoted in Kraus, *Psalms*, ii, p. 270.

¹²¹ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, (Waco, TX: World Books, 1983), p. 181.

comprehensible. Secondly we may ask what function that voice may have, whether it has a message for humanity.

Beginning with the first question we find that some commentators interpret Psalm 19's statement that the voice of creation is unheard as indicating that creation's voice has no real existence but is a metaphorical device of the psalmist. Thus Donners suggests that the talk of the heavens' declaration is mystification, as the psalmist "clothes the religious experience in which he participates in a cloak of metonymy".¹²²

Kraus and Craigie, however, are more willing to consider the declaration as something of substance. Kraus believes that the speech of the heavens is "unintelligible"¹²³: "the hymn of creation which Psalm 19 speaks is a message that cannot be perceived by humans ... The teaching and praising of nature which powerfully penetrates heaven and earth, remains an unfathomable secret."¹²⁴ Craigie, however, suggests that

"the speech of the heavens and firmament, of day and night, has a twofold thrust: it is addressed to God as praise, yet it is also addressed to mankind as a revealer of 'knowledge' (v 3). That is, as mankind reflects on the vast expanse of heaven, with its light by day and its intimation of a greater universe by night, that reflection may open up an awareness and knowledge of God, the Creator, who by his hands created a glory beyond the comprehension of the human mind."¹²⁵

Nevertheless, this awareness is, according to Craigie, only available to those who already know Yahweh's purposes revealed in the Torah. For these commentators, then, the declaration of the heavens is at best supplementary and at worst a fiction.

Yet in these comments we perhaps detect the tendency, which we have already identified, to overlook passages that assign a genuine and

¹²² H. Donners, quoted in Kraus, *Psalms*, ii p. 271.

¹²³ Ibid. p. 272.

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 275.

¹²⁵ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, p. 180.

active role to creation. For these commentators, the psalmist's talk of speech is scarcely as much as a metaphor, for it does not appear to describe an active feature of creation's identity but rather an idea imposed upon it by the psalmist. Craigie comes the closest to taking creation's speech seriously when he writes of the awareness of God which human beings receive when contemplating the heavens. However, this awareness is still very much an achievement of human reflection rather than the result of the heaven's active declaration.

By contrast, the Earth Bible team, whose third ecojustice principle is that of voice ("Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice"), insist that Earth's voice is more than a metaphor and believe that it

"opens for us a domain of reality about Earth as a subject ... exploring this metaphor becomes a hermeneutical device; exploring this metaphor becomes another hermeneutical tool to enable us to move beyond the dualisms that we as a team have inherited as Western thinkers, and to begin to relate to Earth as kin rather than commodity, as partner and co-creator rather than property."¹²⁶

This recognition of Earth as an independent subject and the sense of kinship that it makes possible are essential for the development of a healthy relationship to the non-human world.

However, I would reiterate the concern I raised in Chapter 1, that the Earth Bible's use of the concept of voice as a "hermeneutical tool" is problematic. The Earth Bible operates a hermeneutic of suspicion in order to detect the suppression of the voice of Earth in the texts. In the Psalms and Prophets edition of the series the team responds to the critique of Tim Meadowcroft who raises concerns about this project. Meadowcroft argues,

¹²⁶ The Earth Bible Team, "The Voice of Earth: More than Metaphor?" Norman C. Habel (ed.) *The Earth Story in the Psalms and Prophets*, The Earth Bible vol. 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield academic Press, 2001), pp. 23-28 (p.28).

“The purpose is to release the voice of Earth from the silence into which it has been bound by both the text and our anthropocentric reading of the text. But the instrument of release [of the voice of Earth] itself is a thoroughly anthropocentric device, namely reader-response whereby the reader is required to adopt some *a priori* positions. At the end of the exercise, the voice of the earth continues to look suspiciously like a human creation.”¹²⁷

The team’s attempt to engage with this criticism is commendable and they are unapologetic about the anthropomorphic nature of the principle of voice. As they argue, humans are bound to use anthropomorphic language to talk about and relate to the non-human world. However, it is not anthropomorphism of which Meadowcroft accuses them but a kind of anthropocentrism. His concern is that there is no way to distinguish between the voice of Earth, which has been suppressed, and the voice of the reader, which is imagined to be the voice of Earth.

Central to the Earth Bible project is the idea that Earth has a suppressed voice which the writers are able to liberate. For all the talk of Earth’s resistance and liberation it is through the writers that that resistance and liberation is made possible, it is through the writers that Earth’s message may be heard. As Meadowcroft argues, this is highly anthropocentric. The anthropomorphic assigning of Earth a voice is not the problem; the anthropocentric assumption that we can understand what Earth is saying and use it to judge a text is a problem. I believe that Earth does have a voice, and a dissenting voice, but that voice cannot be wholly apprehended and understood; we should be very careful about claiming that we are the means through which Earth’s message is made known.

How then should we envisage the voice of Earth? I would argue that it should be understood analogously, implying both continuity and discontinuity with the human voice. The mistake common to both the

¹²⁷ Quoted in The Earth Bible Team, ‘The Voice of Earth’, p. 23.

Earth Bible team and the biblical scholars is that they imagine the Earth's voice can be easily understood. In contrast this psalm suggests that the voice of Earth speaks continually but without words. This mysterious language flows in ceaseless activity and there is no corner of the earth which it does not reach.

The voice of Earth may be heard by anyone who will listen but understanding its meaning is a far more difficult task. We ought, then, to share the psalmist's sense of awed mystery: "Their voice is not heard, yet their voice goes out through all the Earth". Our understanding of Earth's voice must share this sense of a really present but entirely mysterious voice. If we can pay heed to it then this mystery refers us to an even greater mystery, the glory of the God to whom creation's voice attests.

Such a conclusion supports our reading of Psalm 148. We have suggested that creation praises by being itself, by existing in the particular order in which God has created it. This order speaks a language that is beyond translation. The growth of a seed, the water cycle, the hibernation of a hedgehog, the digestive system of a giraffe: none of these things praises God in a language that we may understand but praise God they do. This is not to say that we can gain nothing from attending to this language. Though it is not a language that is naturally accessible to us, studying it may yet reveal something of God. Equally, as I shall argue below, if we approach this language with minds and hearts fixed on God we may find a greater affinity with it than we could have previously expected.

In summary then, we have, with help from the writers of psalms 148, 104 and 19, begun to answer the question of what it means for creation to praise God by being itself. It means that creation is ordered and that that order is both a cause for praise and the substance of praise. It means that praise is the common project which holds the created order

together. It means that creation praises because it is spared from the constant threat of chaos and that, by threatening creation's order, human action jeopardizes creation's praise. Finally, it means that creation speaks its own language of praise, a language which, precisely because it is utterly different to human language, draws us into the mystery of God's created order.

There is much about this scheme which is strange. It is, at present, firmly rooted in peculiarly Hebrew notions of the universe. Yet there is much here that suggests itself to more Christian categories, in particular the theme of God's defence against chaos and the importance of cultic activity. I turn now to bring these psalms into conversation with Christian authors: Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor and Thomas Aquinas. With their help we will see how this scheme can be picked up in Christian thought about God as the ground of being and of praise as liturgical approach to mystery.

Three Christian Thinkers

St Dionysius the Areopagite

Turning first to St Dionysius, we begin by noting his most important point of contact with the writers of the psalms we have discussed. Whatever the differences of context, doctrine and cult, Denys is an author enraptured by the created order. Drawing upon Neoplatonic heritage he envisions the universe as a great hierarchy (or, rather, a hierarchy of hierarchies) in which all things are placed in their own particular and appropriate relation to each other and to the divine One, the source of being, God.

Now, Denys' extensive use of non-Christian sources and the centrality of hierarchy to his scheme will present certain problems for the

present project. Moreover, he devotes little attention to the non-human creation. However, the previous chapter has suggested that excluding Christian writing because it does not speak directly to our context or because it fails when judged against current concerns may well prove to be a loss to theology. Denys, as I have said, is a writer enraptured with creation and, more importantly, the God whom this creation reflects. This rapture shines from the pages of his works and will become the basis for a vision of a creation which praises God with every part of its being. Before we address the problems, therefore, let us first attempt to appreciate the scope of Denys' theology.

Denys the Areopagite is a pseudonym. The name to which the author chose to attribute a corpus of work (from which survive the *Divine Names*, the *Mystical Theology*, the *Celestial Hierarchy*, the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and various epistles¹²⁸) belonged to a biblical character, a briefly mentioned Greek, who is converted by Paul in Acts 17:34. Thus the four main works are intended to be read as the communication of a first century Christian Elder to another (Timothy, Paul's follower and correspondent) and, therefore, as writings for a worshiping community in need of apostolic guidance.

All that is known of the actual author is that he (or she) wrote at the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century. However, understanding Denys against this background is, Andrew Louth argues, essential. Denys understands theology to have two inseparable aspects, it is "on the one hand ineffable and mystical, on the other manifest and more knowable; on the one hand symbolic and presupposing initiation, on the other philosophical and capable of proof – and the ineffable is interwoven with what can be uttered".¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Other works are mentioned in the Dionysian corpus but they are lost and their original existence is debated by scholars. See Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Continuum, 1989), p. 19-20.

¹²⁹ The quotation is from Epistle IX translated by Louth in *Ibid.* p. 24.

Thus a large part of what Denys is concerned with is the mystery of God. 'Mystery', however, had come to hold a particular meaning by the fifth century. It referred, Louth argues, to God's love for humanity which is a mystery revealed in Christ. It is not a mystery because it is exclusive to some and hidden from others but it is a mystery because it is open to all yet remains hidden even as it is revealed. In accordance with this, Louth argues, Denys places particular emphasis upon the knowledge of God in which the Christian may participate liturgically. Thus Denys' writing has a strongly liturgical character from the function of the angelic ranks and the meaning of the sacraments described in the hierarchies to the analysis of the names used to ascribe glory to God in *The Divine Names*. Louth concludes: "It is the liturgy, and the understanding of the Scriptures that are read and expounded in the liturgy and in which the language of the liturgy is drenched, that is the fundamental context for Denys."¹³⁰

It is this liturgical context which makes such an interesting comparison and contrast to the psalmists discussed above. One feels that he might put down his pen any moment, give up on theological prose and return to participation in liturgy, his liturgical actions expressing so much more clearly the theology he is attempting to convey. His writing is often poetic and hymnic, and in fact he opens the *Mystical Theology* with a hymn:

"Trinity!! Higher than any being,
any divinity any goodness!
Guide of Christians
in the wisdom of heaven!
Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
up to the farthest, highest peak
of mystic scripture,

¹³⁰ Louth, *Denys*, p. 30.

where the mysteries of God's Word
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
Amid the deepest shadow
they pour overwhelming light
on what is most manifest.
Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
they completely fill our sightless minds
with treasures beyond all beauty."¹³¹

This hymn serves well as an introduction not only to *The Mystical Theology* but to the aim and character of the whole corpus. In it we see the Neoplatonic influences upon Christian spirituality which we have noted in the previous chapter. There is one great divine source of all being, and the glory of this great source, God, shines forth, ever undiminished, into every corner of creation. In a complementary movement the Christian worshipper ascends not away from but through and beyond the material world into this great light. As greater intimacy and unity with God is received the worshipper is so overcome by the brilliance of God's light that they become enveloped in darkness. Yet this is not the darkness of sin and nothingness but the 'brilliant darkness' of God. This then is the purpose of all Denys' writing: to detect the light of God as it is manifest in every part of creation and to ascend towards that light in prayer and praise.

Thus *The Divine Names* treats of the different names of God, revealed in Scripture, and describes how each one, in order, allows us to know more of God's nature and so ascend further the path to God. At the heart of this movement is a dialectic of apophatic and cataphatic theology. Denys is quite clear that God is ineffable and that no statement about God can ever convey even the smallest truth about the divine being. He writes, "Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this

¹³¹ St Denys, *The Mystical Theology*, Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (eds. and trans.), *The Classics of Western Spirituality: Pseudo Dionysius, The Complete Works* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 135.

Source of all unity, this supra-existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name."¹³²

We must give no names to God and use no description, yet it is impossible to name God with names that are not of our own invention. We may say nothing, "apart from what the sacred scriptures have divinely revealed".¹³³ Thus *The Divine Names* consists of discussions of various names for God, ascending through them until he reaches those which express the most enduring truths about God: that God is called 'Perfect' and 'One'.

This, however, does not simply amount to an exception to the rule that God may not be named. Rather, these names, in themselves, are provisional. They are admissible in as much as it is necessary for humans to address God by name; however, even as they are spoken it must be understood that they both name God and utterly fail to name God, since God is in no way comparable to the human associations that these words create. Thus, Louth argues, "what God reveals of himself is not himself, we must go behind the affirmations we make, and deny them of God, and thus engage in apophatic theology. It is apophatic theology that is ultimate: our denials are truer than our affirmations in relation to God."¹³⁴

Elsewhere, Denys sums up such a dialectic in this way:

"What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion."¹³⁵

¹³² Denys, *The Divine Names* (PG 3:588B) in *ibid.* p. 49-50.

¹³³ *Ibid.* (PG 3:588A), p. 49.

¹³⁴ Louth, *Denys*, p. 88.

¹³⁵ Denys, *The Mystical Theology* (PG 3:1000B), in Luibheid and Paul Rorem (eds. and trans.), *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 136

Thus we speak the names of God given in Scripture and so begin to hazard towards saying something true of God. In the same moment we recognise the complete inadequacy of what we are saying. We may say that God is called Good¹³⁶ (and God certainly is called Good and not Evil) but God is not comparable to any human virtue and so the human word 'good' cannot finally be true of God. Thus Denys progresses through the names of God leaving behind not only what God cannot be compared to but also what God can be compared to. The result of this, as Denys Turner points out, is a breakdown in the very language of like and unlike since God is only like something in as much as God is less unlike that thing than another thing. "God is more obviously not a rock than he is not a spirit," Turner says.¹³⁷

Thus we are left only with apophatic statements as all comparisons are left behind. Finally, having passed through this great series of names for God, Denys ascends to the final name, God is One. In this name is the final denial of comparison – God is one not many, this particular thing and in no way any other thing. "We cannot describe the difference of God from all creation in terms which do not also attest to her similarity to all creation," Turner argues. "But there is nothing in creation which God is like. Therefore, the only way in which we can attest to the absolute transcendence of God is by transcending the language of similarity and difference itself."¹³⁸ Thus we are left with no names at all and we can only fall silent, absorbed in 'the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence'.

Yet whilst all naming of God must end in silence, this does not mean that the speaking of these names has no value. Rather, as we are drawn up into God by the speaking of and meditation upon God's divine names we come to worship God with our whole being. Thus Denys writes:

¹³⁶ Denys, *Divine Names* (PG 3:693B), p. 71.

¹³⁷ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 44.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 45.

“We go where we are commanded by those divine ordinances which rule all the sacred ranks of the heavenly orders. With our minds made prudent and holy, we offer worship to that which lies hidden beyond thought and beyond being. With a wise silence we do honour to the inexpressible. We are raised up to the enlightening beams of the sacred scriptures, and with these to illuminate us, with our beings shaped to songs of praise, we behold the divine light, in a manner befitting us, and our praise resounds for that generous Source of all holy enlightenment.”¹³⁹

At this point it may seem that we have digressed some way from discussion of what it is for non-human creation to praise God. However, the preceding descriptions are essential not only to understanding the overall purpose of Denys’ theology but are also essential to the argument that I wish to make. Therefore, before proceeding to discuss Denys’ vision of the created order let us take stock. We have begun to see that praise of God is at the heart of Denys’ theology. Recalling what was said above concerning the liturgical nature of Denys’ theology, we see that the aim of *The Divine Names* is to provide the theological groundwork necessary for the speaking of these names in a liturgical context. Such speaking not only glorifies God but changes us; it sees ‘our beings shaped to songs of praise’.

These songs of praise draw us up into the mystery of God and, as we are changed, we draw closer to truly understanding that God is utterly ineffable. Thus we return to *The Mystical Theology* and the hymn with which we began. The book is very short and, perhaps, can be seen as a conclusion to the much longer *Divine Names*. If *The Divine Names* is a consideration of the names used of God in the liturgy then *The Mystical Theology* is a consideration of the mystery that lies at the heart of the liturgy and to which the liturgy strives. Louth comments, “*The Mystical Theology* is speaking of what happens beyond the symbols of the liturgy and beyond the affirmations, both metaphysical and conceptual, of our

¹³⁹ Denys, *Divine Names* (PG 3:589B), p. 50-51.

praise of God. It is the theology of silence and union with God.”¹⁴⁰ As we pass beyond all names for God we fall silent and “amid the wholly unsensed and unseen [the mysteries of God’s Word] completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty”.¹⁴¹

The truest and deepest praise of God is not, finally, speech, it is not educated and erudite description of God’s commendable qualities. There is certainly value in such projects and there is value in all the great Christian writings, in hymns both ancient and modern. Yet these hymns can only have true value as long as they point to something which is beyond their power to describe. The greatest and truest hymn must eventually give way to silence as the worshipper is drawn into the mystery of God’s being.

This is the understanding of praise which will inform this thesis, an understanding characterised by a sense of awe and mystery, an understanding that will be circumspect about making judgments about what God might appreciate as true praise and yet confident in that God has revealed Godself to God’s creation, enabling it to follow that movement and be drawn up into God’s being. Thus the right question we should ask is not ‘Can non-human creation achieve something which is comparable to human language and thought and so praise God?’ Such a question reveals a mistake about the true nature of praise. Rather, the question is, ‘Is there something about non-human being which strains beyond its being towards another being which cannot be finally described by any form of language, human or non-human, animate or inanimate?’

How might Denys help us answer such a question? Well, I do not think that we can get all of the way to what I want to argue using Denys alone (and we will, in due course, arrive at the questions I hinted at in the opening to this section) but I believe that he still has more to offer to that

¹⁴⁰ Louth, *Denys*, p. 104.

¹⁴¹ Denys, *Mystical Theology* (PG 3:997B), p. 135.

end. We turn then to the structure of the universe in the Dionysian vision, to *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. These hierarchies make up the structure of the universe, consisting of the celestial beings and the earthly appointments and sacraments.¹⁴²

If *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* are concerned with our ascent towards the great divine Source, then the *Hierarchies* are concerned with the way in which God is that Source, the way in which the divine light flows from God, illuminating and sustaining every part of creation. For the hierarchies are the structure through which the knowledge of God proceeds from God, they are full of light, as Louth writes,

“light flowing out from the supreme Godhead and irradiating the whole created order. But it is not a light that shines *on* the created order, but rather *through* it: those nearest to God are illuminated and their brightness, derived ultimately from the brightness of God’s glory, radiates the divine light further and further into the deepest recesses of the created order.”¹⁴³

Thus the angels of the celestial hierarchy receive and pass on the glorious divine light to the earthly elements of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

This flow of light is the function of the hierarchies and it directs them towards a great purpose. Denys writes,

“The goal of a hierarchy, then, is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him. A hierarchy has God as its leader of all understanding and action. It is forever looking directly at the comeliness of God. A hierarchy bears in itself the mark of God. Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of

¹⁴² The heavens contain a hierarchy consisting of three further hierarchies, each of which contains three ranks. They are: the seraphim, cherubim and thrones; the dominions, powers and authorities; the principalities, archangels and angels. The earthly hierarchy is less neatly divided but consists of the sacraments (the rites of illumination, synaxis and ointment - that is, Baptism, Eucharist and the blessing of oil), the priestly and monastic orders, and concludes with a discussion of the rites for the deceased. Our concern at present, however, is not the contents of these hierarchies but their nature and function.

¹⁴³ Louth, *Denys*, p. 39.

primordial light and indeed of God himself. It ensures that when its members have reached this full and divine splendour they can then pass on light generously and in accordance with God's will to beings further down the scale."¹⁴⁴

The hierarchies, then, enable the participation of beings in God. The divine light emanates from God, enlightening beings and catching them up into the divine being. Since they participate in the divine being, these beings therefore become images of God, reflecting and displaying God's great glory. In reflecting the divine light these beings display God to other beings and they too are caught up into the divine. Thus, Louth comments, "the hierarchies are a glittering display of the vehicle for theophany: they *are* a theophany".¹⁴⁵

Bearing in mind the liturgical character of Denys' theology and his understanding of God as one who is above all names, we can now deepen our claim that creation praises God by being itself. The psalmists have shown us a vision of creation worshipping God in gratitude for God's sustaining it over and against the threat of chaos. It praises God by being itself – that is it praises in as much as it gives its allegiance to God and obeys God, rather than striving to show itself to be greater than God. In other words, creation both praises God *because* it exists and it praises God *by* existing.

Moreover, God is praised not because this existence is generic but because it is particular and, indeed, the sum of an extraordinary variety of particularities. The author of Psalm 148 surveys all of this, perhaps as a priest, standing in the centre, in the temple, the point where God dwells upon earth, guaranteeing creation's order and the diverse and particular things which that order preserves. To this we add the Dionysian vision and his Christianisation of the neoplatonic scheme of emanation and

¹⁴⁴ Denys, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, (PG 3:165A), in Luiheid and Paul Rorem (eds. and trans.), *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 154.

¹⁴⁵ Louth, *Denys*, p. 39.

return. Creation is not only ordered by God but emanates from God's very being. The ordered hierarchy that this creates means that every part of creation is not only held in existence by God but reflects the very depths of the being of God. The divine light illuminates the ordered creation so that it is not only sustained by God but it participates in God.

Thus we add to the psalmist's vision the conviction that God not only gives creation existence, so that it is not overwhelmed by chaos, but gives it being, so that it participates in the divine being and reflects its glory. This participation in the divine being can truly be called praise since praise at its fullest does not, finally, consist in words or even thought. Rather, by being illuminated by the divine light and so sharing in the divine being, creation falls into that reverent silence which is the deepest praise of God. It is, of course, only some parts of God's creation that are able to give praise in word and thought but silence is surely available to every last part of it, from sand to seraphim.

Placing Denys' scheme alongside Psalm 148 we begin to see how Denys' mystical hierarchies and the psalmist's vision of a created order resplendent in praise may mutually inform each other. There are, of course, many differences as my exegesis of the authors has shown. However, it seems to me that, despite the separation of many centuries, they share a certain affinity. Creation praises God but it does this not by engaging in an activity which is extraneous or added to its fundamental character. Rather, creation praises by being precisely what God created it to be. It praises by existing to receive and reflect the glory of God and it does this not in a haphazard or individual way but by existing as a community of living things, each with its own place in the created order.

What this provides as a dogmatic basis for environmental ethics is a reason to think about and value creation outside of both its usefulness to us and our obligations to it. A theological description of the non-human creation is, first and foremost, a description of a world with a hidden life

in God. Not hidden in the sense that it is a secret but hidden in that it is directly rooted in the divine nature. This gives all of creation, including human beings, a value and importance which cannot be empirically observed and yet, if meditated upon, has the potential to show us the very depths of God's being.

Now we come to two problems which must be addressed before proceeding: first, it may be asked whether the hierarchies, in spite of the illumination they bring to creation, do not imply a subordination of 'inferior' beings which may have disastrous results for an ecological ethic. Secondly, it may be asked whether Denys' heavily Neoplatonic scheme is Christian enough, whether there is a sufficient Christology in the corpus.

Before addressing these challenges I should say that I do not intend to rebut them entirely; indeed it seems to me that Denys is sailing close to the wind on both counts. However, in the exposition above, I have endeavoured to describe the riches of Denys' theology and explain something of why I find it so compelling. Now, I believe that we would be mistaken to think that Denys' theology is in any way heretical, but I also think that it would lose its heart if one were to diminish or embellish it in order to secure his orthodoxy beyond question. The riches are inextricable from the difficulties. It is, for example, precisely because he speaks of God in language so frequently infused with Neoplatonic thought that his vision of God is so compellingly strange and fascinating. I propose, therefore, to let Denys stand as he is, declining to mould him to a different theological sensibility. The purpose of addressing these questions, then, is not to exonerate Denys but to describe exactly the kinds of criticisms to which I judge him to be vulnerable.

Firstly, then, we address the question of the potentially oppressive nature of hierarchies. For all that I have said about Denys having a wonderful vision of the created order it must be admitted that vast tracts of creation are barely mentioned in the corpus. The earthly hierarchy is an

ecclesiastical one, concerned with priestly and monastic order. This, of course, raises many questions concerning the value of the laity and the priesthood of all believers. It also raises questions about women and whether they are part of such a hierarchy. However, in the context of the argument I am making I will pass over these questions to focus on the question of non-humans. The rest of creation is not addressed in the works on the hierarchies and we can only assume that they find their place, if any, beneath the human institutions discussed in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

As I discussed in my introduction, this thesis does not see anthropocentrism as necessarily a problem. That is to say, a theology which is undertaken from a human perspective and which understands humans as especially made in the image of God need not imply a theology which is blind to the non-human and assumes it to have no connection with the divine. Denys' writing implies that humans are closer to the divine, that they most especially reflect God's glory, but it is only if this results in a theology which has no interest in the particular ways that the rest of creation reflects God's glory that our argument will face a serious problem that would require us to abandon our interest in Denys.

My argument so far has claimed that creation's praise lies in God's sustaining its being in the various and particular ways God created it to be. If creation does not have this direct connection to God but is rather sustained via humans through hierarchy then we lose the sense that creation's praise really emanates from creation, that praise is creation's gift to God. We must, therefore, consider whether there is scope within Denys' work to envision the non-human as directly subsisting in the being of God.

In fact, Denys does insist upon this kind of connection between God and all living things. In *The Divine Names*, when discussing God as

called Good, he insists on the absolute necessity of the Good for the continued existence of all things:

“And, if we must speak of the matter, all this [the subsistence of beings in the Good] applies also to the irrational souls, to the living creatures which fly through the air or walk the earth, those that live in the waters, the amphibians as well as those which are burrowed in the ground, in short, every sentient and living being. They all have soul and life because of the existence of the Good. And the plants too have nourishment and life and motion from this same Good. So also with soulless and lifeless matter. It is there because of the Good; through it they received their state of existence.”¹⁴⁶

Despite Denys’ reluctance to speak of the non-human world, he believes that its being subsists directly in the divine. This implies a direct connectedness between the non-human and God which does not require humanity’s participation. Louth identifies this as a significant departure from Neoplatonism:

“If the hierarchies mediate *everything* we receive from the Source of all – being, life, intelligence – then to ascend to the One is to recapitulate the procession *through* the hierarchies. If, however, we are created immediately by God, and it is only the light of revelation we receive through the hierarchies, then we can be united to God by responding to his immediate act of creation. God’s creative act is seen by Denys as an act of his ecstatic love: God goes out of himself, while remaining himself, in love in the act of creation.”¹⁴⁷

Thus everything, Denys believes, has a direct and essential link to God in its being.

Furthermore, as Louth argues, every part of creation must respond to God’s creative love in order to find full union with God. It is interesting to note that although Denys is reluctant to talk of non-human creation he

¹⁴⁶ Denys, *Divine Names* (PG 3:696CD), p. 73.

¹⁴⁷ Louth, *Denys*, p. 106.

nevertheless describes it with some breadth, providing a list which seems to be an attempt to summarise and encompass the entire non-human order. He does this because he wishes to show the efficacy of God's goodness in upholding and sustaining the world. In other words, Denys isn't actually interested in explaining why the non-human world exists but in conveying the glory of the divine name Good, yet to do so he briefly dwells on the scope and variety of the world. He does so because he sees the divine Good reflected and great extent of the world around him.

This claim is supported by a sentence from elsewhere in *The Divine Names*, which rather sums up everything that I have argued thus far: Denys states that God is "praised from all things according to their proportion from him as their cause".¹⁴⁸ Louth translates the clause 'according to their proportion' as 'according to the analogy' and he equates it with a platonic phrase.

"The Platonic qualification 'as far as possible' (*kata to dynaton*) has for Denys a precise meaning: it is the same as 'according to the analogy' (*kata tēn analogian*), where analogy means the aptitude of the creature to receive the divine, an aptitude given by God and perfected by the creature's co-operation with God."¹⁴⁹

In other words, not only is everything created by God but each thing is also directly sustained by its participation in God's being and this Denys describes as praise.

Nevertheless, Denys rarely speaks of the non-human world and doesn't draw attention to its particular praise. In fact, he seems rather unimpressed by creation's capacity to praise. In the following passage Denys is cautioning against understanding the descriptions of the heavenly creatures in Revelation literally. He warns of what would

¹⁴⁸ Denys, *Divine Names* (PG 3:872A), p. 109.

¹⁴⁹ Louth, *Denys*, p. 107.

happen if one were to assume that the descriptions, a number of which use animal imagery, were real depictions of celestial beings:

“One would likely then imagine then that the heavens beyond really are filled with bands of lions and horses, that the divine praises are, in effect, great moos, that flocks of birds take wing there or that there are other kinds of creatures all about or even more dishonourable things, whatever the completely dissimilar similarities of the revealing scriptures depict as tending toward the absurd, counterfeit, and emotional”¹⁵⁰

His point is simply that, despite the images used in the scriptures to describe the indescribable, the heavenly creatures are entirely unlike earthly ones. This, it seems to me, does not undermine the argument I have made thus far. It is unfortunate, however, that Denys is so vehement in his insistence that passages from Revelation should not be understood literally. The result is that Denys implies that the praise of animals has no place in heaven. Clearly my argument relies on the claim that the moos of cows (and indeed everything about their physical nature and behaviour) really are desired, heard and received by God as praise.

Furthermore, I have claimed that silence, the highest form of praise is available to all created things. This is, at best, an embellishment of Denys’ theology. For Denys that silence is the result of the human intellects attempts to understand God, the end of a process of considering and discarding the divine names and so ascending further toward the truth of God. Whilst I do not wish to lose Denys’ sense that true knowledge of the divine comes through contemplation, my argument requires something of an adaptation of his scheme to fit non-human creatures. I have to be able to suggest, then, that non-human creatures can participate in their own kind of movement towards the divine which, to some extent, mirrors the ascent of *The Divine Names*. The sense of reaching

¹⁵⁰ Denys, *Celestial Hierarchy* (PG 3:137CD), p. 148.

a unity with the divine being which is beyond language and knowledge should also apply to the non-human, though once again in a way which is proper to the non-human rather than comparable to the human. Denys provides a solid basis for understanding the non-human relation to the divine as unique and particular to each non-human being. He does not, however, offer much that will help us describe this relationship any further.

The upshot of all this is not to conclude that the argument I am making turns out to be in conflict with Denys theology, rather that I am taking elements of his work and developing them in directions that he may not have taken. In doing so we are faced with the problem not so much of what Denys did say but what he did not. There is no mention of non-human creation in the hierarchies; although non-humans are said to be sustained by God and, therefore, it is implied that they praise God, Denys seems to place little or no value in the non-human; there is certainly no consideration of whether non-human praise of God can exhibit the silence before the divine which is the true end of praise.

I turn now to the second difficulty, which may be described more briefly. Simply put, might we not conclude that Denys is not Christian enough? Might we not agree with Karl Barth that Denys' work represents "a hardly veiled Platonism," which speaks of God in entirely inappropriate ways?¹⁵¹ In particular it may seem that Christ is nearly absent from the work of Denys. Yet Louth argues that Christ's action lies behind Denys' entire scheme since his scheme is finally liturgical and sacramental.¹⁵² In his discussion of the sacrament of ointment in *The Ecclesial Hierarchy*, Denys makes it clear that Christ is the source of a 'divine fragrance' which, through the sacrament, flows throughout the hierarchies:

¹⁵¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), II/1 § 31. p. 651.

¹⁵² Louth, *Denys*, p. 74.

“Jesus is the rich source of the divine fragrances. In a manner appropriate to the divinity he turns to those minds which have achieved the closest conformity to God and he bestows on them an outpouring of divine fragrances to delight the intelligence, to cause a longing for God’s gifts, and to feed our conceptual food. Each intellectual power is granted these fragrant outpourings in proportion to whatever part it has in the divine.”¹⁵³

Furthermore, it is particularly Christ’s incarnation that consecrates the hierarchies and allows them to be blessed by the divine fragrance. More than this, in Christ, who became one of us, the hierarchies are purified and offered to God: “For it is on Jesus himself, our most divine altar, that there is achieved the divine consecration of intelligent beings. In him, as scripture says, ‘we have access’ to consecration and are mystically offered as a holocaust.” Thus Louth comments, “Jesus is the source and end of all hierarchies, hierarchy is therefore subordinated to him”.¹⁵⁴

Yet it remains the case that Christ is mentioned sparingly in the Dionysian corpus. Even Louth notes that the hierarchies seem to undermine Christ as our direct means of access to God the Father:

“The principle of hierarchy seems to be at once a means by which all that Jesus achieves in the incarnation is made effective among men and women and available to them, but also seems to place a distance between God and mankind: there are intermediaries and their mediation is strictly observed.”¹⁵⁵

Furthermore, as much as there may be a question here regarding humanity’s direct access to God through Christ, we are again confronted by the absence of the non-human from Denys’ thought. The achievements of Christ, given to us in the hierarchies, are given to the ‘intelligent beings.’ There is no mention of the rest of creation and whether it has any

¹⁵³ Denys, *The Ecclesial Hierarchy* (PG 3:480A), in Luijckheide and Paul Rorem (eds. and trans.), *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 228.

¹⁵⁴ Louth, *Denys*, p. 74.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

connection to the divine through the work of Christ is unclear. Perhaps, once again, we are confronted with the problem of what Denys does not say. Why is Christ so essential to the hierarchies? We know that Christ is at the heart of the divine mystery but what, precisely, is it that Christ does that makes him so central to Denys' vision of the universe? Are human beings directly connected to God in Christ? Can this connection be extended to include the rest of creation?

Thus we are able to state our two difficulties more clearly. Firstly we note that Denys has little interest in the non-human parts of Earth. On occasion his language about it can seem fairly denigrating but we should remember that its function is to emphasise the absolute transcendence of the divine rather than the insignificance of the material. As I have explained in the introduction, this thesis will explicitly accept various elements of Christian tradition, such as an absolute distinction between God and the world, which other writers have found troublesome. As such this element of Denys' theology does not have to trouble us.

What is a problem, however, what will require us to look beyond Denys to further our argument, is the fact that Denys does not consider what particular worth the non-human might have. It seems to me that, given Denys' insistence on God's direct creation of every thing and the subsistence of every thing in God, that each thing ought to have its own particular place in the cosmic scheme. Precisely because this place must be different to that of the inhabitants of the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchy it must be particular to the non-human and worthy of investigation. Secondly, we need to make sure that a Neoplatonic scheme of emanation and return can be properly Christian. This requires a stronger Christology – it needs to be clear that this scheme cannot work without the incarnation of Jesus Christ. There are hints in Denys that Christ lies behind his entire scheme but a fuller Christology needs to be drawn.

I intend to address these concerns with the help of Maximus the Confessor and Thomas Aquinas. In doing so my emphasis is not on a defence of Denys – I have expressed above my desire to allow Denys to stand as he is, whatever the consequences – rather, I intend to develop my own argument, which is inspired by Denys, in such a way that I might avoid these potential pitfalls. I turn first to the second of these difficulties, that of Christology, and to the work of Maximus. This will allow me to put in place some important elements of my argument before proceeding to discuss the first problem, that of the denigration of the non-human, with the help of St Thomas.

St Maximus the Confessor

Thus we come to Maximus the Confessor. With his help we will take the spark of an idea, inspired by Denys, and develop it. Maximus (580-662) was born only fifty years after Denys came to the attention of Christian writers, yet the Dionysian corpus had a profound influence upon him.¹⁵⁶ Louth believes not only that Denys provides the ‘cosmic framework’ for Maximus but that, “in his own theological reflection he works out in greater – and more practical – detail what in Denys is often not much more than splendid and inspiring rhetoric”.¹⁵⁷

Maximus believed that each thing has its own particular *logos*, its own way of being, which is derived from God. Maximus writes,

“The *logoi* of all things known by God before their creation are securely fixed in God. They are in him who is the truth of all things. Yet all these things, things present and things to come, have not

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Louth, ‘Introduction’ in id. (ed.), *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 29.

¹⁵⁷ Louth, *Maximus*, p. 31.

been brought into being contemporaneously with their being known by God; rather each was created in an appropriate way according to its *logos* at the proper time according to the wisdom of the maker, and each acquired concrete actual existence in itself.”¹⁵⁸

Thus, with Maximus’ help, we may develop Denys’ claim that all things owe their being to God. For Maximus, all things exist because there are ideas conceived in the divine mind that have been given concrete existence in creation. Both parts of this formulation are given weight in Maximus’ cosmic vision. He takes seriously the existence of the *logos* of each particular thing eternally in God’s mind; he also takes seriously the making actual of those *logoi* in the concrete particularities of nature.

Maximus understands the *logoi* as given concrete existence by God but he does not understand this simply as a matter of bare instantiation. Rather, it is a movement from and to God. He understands each *logos*, firstly, as becoming existent, becoming a being, through the creative act of God. Secondly, having been brought into being by God it therefore has a natural reciprocal movement back towards God (though this movement is misdirected by the fall). Finally, the movement of each being will lead it to final rest in God; the goal of all created things is unity with God’s own self and the rest that this brings. This three stage scheme, becoming-movement-rest, thus describes the basic character of existence of all beings.¹⁵⁹ The *logoi* come into existence in motion towards God where they will find their final rest. Thus, “every kind of being is moved, except for the sole cause which is unmoved and transcends all things”.¹⁶⁰

Since all things that have come to be are in movement towards God from the moment of their coming to be, Maximus is able to say that this

¹⁵⁸ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 7 (PG 91:1081A), in Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (eds. and trans.), *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St Maximus the Confessor* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003) p. 56-7.

¹⁵⁹ Maximus develops this scheme as a correction of Origen. Origen’s own scheme, rest-movement-becoming is inverted by Maximus. This relatively simple change is highly significant since it identifies the movement of beings as towards God rather than away. Cf. Maximus, *Ambiguum* 7 (PG 91:1068D-1101C), p. 45-74, and also the introduction of the volume in which it appears.

¹⁶⁰ Maximus, *Ambiguum* 10 (PG 91:1177A) in Louth (ed. and trans.), *Maximus the Confessor*, p. 137.

movement is entirely natural. All created things have movement towards God written into their very being and this movement is inalienable. Whatever the consequences of the fall in skewing this movement, Maximus is profoundly optimistic about creation: "No creature has ever ceased using the inherent power that directs it towards its end, nor has it ceased the natural activity that impels it towards its end."¹⁶¹ Thus Hans Urs von Balthasar comments that, in Maximus' cosmos, all things are inherently good: "Since [creation's] natural motion ... is directed towards a goal, and since that goal cannot be anything else than God, its origin, the underlying orientation of nature must have goodness written into its being."¹⁶²

It is in this orientation towards God that we begin to see that the particularity of each thing is essential to Maximus' scheme. It is not just the case that every being moves towards God but that each moves towards God in its own particular way: "If the movement of things that have come into being is of intellectual things it is intellectual movement, and if it is of sensible things, it is sensible movement."¹⁶³ .

Not only is the being of each thing fixed in God but the particular existence of this being is also differentiated from other existent beings by God. Just as each thing is given to exist at its own particular time so it is given to exist in its own particular way: "For all created things are defined, in their essence and in their way of developing, by their own *logoi* and by the *logoi* of the beings that provide their external context. Through these *logoi* they find their defining limits."¹⁶⁴

Furthermore, Maximus believed that due to the, "infinite difference and variety of things," it is certainly the case that, "the one Logos is many

¹⁶¹ Maximus, *Ambiguum* 7 (PG 91:1073B), p. 50.

¹⁶² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 147.

¹⁶³ Maximus, *Ambiguum* 7 (PG 91:1072A), p. 47.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* (PG 91:1081B), p. 57.

logoi”.¹⁶⁵ Thus, through their *logoi* all things are related to the one divine Logos. In fact, Maximus’ entire scheme is dependent upon the work of the divine Logos. For Maximus, therefore, the Logos holds the key to understanding the universe; it “holds the secret to the foundations – the architectural *logoi* – of the created cosmos.”¹⁶⁶ For each created thing, we find in its bearing of its own *logos* a trace of the divine Logos. It is because each thing bears in its own way a trace of the divine Logos that each thing accordingly participates in God in its own particular way.

The crucial point here is that it is only because there is one uncreated divine Logos that there can be many divinely created *logoi*, only because there is one uncreated divine Logos that those *logoi* form a unity, an ordered whole. As Lars Thunberg comments, “the principles of differentiation and unity are inseparable in Maximus’ theology of the *logoi*.” Because of the Logos the *logoi* are both united in God and differentiated from one another.

Each particular, historical thing is, by virtue of possessing a *logos*, striving towards the transcendent and all-encompassing Logos, and communicates something of the Logos in its own particular, historical way. For Maximus, therefore, the material world is not an ungodly diversion, a place where the spirit awaits its escape to its true destiny. Rather, it is by turning towards material existence, the particular *logoi* which have been God’s gifts to the creatures around it, and to itself, that the creature encounters the transcendent reality of the one divine Logos.

Von Balthasar explains:

“In the *logos*, then, all the individual ideas and goals of creatures meet: therefore all of them, if they seek their own reality, must love him and must encounter each other in love. This is why Christ is the original idea, the underlying figure of God’s plan for the world,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. (PG 91:1077C), p. 54.

¹⁶⁶ Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken, ‘Introduction’ in id. (ed. and trans.) *Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, p. 13-43 (p. 20).

why all the individual lines arrange themselves concentrically around him.”¹⁶⁷

Thus, all things are oriented towards God within their own created way of being. Yet their final goal lies beyond this way of being, it lies in the divine Logos who sums up all being. Every created thing is being reaching out to being beyond its own particular being; all creatures are more than they appear to be because they have their end outside of themselves.

Thus we begin to recover something of the importance of the particularity of every single created thing, something which, perhaps, Denys’ loses in his fascination with the grandeur of the created hierarchies. In Maximus we see the intimate and particular touch of the divine on every single thing and we recall the psalmists’ fascination with encompassing all living things in their rhetoric. In drawing together Maximus and the psalmists we see the uncommon grandeur of the commonplace, we discern the epic in the everyday.

There is one further crucial element of Maximus’ cosmology that we must bring out briefly here before discussing in greater depth in chapter 4. As we may note in the passage from von Balthasar quoted above, it is not simply the eternal Logos which gives particularity to beings but it is the eternal Logos incarnate in the person of Christ. Thunberg comments: “On the one hand [created, differentiated things] are summarised in the Logos; it belongs to the very nature of the Logos, on the other hand, that he wills to become flesh, to be incarnate, which is also to say, differentiated.”¹⁶⁸

Because the Logos has become incarnate in Christ, it is only in relation to Christ that each created thing fulfils its movement toward God. Therefore, to exist and to possess a *logos*, is already to be oriented to final consummation of that existence in Christ, and Christ’s incarnation

¹⁶⁷ Von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, p. 133.

¹⁶⁸ Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Lund: Håkan Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1956), p. 80.

anticipates that final consummation. "By revealing the Logos as the secret heart of the world, Christ's Incarnation reveals the world's communion with God, in whom its diverse natures already abide."¹⁶⁹

The cosmic focus of Maximus' theology means that his Christology has implications wider than humanity alone, and his vision of the theophanic cosmos is finally an eschatological and a Christological one. It is in the ultimate glorification and raising of Christ to God that all things are raised in Christ to God; the incarnation completes what is begun in creation. This does not nullify the difference and particularity of created things, rather it achieves that for which this difference and particularity was created: the complete and undiminished glory of God. Thunberg comments:

"Unification without annihilation is thus indeed the divine purpose itself. It has been prepared in creation by the diversification of the Logos ... and it has been brought to a victorious conclusion by Christ's unification, not only of what had been torn asunder by sin, but also of that which was naturally differentiated."¹⁷⁰

All of this is possible because the divine Logos became incarnate, uniting divine and human natures without confusing the two. The final uniting of all things in God, without the destruction of their particularity, is already anticipated in Christ in whom humanity and divinity are united without the destruction of either.¹⁷¹

Thus, with the help of Maximus, we have taken important steps forward. We have provided a Christological foundation for a scheme which remains recognisably Dionysian. More than this, we have begun to see how the particularity of every single created thing is grounded in God. Every single thing, from rocks to elephants, has its existence because it is an expression of God's own being. Thus it is not only in the grand order of things but also in the particular existence of things that creation's identity is

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 82.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 83.

¹⁷¹ Maximus' dogged defence of the Chalcedonian definition is, therefore, central to his cosmology. This is discussed at length in chapter four.

found. Maximus' cosmos is still the Christianized Neoplatonic vision of a cosmos which radiates from and returns to its divine centre but his cosmos also finds its being in the particularities of the individual substances of which it consists.

Recalling the unflagging and undiminished call of creation in Psalm 19 the great scope and power of creation to voice God's praise comes into view. We also remember the great mystery of that voice, its inaccessibility to humanity. Yet Psalm 19 does not suggest that creation's voice falls entirely on deaf ears, rather that it is a mystery which draws in those who have found the truth of God in the Torah. As a Christian reader of the psalms I work with the assumption that the Torah is summed up and fulfilled in the purpose of Christ. Reading this psalm in conversation with Maximus, therefore, we may suggest that it is the work of Christ which draws together the praise of all creation.

Each thing is created, in all its diverse particularity through the Logos and subsists in God through Christ. Furthermore, we begin to see that the work of Christ might draw together the human and the non-human, the work of Christ might allow us to hear the call of creation to praise God.

There is much more to say on this subject and Maximus will reappear in the final chapter of this thesis. However, for the present we will leave this path unexplored as we complete our consideration of what it means for creation to praise God by being itself. There is one final stage of the present argument to be made. This diverse particularity of created beings, emanating from God and returning to God, constitutes creation's praise of God. But what makes creation's praise really creation's own offering of praise to God? Since everything is what it is because of God is it not the case that creation simply reflects God in a passive way? We have already the beginning of an answer to this and it lies in the return of all created things to God. God does not simply create inert things but things which have their own inherent movement back towards God. In other

words, we have considered in some detail the emanation of things from God, now, with the help of Thomas Aquinas, we consider their return.

St Thomas Aquinas

Thus we come to Thomas Aquinas for the final part of my argument. Thomas is the most prolific of the theologians I am considering in this section and his theology is the widest ranging and most comprehensive. I will not, therefore, attempt to give an overview of his theology nor even attempt to give an overview of what an ecological Thomas might look like. Thomas is also the most influential of the theologians I have discussed thus far. The extent of his influence is, in itself, a reason to attempt to address his work.

I have stated that I wish to construct a theology which is situated within the main stream of Christian thought and Thomas' place in that tradition is surely secure. I find Thomas' theology to be an enormous source of inspiration and I want to show that the argument I have made up to this point resounds within the thought of this important Christian thinker. On a more practical note, I wish to use Thomas to help complete my argument, making one final claim: that all things have an inherent movement towards God and that this movement is not something that they passively undergo but something they actively undertake.

To begin, let us establish the way in which Thomas affirms the scheme we have already built in discussion with Denys and Maximus. Denys, in fact, was a significant influence upon Thomas and Thomas had also read Plato. Thus Thomas' theology assumes the basic scheme of emanation and return from the one divine source. God, Thomas argues, is

the only self-subsisting being, that is to say that God's being is guaranteed by nothing other than God's own existence. God simply is.¹⁷²

Only God is self-subsistent and all other beings are characterised by the fact of their being subsisting in God's being. Therefore, in the section of the *Summa* where he discusses divine governance of the world he argues against any who might doubt the necessity of God for any part of creation's being: "The being of every creature depends on God, so that not for a moment could it subsist, but would fall into nothingness were it not kept in being by the operation of the Divine power."¹⁷³

Just as in the work of Denys, things are created directly by God and rely on God for their continued existence. God, exercising divine power, works continually to keep the created order in place. This being the case, God's creative act is not a one off event but a continual act. Every created thing owes its continued existence, its very being, to God. Thomas writes that "all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation".¹⁷⁴

Not only does each thing owe its existence to God but, simply by virtue of its existence, each thing participates in the divine, each thing has a share in the very being of God. Thus, Thomas states, God is the first cause of all things. God is that without which nothing would exist or have any being.

Thus we have come a long way in our attempt to consider what it is for creation to praise God. The psalmists envision creation's praise as consisting in its being ordered and particular. With the help of Thomas we may now add to that conviction the belief that every single thing is not only ordered within the creation but ordered directly to God in its very being. Creation praises God by participating in God.

¹⁷² Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (London: R. & T. Washburne, Ltd, 1911), Ia 3.4.

¹⁷³ Ibid. Ia 104.1.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. Ia 44.1.

This participation of all things in God is strongly emphasised by Thomas and, like Denys, he links it to God's goodness.

"He brought things into being so that His goodness might be communicated to creatures and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures... For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever."¹⁷⁵

Thus it is for goodness that beings are made, they are made so that they may display the glory of God. Moreover, no single creature could adequately reflect God's glory and so a diverse creation was brought into being. It may be that human beings are particularly created in the image of God but they cannot reflect God's glory alone as well as can the entire congregation of God's creative works.

Yet this does not mean that goodness is some quality which is imparted to creatures by God, goodness is not, as it were, the divine maker's mark stamped onto creation. Rather, goodness is the continual result of creation's ongoing relationship with God. Goodness is closely linked to being and functions in a similar way. Just as the being of things rests in God's being so too does the goodness of things rest in God's goodness. Thomas quotes Boethius to say that "all things but God are good by participation".¹⁷⁶ Only God is truly good but this does not mean that the good of created things is illusory, rather, all things are saturated in God's goodness. Creation is not simply touched by God's goodness but is created, in all its diversity, in goodness. Thus each part of the creation participates in God as a whole and in the same way, by goodness, yet in a differentiated way, each according to its own being.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. Ia 47.1.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. Ia 6.3.

This means that goodness in creation is not an abstract quality but is found in the particular natures of created things. In other words the goodness of a ring-tailed lemur is particular to that animal and consists in it having ringed markings on its tail, its agility, its originating in Madagascar and so on. Thomas calls the particular form of goodness in each created thing its perfection. In fact, Thomas describes perfection in this threefold way: "Everything is good according to its perfection. Perfection of a thing is threefold: first, according to the constitution of its own being; second, according as any accidents are added for its perfect operation; third, perfection consists in the attaining to something else as the end."¹⁷⁷ Every created thing is good firstly in that it exists as a particular being, distinct from others; secondly in that this being has properties which are particular to it, such as the properties of the Lemur given above; thirdly in that it finds its purpose in something that is not one of its properties. This third perfection is the one to which we must now pay attention.

All living things strive for their immanent ends, towards all the things that characterise their lives as good. God's goodness is seen in God's creation by the beings which God has created moving towards these goals. All of these various goals, however, are not the final end, the true *telos*, of beings. Rather, the final end of all created things is God: "He is not ordered to anything else as his end; but he himself is the end of all things."¹⁷⁸

Thus we see again the pattern found in Thomas' discussions of being and goodness: God is the only being without an end which is outside itself, all other beings find their *telos* in God. This is not at odds, however, with each creature's desire to achieve its own particular ends. Rather, by moving towards its contingent end creation strains beyond that

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

end towards its final divine *telos*. Thomas writes “every creature intends to acquire its own perfection, which is the likeness of the divine perfection and goodness. Therefore the divine goodness is the end of all things.”¹⁷⁹ So, to sum up our line of thought thus far, Thomas believes that God is both the first cause and final *telos* of all things. God creates all things and their beings subsist in him. In creating God imparts his goodness to all things; this means both that they participate in goodness and strive towards goodness as the perfection of their beings. God as the one true good is thus their ultimate *telos*. This is a vision of God as truly *alpha* and *omega*, as first cause and final *telos*. It is a vision of creation as dynamic and growing, a vision of creation as divine action striving towards a divine goal.

This brings us to an important innovation of Thomas, namely his incorporation of Aristotelian metaphysics into a Christian scheme. Recently re-discovered works of Aristotle fired Thomas’ imagination and their influence is felt throughout his work. We cannot do justice here to the wealth of this work but only attend briefly to one particular feature, that of motion. In the famous Five Ways, situated at the beginning of the *Summa*, Thomas’ first proof of the existence of God is from motion. Thomas claims that all things move but nothing can be the final cause of its own movement. The final cause of movement must, therefore, be God, the unmoved mover. Movement, here, is understood in a broad sense and means, “the reduction of something from a state of potentiality into a state of actuality”.¹⁸⁰ Movement, then, implies change, development; the example Thomas gives is that of wood catching fire – wood contains the potential to be hot, this potentiality becomes actual when it is moved to become hot by fire. Movement in things is caused by another thing producing that movement, just as the movement in the wood is caused by

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. Ia 44.4.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. Ia 2.3.

fire, fire itself, in turn, has been put in motion by something else. This is why God is the source of all movement, for this chain of motion cannot be infinite, there must be something which moves things at the beginning which is not, itself, moved.

It is important to understand that this way of thinking is an ancient kind of science and rather different from science as it is understood today. One could, of course, compare it to modern scientific thought and, no doubt, find it rather lacking. However, that would miss the point. Thomas looks around him and sees a world full of activity, full of wonderful growth and change. This is a world with much potential and a huge amount of this potential is fulfilled. This, Thomas reasons, cannot be self-perpetuating; there must be some reason, some ultimate cause for the flourishing of the world. This then is what it means to be: to be created by God and set in motion; this motion is from, through and towards goodness; it has its contingent ends in the flourishing of the world and it has its final end in participation in God's goodness and God's very being.

To say that motion is fundamental to the flourishing of being may seem odd to modern ears. However, I believe that it is an extremely helpful way to think about the nature of everything that exists. The task of this chapter is to produce a credible explanation of what it means for the entire creation to praise God. For this to be a truly universal definition it must be applicable to everything that exists within creation. It seems to me that motion, change and flourishing, does this very well. It is clear that living things possess movement, including plants which grow, reproduce and recycle carbon dioxide.

Those parts of creation which we would not describe as living, however, also possess movement; they are shaped by constant change. Water and nitrogen cycles, tides and currents – the earth is characterised by movement, by change and development. On a universal scale, in fact, nothing would be as it is, were it not for rotation and orbit. This is not to

claim that Thomas anticipated the discoveries of Enlightenment science but to say that a vision of creation which, inspired by Thomas, is characterised by change, movement and flourishing resonates with the way that we tend to envision the natural world.

We are now beginning to see our response to the problem of the denigration of the non-human. I have developed the scheme, taking inspiration from Thomas, to suggest that every single created thing is connected to God in the most direct way and that every created thing is necessary in order to better reflect the glory of God. Furthermore, given the way in which created things participate in God's goodness by their very being, it is, hopefully, beginning to be clear that it would be inadequate to describe creation's role in this as merely passive. There is, however, one more piece of the argument to be gained from Aquinas which should settle that matter.

Thomas refers to creation's orientation towards God, on every level, as desire:

*"All things, by desiring their own perfection, desire God himself, inasmuch as the perfections of all things are so many similitudes of the divine being ... And so of those things which desire God, some know him as he is himself, and this is proper to the rational creature: others know some participation of his goodness, and this belongs to sensible knowledge: others, have a natural desire without knowledge, as being directed to their ends by a higher intelligence."*¹⁸¹

Creation's movement towards God is a movement of desire. It is, I would argue, significant that Thomas ascribes desire to the non-human creation, and even, it would seem, to the non-animal creation, to the insensible things which have no knowledge. Recalling what we have said about understanding of God in the previous chapter, we may remember that desire is that which compels the human soul to search for God.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. Ia 6.1.

Human beings, prompted by desire, turn their whole beings towards God and receive participation in the divine. Thus desire is the starting point for the souls journey into God, as Rowan Williams observes: “Understanding culminates in the union of knower and object, and this is an occasion of ‘delight’; and it begins because of a willed search, a ‘feeling around’ for an adequate object, an *appetito*, a desire to be completed by an *other*.”¹⁸²

This desire, this willed search, Thomas attributes to all things and thus makes clear that the movement of things to God, and the glory which this movement brings to God, is not passively undergone by creation but is a real operation of its being. This is not to say that Thomas ascribes human characteristics to non-humans, quite the contrary. He is clear that different kinds of beings desire God in ways that are appropriate to their natures yet this is, nevertheless, to be understood as desire.

Thus, with Thomas’ help, we have been able to develop our argument to fully encompass every part of creation. We may now state that everything praises God by being itself. By being itself we mean that it is created, in goodness, by God and, in desiring the fulfilment of its being, to return to God. This is perhaps best summed up by Thomas himself in a passage where he goes so far as to attribute love of God to inanimate objects:

“Now the fellowship of natural gifts bestowed on us by God is the foundation of natural love, in virtue of which not only man, so long as his nature remains unimpaired, loves God above all things and more than himself, but also every single creature, each in its own way, i.e. either by an intellectual, or by a rational, or at least by a natural love, as stones do, for instance, and other things bereft of knowledge.”¹⁸³

¹⁸² Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), p. 127.

¹⁸³ St Thomas, *ST IIa IIae* 26.3.

We have now reached the point of being able to say with great confidence and significance that creation truly does praise God by being itself.

We have done so with the help of Thomas' vision of the nature of created beings. However, I hope that Thomas has done more for us than simply providing the final pieces of the argument. My hope is that, in proposing this definition of creation's praise, I have offered a vision of the universe which is not simply credible but may actually be inspiring to Christians. As I argue in its introduction, I do not wish this thesis to simply provide more reasons why Christians should treat the environment with greater care; Christians need something other than a new set of sins to add to their list of things to feel guilty about. Rather, Christians need to feel that creation is really worth preserving, that it provides something more than merely diminishing amounts of food, fuel and furniture. I have turned to these three authors because they offer Christians not a picture of responsibility but a vision of cosmic opportunity. It seems to me that Thomas' scheme is at the very pinnacle of these cosmic visions.

Thomas, I believe, offers an elegant, beautiful and, above all, truthful vision of God. There is an intricacy in Thomas' work, a delicate completeness, which seems to touch upon every aspect of created existence. Yet, for all the great scope of his work Thomas seems always to be talking about God, for Thomas any question that can ever be asked is finally a question about the nature of God. This gives his work an extraordinary brilliance of clarity. Thomas' vision of the universe is one in which God is truly *Alpha* and *Omega*.

This is, admittedly, a rather intangible quality and I can only hope that it is not entirely lost in my descriptions of Thomas' theology. Yet if it is at all possible to borrow something of this quality from Thomas it will go a very long way towards helping this thesis achieve its aim. For I believe that it is the work of the theologian to try to say something true

about God. The nonhuman creation is the subject of this thesis and I hope that it will resonate in this context of environmental crisis. However it seems to me that theology should not take questions, concerns and commitments about the world and attempt to fit God into them. If a theologian wishes to say something useful about the world then they must first say something true about God.

Conclusion

What, then, is it that we have said about God? Let us attempt a summary: from the psalmists we have gained the conviction that God is the object of creation's praise. God is the one who binds all of creation together, guaranteeing its flourishing and diversity. God is the one who defends creation against the threat of chaos. God is the subject of the ever-flowing mysterious speech of creation, audible to those who have ears to hear.

From Denys we have gained a vision of God as the mystical source of the created order. In his writings we begin to see the possibility of a theology of creation which is not satisfied to simply make statements about creation but wishes, in some measure, to reach towards and participate in the movement of creation out of and back towards its divine source. From Maximus we have gained the strong and resounding conviction that the divine Logos is the unmatched turning point of all existence. Maximus' theology shows us a God who is active in God's creation on the most individual and particular of scales.

Finally, Thomas draws all of this together showing us a God who is above all and yet in all - a God who breathes life and motion into all things. The response of praise given by creation is truly its own and emanates from its own intentionality. As Thomas states, "The young ravens are said to call upon God, on account of the natural desire whereby

all things, each in its own way, desire to attain the divine goodness".¹⁸⁴ Creation, in other words, praises God by being itself.

As Artur Weiser claims in his commentary on Psalm 148, "The glorification of the Creator and Preserver of the world fulfils the ultimate depth of meaning which unites the inanimate created things and the living creatures in a mutual relationship; to praise the sole majesty of God is the final goal which unites the whole universe in a communion of God's service."¹⁸⁵ This offers the refreshing chance to view creation's purpose and identity as grounded in the person and actions of God. This could provide a fresh dogmatic basis for ethical discussion which, because it begins with God instead of us, provides a context for discussions about our positive and negative exploitation of the environment rather than that exploitation being the entire discussion. Non-human creation is able to live once more, having an identity outside of our current wranglings over what we should and shouldn't do to it.

There are now two further questions which will be addressed in the third and fourth chapters respectively. Firstly, it may be asked what the relationship may be between creation's praise and the suffering and death which pervade its life. Secondly, it may be noted that this scheme is one of movement. Of creation being drawn into the life of God. How is this movement to reach fulfilment, and what will it mean for creation to find union with God? Answering these questions will, I hope, not only protect the viability of my thesis but also deepen its understanding of creation's praise.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. IIa IIae 83.10

¹⁸⁵ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 837.

Chapter 3

Introduction

Creation praises God by being itself, creation's being itself consists in its orientation towards God; in its orientation towards God creation participates in God's goodness; in participating in God's goodness in all its diversity creation praises God. Thus concluded the previous chapter of this thesis and the first step of my argument. Creation's praise is intrinsic to its being. It is not contingent, it is not a feature of its character which may not have been or could ever not be. Creation's praise is not an activity which it may or may not undertake, nor is it a process which it passively undergoes. Rather, praise is at once the most basic and most complex aspect of creation's identity; it is both the root and blossom of its life. Praise is basic in that it is absolutely essential and fundamentally the same in all things. We cannot imagine a being which does not praise any more than we can imagine a being without extension in time and space. Yet praise is also the most complex element of creation because it is the sum of every wonderful particularity in the cosmos; praise is given by everything that makes a being uniquely itself.

Creation's praise is to be identified with its goodness, every good from the simplicity of a grain of sand to the complexity of a rainforest ecosystem. All this goodness is received from God and it radiates back to God in praise. We human beings observe creation's praise every time we recognise the goodness of the non-human world. We also miss creation's praise on occasions when we fail to see the goodness of the non-human world and in those places where we have not yet discovered how to see it.

Upon considering this scheme, however, we are presented with a problem. This harmonious image of a praising creation is fractured by

suffering and death. Life is hard and disease, scarcity of food, severity of weather and many other factors cause animals' lives to be characterised by suffering. The end of life need not, perhaps, present a problem in itself. It is not given to living things to be eternal (for only God is eternal) and, in time, they run their course upon Earth. Yet things do not simply blink out of existence, rather death comes as the end and death is often callous and brutal.

The example which comes most readily to mind is that of predation, for animal life as we know it is impossible without the food chain. Wild-eyed prey are brought down and torn apart, every nerve in crisis. A less dramatic end awaits the predator which does not find its prey: with each organ slowly shutting down it simply stops but this should not lead us to imagine that its suffering is not great. The problem this raises, in short, is that there are many aspects of creatures' lives, of their being themselves, which do not seem to be a participation in God's goodness. If this is the case then how can these things be a part of their praise?

One might wish to respond to this problem with an account of evil as privation, claiming that the evil which creation experiences is due to its being turned away from its orientation towards God. In this case it would praise from the goodness of its being but that praise would sit alongside the problems of a corrupted existence. Such a response is going to be problematic, however, because the goods and harms within creation do not simply 'sit alongside' one another. Beyond predation and misfortune, suffering and death are written deeper still into the identity of the biosphere. The discoveries that began with Darwin's work have allowed us to understand the centrality of natural selection to the evolution of the Earth as we know it and such a process inevitably relies upon suffering and death. Those animals which are too weak, not fast enough, not tall

enough, not clever enough or not resistant enough to disease simply don't survive. In this way not only individuals but entire species are lost.

Species go to great lengths to survive the ordeal of living and many of these methods, stunningly captured on film and accompanied by a stirring orchestral score, strike us as caring or even heroic. Yet other species have survival strategies that would make less family-friendly viewing. Holmes Rolston gives the example of the white pelican's 'insurance chick', this being a second hatchling existing solely as a back up should the first chick fail to survive. Once the first chick has gained its strength the parents stop feeding the insurance chick. The first hatchling drives the second out of the nest and it falls to its death.¹⁸⁶ Organisms have been forced to fight, across millennia, for their survival and so the natural history of the Earth is a history of suffering. Rolston writes: "Written deep into the nature of the planetary drama, struggle deepens through time into suffering. We eat our bread with tears".¹⁸⁷

Careful consideration of the suffering and death which an evolving biosphere contains reveals that they are more than a stain upon creation's goodness. Suffering and death are not merely the enemies against which organisms must fight; they are intrinsic to the flourishing and diversity of the biosphere. Since natural selection brings about fecundity it is problematic to suggest that evil enters to corrupt an otherwise perfect creation. Suffering and death are the cause of good things within the biosphere, not just their enemy. To claim that they are interlopers in a divine creation fails to recognise the essential part they play in the development of creation.

In other words, particular things are only what they are because of the trials they face and because of the unimaginably long history of suffering which precedes them. It is in the struggle to survive that beings

¹⁸⁶ Holmes Rolston III, *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), pp. 137-140.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 286.

develop all the particular goods associated with their forms. As Rolston puts it, “the cougar’s fang has carved the limbs of the fleet footed deer”.¹⁸⁸ It is because organisms are forced to adapt, forced to defend themselves, that the variety and potency of the biosphere has arisen. Thus as Christopher Southgate argues, “Darwin’s scheme both *extended* the narrative of creaturely suffering over vast spans of geological time, and *embedded* that suffering within the process by which value arose”.¹⁸⁹

Understanding the fires in which nature is refined leads to one uncomfortable conclusion: the Earth is good because of evil. Let us be clear about the importance of the word ‘because’ in the previous sentence – it implies some kind of causation. The Earth is not good *in spite of* evil. This is not a heroic tale of triumph over adversity. Rather, good things about the biosphere are present because of evil; death, suffering, life and flourishing are inextricably linked. It must also be accepted that this statement is applicable to the entire biosphere, including human beings. Human beings have evolved by the same process as every other living thing, and goods are present because of the evils through which humanity has evolved.

It seems, therefore, that I must make something of a revision in my talk of what it means for creation to ‘be itself’. A description of creation’s being which accounts neither for the way in which natural selection has shaped the form of that being nor for the way it continues apparently to be the central pattern of many creatures’ lives, will be shown to be incredible in the light of a Darwinian account of the formation of organisms. Thus, if creation praises God by being itself, we seem to face a particular problem when considering the praise of living beings. A Darwinian understanding of an evolving biosphere seems to imply that to call something good is

¹⁸⁸ Quoted in Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 2.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 10.

also to call it dependent upon evil since the two are bound up in one another.

This makes it very difficult to speak of evil as a privation of good. In fact, it seems to give evil an ontological priority, since it appears to be a condition of the good. Evolutionary evil would seem to prevent us from saying that creatures' being is wholly good and only good and that evil is secondary to their intrinsic goodness. The Neo-Platonic tradition, in which chapter two was set, understands God as the source of all goodness and understands the goodness of beings as participation in God. If there is some evil which is essential to creatures' being then there must be some part of their being that is not participating in God.

Thus we are left struggling to synthesise the various elements of our account. How can we hold, simultaneously, that God is wholly good, that the world is good by participation in God and that evil cannot be understood as merely a corruption of the good but must be recognised as intrinsically bound up in creation's good? Furthermore, how could this understanding of creation's being be understood as praise? The previous chapter defined praise as participation in the goodness of God. If creation's being is, even in part, defined by natural evil, then it becomes impossible to affirm that it praises God by being itself.

My task, then, is to find a way to deepen my claim about creation's praise in such a way that it can account for the thoroughgoing extent of natural evil. It must do so without giving natural evil an ontological foothold, since this would undermine my claim that creation's being is defined by its participation in God's goodness and in turn bring my claim that creation praises by being itself to a point of crisis. This chapter will attempt to address this challenge. I will begin by assessing the possibilities offered me by evolutionary theodicy as well as considering some recent criticisms of theodicy in general. This will lead me to accept some particular critiques and arguments of evolutionary theology but to pass

over it in the main as a solution to the questions at hand. Finally, I will attempt an answer of my own to those questions. I will endeavour to be responsive to the challenges raised by evolutionary theodicy yet, ultimately, offer a substantially different treatment of evolutionary evil.

Evolutionary Theodicy

The problems outlined above revolve around the broader problem of accounting for evil within Christian talk of a good God and a good world. The problem was summarised in the classic formulation of David Hume: "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"¹⁹⁰ The purpose of the discourse of theodicy and the hope of those who pursue it has been to solve this conundrum, to find a way to defend the attributes of God without denying the potency of evil. Theodicy, therefore, has developed as an apologetic discourse. It takes as its task the defence of God's goodness and power and the explanation of why belief in these attributes appears to be contradicted by the experience of evil.¹⁹¹ Indeed, some thinkers have concluded that such a defence is impossible and that the existence of evil disproves the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God.¹⁹²

Theodicists have been prompted by the experience of suffering and the problem has attracted much attention and passion due to the unavailability of this aspect of human life. Theodicy has, as a result, concentrated on the problem of human suffering and, therefore, the

¹⁹⁰ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp-Smith (London: Thomas Nelson, 1947), p. 198.

¹⁹¹ See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966); Alvin Plantinga, 'The Free Will Defence' in William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), pp. 217-230; Richard Swinburne, 'Natural Evil', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15: 4 (1978), pp. 295-301.

¹⁹² See J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

problem of natural evil (in as much as it affects human beings) and moral evil in general. The problems outlined above, however, bring a new force to bear upon the problem of natural evil specifically. This presents theodicy with a problem of evil which is committed not by wilful human aggression but simply by the natural processes of the planet. The potency of such a problem can only be increased by the recognition that evil is as thoroughly woven into the biosphere as Darwinian science attests. Darwin himself in fact wrote, "I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars".¹⁹³

In the light of this criticism it must be accepted that one of the mainstays of many theodicies, the free will defence, is rendered inert (as a response to non-human suffering at least), for it seems to be of little help in explaining the ichneumonidae or the white pelican's insurance chick. To do so one would not only have to argue convincingly that human freedom is a justifiable reason for God to allow moral evil but also that the presence of natural evil and its impact upon non-humans are somehow the result of that free will. If it were possible to make such an argument one still would not have gone very far towards addressing the heart of the problem raised above: that evolutionary evil is intrinsic to the flourishing of the biosphere.

There is also a further problem with identifying natural evil with human sin. To do so involves the conviction that the fall of Adam and Eve was a catastrophic event in which all humanity share complicity and which marks the entrance of evil into God's good creation. However, as Holmes Rolston states,

¹⁹³ Quoted in Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, p. 10. (Ichneumonidae inject their eggs into the larvae of other insects; when the eggs hatch they devour the larvae from within.)

“It is false to think (as earlier theologians did) that chronologically suffering entered the world after sin and on account of it. There was suffering in the world for long epochs before the human arrival, and in human history ample suffering continues that has no origin in sin”.¹⁹⁴

Quite simply, the fall cannot have resulted in suffering which existed before it occurred. This not only makes it impossible to blame non-human suffering upon human sin, but also any suffering which human beings endure of natural cause, since humanity is subject to the same evolutionary processes as any other organism.

Thus we come to the conclusion that non-human suffering cannot be explained by human sin. What alternative explanation may be offered? I turn now to consider the possibilities offered by evolutionary theodicy, in particular Christopher Southgate’s book *The Groaning of Creation*. As Rolston does, Southgate rejects the notion that humanity’s fall resulted in the interruption of a primordial paradise by suffering. He also rejects suggestions by Michael Lloyd and T.F. Torrance relating to what he terms ‘mysterious fallenness’. For Lloyd this consists of a separate fall of the non-human world, before humanity’s fall, caused by rebellious angels. In Torrance’s case it is a rather more subtle proposal which is reticent about the precise origin of creation’s fallenness but believes evil has given the non-human world a ‘malignant twist’.¹⁹⁵

Southgate believes that these proposals are impossible in the light of scientific understandings of the evolution of the biosphere. His concern, however, is not simply the possibility of overlooking an important contribution from the natural sciences but the possibility of making a mistake about the identity of creation. Southgate argues that to declare all natural evil to be extrinsic to the original perfection of the world “splits the creation awkwardly into ‘distorted’ bits and others,” and thus “seems

¹⁹⁴ Rolston, *Science and Religion*, p. 290.

¹⁹⁵ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, pp. 28-35.

dangerously like saving the theistic hypothesis by wheeling on a dualist world view whenever the going gets rough".¹⁹⁶ To deny the intrinsic nature of natural evil is a failure to recognise things as they really are. Such a move may be theologically convenient, but it risks the integrity of the biosphere. Whatever the true relationship might be between God and evil we cannot conclude that natural evil is contingent to the world. Suffering and death are so embedded in the goodness of the world that to disentangle them from a credible description of the biosphere would cause that description to collapse.

In contrast to those who appeal to fallenness, then, Southgate thinks that the evolutionary process has its own particular integrity. It cannot be dissected and dismantled, certain elements of it being judged to be something other than the result of God's creative act. Therefore, Southgate concludes, "Whatever processes science is able to understand as contributing to the complexity, life, richness of ability and diversity in life, and the growth of self-consciousness and freedom of choice, must be presumed to be the gift of God in creation".¹⁹⁷

At this point it may be objected that this seems to be a rather odd gift for God to bestow upon creation, and one which it might prefer to do without. Southgate is well aware of the implications of his claim and spells out that God's 'gift' includes, "the explosions of supernovae, the plate tectonic activity which gives rise to earthquakes and volcanoes, competition in living systems, predation, and, at higher levels of consciousness, the capacity for selfishness, exploitation, and manipulation".¹⁹⁸ Yet however odd such a claim may appear, Southgate is determined that it must be made, for any other conclusion is simply a denial of the way the world really is. Cougars hunt and kill deer and that makes both deer and cougars what they are, it defines the form of their

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 32.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 33.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 33.

being. It must, therefore, be the case that God chooses predation as the creative method by which the particular values of cougars and deer are achieved. Southgate is now faced with the task of defending the goodness of this God, of constructing a plausible evolutionary theodicy in the light of these conclusions.

Southgate, in fact, expands a little upon this task. He wishes to maintain that the God who created a world which is 'groaning in travail'¹⁹⁹ may be called good. More than this, he takes up David Hull's question of whether the God who creates an evolving biosphere may be considered worthy of worship. As I have noted above, this question is at the heart of my own task in the present chapter. If we are to attempt to retain the belief that God is good we need to ask what it might mean for God to be good. This is a question to which I will return; however, for the moment, Southgate's concern to defend the claim that God is worthy of worship is very helpful in giving content to the term.

Human and non-human beings may be called 'good' in ways that are appropriate to them but they may not be described as worthy of worship. God, however, is worthy of worship. In particular God is worthy of worship that is motivated not by fear and oppression but by love and freedom. As I have argued in the previous chapter, God is the object of worship towards which the being of all creation is turned. Therefore, we may begin to specify what it means for God to be good. God is good in that God is that which creation fixes upon as the source and fulfilment of all flourishing and fecundity. God is not *a* good but *the* good; to be alive is to strain towards participation in this good.

How can the creator of this evolving world be called good and worthy of worship? The first step in Southgate's argument is to propose his version of what he calls the 'only way argument'. This is the argument that "an evolving world was the only way in which God could give rise to

¹⁹⁹ The reference is to Romans 8:22.

the sort of beauty, diversity, sentience, and sophistication of creatures that the biosphere now contains".²⁰⁰ Thus, Southgate concludes, the way in which suffering and death are embedded in the biosphere and the extent to which they give rise to diversity and flourishing imply that God chose these harms in order to bring about good.

This means that there is a particular relationship between the goods and harms present in the biosphere such that good is not possible without harm. Southgate, drawing on a previous paper co-written with Andrew Robinson, describes different ways in which this relationship can be described, calling them 'good-harm analyses' (GHAs). Southgate judges his own argument to be an example of a developmental GHA, that is, an analysis which understands the goods of the Earth as being developed through the harms.²⁰¹ As we have seen above, the development of goods within the biosphere is only possible through the affliction of harms. It is not simply that value arises from a process which also *allows* harm but that value arises through a process *of* harm.

Southgate argues that "all evolutionary theodicy should start from a version of the 'only way' argument, based on a developmental good-harm analysis".²⁰² Indeed, a number of other writers share the conviction that natural selection was, "the only, or at least the best process by which creaturely values of beauty, diversity and sophistication could arise".²⁰³ Nancey Murphy, for example, believes that "Natural and metaphysical evil are unavoidable by-products of choices God had to make in order to

²⁰⁰ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, p. 16.

²⁰¹ There are two others: the Property-Consequence GHA, in which the existence of a particular good *entails* the possibility of causing harm, as in the free will defence and the Constitutive GHA, in which the good is inseparable from harm, as in the belief that the value of human life can only be understood in the context of death, for example. (Ibid. p. 41). On the latter see also: Christopher Southgate and Andrew Robinson, 'Varieties of Theodicy: An Exploration of Responses to the Problem of Evil Based on a Typology of Good-Harm Analyses' in Nancey Murphey, Robert J. Russell, and William R. Stoeger SJ (eds.) *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Evil in Nature* (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 2007), pp. 67-90.

²⁰² Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, p. 48.

²⁰³ Ibid. p. 48.

achieve his purposes in having creatures who could know, love and serve him".²⁰⁴

Robin Attfield believes that, "No other world that God could have created would have had a better balance of good over evil than the actual world, despite the many evils it contains, has or will have".²⁰⁵ Specifically, Attfield believes that this world was the only kind of non-interventionist world that could have contained the particular traits that we value. God could only have made things otherwise by "incessant supernatural interventions",²⁰⁶ but this would result in a creation which did not possess the elements of intelligibility and predictability which make possible creative interaction with the world.²⁰⁷ Southgate also believes that a noninterventionist theodicy is necessary, arguing that "postulating that the key elements in creatures were designed, rather than the result of a long process of exploration under the influence of both law and chance, seems to exacerbate the problem of theodicy created by the suffering of those creatures".²⁰⁸

Yet, as Arthur Peacocke recognises, it is not possible to remove all imponderability from the 'only way' argument and finally answer the question of whether God could not have made a better world. Peacocke writes,

"This is one of those unanswerable metaphysical questions in theodicy to which our only response has to be based on our understanding of the biological parameters ... discerned by science to be operating in evolution. These indicate that there are inherent constraints on even how an omnipotent Creator could bring about the existence of a law-like creation".²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ Nancey Murphy, 'Suffering and the Problem of Evil: Suffering as a By-Product of a Finely Tuned Cosmos', in Murphy, Russell and Stoeger (eds.), *Physics and Cosmology*, pp. 131-151 (p. 140).

²⁰⁵ Robin Attfield, *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2006), p. 135.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 129.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. pp. 124-125.

²⁰⁸ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, p. 20.

²⁰⁹ Arthur Peacocke, 'The Cost of New Life' in John Polkinghorne (ed.) *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 21-42 (p. 37).

Southgate similarly states, "I fully accept that we could never be sure that this was God's only way to give rise to creatures".²¹⁰ Nevertheless, he believes it to be the most plausible.

The philosopher Holmes Rolston also argues that good develops through harm, particularly noting the role of predation in bringing about complexity in animals. Rolston writes, "The animal skills demanded [in a non predatory world] would only be a fraction of those that have resulted in actual zoology – no horns, no fleet-footed predators or prey, no fine-tuned eyesight and hearing, no quick neural capacity, no advanced brains".²¹¹

In Rolston's work the development of the biosphere takes on an epic quality. He writes of a world which is granted a life that is hard won through millions of years of evolutionary suffering. This struggle is not in vain but draws the world into ever higher beauty. He writes:

"This beauty approaches the sublime; the tragedy is perpetually redeemed with the renewal of life, and the inexhaustible queerness recomposes as the numinous. If anything at all on Earth is sacred, it must be this enthralling creativity that characterizes our home planet".²¹²

For Rolston this sublime beauty is particularly characterised by the emergence on earth of organisms which are identifiable as 'selves', organisms with their own clear identity. There is enormous beauty and value in the capacity of these selves to interact with, indeed to depend upon, others in community.

That an evolving world was the only way for God to achieve a flourishing biosphere is only the first step in Southgate's defence of God's goodness and worthiness of praise. There are three further arguments:

²¹⁰ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, p. 30.

²¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.* p. 44.

²¹² Holmes Rolston III, 'Naturalizing and Systematizing Evil' in William B. Drees (ed.), *Is Nature Ever Evil? Religion, Science and Value* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 67-86 (p. 82).

first that the suffering of every individual creature, not simply of the whole, is of great significance; secondly that God suffers with those creatures; and, thirdly, that God provides eschatological redemption of those creatures' suffering. I shall examine each of these arguments in turn.

Southgate argues that a focus on the suffering of individual creatures is a key move in evolutionary theodicy.²¹³ He takes his lead from Rolston, who is moved to meditate on the effect of evolutionary evil upon the individual through his contemplation of the white pelican 'insurance' chick. The actions of the parents seem callous but result in the flourishing of the pelicans which, he points out, have been around for 30 million years. Nevertheless, this does nothing to change the fact that in every birth one luckless bird is almost certainly doomed; this Rolston comments, cannot but appear "cruel and ungodly".²¹⁴ However, he does not think that the chick is outside of the creative work of God; rather, the chick is a sacrifice for the good of its species. In this way the chick prophesies and participates in the pathos of God which reaches its culmination upon the cross.

The life that Christ offers his disciples is a life of sacrifice for a greater purpose and it is in this life that the pelican chick shares. "The cruciform creation is, in the end, deiform, godly, just because of this element of struggle, not in spite of it."²¹⁵ Southgate takes up the notion that the suffering of the chick matters and that it is a sacrifice for the good of the whole. However, he argues that comparing the death of Christ to the 'passion play' of evolution is problematic. The chick's death may be a sacrifice but it is not a *self*-sacrifice. He writes: "Rolston makes much use of the language of sacrifice, but this only sharpens the point that it is not the evolutionary victim ... that has *chosen* the good of others over its own. It is

²¹³ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, pp. 12-15.

²¹⁴ Rolston, *Science and Religion*, p. 140.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 145.

the *process* that has 'sacrificed' the victim's interests to the interests of the larger whole".²¹⁶

The sacrifice of an individual creature must be the focus of evolutionary theodicy because it is upon such sacrifices that the flourishing of the Earth depends. Yet the good of the whole is not enough to address the suffering and death of the individual. In order to do this Southgate argues that God co-suffers with each individual creature. To do so he develops Rolston's argument in a different direction. To describe the creation as 'cruciform', the suffering of individual creatures as sacrificial, he argues, implies that God is with creation in its suffering. This means that God is affected by God's creation; that in God's experience of the life of the world God suffers.

Southgate argues that this also implies a kenotic model of God's creative act. Specifically he does not think that God creates 'space' outside of Godself in which creation comes to exist,²¹⁷ rather he follows von Balthasar's argument that, in begetting the Son the Father makes otherness possible and so makes creation possible: "Otherness in the Trinity is the basis for the otherness of creation"²¹⁸. God's creative act is kenotic in that it is a self-offering of the divine to the world. In God's offering of Godself, God draws alongside, joining creatures in the particularity of their lives. This means that God knows creaturely suffering, not least in God's own suffering as a human creature. Precisely what a creature's experience of suffering and what God's involvement in it might be are difficult questions to answer. Southgate, however, is convinced that "God must be bound up in [creaturely suffering] in a way that affects creatures at some level or other of their experience".²¹⁹ This belief is essential, he thinks, if we are not to lose sight of a God who cares about all of God's creation.

²¹⁶ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, p. 50.

²¹⁷ *Contra* Jürgen Moltmann. See *ibid.* p. 59.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 59.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 47.

Difficult as it is to suggest what God's activity might offer to a suffering creature, the third element in Southgate's argument, that God provides eschatological redemption for creatures, is a significant step towards providing an answer. He quotes Keith Ward's statement that "Immortality, for animals as well as humans is a necessary condition of any theodicy".²²⁰ He also follows Jay McDaniel's argument that each individual creature must ultimately find fulfilment of the possibilities it could not realise in life after its death.²²¹ This sense that it is specifically the unfulfilled potential of the individual which receives eventual completion is the basis of Southgate's eschatology. It is what Daniel calls 'pelican heaven', the claim that the unfulfilled 'insurance chick,' discussed above, will receive the fullness of existence which it was denied in life after its death. Thus Southgate rejects John Haught's suggestion that creatures are granted eternity in the memory of God. Such a move, he believes, "does not seem quite to do justice to the type of instance that I identified as the most problematic for theodicy".²²²

Southgate is rightly reluctant to make strong pronouncements on what heaven for animals might look like. Rather he quotes a poem by James Dickey on the subject. Dickey's poem imagines a heaven in which animals' instincts bloom to fullness set in landscapes flowering to complement them. In this heaven, predation persists but with no suffering or death for either animal. Predators stalk and spring silently and powerfully, prey walks free, rising up as soon as it is painlessly brought down. Following this lead, Southgate ponders a heaven which "preserves the characteristics of species, but without pain or death or destruction",²²³ and offers a possibility: "Does such a heaven involve some sort of self-transcendent pelicanness that is [very hard] for us to imagine, perhaps

²²⁰ Quoted in *ibid.* p. 78.

²²¹ *Ibid.* p. 53.

²²² *Ibid.* p. 87.

²²³ *Ibid.* p. 89.

even involving an experience for the redeemed prey-animal that delights in the beauty and flourishing of the predator and vice versa?"²²⁴

Thus Southgate offers a complex and imaginative theodicy. It is founded upon the conviction that an evolving world was the only way that God could achieve a flourishing biosphere. Yet his argument is not limited to this broad view of the problem but resolutely pushes the significance of the suffering individual creature, particularly the creature which achieves very little of its potential during life.

There is much in Southgate's argument with which I would wish to agree. His insistence upon the way in which good develops out of harm within the biosphere is important, and I have already indicated the kind of questions it raises for my thesis. I also wholeheartedly endorse Southgate's conviction that the suffering of each individual creature is of significance. Such suffering must have a bearing upon the integrity of creation's praise, and such a conclusion cannot be avoided by claiming that the integrity of that praise rests only upon the overall goodness of creation's life in general. Creation's praise certainly is the sum of all its creatures, but it is the sum of the *particularity* of those creatures. If the particularity of even one of those lives is defined by suffering and death then that experience of evil rises as a cry of anguish to God in the midst of creation's praise. I also agree with Southgate's argument that creatures' suffering must receive eschatological redemption. I particularly appreciate his refusal to dilute this conviction by imagining such redemption as anything other than the real fulfilment of the physical characteristics of a creature's life. Southgate's emphasis on the particularity of creatures' existence chimes with the emphasis upon such particularity as central to creation's praise.

I have reservations, however, about Southgate's project as evolutionary theodicy. These reservations are not limited to his project in particular but to the practice of theodicy in general. I will, therefore,

²²⁴ Ibid.

proceed to a discussion of some recent objections to theodicy as a discourse before considering how those objections might specifically impact upon evolutionary theodicy.

Theodicy's Detractors

I turn now briefly to survey some of the arguments that have been put forward against the discourse of theodicy in recent years. In doing so I hope to construct a critique that may be applied to some of the elements of evolutionary theodicy discussed above. I will do this with particular attention to Kenneth Surin and D. Z. Phillips. Both Surin and Phillips have various criticisms of theodicy, some of them very strong. These criticisms, however, focus upon theodicians who deal with human suffering, and many of their strongest criticisms are made of arguments and characteristics of those writers which are not necessarily present in the evolutionary theodicies which I have discussed. I will, therefore, address only those parts of their work which are relevant to the critique that I wish to make of evolutionary theodicy. I will consider those critiques, in this section, as they are presented (as criticisms of particular theodicians of human suffering), before turning, in the following section, to consider the extent to which they are applicable to evolutionary theodicians.

The key question which the following two sections will address concerns what kind of picture of God is assumed by evolutionary theodicy. What language is used by evolutionary theodicy in describing God? What assumptions underpin this language, and what kind of commitments does it imply? Most importantly, I must assess whether this picture of God is in sympathy with the understanding of God's being and relationship to creation outlined in the previous chapter. It is the question of what language is appropriate for God which underlies the various

criticisms of Surin and Phillips. I will begin with Surin's comments concerning the origin of language common to theodicies.

Surin believes that although theodicians think themselves to be pursuing a question which recurs throughout the Christian tradition, their formulation of the problem is heavily influenced by Enlightenment philosophy.²²⁵ Surin traces the scientific advancements of the period which, as well as producing a far greater understanding of the workings of the cosmos, brought with them new and difficult questions about God. The cosmology developed first by Galileo and then by Newton began to uncover the physical laws by which the continued operation of the universe was guaranteed. In time, Newtonian physics superseded the Aristotelian synthesis of Thomas which had been the foundation of mediaeval cosmology (and, indeed, is the background of the previous chapter of this thesis).

Rather than understanding all things as directly set in motion by God, it was now possible to understand God as the agent who set up the cosmos as, to one degree or another, a self-regulating system. In other words, there was a move away from the Neo-Platonic understanding of the universe which underpinned my scheme of a praising cosmos. Instead of God being the source of all being, holding creation in existence, God was now an external agent, acting upon creation.

These developments, Surin argues, resulted in questions about evil which were phrased in new ways: "If the nature of this world, as represented by this cosmological synthesis, was so precisely ordered, so (seemingly) flawlessly proportioned, then why were there evil and disharmony in the world?"²²⁶ Rather than believing that creation was safe from evil in as much as it was oriented towards God and in danger when

²²⁵ Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) pp. 1-3. Surin's argument is, perhaps, a little lacking in complexity. I do not wish to suggest that the Enlightenment resulted in an immediate and complete contrast between good theological discussions of evil which came before it and poor or sub-theological ones that came after. Nevertheless, I do think that Surin's account offers a valid critique of recent theodicy.

²²⁶ Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, p. 42.

it turned away from union with God's being, it now appeared that creation had been failed by a God who had not taken enough care in its construction. In other words rather than being the source of the cosmos, God was now a moral agent over against the universe.

That God was no longer necessary for the sustained being of the cosmos became a twofold problem for theology, first because the problem of the presence of evil in the world now raised primarily causal questions, and secondly because a picture of creation's ontological participation in God was no longer available as a framework within which to address the problem. Thus Surin comments: "The Enlightenment, it would seem, managed at the same time both to make theodicy a *problem* and to deprive its proponents of the intellectual horizon traditionally presupposed by their ancestors in their attempts to solve the problem".²²⁷

The 'epistemological crisis' of the Enlightenment is not, Surin believes, sufficiently accounted for by theodicians. He argues that this failure results in a misappropriation of thinkers from the Christian tradition: "Modern theodicians who blithely include the 'timeless' writings of Augustine and Irenaeus in the genealogies of their own material, have succeeded only in obscuring the unique historical specificity of these ancient texts".²²⁸ Doing so is a problem because it overlooks the significantly different theological language used by these authors. The particular narratives, presuppositions, and concepts of pre-Enlightenment thinkers are lost.

Thus, the question of evil as formulated by Hume is not the question addressed by the great 'theodicians' of the pre-Enlightenment Christian tradition. Augustine's solution to the 'problem of evil', for example, is the conversion of the heart, brought about by the cooperation

²²⁷ Ibid. p. 44.

²²⁸ Ibid. p. 19. *Contra* Plantinga, who appeals to Augustine in his free will defence; also, Hick, who believes that his 'soul-making' theodicy can be described as Irenaean.

of the will with divine grace.²²⁹ This is not an attempt to offer a philosophically credible apology for the existence and benevolence of God in the face of suffering; it is a more practical attempt to articulate how Christians should respond to the presence of such evil in their lives and the world around them. Thus, Surin thinks, “The attempt to align [the] second-century appreciation of the ‘problem of evil’ with the post-seventeenth century theodicy involves a conflation of two radically different, even incommensurable, intellectual contexts”.²³⁰

Surin’s argument is not that nobody before the enlightenment ever wondered why it was that God allowed evil. Rather it is that this question was asked using particular language and pictures of God in which God was not pictured as a moral agent, in the modern sense. It is, Surin believes, the developments of the Enlightenment, discussed above, that allow for a discussion in which the world exists as an object and God exists as a being outside this object and acting upon it. This God is, according to Surin,

“‘a’ being (an implicit stress is invariably placed on the indefinite article), a rare and fascinating ‘entity’ possessing a number of clearly specifiable characteristics [such as omnipotence, omniscience, omni-benevolence and the like]. Theism is then to be understood simply as a hypothesis about this most sublime ‘entity’”.²³¹

God is not a ‘thing’ the place of which can be plotted in relation to the rest of the universe. The important point here is that if we think of God as observable and definable then we tend to think of God as an agent, much like our selves, only a good deal greater. Against this Surin is claiming that there is an absolute and immeasurable difference between God and the human moral agent. Thus at the heart of Surin’s complaint is

²²⁹ Ibid. p. 11.

²³⁰ Ibid. p. 19.

²³¹ Ibid. p. 5.

a critique of the theodacists' picture of God. He calls it 'philosophical theism' and believes it to be

"a philosophical construction which fails signally to grasp that most elementary of rules in the 'logical syntax' of a properly formed theological speech, that logically (and not merely 'theologically') there can be no 'order' or 'ratio' between finite and infinite. Any theology which does not incorporate this rule is one that effectively prevents the reality of God from being spoken".²³²

Thus Surin raises a concern about the way in which theodicy views God as a moral agent acting over against the universe. To pursue this claim and to consider what might be problematic about such a picture I turn to D. Z. Phillips. Phillips also believes that theodacists work within a 'problematic inheritance' of misplaced language for speaking of God. Of Phillips' various critiques it is his discussion of the language of omnipotence and goodness that will be particularly instructive for us. I will begin by considering the argument in the strong form in which he makes it, against the most problematic theodicies, before refining his critique to the more subtle problems which, I believe, are present in evolutionary theodicy.

Firstly, Phillips' argument about the power of God is made against theodacists who hold a particular understanding of omnipotence. He wishes to question what meaning the term 'power' holds and how it functions in relation to God in the context of Christian devotion and practice. Richard Swinburne's definition of omnipotence provides Phillips with a useful example of the kind of theodicy that is his target. Swinburne writes: "An omnipotent being is one who can do anything logically possible, anything, that is, the description of which does not involve a contradiction".²³³ Phillips argues that this picture of God's power is

²³² Ibid. p. 7.

²³³ Quoted in D. Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 6.

mistaken. His argument is simply to show that certain statements about God which are not logically inconsistent nonetheless make no sense when applied to God. I shall quote Phillips' own summary:

"If God is omnipotent he can do whatever is not logically contradictory. 'Riding a bicycle' is not logically contradictory. God cannot ride a bicycle. Therefore, God is not omnipotent. One may respond to the objection, a response that can be repeated in countless examples, that it simply so happens that God cannot ride a bicycle, and that he could will all the changes necessary to make this possible. But the objection was that it *made no sense* to speak of God riding a bicycle. If 'sense', in relation to God, is to be extended to cover any absurd suggestion, the extension has no contextual warrant of any kind. It is quite unlike biblical religious developments in the idea of God. We are simply confronted with 'building in the air'. No one would actually inhabit these philosophical castles."²³⁴

Thus the claim that God is omnipotent can only make sense when it is used in the context of theological claims about the nature of God and in such cases theologians usually want to define power as something rather different from a freedom from constraint or the ability to impose one's will upon the world in general.

Within Christian theology the claim that God is omnipotent should not mean that God has the power to do anything. It does not mean that God, given any hypothetical task in any hypothetical situation – so long as that task and situation are not nonsensical – is able to achieve that task. Rather, God's omnipotence is God's power to accomplish those acts which are proper to God's being. So God is omnipotent, for example, in that God the Father is able to beget God the Son in eternity. Of course, such a claim may well be endorsed by the writers of evolutionary theodicy but, I would argue, this critique of a certain understanding of God's power may be developed in a way that does begin to press upon their work.

Phillips' arguments concur with Surin's belief that any talk of God that does not recognise an absolute discontinuity between God and

²³⁴ Ibid. p. 113.

humanity is badly misplaced. Thus he criticises theodocists for imagining that “God is a moral agent who shares a moral community with us”.²³⁵ Since certain creative options are logically contradictory they are unavailable to this moral agent. This tends to result in such descriptions functioning by imagining God as faced with a choice: to allow particular evils in order to bring about particular goods or to prevent particular evils and lose the chance to bring about particular goods. Since the physical laws of the universe make certain actions incomprehensible and certain combinations of goods impossible, God is thought to be limited to those scenarios.

This is a view of God’s creative action from within God’s creation; it is a view of God’s power which is defined by the kinds of actions which are comprehensible within the framework of our understanding of the universe. This is not to say that someone holding such an understanding of God’s omnipotence could not believe in miracles. However, miracles, such as Christ’s healings, would be understood as suspensions of the natural laws of the cosmos. The curing of leprosy, for example, would be a miraculous display of power precisely because it was a suspension of the laws of biology. In this case Christ has undertaken an action which, although impossible for human beings, is nevertheless coherent. God’s power is, then, defined in the same way as human power only God is understood to have far greater amounts of it.

Secondly, Phillips wishes to question certain theodocists’ understanding of God’s goodness, an understanding which, he thinks, is closely related to the understanding of power outlined above. As I have argued, understanding God’s power as the capacity to do anything which is not logically contradictory tends to envision God as a moral agent making choices. Such a picture of a choosing God utilises certain language for describing God’s goodness. In this picture God’s goodness is

²³⁵ Ibid. p. 35.

understood in terms of God's choosing the best or only option available that will produce a universe which contains certain values. A common example of this is the free will defence which states that, although human beings are able to choose to sin, God is right to allow this because it enables humanity to freely choose to love God. Since it is not possible to allow free will without allowing the possibility of humanity willing evil, God made the only choice that a truly good being would make, given the options available.

Phillips believes that this picture of God's goodness has serious ramifications; he believes that it undermines any talk of God's goodness at all. He suggests that a situation in which God must allow certain evils to exist to achieve a greater good is a story with which we are already familiar. Phillips refers to William Styron's story *Sophie's Choice* in which a woman is forced, by a Nazi concentration camp guard, to choose which of her children will live. She does so and loses a child. She survives the holocaust but, tortured by her guilt, later takes her own life. Phillips comments that her guilt is understandable, in spite of the fact that the 'choice' was forced upon her.²³⁶ He therefore asks: does God suffer the consequences of God's actions? In considering the holocaust, "Does he think that it can be excused in the light of the greater good that made it necessary, or does he recognise that he has something to answer for?"²³⁷

As hard to contemplate as Sophie's choice is, we would find it much more difficult to understand her if she had not felt a sense of guilt at the 'choice' she made. This must be applicable to a much greater degree to God, for God created the entire cosmos. If God has allowed evil to exist for the sake of the greater good then he is directly and personally responsible for choosing every evil that has ever occurred. If this is the case, how does God feel about this? Does God feel no guilt, in which case God is surely a

²³⁶ Ibid. pp. 41-42.

²³⁷ Ibid. p. 43.

monster, or is God wracked by guilt at what God has been forced to do? Phillips observes, "It will be obvious within these moral parameters that there will be no logical space for talk of God's perfect goodness".²³⁸

Thus Phillips underlines the consequences of speaking of God's goodness in such a way that 'good' in reference to God holds the same meaning as 'good' in relation to humanity. If we are to speak of God's goodness in the terms of my previous chapter then it will mean something different from the sense outlined above. God's goodness is known in that God is the source and ground of all being. In this understanding things are good only by participation in God. The goodness of creation does, therefore, tell us something about the nature of God. The goodness of beings is dependent upon God and everything that is good about creation is contained within God. Yet this does not mean that the goodness of God can be extrapolated from the goodness of created beings. Rather, God's goodness altogether transcends the goodness of creation such that it cannot be understood in terms of created good. Whilst we may make the cataphatic statement that God's goodness is revealed in creation we must also come to the apophatic realisation that God's goodness can in no way be adequately represented by the goodness of creation.

Thus Phillips critiques the pictures of God, commonplace in theodicy, which understand God's power and goodness within the frame of reference of human power and goodness. Because the power and goodness of this God are construed along such lines, Phillips believes, these theodicies fail. They fail because their God is only powerful and good in comparison to human beings. Such understandings of power and goodness will fail to stand up as descriptions of the transcendent power and goodness of God. In particular they cannot function as descriptions of the God who was described as the source and goal of all created being in my previous chapter. If the evolutionary theodicies I have outlined are

²³⁸ Ibid. p. 43.

vulnerable to some form of these critiques then they cannot help me, within the context of my argument thus far, to deal with the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter. I will argue, in the next section, that they are indeed vulnerable to these critiques. In the rest of this chapter I offer a different response to those questions.

Questions to Evolutionary Theodicy

I have outlined some criticisms of theodicy in general and I now turn to evolutionary theodicy specifically. Are the evolutionary theodicies discussed above vulnerable to these critiques? It is my belief that they are and I will now attempt to justify this claim. I begin with the critique of language about God's power. That evolutionary theodicy understands God's omnipotence in the ways challenged by Phillips is demonstrated by the following extract from Robin Attfield:

"A being x is omnipotent if and only if it is capable of bringing about any contingent state of affairs (a) whose description does not contain or entail a contradiction and (b) whose description does not exclude or entail the exclusion of x or any omnipotent agent from among those which may have brought about that state of affairs."²³⁹

According to Attfield, the creation of a world such as ours, with all of the goods and none of the ills, contains or entails a contradiction, and thus the being described by Attfield cannot create it. A flourishing world is necessarily an evolving world and the correct world for this being to choose to create. Undoubtedly this argument is perfectly sound for 'being x' but since it is with God we are concerned it is of little help to us. 'Being x' is not the divine source of all being, the one whose goodness is granted by participation to all things. Furthermore, this being is also not identified

²³⁹ Attfield, *Creation, Evolution and Meaning*, p. 134.

with Jesus Christ, who will be the focus of the culmination of my argument in the following chapter. In short, 'being x' is not the object of creation's praise.

If we ask Attfield why God could not have created a better world his definition of omnipotence would imply that such a world is logically incoherent and therefore not available to God. In actual fact this is not quite Attfield's response. As we have seen, he thinks that a world in which God just created creatures with all of the good and none of the harm is logically possible. However, it would require constant divine intervention and would, therefore, not allow for free creative engagement with that world. This, however, only pushes the question back, for surely I can simply ask why God could not create a world in which all the values persisted yet with none of the harms *and* without the kind of intervention that Attfield finds problematic? Or indeed, why not a world in which God did intervene miraculously and yet things also followed predictable patterns? Such a world would, of course, be logically impossible and, therefore, not within the power of the God described above.

Such a concept of God also lies behind Southgate's endorsement of the 'only way' argument. Southgate adopts the 'only way' argument because it is the only argument which can explain the world which we inhabit. He argues,

"Given what we know about creatures, especially what we know about the role of evolution in refining their characteristics, and the sheer length of time the process has required to give rise to sophisticated sentience, it is eminently plausible that this was the only way open to God".²⁴⁰

To suggest that this was the only way open to God necessarily implies the picture of God choosing between possible worlds. If God has chosen this world, in which there are all the values that exist, then God

²⁴⁰ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, p. 30.

has rejected other worlds, in which those values are not present. Thus the 'only way' argument, in effect, states that since we cannot imagine a world which contains all of the values of this one with none of the evils, we can safely assume that no such world could have existed. Since no such world could have existed, God cannot be blamed for not creating it.

This picture of God choosing between possible worlds is thoroughly different from the picture of creation emanating from and participating in God's being which, in the previous chapter, was essential to my understanding of creation praising by being itself. In Southgate's understanding God *chooses* to create this world; in my understanding God *wills* to create this world. God's creative act is not one of deliberating, of balancing different options, of calculating a cost-benefit analysis. Rather, God's creative act springs from the depths of God's being and everything that defines the cosmos' being stems from the particular character of God. There are no other possible worlds any more than there are any other possible Gods.

Turning to the picture of God's goodness critiqued by Phillips we find, I argue, that it is also at work in the 'only way' argument. The argument seeks to defend a God who may be judged to be good given the context in which God's creative act was undertaken. God is good because, given that a world which contained evil was the 'only way' to create a world which displayed all the goods of ours, God chose to create. At work here is the particular language of goodness which understands it as relative and contextualised by the alternative possibility of evil. The emphasis of such language is not so much upon a God who is absolutely and essentially good within Godself, an *a priori* goodness, but rather upon a God who is good in the context of the choices God makes.

In contrast to this, I would argue that God is good in as much as God freely wills to share the riches of God's being with God's creation. God is good, therefore, in as much as God calls all things into communion

with Godself and makes this possible by the incarnation of God's Son and the gift of God's Spirit to creation. God is called good not in reference to the relative goodness of particular choices God has made but in reference to the absolute goodness of God's essential being which, through participation, is the ground of goodness in created beings.

At this point it is very important to be clear that I am not necessarily arguing that evolutionary theodicy fails to talk about the God of Christian faith altogether. Southgate's work is not 'sub-Christian theology' which bears no relation to the tradition patterns of Christian belief and devotion. In particular, the majority of Southgate's book, including the proposals that I recommended above, is, to my mind at least, of strong theological merit. However, my reservations concern the relationship between these proposals and the 'only way' argument, which is the first step in his scheme. Southgate himself finds the 'only way' argument not to be enough in itself and so proceeds to other arguments.²⁴¹

It is my conviction that the only way argument is not only not enough but is not, in fact, a starting point which would naturally lead one to consideration of the kinds of theological arguments Southgate proceeds to make. What, for example, is the relationship between the God who must allow certain evil states of affairs in order to achieve certain good ones and the Triune God who creates the possibility of otherness within creation by the eternal begetting of the Son? Why would talk of the former inevitably lead to talk of the latter? I am unable to discern the continuity between the God of the 'only way' and the God of co-suffering and pelican heaven. In other words it is not my argument that the 'only way' argument makes all other Christian talk of God impossible only that I can see no reason why it would naturally lead one to talk of God in any of the diverse ways of Christian belief and devotion.

²⁴¹ Ibid. p. 13.

It seems to me that there are two different pictures of God at work in Southgate's theodicy. The picture of God which dominates the majority of the argument is one that I recognise. It is the God who is characterised by Trinity, incarnation, sacrificial love and redemption. The God of the 'only way' does not share these characteristics but instead is characterised by a language of power and goodness which is critiqued by Surin and Phillips. This picture of God has a particular function; it is designed to explain why the world is the way that it is. A passage quoted from Southgate earlier demonstrates that he is interested in constructing a picture of God which is determined by the world to which God gives rise – "given what we know about creatures...", begins his argument. Thus the argument begins by describing the world as we observe it and then proceeds to find a picture of God which will explain it.

The problem with such an ambition is that it also entails an attempt to explain evil. That is to say that it attempts to find a way in which evil fits into God's creation such that God can be its creator without ceasing to be good. This attempt to explain evil comes under criticism from Surin who believes that questions about God and evil, described in the language which we have criticised, become a philosophical game in which the domestication of evil becomes a real danger. Once evil is diagnosed and placed within a theoretical structure it is no longer a real threat. Surin thinks this move very dangerous and believes that it risks a complete eclipse of the issue that really matters, the irreducible tragedy of particular examples of evil.²⁴²

It is important to note that this criticism is aimed at particularly bad examples of highly abstract discussions of human suffering by certain theodicians. Southgate's resolute focus on non-human suffering cautions us against such a conclusion. In fact, his focus on non-human suffering at all marks him out from most theodicians and, indeed, the critics of

²⁴² Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 46-54.

theodicy discussed. Nevertheless, it is my belief that ways of discussing evil which refuse to explain it, which consider it to be a terrible mystery, are more appropriate ways of considering suffering of all kinds. It is, therefore, to a different way of dealing with evil that I will apply myself in the rest of this chapter.

In summary my disagreement with Southgate and the other evolutionary theodacists is this: first, I accept without reservation their insistence that the biosphere only possesses the goods that it does due to a process which entails harm. Secondly, however, I do not accept without reservation their inference that this was the only way the biosphere *could* have come to possess these goods. I have reservations about this because of the logic of God's power which underpins it. Thirdly, I strongly disagree with the resultant conclusion that God chose the evils which afflict the world. I believe that this is an unnecessary conclusion (since a different logic of God's power would produce a different understanding of God's creative act) which produces an unsatisfactory description of God's goodness and undermines aspects of Southgate's theodicy in particular which I wish to endorse. Finally, I find myself unable to agree that natural evil is God's choice, and I turn now to consider ways in which it can be considered an interloper within creation to which God is thoroughly opposed.

An Alternative Proposal

I have declined to undertake an evolutionary theodicy on the grounds that such an argument draws upon a picture of God which is at odds with the second chapter's implications for our understanding of divinity. The scheme of chapter two affirmed that God was the source and ground of all being, that all things subsisted in the divine being. This

means that God's act of creation must be understood not solely as construction but as a free outpouring of the divine nature, or a making available of that nature for participation. Therefore, as I have argued above, the relationship between creator and creature cannot be sufficiently described in the image of engineer and engineered. God creates from the abundance of God's being, effecting an intrinsic ontological connection of creation to creator. In this connection there is absolutely no room for any influence which is not God; there are no contingent or conditional influences upon this creative act. Any element within creation, therefore, that is ungodly and evil must be understood as secondary and subordinate to the primary creative act. The challenge for the rest of this chapter is to find a way of speaking of evolutionary suffering within the parameters of this commitment.

God's creative act flows from God's Trinitarian being and this Trinitarian being characterises creation. The resplendent creation is good in all the ways that it is because of its direct subsistence in the Trinitarian life. The cosmic scheme of the second chapter is, therefore, complemented by a Trinitarian statement of creation, such as that given by David Bentley Hart: "God's gracious action in creation belongs from the first to that delight, pleasure and regard that the Trinity enjoys from eternity, as an outward and unnecessary expression of that love; and thus creation must be received before all else as gift and beauty".²⁴³ Southgate believes that the goodness of the world is ambiguous and, as we have seen, this is not without reason. However, in its primal and original state, 'before all else' as Hart puts it, a Trinitarian creation is good. That which is not good, that which confuses and clouds that good, is secondary; it is extrinsic because evil is extrinsic to the Trinity.

²⁴³ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 249.

The God of the creeds is also known to us in the Incarnation. In Christ God comes to dwell with God's creation, reveals Godself and redeems the world. The birth, death and Resurrection of Christ are the culmination and turning point of the narrative of history. A theological telling of the narrative of history is, therefore, to tell a story which is extrapolated from the specific history of Christ so that, from protology to eschatology, this story is told for and about Christ. In describing the coming to be of the world our primary concern must be to speak of it in such a way that it could not stand as its own story but can only be made sense of by its fulfilment in Christ. This is not to say that speaking to the situation of suffering and death which characterises life on Earth cannot be an aim of telling this story. Rather it is to say that it cannot be an aim apart from or even alongside the telling of the story of Christ. Telling the story of life on Earth and grappling with its pain can only be done within the telling of the story of Christ.

More particularly, then, the task which is now at hand is to appropriately situate the occurrence of natural evil within a narrative of the world which culminates in the specific narrative of Christ. The aim in doing so is primarily to find what place evil has in this plot. This emplotment is not necessarily the same as the 'explanation' of evil which, I have argued, is the object of evolutionary theodicy. This is because the resolution of the 'problem' of evil is not, ultimately, achieved by the correct telling of the story itself. Rather the story refers to the resolution of the world in the victory of Christ. This victory has been won but awaits final consummation at the end of time. Therefore, evil remains unexplained and unresolved in as much as it has not yet met its final vanquishing from creation. Evil remains a problem in exact proportion to the extent that it is still experienced in the life of God's creation.

This attempt to find the place of evil in the plot will be pursued in part by a reading of Genesis 1-3:24. I have selected this passage, in the first

place, simply because it has often been read as the beginning of the Christian narrative. I am aware, however, that it need not be read in this way, indeed that there are reasons, provided by biblical scholarship, to suggest that it should not be read in this way. Furthermore I am aware that there are various other biblical passages which may also be described as creation accounts. My reading, therefore, will proceed along the broadly post-liberal lines laid out in the first chapter and put into practice in the second. Whether the choice of biblical material and the reading offered are successful must be judged upon the interpretations at which I will arrive.

This reading of Genesis will be carried out in conversation with Karl Barth. Barth is selected because I believe that his doctrine of nothingness (*das Nichtige*) is of particular use in finding a way forward from the point my argument has reached. The focus, therefore, will not be on Barth's own interpretation of Genesis²⁴⁴ but rather upon his discussion of nothingness²⁴⁵ which will be read alongside modern biblical scholarship. The context of Barth's discussion of nothingness is his conviction that the history of the world is the history of the covenant. He calls creation the 'external basis of the covenant' and believes that "the covenant is the goal of creation and creation the way to the covenant".²⁴⁶

This means that the covenant of God has no object without creation. Equally, apart from the covenant creation has no purpose in its existence. Barth states: "By its whole nature the creature is destined and disposed for this covenant. There is no peculiarity in man and the world which does not as such aim at this covenant".²⁴⁷ With this statement I affirm my commitment to understanding history as the history of Christ. Since Christ is the fulfilment of the covenant, creation's history is heading for this

²⁴⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter *CD*], 4 vols. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004) III/1 § 41, p. 94-329.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* III/3 §50, p. 289-368.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.* III/1 §41, p. 97.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

culmination from its birth. Furthermore, I affirm my commitment to a particular appropriation of Genesis 1-3:24 as the opening of this narrative.

Thus I have claimed that the redemption of the world in Christ is the true goal and purpose of creation. This raises the slippery question of what is really real. It may seem that I am suggesting that the story of God's interaction with the world describes the real world and that the observations of science simply describe a kind of illusion behind which reality lies. As we shall see below, however, Barth does not allow for the easy binary which such a view would imply. There is no question of covenant history being anything other than the real history of Jesus Christ. It is therefore, a history which, like Christ himself, is physical, social and bodily.

Furthermore, we have seen that Barth emphasises the creation as necessary to the covenant. Because of this our experiences, our material existence and our particularity are also important. We do not need science to tell us that the world is a painful place; however science does deepen our understanding of that experience. Evolutionary biology tells us that there are experiences of suffering without which we cannot imagine the world, preventing us from brushing them off as a mere contingency. Yet these experiences, as experiences, are inseparable from our particularity as creatures of God's creation. Good theology will always find room for experience, for our capacity to undergo experience helps to define us as created. Therefore, empirical engagement with the world, which is a kind of experience, cannot be irrelevant to the truth of covenant history. If it were not the case that the world contains experiencing subjects, God's covenant would have no object.

Neil Messer, in his own argument against evolutionary theodicy, has made a similar point. Having argued that pain, suffering and loss are what God has *not* willed, he recognises that this could lead to a kind of Gnosticism, in which ultimate redemption involves salvation from God's

failed attempt to create a good world. His response is that salvation lies in Christ and, quoting Gregory of Nazianzus, everything that Christ has united to the Godhead has been saved. Therefore Christ promises “not an escape from the material, but its healing and transformation”.²⁴⁸ Thus what prevents us talking of a theological reality which lies behind the illusion of experience is not only that our experiencing selves are a part of God’s created reality but also that these selves (and indeed everything that is material and particular about existence) have been taken up in Christ.

Messer’s argument not only gives us further reason not to exclude scientific experience of evil from our view of reality but actually points to where that experience should be placed. If, as we have argued above, our task is to discover where evil fits into the narrative of Christ and if, as Messer argues, salvation amounts to the healing and transformation of the material world, then evil appears in the narrative as that which is met, triumphed over and redeemed on the cross. The radically embedded nature of evil in the ecological systems of the world, attested by the sciences, is precisely that which must be disentangled and denied by the work of God achieved in Christ. The experience of evil is essential to our telling of the narrative of Christ because it is the antagonist, it is that against which Christ acts.

Thus theological telling of the narrative of history is, in fact, telling of the narrative of Christ, in whom the entire sweep of history culminates. Within this narrative we must situate our experiences, including empirical engagement. However, whilst our experiences must be situated within this narrative we will not necessarily find that this can be easily achieved. In fact, it will be the case that certain experiences simply appear irreconcilable with the narrative. This may well turn out to be the case with the structures of efficient causality which science has traced for the

²⁴⁸ Neil Messer, ‘Natural Evil after Darwin’ in Michael Northcott and R. J. Berry (eds.) *Theology After Darwin* (forthcoming from Paternoster Press).

natural world. Nevertheless, scientific claims, such as those about evolution, cannot remain independent of the narrative because there is nothing which is extrinsic to this narrative.

Given these commitments, the primary aim in reading the Genesis creation accounts is to consider how they fit into the Christian narrative, to ask how they can be appropriated as the beginning of a narrative which culminates in Christ. Once this primary question of plot has been addressed the connections to empirical ways of knowing the world in terms of efficient causality can be addressed. This, however, will not be a primary question which can be put to the Genesis passages apart from their function within the Christian narrative. Rather, it is a secondary question about the relationship between the passages and human experience, which can only be asked after we have discerned the place of the passages within the narrative.

When the attempt to address this conflict is made, it may well turn out to be irresolvable. The evolutionary theodicies discussed above see that the scientific understanding of natural evil as embedded in the process by which value arises in the natural world seems to conflict with God's declaration of the world as good. I would also acknowledge this as a discrepancy. These theodicies are confident that this conflict can be resolved and the two elements united in one account. In contrast to this, I propose that both accounts be left to stand and, to some extent, their discrepancies unresolved. I refuse, therefore, to qualify the meaning of 'good' in order to harmonise the accounts. I also refuse, however, to deny or modify the scientific evidence to fit the narrative. This important refusal is what ensures that my argument does not succumb to fundamentalism. When the evidence of experience does not fit the convictions of faith neither one is forced to defer to the other.

There is a conflict, therefore, between the conviction that God created a good world and the recognition of the role of natural evil in the

world's process of flourishing which cannot be explained. This, as my argument has suggested, is not a failure to solve a problem but a recognition of the fact that the narrative of Christ still awaits its final consummation. The final reconciliation of the world is still to come and the resolution of God's proclamation of the world as good and creature's experience of the world as evil awaits that reconciliation. This final redemption and its status as the culmination of the work of Christ is the end of the story and will be discussed in the fourth chapter. For the present I shall proceed with my telling of the coming to be of the world which should be understood as the beginning of a narrative which will only make sense in its culmination and fulfilment in Christ.

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

The creation account of chapter one is characterised by its distinctive arrangement of the creation over six days. Before this process begins it seems that there already exists a formless void or abyss (v. 2). Yahweh creates by speaking and by separating various elements of the abyss creating light and darkness, lower waters and upper waters, and sea and land. In this some commentators have seen the *Chaoskampf* motif, particularly in the separation of the upper and lower waters which is reminiscent of Marduk's victory over Tiamat. This seems particularly plausible as the passage is usually dated to the period of the Babylonian exile and, as Bernard Batto argues, it is likely that the author was attempting to reassure Israel of Yahweh's supremacy by claiming Marduk's victory for Yahweh. "The Abyss," he writes, "may be less personified than Tiamat in Enuma elish ... but it is nonetheless a force which must be subdued in order for the Creator's design to come into

being".²⁴⁹ Thus Genesis 1 reflects contemporary creation myths in imaging an epic battle between Yahweh and the forces of chaos. Batto concludes: "Creation would cease in an instant, were the divine sovereign not in his heaven keeping the chaos dragon in submission".²⁵⁰

Batto, however, is somewhat in the minority in his interpretation of Yahweh's act as combative. Though he notes a certain de-personification of the abyss, he does not acknowledge the simple fact that there is no mention of combat or conflict in the passage. In contrast, most commentators emphasise this deviation from the *Chaoskampf* motif. Wenham, for example, is representative: "There is no hint in the biblical text that the deep was a power, independent of God, which he had to fight to control".²⁵¹ In fact, John Day suggests that the passage is actually dependent on Psalm 104 and believes that "it is improbable that the account of creation in Gen. 1 is dependent on Enuma elish at all".²⁵² Cassuto comments, "We [cannot] fail to appreciate the originality of the Torah account".²⁵³

It seems clear, therefore, that chaos has been overcome, but there is no suggestion that this requires struggle on Yahweh's part; rather he speaks and it is accomplished. This is further illustrated when the Priestly source takes up the flood narrative. The bounds which hold back the watery chaos are broken at Yahweh's command, for his purposes and precisely for the length of time which he decides. The creation is not a struggle against chaos, and the flood is not a resurgence of the monster. Both events are controlled by Yahweh's command.

²⁴⁹ Bernard F. Batto, 'Creation Theology in Genesis', in Richard J. Clifford and John J. Collins (eds.) *Creation in the Biblical Traditions* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992), pp. 16-38 (p. 32). The claim that Genesis 1 is related to Enuma elish is an old one, first made by Herman Gunkel at the end of the Nineteenth Century, who went as far as to argue that the Hebrew *tehom* is derived from the Akkadian *Tiamat*. However John Day, writing some of the most important work on *Chaoskampf* since Gunkel, rejects the suggestion that *tehom* is derived from *Tiamat*. Cf. John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 50. Batto also notes the similarities between the end of the stories, both Genesis 1 and Enuma elish concluding in the god resting.

²⁵⁰ Batto, 'Creation Theology in Genesis', p. 33.

²⁵¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), p. 16.

²⁵² Day, *God's Conflict*, p. 51.

²⁵³ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part I, From Adam to Noah: Genesis 1-6:8*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), p. 32.

If there is no indication that Yahweh engages in struggle then there is a corresponding question concerning how chaotic the author considers the abyss to be. If there is no *kampf* then how much *chaos* is envisioned? Westerman rejects the mythical understanding of the abyss employed by those who read it in the light of Enuma elish. Rather, he points to the use of such language in Job and elsewhere, and suggests it be translated desert, waste, devastation or nothingness. Agreeing with him, Rebecca Watson comments that “any attempt to translate this vocabulary as ‘chaos’ would certainly require careful definition, and is best avoided”.²⁵⁴ Furthermore, Watson argues that it is not clear that the writer of Genesis 1 envisioned pre-existent matter which contained the necessary ingredients for creation. She points out that this requires one to understand verse 2 to describe the situation before creation rather than the result of the first act of creation, a distinction that she is unwilling to make.²⁵⁵

What, then, might we conclude about the meaning of Genesis 1:2? Having noted an over-eagerness by some commentators to equate the passage with Enuma elish and other *chaoskampf* myths, I will exercise caution in making claims about meaning in the light of contemporary sources. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is safe, at least, to assume that Genesis 1 shares the basic Ancient Near Eastern concept of the world as a safe haven surrounded by threatening waters suspended above and below. Batto is more or less correct in his claim that “the image of living within a ‘bubble,’ surrounded on all sides by the nihilistic powers of chaos, appropriately evoked images of the precariousness of existence”.²⁵⁶ However, he is wrong to focus exclusively on that precariousness. Genesis 1 does seem confident in Yahweh’s power to keep those threats at bay. There is no battle imagery, no weaponry, no real question of Yahweh being defeated. Furthermore, the abyss is clearly heavily de-personified

²⁵⁴ Rebecca Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of ‘Chaos’ in the Hebrew Bible* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), p. 16.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 18.

²⁵⁶ Batto, ‘Creation Theology in Genesis’, p. 33.

and not imagined as an opposing divine presence. If it is threatening it is not actively so - it is not bellicose. Rather it is a threat because it is empty and desolate.

I do not wish to commit myself to any particular translation of verse 2. Let me also be clear that I am not attempting to massage the text into a shape which will make it compatible with the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Such a doctrine requires commitment to ontological absence, an understanding of a situation in which there is no matter, space or time. We cannot know what the author of Genesis 1 might have made of such a claim but we can say that it belongs to a later time and is simply not within the realm of the writer's thought. In any case, Watson makes an important observation when she notes that the author displays no keen interest in the precise nature of the material from which the universe was formed. The emphasis is entirely upon Yahweh's bringing forth and sustaining of a world which is ordered for its flourishing.

For what reason might the author have departed from contemporary myths to this extent? I think it possible to suggest that his reasons for departing so far from *Chaoskampf* are the same as his reasons for adopting it in the first place. Under Babylonian rule, he wishes to assure his people that Yahweh is the one true God, the God who has not only defeated chaos but done so with ease. Marduk may need bow, spear and club to defeat Tiamat but Yahweh commands the deep with a word and separates it without resistance. This late text, then, is moving somewhat towards monotheism in its affirmation that absolutely no one and nothing can challenge the supremacy of Yahweh. The background to the passage is the common Ancient Near Eastern belief that the world is sustained over and against the power of chaos. This particular passage, however, shows a great deal of confidence in the divine power to overcome this chaos, to such an extent that the abyss is de-personified and the battle elements removed.

The question which this chapter addresses concerns whether it is possible to make sense of the claim that creation praises God by being itself in the light of the fact that suffering and death seem to be an inherent part of creation's being. My reading of Genesis has suggested the beginning of an answer or, rather, it has indicated a way to begin telling the Christian story which is able to locate this element within the narrative. This telling would, following my interpretation of Genesis 1-2:3, hold that part of what it means for creation to be good is that it is secured and ordered against the possibility of chaos. In this telling, that which afflicts the world is acknowledged but ultimately given no power. To develop this account I turn to Karl Barth because, in his discussion of nothingness, he is attempting to achieve a similar balance between evil being utterly overcome by God and yet possessing power to cause destruction in the world.

Barth's discussion of *das Nichtige*, translated into English as 'nothingness', comes in the third volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. This volume is dedicated to creation and the discussion comes in the third part which is concerned with the relationship of the Creator to the creature. It is preceded by a discussion of the way in which God's lordship is expressed in God's preserving of the world. Barth affirms that the creature's very existence depends on God's preserving it, on God's upholding and sustaining of its existence and by giving that existence continuity. Here we touch on an important theme in Barth's doctrine of creation: his conviction that God gives to God's creation the gift of time in order to provide the context and conditions for God's covenant with it.

Thus, the creature is limited within time but this is not to be considered a mark of something lacking in the creature but rather of fullness. God delights in allowing each creature the freedom to "be what it is, running its course within the limits laid out for it".²⁵⁷ This preservation

²⁵⁷ Barth, *CD* III/3 §49, p. 97.

is the free act of God and grants freedom to the creature. Yet it is also absolutely necessary for the creature's existence since creation's existence is constantly threatened by the possibility of it not existing. "If God did not will to save it and keep it, it might well, indeed it must, be overwhelmed by chaos and fall into nothingness".²⁵⁸ In other words, precisely by creating something that has contingent existence in communion with Godself, God creates something for which there is the possibility that it may cease to have these qualities of existence and communion.

Das Nichtige is the term which Barth designates to that which threatens the continued existence of creation. Nothingness is that which God has not willed, that which is not preserved by God's providence, that which is in opposition to God and God's world. Nothingness is evil, Barth says, it is "a being that refutes and resists and therefore lacks his grace".²⁵⁹ Thus in Barth we find the orthodox Christian conviction that evil is a privation; it is the antithesis of God and God's creation. Nothingness has "the being of non-being, the existence of that which does not exist".²⁶⁰ Yet it is clear from these quotations that nothingness is not without substance, Barth going as far as to call it a 'being'. Nothingness is something, but it is a strange and unique kind of something. It exists entirely outside of God's providence and grace and yet has substance, it has being. Thus John McDowell argues, "It may be not-being, but it is certainly not non-being, although its disruptiveness leads precisely towards the annihilation of the beingness of being; *something* but not *some thing*, although it attempts to have its own kind of existence".²⁶¹ Nothingness is not nothing and it would be an error to imagine that it has no existence.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. §49, p. 74.

²⁵⁹ Ibid. §50, p. 353.

²⁶⁰ Ibid. §49, p. 77.

²⁶¹ John C. McDowell, 'Much Ado About Nothing: Karl Barth's Being Unable to Do Nothing about Nothingness', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 4.3 (2002), pp. 319-335 (p. 329).

Barth's concern is to establish that the being of nothingness is motivated by a desire to make the destructive power of nothingness clear. Thinking that nothingness is nothing would be an error because we would fail to understand how unequivocally God is opposed to it. "God takes it into account. He is concerned with it. He strives against it, resists and overcomes it."²⁶² McDowell writes, "It is the radicalness and ruthlessness of *das Nichtige*, or in Ruether's words 'the evilness of evil', that Barth wants to assert and refuse any possible domestication and justification of".²⁶³ Consequently, Barth's picture of God's creative act is one of God willing a world which is not subject to nothingness and sustaining that world over and against nothingness. In nothingness creation faces the very serious and dangerous possibility of the destruction of being.

This raises a difficulty, for how can anything have being which is not willed by the Creator? If nothingness is really existent, really a force to which God is opposed, from where did it receive its substance? How can there be anything opposed to God, since all things come from God? To answer this, Barth secures the being of nothingness by arguing that its being is grounded in God's *not* willing. "It lives only by the fact that it is that which God does not will. But it does live by this fact."²⁶⁴ This strange kind of life is a unique kind of being which, as McDowell argues, should not be understood as non-being but as not-being; in other words it is the very negation of being itself. Barth's paradoxical claim is that whilst all of God's creation has its being grounded in God's willing its existence, nothingness has its not-being grounded in God's not willing it. To understand the force of Barth's argument it is important to note his insistence that nothingness is in no way within the realm of God's creative act. Thus, Nicholas Wolterstorff writes, "*Das Nichtige* is not a creature of

²⁶² Barth, *CD* III/3 §50, p. 349.

²⁶³ McDowell, 'Much Ado About Nothingness', p. 331.

²⁶⁴ Barth, *CD* III/3 §50, p. 352.

God but comes about as the inevitable *accompaniment* of God's bringing forth of creatures".²⁶⁵

However, Wolterstorff then proceeds, I believe, to make an important mistake. He interprets Barth's claims that nothingness is what God has not willed to create as an assertion that nothingness consists of elements of creation which could have been but were not optioned by God. "The picture comes to mind of a numberless swarm of possible wrens, robins, sparrows and such like, to which God in wrath said 'No, I refuse to create you,' and which now menace creation by trying to drag them into the abyss where they too will become possibilities."²⁶⁶ That which God rejects is not various uncreated possibilities but the very possibility of un-creation; God resists the possibility that anything could exist outside God's loving providence, that possibility is nothingness. In postulating nothingness Barth does not have in mind Leibnizian 'possible worlds' and indeed, in a measured evaluation, he makes his opposition to Leibniz clear.²⁶⁷ Barth would think that Wolterstorff's picture fails to take the absolute opposition of nothingness to God seriously enough.

That which God rejects is not simply a less preferable option but a real threat to the very possibility of God's giving creation the freedom of its existence. The suspicion that Wolterstorff's picture cannot fully capture the absolute opposition of God to nothingness is heightened, ironically, by his insistence that God refuses to create sparrows 'in wrath'. Why should God be made so angry, we might ask, by the possibility of a sparrow? Why should one possible sparrow deserve God's love and protection and another earn his wrath? Yet whilst missing the force of the opposition of nothingness to God, Wolterstorff also gives it a kind of power which Barth is keen to deny. The picture of swarms of non-birds dragging actual birds into the abyss is disturbing and monstrous. Yet Barth warns against

²⁶⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Barth on Evil', *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*, 13.4 (1996), pp. 584-608 (p. 587).

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 589.

²⁶⁷ Barth, *CD* III/3 §50, p. 316ff.

understanding nothingness in such a way that it “assumes the form of a monster [which], vested with demonic qualities, inspires fear and respect”.²⁶⁸

Thus Barth remains careful to deny that nothingness is anything other than the absence of God, to deny that evil is an independent force, to deny that, in John Milbank’s words, it has any positive foothold in being.²⁶⁹ Nevertheless, it does have its own kind of negative being, its own not-being; it is, we might say, the presence of the absence of God. As such it is a real danger; it assails the world by constantly threatening it with the possibility that it might cease to be. Since nothingness has its life in being what God has not willed, it follows from this that God’s very willing of the world to be something makes possible its being nothing.

Thus nothingness has always been a threat to God’s creation. However, we should not understand this in a causal sense and infer that nothingness was the compromise God was willing to make in order to create. Neither should we imagine nothingness as a surprise to God, a nasty side effect of creation for which God was not prepared. Such conclusions would render nothingness as an object within the creation, something with a substance which it has been given, albeit inadvertently, by God. Barth is keen to emphasise the substance of nothing but only in as far as its substance consists in its being *not* willed, not covered by God’s providence, not given God’s grace. Its substance is defined by its lack of substance. The evil which assails God’s world from its creation is rooted in God’s refusal of its existence; it is the presence of the absence of God. This existence is a mystery for there can be nothing which exists outside of God. Yet nothingness, in its not existing, threatens all life in God’s creation, warping it towards its destructive being.

²⁶⁸ Ibid. §50, p. 293.

²⁶⁹ John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 1.

We may see now that the first chapter of Genesis and Barth's discussion of nothingness are not necessarily incompatible. Barth, though his discussion of nothingness may be controversial, is working within the Christian tradition, attempting to do justice to its conviction that nothing can exist outside of God. In doing so he provides a way for us toward a Christian appropriation of God's victory over chaos in Genesis 1. Barth himself makes the connection between his discussion of nothingness and that passage. He believes that verse 2 refers to the chaos which God had already rejected even before his first creative word, which God "consigned to the past and to oblivion".²⁷⁰ He notes that God creates by a process of separation and comments that this means that a side of Creation arises which is, "as it were the neighbour and frontier of chaos".²⁷¹ The nothingness which threatens creation is the abyss from which it is separated in Genesis 1.

In comparing Barth's concept of *das Nichtige* to the Priestly writer's cosmology I do not intend to repeat the mistakes against which Hebrew Bible scholars have cautioned Christian theologians. Genesis 1 does not straightforwardly contain the Christian doctrine of creation and it is important to understand how different some of the underlying images and ideas are. The void, in the Priestly writer's cosmology, seems to be an essentially physical entity and, correspondingly, Yahweh's resistance to it is characterised by physical, constructive action – limits are placed above and below the Earth, light and dark are distinguished and so on. In contrast, Barth's conception of nothingness is more ontological in character and, correspondingly, God confronts it with an act of will which inaugurates a relationship with God's creatures. It is this covenant of grace which ultimately requires and guarantees the physical existence of the creation.

²⁷⁰ Barth, *CD* III/3 §50, p. 352.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

However, there are evident similarities. Barth is insistent that nothingness is not empty space but a force which resists God and which God resists. He is also clear that it is not a part of creation but a force set in opposition to it. In fact his language of God's struggle is stronger than that of Genesis 1, for the Priestly author seems to decide against picturing Yahweh's resistance of chaos as a battle, rather, Genesis 1 portrays Yahweh as simply speaking his creation into being. There are obviously entirely different concepts of God's willing and acting underlying this but we may note that neither author pictures God's resistance in terms of violence nor allows any sense that God might not achieve God's creative goals. All that is required is God's decision to act and God's creative purposes are achieved.

Furthermore, Barth and the Priestly writer are united in their refusal to personify, or – better perhaps – demonize the void.²⁷² I have noted both the Priestly writer's decision not to follow his contemporary influences in rendering chaos as a monster and also Barth's warning against imagining nothingness as a monster. Finally, Barth and the author of Genesis 1 both understand God's creative act as an act of separation. Yet neither of them should be understood as suggesting that God separates the ideas God likes from the ideas God does not. In Barth's case such an interpretation is prevented by the force of his conviction that nothingness is absolutely alien to God. As for the writer of Genesis 1, such a claim would be anachronistic, emanating, as it does, from the modern concept of possible worlds. Rather, God separates and marks off that which God wills, an ordered and flourishing world, from that which is opposed to the will of God, disorder and barrenness.

By bringing Barth's doctrine of nothingness into conversation with Genesis 1, we may begin to see that they are, as it were, coming at the

²⁷² Whether or not Barth is successful in never personifying nothingness, he certainly believes that one shouldn't and, therefore, would presumably wish to defend his thesis against the claim that he does.

same problem from different directions. They both wish to balance the absolute power of God with the threat to creation which is posed by that which is opposed to God. Thus the writer of Genesis 1 de-personifies the chaotic abyss which his contemporaries understand to be a threat to the world and emphasises the absolute power of God to defeat it and bring about order. Barth, on the other hand, affirms the tradition that there is nothing which exists outside of God and then endeavours to describe the force of the opposition to God whilst remaining within this affirmation.

For Barth this means that the effects of nothingness are known and suffered within created life. Barth, therefore, states that creation exists on the frontier of nothingness. There is, for Barth, the possibility that there is that within creation which points towards and is in the shadow of nothingness. The results of this mysterious corruption are manifest in the disorder of the human will, but how are they manifest in the non-human creation? I argued above that predation, competition and death are incompatible with the love of the self-giving God and cannot, therefore, be God's work. It follows that these realities are, in fact, the manifestation of creation's orientation away from God.

Yet this part of creation that exists on the shadow side is not the part that is abandoned or lost; it is not the part which has been cut off from union with God. In fact, Barth argues that this part of creation is in fact engaged in worship of God: "It praises its creator and Lord even on its shadowy side, even in the negative aspect in which it is so near to nothingness".²⁷³ If we understand this praise in the terms of the argument of the previous chapter then it means that, even under the shadow of nothingness, creation is able to strive towards fulfilment of its being in God. We now see that this striving towards God is also a striving away from that which is not God. Since the foundation of the world God has resisted the impossible possibility of nothingness overthrowing God's

²⁷³ Barth, *CD* III/3 §50, p. 297.

creation. In the flourishing of its being itself creation joins God in this resistance.

In theological terms, therefore, evolution is not the method which God uses to achieve the flourishing of creation but is a name for God's continual resistance to creation's being overwhelmed by nothingness. Evolution is not merely a tool of God, utilised upon creation, but an active process in which creation participates as it strives to fulfil its own being in praise. God takes the violent and deathly results of nothingness and transfigures them into lifefulness. The very substance of creation's disorder is turned back to God in ordered flourishing. In this we may see, once again, that creation praises God in spite of, indeed in the midst of, its suffering and futility.

This is not a causal narrative; it does not imply that God chose to allow nothingness in order to bring about creation's praise. Rather it is a way to place suffering and death into the Christian narrative. The world is created to witness to the glory of God which is fulfilled in Christ. Within that creation there is, therefore, that which witnesses to the glory of God. Yet there is also that in creation which seeks to witness against the glory of God. However, God draws witness to God's goodness even out of that which exists under the shadow of nothingness and witnesses against God's glory. Evolutionary suffering fits into this plot, both in the sense that it seeks to compromise the goodness of God, and in the sense that it is redeemed by God in the flourishing of creation and so witnesses with even greater strength to the unfailing goodness of God.

The second creation narrative in Genesis focuses more closely upon human beings and their activities after the creation is completed. Anthropology, however, is not the subject of this thesis except in as much as it is important for Christians to feel kinship with the non-human. Therefore, whilst this text has been of central importance to Christian interpreters of the Bible, I will appropriate this passage in the context of the argument of this thesis thus far. That is to say, it will be read as a text which can further our attempt to find a place for natural evil in our telling of the Christian narrative. In particular the passage offers us a glimpse of creation, including humanity, existing in a state where their praise, as defined by the understanding offered in the previous chapter of this thesis, is of particular strength and freedom. Such a reading is a controversial one, however, and before offering it I must address two potential problems.

Firstly, in reading this narrative we must remember that Hebrew Bible scholars have pointed out significant differences between the text and the way the Christian tradition has read it. In particular the overlaying of Christian concepts of sin upon the story has been criticised. The narrative does not suggest that the disobedience in the garden decisively introduced sin into the world, remaining as a stain upon the souls of all humans born thereafter. Nor does it suggest that the disobedience is punished by the introduction of death into the world; rather, the curse is manifested in the man's new found struggle to bring sustenance forth from the land and the woman's pain in childbirth.

A reading of the passage which understands it to portray a prelapsarian paradise is certainly a particular Christian appropriation. This is not to say, however, that it does violence to the passage and it does seem that the Yahwist envisions the garden as a place where the normal

difficulties of life do not apply. The idea of a lush divine garden is common to Mesopotamian thought, and Eden bears comparison to Dilmun, the divine garden in the Sumerian myth, *Enki and Ninhursag*. Dilmun is described as pure and clean and “Its old woman (says) not ‘I am an old woman’”.²⁷⁴ Similarly, the Christian belief that Adam’s action introduces the stain of original sin is not found in the passage yet the passage does suggest a sense that the disobedience in the garden has had a permanent effect on human beings. Perhaps the curse of toil reflects the experiences of the author and his contemporaries in their attempts to gain sustenance from the land. Furthermore, though it does not appear to be in the mind of the author, and though the narrative is barely referenced throughout much of the Hebrew Bible, the idea that Adam’s actions bring death to the world is not the invention of St Paul. Jewish writers of the inter-testamental period wrote in such a way, as in 3 Baruch: “Adam first sinned and brought untimely death upon all men”.²⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the responsibility for transforming the passage into a Christian text begins with St Paul. James Dunn notes that Paul alludes to the Wisdom of Solomon in Romans 1.19 – 2.6 and that his theology of the fall is closely related to Wisdom 2.23 – 24: “For God created us for incorruption and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world”. Dunn believes this language forms “an echo chamber for several of Paul’s own theological assertions”.²⁷⁶ Thus, in Romans 5:17, Paul draws together his belief, formed in the ‘echo chamber’ of the post-biblical Jewish tradition, that Adam’s sin resulted in death for all and his conviction that Christ is God’s solution to that problem: “If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise

²⁷⁴ Quoted in John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 68.

²⁷⁵ Quoted in *ibid.* p. 73.

²⁷⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1998), p. 86.

dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ". In this way the Yahwistic narrative takes on a central importance for Christianity as the opening of its narrative about God and God's actions.

The Christian appropriation of Genesis' second creation account as a fall narrative lies in the background of the argument of a later part of this thesis, as we shall see in the fourth chapter which will consider the role of humanity in creation's praise and the implication of fallen humanity's failures to fulfil that role. The Fall is not, however, the focus of this chapter. The task at hand is to place natural evil within the narrative we are telling. Whether or not there is any kind of relationship between the affliction of natural evil and the onset of moral evil, we have already located the ultimate origin and continuing threat of natural evil in the existence of nothingness. The second Genesis account should not be read, any more than the first, as an 'explanation' of evil. It does, however, offer a picture of a creation which is not subject to nothingness and a picture of human living before its relationship with the non-human is compromised.

This claim brings us to our second problem. If we are to read Genesis 2:4-3:24 as saying something true about the world then we run into a conflict with the natural sciences. As we have seen in the preceding argument, natural evil is intrinsic to the flourishing of creation. The scientific evidence, therefore, shows that creatures have suffered for as long as they have been complex enough to suffer. If we were to understand Genesis' second creation narrative as referring to some scientifically verifiable description of life then we would undoubtedly be in conflict with every piece of scientific evidence about the origins and continuation of life. Clearly an interpretation of this passage as history or science in a modern sense is untenable.

This, however, should not mislead us into imagining that they are merely illustrative of some rather intangible truth which does not function at the level of reality as we experience it. I would reject the conclusion that

biblical passages which do not concord easily with modern views of the world convey 'spiritual' truths, opposed to data about the 'real' world. Such assumptions are easily made in the light of the fact that, in the modern period, the attempt to understand Genesis as factual and literal seems to have failed. It is all too often assumed that the alternative to a fundamentalist reading of the passages as fact is to read the passage as fiction. Interpreting Genesis within such constructs is particularly problematic because the character of the text will tend to reinforce this dichotomy once it is applied. Since the claims it makes cannot be factual they are assumed to be fictional and in this case, since the narratives are supposed to be telling us something about the origins of the 'real' world, the latter is decidedly inferior to the former.

Employing such a binary, forcing the passage into the category either of fiction or of non-fiction, loses the particular dramatic and narrative sense of the text. In fact, the content of such a passage exists in the emplotted relationship between the different elements of the text; it is the interaction of character and circumstance, the order and culmination of the narrative, which conveys the meaning. In other words to assume that Genesis is 'mere' fiction misses the fact that the truth of the passage cannot be separated from its narrative content. The task at hand, therefore, is to find a way of reading the text which affirms the inseparability of text and meaning without needing to claim that the text is 'true' in a modern scientific or historical sense.

I will not, therefore, posit Genesis 2:4-3:24 as a rival to the scientific account of how the world came to be as it is. Rather it should be understood to describe reality in a different way, saying different things about it. This way of describing the world is no less substantial than a scientific account yet allows us to hold convictions about the world which go beyond what science is able to describe. One possibility for thinking about Genesis in this way is offered by Karl Barth. Barth describes creation

as God's first act and, as such, the beginning of history. History, for Barth, is not simply the progression of time or even the record of events which happen within time. Rather it is the ordered narrative of the covenant of grace, the story of God's action towards and within the world.

This 'history', which culminates in Christ, is "the sequence of the events for the sake of which God has patience with the creature and with its creation gives it time – time which acquires content through these events and which is finally to be 'fulfilled' and made ripe for its end by their conclusion".²⁷⁷ Time is not to be conceived independently of the history of the covenant and time is given, by God, as a gift to effect the passage of this history. For the scientist, time is one dimension of reality which observation attempts to understand and bring to view. For Barth time is an element of the gospel which theological reflection attempts to bring to view. It therefore has an inherently narrative quality. It is the unfolding of the history of the covenant of grace; it has a climax in Christ, it awaits its fulfilment in the *eschaton* and it has its beginning in creation.

Barth writes, "The covenant of grace has its origin, takes place and is accomplished in histories; not alongside, behind or above these histories in the form of ideas, but really in them."²⁷⁸ Creation, therefore, is, first and foremost, not the construction of the physical universe and the laws which govern it but the foundation of the basis of the covenant. The question remains open as to the relationship between the scientific understanding of time and Barth's theological time. There will often be an overlap of language between these two understandings of time – both will speak of sequence and event – but we must not imagine that the two are interchangeable. How they are related is a question which, following the logic outlined above, cannot be asked in the abstract but only once a particular telling of the Christian narrative has been established.

²⁷⁷ Barth, *CD III/1* §41, p. 59.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.* §41, p. 66.

Barth argues that, since time is to be understood as the progression of covenant history, creation belongs to history. Barth calls it a 'historical reality'; as God's first work it is the absolutely necessary foundation of all that follows. God creates the world for the purpose of his covenant with it. In the Thomist terms used in the previous chapter, we might say that God creates the world so that God may turn Godself towards the world and the world might turn itself towards God. Barth adds to our previous argument the crucial sense that this occurs as history, a narrative beginning with the foundation of the world/covenant and heading, through Christ, towards its consummation. If this is the case then we must be attentive to the way we ask questions about why the world is the way it is. Questions about the character of creation, be they referring to its beauty and goodness or its frailty and bleakness, ought to be framed in the context of the covenant history.

Yet creation is not only a part of the narrative but the unique opening of the narrative. As the preface to covenant/history, creation is "a pre-history not a non-historical pre-truth".²⁷⁹ However, precisely because it is a preface, it does not bear the usual marks of creaturely history. It cannot be investigated and compared to other events which exist side by side with it and is not visible or perceptible to human enquiry. Rather it marks the beginning of time, the point at which God gives time to creation for the purpose of the covenant. Because it is the moment at which history begins it is neither outside of history, for if it were history would have no beginning, nor within history, for if it were it would be comparable to other historical events and not have the unique quality of being the beginning of history. "For this reason", Barth says, "it is 'non-historical' history, and it can be the subject only of a 'non-historical' history".²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. §41, p. 78.

How might this understanding relate to the scheme of creation presented in the thesis thus far? If we were to explicate this claim in terms of narrative, in the terms of our attempt to tell the Christian narrative, then we might speak of a double narrative. One strand of this narrative is that of creation which was seen in the second chapter. It concerns the coming of the universe to be and its final fulfilment; its emanation from and return to God. The other narrative strand is discussed in this chapter, a narrative of 'fall' and redemption. It concerns the affliction of the universe by nothingness and its continuing salvation from this in the form of its flourishing. The first strand provides the conditions for the second, since the second is contained within the first. Therefore we are not dealing with separate narratives. Rather, this a double narrative in which the two strands are distinct but nevertheless both essential elements of the telling of one story.

The second strand does not constitute the defeat of the first since it concludes in redemption and thus in the restoration and fulfilment of all that which characterises the first. Yet, at the same time, the second strand is not irrelevant or a diversion since it is the narrative in which we see the fullness of God revealed in Christ which is that to which the first strand always pointed. The double narrative, therefore, culminates in the union of creator and creation in Christ (of which more will be discussed in the fourth chapter). The second narrative strand is both contingent, in that it deals with a disruption of the first narrative which was not willed by God, and yet essential, since it provides the conditions in which the incarnation of Christ occurs which is the fulfilment of the first narrative.

Thus, by interpreting Barth's understanding of creation as 'non-historical' history in the light of my argument and commitments thus far, we may say that creation is the opening of the first narrative strand, the narrative of creation's emanation from and return to God. Creation's affliction by nothingness, the subject of the present chapter, may be

identified with the second narrative strand. This double narrative culminates and is fulfilled in the coming of Christ and it is his work that ensures that this is a double narrative in which both strands are united in their fulfilment.

Given that we are dealing with a double narrative, our question about its relationship to science now takes two forms. First, we may ask about the relationship between scientific understanding of the functioning of the natural world and the second, the covenant, strand of the narrative. In answer to this we would say that a certain degree of correlation between the science and the narrative strand is to be expected since suffering and death appear in this narrative as that which God resists in Christ. This is, in fact, the argument I made above. This correlation is, however, ad hoc and not programmatic since the second narrative strand ultimately finds its meaning in the first.

Secondly, we may ask how our scientific knowledge of the origin of life, with all the millennia of painful and wasteful development, fits with the first narrative strand and, particularly, with its telling of the creation of the world. In this case we may expect to see much less correlation since it is, at Barth says, 'unhistorical' history. There is an irresolvable tension here since creation occurs neither before nor alongside this history. In what follows, therefore, I intend to leave open and unresolved questions concerning how what we read in the Genesis passages relate to a scientific history of the world's development. Such a tension is inevitable within an argument which wishes to illuminate how the divide between God and God's creation came to be. Furthermore, it is not necessarily detrimental to this argument since it only serves to further highlight how unbridgeable the ontological distance is between God and the world.

In this second case, and to some extent in the first, we are faced with a significant and irreducible difference between scientific observation and theological narration. However, this inability to unite the two

accounts should not be viewed as a failure, just as I concluded, above, that an inability to reconcile God's goodness and the evil which afflicts the world was not a failure. There is no way around this discrepancy. It cannot be resolved by a harmonising of the accounts; neither can it be concluded by positing an absolute disconnection of the two and selecting one as the truth. Rather both ways of describing the world must be considered to be true.

Thus with these two problems and my responses to them in mind, we may proceed to consider what Genesis 2:4-3:24 might add to our understanding of creation's praise and its relation to natural evil. First we may note, as I did above, that the passage does envision a state of created existence which might be described as distinct from earthly life as it is now known. The passage speaks of a garden which is planted in Eden (2:8), in which God places a man (2:7). It seems to be this man's job to 'till the ground' (implied by the passages reference to the lack of anyone to fulfil this task before the creation of the man, 2:5). The garden appears to be flourishing and the author is careful to stress the completeness of the garden's inhabitants: the garden contains 'every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food' (2:9) and 'every animal of the field and every bird of the air' (2:19). This admittedly brief listing of created elements reminds us of Psalm 148, discussed in chapter two, which is a central inspiration for this thesis and is also from the Yahwist source. We may say, then, that the garden in Eden worships God by being itself.

Turning to the role of humanity in this picture of creation, we may begin to see the beginnings of an understanding of the place and role of the human in creation. This is a topic which chapter 4 will address at length, but I will make two preliminary remarks. As I noted above, the text has parallels in other Ancient Near Eastern literature which concerns divine gardens, in which the usual patterns of suffering and death are not present. That the garden in Eden is also not afflicted in the way of the

world as we know it is, perhaps, implied by the naming of the animals. The man is given all animals to name and there is no sense that they represent any threat to him. Secondly we may note that 3:17 introduces toil as a curse for the man's disobedience, implying that the tilling in which he was previously engaged was not a struggle.

First, therefore, if we read the passage as the 'non-historical' history of creation, then we may see that humanity's role is central and seems to benefit the rest of creation. We may also note that it seems to be free of suffering and toil. Secondly, humanity's fall seems to lead to a breaking of its relationship with the land as well as its relationship with God: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you" (3:17-18). These preliminary remarks will be followed up in chapter 4 but, for the present, we may note that, whilst the focus of this chapter is natural evil, there is a good deal of human moral evil which is responsible for the suffering and death of the non-human world. Genesis' second creation account shows us that this need not be the case.

All in all the author of this passage offers a particularly 'earthy' vision of the creation. If we are not to dismiss this passage as having only a 'spiritual' meaning then we must attend to the fact that this earthiness is intrinsic to the meaning of the passage. The truth of creation is that it was brought into being as a decidedly physical community of beings and intended to be one which praised in harmony. It allows us to envision a 'perfect' world, a world untouched by nothingness, as one which has a real connection and similarity to our own. This will raise questions about how similar to our world this world might be and such questions will be addressed in the fourth chapter's discussion of heaven. However, for the present we emphasise that a universe which is fully liberated in the praise of God is not merely a fantasy but looks back to creation as it was willed to be by God.

From this we should not infer that the redeemed earth will be nothing more than a reestablishment of the garden in Eden. Rather, the first thread of the double narrative looks toward an eschatological fulfilment which is even greater than its beginning, a fulfilment which will be considered in the fourth chapter. This fulfilment is, however, a fulfilment of what is begun in the garden. Thus the second Genesis creation narrative gives us, as it were, permission to imagine a world untouched by nothingness and unfettered in its praise. Despite the serious discrepancy between this imagining and the world as we observe it, this vision shows us that God did not will the detriment of God's creation and points our praise towards the universal fulfilment for which it awaits and to which it witnesses.

Problems

We have, I hope, gone some way towards constructing an understanding of creation's praise of God which does not ignore the suffering which is the daily experience of that creation. Before concluding this discussion there are two more objections that might be made to the arguments I have put forward. First, it might be said that my account is dualist. Secondly it might be said that I have sidestepped the problems I raised at the beginning by resorting to mystery; that my response to the problem amounts to a shrug of the shoulders.

Addressing the problem of dualism first, it could be elaborated in two ways. First, it could be argued that my account of creation is dualist. This is to raise again the problem with which we began this chapter. Natural evil is so thoroughly woven into the fabric of life that we cannot separate it from all the goods of the flourishing world. To attempt to do so, Southgate thinks, "splits the creation awkwardly into 'distorted' bits and

others", as we discussed above.²⁸¹ Secondly, it could be argued that my description of God is dualist since it appears to describe God encountering a force which is outside of Godself.

To begin with the first charge of dualism I would reply that any account of evil within creation risks this dualism. Doesn't the 'only way' argument itself split creation into the bits that God actually wanted and the bits that God had to accept in order to achieve God's creative ends? The point here is that any account of natural evil will have to make some kind of distinction between those things within creation which are valued and those which are considered to be ultimately disvalued. Even if the disvalues produce the values they are still disvalues, ultimately contingent and excluded from the redeemed creation. The challenge is to find a way of speaking of this evil which does not deny the extent to which it is inherent within the flourishing creation. This does not involve insisting that this flourishing *could* not occur without suffering and death, only that it *does* not.

Barth's conviction that nothingness is a genuine threat to the world leads him to talk of the very real and practical effect of nothingness upon the world. Barth believes that creation has a shadowy side; that creation exists, in part, on the frontier of nothingness. This is evidenced for Barth in a series of antitheses which describe the state of the world. These include growth and decay, beauty and ashes, value and worthlessness. This might suggest that Barth would divide and categorise the natural world, judging one part to be good, another to be shadowy and on the very edge of nothingness. Yet Barth insists that all of creation is good and warns that it would be an error to imagine that some element of the world could be identified which does not come under God's declaration that 'it is good'.

Barth wishes to assert that everything in creation is good but not deny the pervasive nature of evil. Creation is afflicted by an 'impossible

²⁸¹ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, p. 32. This is a criticism of T. F. Torrance.

possibility', by the orientation of the good creation away from the source of that goodness and towards that which is not goodness. This balance is important for my argument. Creation praises by being itself and yet is under the shadow of nothingness. The claim that creation is itself only in its goodness, therefore, need not deny the thoroughgoing way in which evil is present within creation. Creation exists, in part, between the certainty of God's protection and the devastation of the abyss. Yet this does not mean that any part of creation can be identified and separated from the rest, condemned as distorted or compromised. We saw above that Barth thinks that creation praises God even on its shadowy side but also speculates that creation might give even greater praise in its afflictions. He comments, "For all we can tell, may not his creatures praise him more mightily in humility than in exaltation, in need than in plenty, in fear than in joy, on the frontier of nothingness than when wholly oriented on God?"²⁸² There is no dualistic separation of creation into distorted and other, because every part of creation praises God.

Turning to the second formulation of the charge of dualism, I would again argue that it is a hazard of any discussion of evil. If one is to hold that evil is unwilled by God and opposed to God's creation then the possibility of evil existing as a being uncreated by God is raised. It seems to me that the 'only way' argument does not avoid this problem either since it is based on the belief that God's creative activity was constrained. In making his argument about nothingness, Barth is both drawing upon and challenging the Augustinian answer to the problem. Evil, in that tradition, is a privation of the good; it is an absence of God. It is therefore neither willed by God nor existent outside of God. The problem with this answer, Barth feels, is that it does not recognise the serious destructive power of evil; 'Nothingness is not nothing', he writes.

²⁸² Barth, *CD* III/3 §50, p. 297.

Barth's answer to this problem, as we have seen, is to give to nothingness a unique kind of being. Barth's argument makes nothingness a real danger but, at the same time, in no sense an uncreated rival to God. Nothingness does not exist apart from God, and it is precisely this not existing that makes it such a threat to the creation. To my mind Barth's argument is successful and I follow it here to make my own case that creation praises God, even on its shadowy side.

The two replies to the first question are possible because I have, earlier in this chapter, rejected certain logics of God's goodness and power. Creation is good *in* the whole, in its orientation to a good which is beyond itself, rather than *on* the whole, in that God's work can be declared good given the circumstances in which it was undertaken. Thus every created being praises God in everything that it is. We may say this with confidence because, even though the impossible possibility of nothingness works to tear creation away from its proper orientation, it continues to praise God in its degradation. God is powerful in the efficacy of God's resistance and not willing of the impossible possibility of nothingness, rather than in God's capacity to achieve all things save those which cannot co-exist with those greater goods which God chooses for God's creation.

Turning to the second challenge, that I have resorted to mystery in order to overlook the pervasiveness of natural evil, I would reiterate my conviction that there can be no explanation of evil, that it resists systematisation. Nevertheless, accepting that we cannot trace the final cause of suffering or vindicate God in the face of evil, we still struggle to formulate our own response when encountering pain and loss. Are we simply to refuse to ask further questions, to choose not to complain? Creation may be transformed by God to bring still greater depths to its praise but its suffering remains. Can we actually believe that creation praises God even in the midst of this suffering?

It is important, therefore, that we do not preclude the possibility of dismay at natural evil. We live between the times, in the promise of the resurrection but in the reality of the fact that we still await its eschatological consummation. Thus God's response, in Christ, to the evil of the world is both deeply reassuring and profoundly unsatisfying. Dismay at the state of the world is not only permissible but essential for the Christian, for it shows our understanding of the world's fallen state and makes possible our hope in its final redemption. If we attempt to answer this anger with a final vindication or condemnation of God we anticipate the world's redemption ahead of time and thus mask the severity of its predicament.

To attempt to understand where the mystery of evil and suffering might fit into our narrative of God and God's world, I turn to a mystic who had great experience of suffering, Julian of Norwich. Julian received her 'shewings' whilst, she believed, on her death bed. In suffering and pain she was granted visions of the cross of Christ and heard God speak to her. Many years' reflection on those experiences produced a text which described the visions and elaborated on their meaning, that by his passion Christ had won eternal life for Julian, that this made his death and the sins which led to it occasions of joy; and that her suffering was a participation in his suffering and so, finally, a cause for joy. In saying this Julian is moved to conclude that human sin is for God's redemptive purposes. In this way, as Grace Jantzen points out, she stands in the Augustinian tradition, believing the fall to be the 'happy fault' which brought about the incarnation and passion of Christ.²⁸³ Thus Julian hears God say, "Sinne is behouely, but alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thyng shalle be wele".²⁸⁴ The Middle English 'behouely' is often translated 'necessary', Elizabeth Spearing, however, translates the term as

²⁸³ Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1987), p. 196.

²⁸⁴ St Julian of Norwich, *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), p. 405, line 13.

'befitting'.²⁸⁵ The two terms have different connotations. The former suggests that sin was somehow required, reflecting, perhaps, an assumption amongst translators that Julian is interested in finding an explanation for sin and evil. The latter, however, seems to suggest that it was somehow appropriate for God to allow sin.

In a carefully argued paper, Denis Turner suggests why sin might be 'behovely' and how this might fit within Julian's theology. For his part Turner renders the term as 'behovely', staying close to Julian's language, and suggests that it should be equated with the use of the term 'conveniens' in Medieval Latin texts. 'Conveniens', Turner argues, "has some of the character of the 'necessary'; that is *conveniens* which is as one would have expected it to be; it 'fits' in some way with something".²⁸⁶ Yet this is not to say that it implies any kind of causality, that Julian believed that because some X existed or was the case, that sin was a necessary result or corollary. Rather, Turner argues that, for Julian, sin was fitting in a narrative sense. Sin, he thinks, is behovely

"not on account of its being explained by a universal and timeless causal hypothesis, but on account of its being fitting within a narrative bound by the particularities of time and place. We grasp the *convenientia* of an event when we grasp how it is 'just so' that it should happen that way, that 'just so' being something which we see when we have got hold of the plot which makes it just right that it should happen thus."²⁸⁷

This being the case, Julian's 'explanation' of evil simply does not offer the kind of robust defensibility that the theodacists is looking for. Rather it can only be seen to be true by those who can see that sin does indeed have a place in the story of God and God's world.

²⁸⁵ St Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 79.

²⁸⁶ Denys Turner, "'Sin is Behovely'" in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, *Modern Theology* 20.3 (2004), pp. 407-22 (p. 413).

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 416.

Ultimately, then, her argument cannot be tested and judged, it must simply be believed, one must have faith that 'all will be well'. This faith, crucially, is not the achievement of the believer but a gift from God and Julian repeatedly states that God gave her comfort and confidence throughout her experience of the passion. This step is, I think, crucial because it places the burden of reconciling the great goodness of the world and its inherent suffering in God. Thus we are called finally not to explanation but to trust, to the acceptance that the ambiguity of creation will not be explained in the life of the world. Thus Julian, reflecting upon God's promise that all shall be well, writes:

"And in these same words I saw a marvellous great mystery hidden in God, a mystery which he will make openly known to us in heaven; in which knowledge we shall truly see the reason why he allowed sin to exist; and seeing this we shall rejoice eternally in our Lord God."²⁸⁸

Inextricably connected to Julian's belief that the final cause of sin is a mystery which can only be resolved by God is her conviction that the focus of all the world's suffering is in Christ. When considering the terrible fact of suffering it is not to illness, misfortune or predation that she turns her mind, rather it is to the suffering of Christ on the cross. This is a considerable divergence from the way in which theodocists usually discuss the problem of evil. For Julian, the 'problem' of evil is located with Christ in his agony and death. In a striking reversal of the way in which many modern theologians talk of Christ's suffering, it is not Christ who suffers with us but we who are called to suffer with Christ. "And all creatures who were capable of suffering, suffered with him, that is to say, all the creatures that God has made to serve us. At the time of Christ's dying, the firmament of the earth failed for sorrow, each according to their nature."²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love*, p. 80.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 68.

One suspects that Julian would be unimpressed with the modern concern to vindicate or condemn God in light of the world's sufferings. Julian is pierced by the knowledge that the world, that she, caused God to suffer and die by sin.

Conclusion

I have considered the way in which evolutionary evil presses upon my account of creation's praise. It is clear that the importance of such evil cannot be dismissed or considered peripheral to the matter at hand. Suffering and death are so integral to life on earth that we can only conclude that they are in some way integral to creation's praise. Declining the lead of evolutionary theodicians, however, I have not concluded that this was either part of God's plan or regretfully accepted as a necessity. Rather, I have argued that the natural evil which afflicts creation is the effect of the nothingness which is the direct opposite of God's good act of creation. Although nothingness remains a constant threat to the continued being of the world, it is not what God has willed. God continues to resist nothingness and, in all its flourishing, creation joins God in that resistance.

Julian's resolute understanding of her suffering as a participation in Christ's suffering reminds us of Rolston's claim that creation is 'cruciform'. Creation does not suffer alone; rather it suffers with Christ and in doing so finds that Christ suffers with creation. At the heart of the world's suffering is a mystery which is terrifying and awesome in equal measure: terrifying in that it makes all too tangible the immense gulf between creator and creation and awesome in that it shows us the lengths to which God was prepared to go to conquer that gulf. And in seeing this mystery we see a further mystery: that God created a world which was to be brought to fulfilment in God's praise. When that praise was jeopardised

by suffering, God took it upon God's self to defeat the evil which caused that suffering. In doing so God not only deepened creation's capacity to praise but drew all its suffering into God's own suffering. This creation praises God in everything it is, even in its suffering.

Chapter 4

Introduction

In this fourth chapter I wish to address one central question which, it seems to me, is raised by my argument thus far. This question is raised in the light of a certain tension which may be evident between the developments of chapters two and three. In chapter two I outlined a cosmic scheme which drew upon Dionysius, Maximus and Thomas and was, therefore, significantly influenced by neo-Platonism. It was a description of a cosmos which radiates from and returns to its divine source. It was a grand vision of a worshipping cosmos, and the particularity of the members of that cosmos mattered in so far as it contributed to that worship. Indeed, this was a vision that stressed the importance of the particularity of every created being and the importance of their diversity for the integrity of creation's orchestrated praise. However, focusing on the particularity of creatures raised a difficulty: in actuality the lives of creatures seem to be characterised by suffering and frustration as much as fulfilment in praise. In other words, the big picture appeared to be one of a fully realised eschatology, of fulfilled and perfected creatures, experiencing unimpaired participation in God. This was a scheme which did not seem to account for the unrealised, unfulfilled and impaired lives of the creature's which inhabit God's creation.

In contrast to this, therefore, chapter three was concerned with the experience of natural evil which is intrinsic to life on earth. With the aid of Karl Barth, the creation accounts of Genesis were read as a narrative about God's creation of the world and creation's joining of God's resistance to the evil which threatens it. Chapter three, therefore, was concerned with

history from the beginning. Rather than allowing descriptions of the process of evolution to set the primary terms in which the nature of God's creative activity is understood (and so rethinking God's creative will in cost-benefit terms), I insisted on taking God's redemptive rejection of nothingness in Christ as the primary datum, the fundamental cause of creation's continual growth and flourishing, and reading evolutionary suffering in its terms. To make this argument I called upon Barth's discussion of *das Nichtige* and positioned it within his theology of creation and covenant.

Barth's understanding of history is inseparable from God's covenant with humanity. For Barth, creation is preserved, over and against nothingness, because it is the external basis of the covenant. The world is created for the covenant and the covenant is fulfilled in Christ, who is the "open mystery of the covenant history which begins after the completion of the history of creation".²⁹⁰ The covenant points, from its foundation, to its enactment and fulfilment in Christ. This being the case we might say that creation is preserved through, by and for Jesus Christ.

This means that we cannot talk of creation being itself without talking of Christ. Whatever scheme we may develop to describe the being and character of creation it will be incomplete if it does not make Christology its grounding principle. Barth writes: "The history of the covenant whose beginning, centre and goal will be this man [Jesus Christ] ... will confirm the history of creation".²⁹¹ To speak of the cosmos is to speak of that which was created by God for the purpose of the covenant and to speak of the covenant is to speak of Jesus Christ. Christ is, therefore, the fulfilment of history and the fulfilment of the cosmos.

Having accepted Barth's help in addressing the suffering which characterises creation's history, we must seek to do justice in our

²⁹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter *CD*], 4 vols. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004) III/1 § 41, p. 190.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

descriptions of creation's praise to his conviction that Christ is the purpose and fulfilment of creation's history. This Barthian addition to our scheme causes us to view the cosmic in light of the particular narrative of Christ. Thus all of history, including every development and setback in the non-human world, including the span of existence of everything that has ever been, can only find fulfilment of its story if it coheres in the narrative of Christ. This chapter asks how this can be achieved. Before continuing, however, it is worth emphasising the questions that this chapter does *not* seek to answer.

First, we might ask whether Barth's conviction that creation is the external basis of the covenant can provide the non-human with sufficient significance and intrinsic worth that its welfare might be central for Christians. This question has been asked (and, indeed, answered in the affirmative) by other theologians²⁹² but it is not the question at hand. Rather, the fundamental claim of this thesis is that a Christian Neoplatonic understanding of creation's participation in God, read as creation's praise, provides a strong basis for theological ethics and Christian practice. Karl Barth has been of help in correcting and challenging this thesis and it is to the continuation of that process that this chapter now attends.

Secondly, it should be noted that Barth was not necessarily sympathetic to those of his theological predecessors I have used in my second chapter.²⁹³ Whilst other theologians, finding themselves drawn both to Barth and the earlier theological systems which he rejected, have attempted to address this²⁹⁴ it is not within the parameters of this thesis to do so. In the case of both this and the previous question it should be understood that the focus of this thesis is upon a set of arguments and

²⁹² See Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 153-188; Geoff Thompson, "Remaining Loyal to the Earth?: Humanity, God's other Creatures and the Bible in Karl Barth" in David G. Horrell et al. *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), pp. 181-195.

²⁹³ Barth refers, for example, to Dionysius' discussion of the beauty of God as 'hardly veiled Platonism' which was, for good reason, not taken up by the Church. Cf. Barth, *CD II/I* § 31, p. 651.

²⁹⁴ Cf. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

ideas inspired by significant Christian theologians rather than upon the theologians themselves. Potential criticisms and questions which might be put to these theologians are of relevance only insofar as they could also be put to the arguments made in this thesis.

This chapter, therefore, will address the questions which remain after the argument of the third chapter. Chapter two concerned a cosmic vision which moved to consider particular beings. The argument of chapter three leaves us with the challenge that our cosmic scheme must begin with the particular historical narrative of Jesus Christ. Thus what we have learned from chapter three sends us back to chapter two with a new question: Can the Neoplatonic understanding of creation's praise be stated Christologically? Can this scheme be grounded in the particular history of Jesus Christ? The purpose of this chapter will be to make Christ the absolute ground and centre of the praising creation, and to show that, without him and the history of his Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection, the participation of beings in God, and therefore the praise of creation, would be impossible.

Asking whether the scheme of the second chapter can be grounded in Christ raises two further questions. First, we have already noted that the second chapter was a vision of a cosmos which had received eschatological fulfilment. Creation was fulfilled and perfected, unified with God and uninhibited in its praise. If the flourishing of creation is fundamentally grounded in the appearance of Christ within its history then we must seek to understand how Christ is essential to its fulfilment beyond the end of history. What will it mean for creation to be fulfilled *in Christ*? In what way will the uninhibited fullness of creation's praise be dependent upon Christ? Answering this question will be dependent upon understanding the way in which Christ is the fulfilment of the particular history of creation. Thus we must consider what particular elements of this world will be the material of this fulfilment. What might union with

God and fulfilment of praise mean in regards to the physical existence of created beings? What will be added to Creation in its final union with God and what will be retained?

Considering Christ and the particularity of created beings brings us to our second question. How does humanity participate in this vision of creation, grounded and fulfilled in the Incarnation? The divine Logos was incarnate as a particular human, Jesus of Nazareth. In his life, death and resurrection he founded a new community, beginning with his disciples and spreading across the world. Thus the particular history of Jesus Christ is in some sense continued in the Body of Christ. This community forms the heart of Christ's continuing work on Earth, and it tells us that Christ's cosmic purposes hold a special place for humanity. What might the nature of this role be and how is this shown in the lives of the Body's members? This, of course, recalls the purpose of the thesis itself, which is to provide resources for Christians to rethink their relationship with the non-human. This final chapter will insist that the vision of creation's praise with which we conclude is one which contains a clear role for humanity and challenges us to fulfil it.

In the terms of the second chapter this means asking what it means for humans, as creatures, to praise God by being themselves. Given that humans are made in God's image, does it mean something different to say that they praise God by being themselves than it does to say it of non-humans? If this is the case what is the relationship between their praise and the rest of creation's praise? Only by addressing these questions might we develop a theology of creation which might encourage Christians to understand environmental care not as a duty but as a central joy of their calling in God. Thus this chapter asks how Christian lives are to be formed as lives which express solidarity and kinship with the rest of God's creation in praise.

In summary, then, we have arrived at one question which must be put to the scheme outlined in chapter two: can it be grounded in Christology? This has led us to two further questions: first, what will be the character of its eschatological fulfilment in Christ? Secondly, can it be put to work in correcting anthropology? It seems to me that these two further questions are intimately connected and centre on Christology. If it can be seen how the Incarnation of Jesus and the narrative of his life, death and resurrection are intimately connected to the history of creation then we will already begin to see how they are connected to the eschatological fate of creation. Similarly, if we place the person of Christ at the centre of our scheme then we make a human being that centre. As we shall see, it is Christ's humanity, as much as his divinity, which guarantees the fulfilment of creation's praise.

This chapter will, therefore, seek to address these questions not as discrete problems but as facets of a discussion about Christology. As I have stated above, this thesis wishes to draw upon the benefits of the Neoplatonic scheme outlined in chapter two. Thus rather than considering Barth's Christology in greater depth I will return to the theological inspirations of the second chapter. In particular I return to Maximus the Confessor. I do this because he has a particularly robust Christology. This Christology, as discussed in chapter two, is the basis of his cosmology. Moreover, it is, as we shall see below, the ground of his anthropology and his eschatology. As shall be seen, his Chalcedonian theology will prove particularly fruitful in completing a vision of creation united and fulfilled in praise. This chapter is concerned with the way in which the whole creation will be drawn up into God – finding final and complete fulfilment of its being in eternal union with God – and with the particular place of humanity in this vision. With Maximus' help I intend to show that the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Christ not only make that vision possible but also determine its contours.

Christology I

The centrality of the Incarnation in Maximus' theology led him, as we noted in the second chapter, to pay a great price for his defence of the Council of Chalcedon. The Council itself was certainly born of fifth century political concerns but the theological questions were no less crucial.²⁹⁵ Similarly, Maximus became caught up in the political ambitions of Constans II and his conflict with Pope Martin I but his staunch defence of the Council is due to his passionate belief in the theological importance of the settlement.

That settlement, the great achievement of the Council, was between Alexandrian Christology, which emphasised that the divine Logos was to be fully identified with the human being Jesus Christ, and Antiochene Christology, which emphasised that the Incarnation in no way jeopardised the integrity of Jesus' human nature. Thus Chalcedon produced its characteristic affirmation that, in Christ, two natures are united in one person, two *physein* in one *hypostasis*. In this way the Council declared belief in

“one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognised in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characters of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence”.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ For a summary of the Council and its origins see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th Edition (London: Continuum, 1977), pp. 310-343.

²⁹⁶ Quoted in Henry Bettenson (ed.) *The Documents of the Early Church* (London: OUP, 1946), p. 73.

This formula, and the way in which it balances the integrity of the two natures with the unity of the person of Christ, became the heart of Maximus' theology, fuelling diverse aspects of his thought.

Maximus' understanding of Chalcedon was particularly Alexandrian in character and he constantly affirms the real union of divinity and humanity in Christ. At the centre of this Christology is Maximus' conviction that Christ was possessed of two natures which, whilst each maintained a distinct integrity, were nevertheless combined. Thus Maximus' Christology begins with an understanding of *communicatio idiomatum*, an exchange of properties, between the two natures. The *communicatio idiomatum* had been present in patristic theology well before Maximus' time; the idea can already be found in both Irenaeus and Origen.²⁹⁷ Maximus, however, was to understand this exchange of properties as a mutual permeation of Christ's human and divine natures; Maximus was, in fact, the first Christian writer to use the term *perichoresis* to describe the relationship between the two natures of Christ.²⁹⁸

Thus Maximus' Christ is God truly penetrating into the very depths of human being. The perichoretic union of Christ is an act of divine grace, initiated by God. Yet, for Maximus, it is just as important that the human nature of Christ is united with the divine; the human nature is not merely, as it were, a passenger in the person of Christ. Elena Vishnevskaya comments: "A one-sided penetration, that is solely on the part of the divine nature, seems inconceivable to Maximus who consistently espouses the dynamic role of human nature in the *perichoretic* process".²⁹⁹ Note that Vishnevskaya describes *perichoresis* as a process. It does not denote simply a change of state within the natures, a sense that they were separate prior to the Incarnation and joined after it. Rather it suggests that *perichoresis* is

²⁹⁷ Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Lund: Håkan Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1956), p. 22.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 23.

²⁹⁹ Elena Vishnevskaya, 'Divinization as Perichoretic Embrace in Maximus the Confessor' in Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 132-145 (pp. 132-33).

an ongoing activity in which the natures engage. Christ is a continual and effective mutual inter-penetration of divine and human natures.

In this union neither the divinity of Christ's divine nature nor the humanity of Christ's human nature are compromised. There is no sense in which either nature must become estranged from what it is so that it may draw near to the other. In fact, humanity and divinity are, Maximus says, entirely different 'poles' of existence. Rather than collapsing the difference between the poles, the Incarnation actually affirms their distinction and integrity. "It is only then," Hans Urs von Balthasar writes,

"when God and man come closest to each other and meet in a single person that it becomes obvious before our very eyes that God is eternally, irreducibly other than man and that man may therefore not seek his salvation in a direction that implies an abandonment of his own nature."³⁰⁰

Thus Maximus deeply affirms the Chalcedonian definition – that, in Christ, divinity and humanity are united without confusion, change, division or separation – and believes that the humanity of Christ is fulfilled and perfected by this union, and the *communicatio idiomatum* that flows from it.

The union of humanity and divinity in Christ is, according to von Balthasar, "unexpected, yet perfectly logical".³⁰¹ Thus Maximus, like Barth, sees Christ as the culmination of history. Christ is that to which human being already pointed, even if it did not know this. Christ is, therefore, the turning point of history and the starting point of cosmology. As von Balthasar argues, Maximus' view of the cosmos is dominated by "three great turning points of history's drama"³⁰², that is, the fall, the Incarnation and the parousia. The drama begins with creation straying from its

³⁰⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 257.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 256.

³⁰² *Ibid.* p. 179.

intended end; it turns upon the Incarnation which reorients creation to its goal and concludes with the final union of God and God's creation.

This chapter seeks to return to the Neoplatonic scheme of the second chapter with the view of cosmology demanded by the third, a cosmology which is seen from the perspective of the history of Jesus Christ. This might be difficult to achieve with the chapter's first inspiration, Dionysius, who holds an almost ahistorical view of creation and has little explicit Christology. He is, von Balthasar argues, "totally absorbed by the overpowering contemporaneity of the divinised cosmos".³⁰³ With Maximus, however, we find concern for the historical and human particularity of Jesus Christ. Although, as we shall see, he shares with Dionysius a sense of a divinised cosmos it is realised through the work achieved by the union of humanity and divinity in Christ.

Maximus, then, does have in view a real history of God's interaction with the world, culminating in the work of Christ. Yet this is not to say that the realised eschatology of the second chapter is abandoned in favour of a cosmology solely imbedded in the temporal finitude of creaturely existence. Rather, as von Balthasar argues, the turning points of history are seen

"less as events in a temporal sequence than as essential *states* of historical existence – human existence and the existence of the world: states that mysteriously overlap each other in the temporal development of every creature and that are recognizable in the creature's life".³⁰⁴

Thus in every creature Maximus sees at once the frustration of fallen creaturely existence and fulfilment in unity with the incarnate Christ.

He sees this because he is convinced that all of history turns upon the Incarnation of the divine Logos in Christ. This event amounts to the

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 180.

uniting of the universe and the unification in God of all its elements, fractured by the fall. Yet the full realisation of this redemption is yet to come. Von Balthasar comments: “Maximus’ reflection on history, then, stands in a curiously unresolved state, somewhere between a pure contemplation of natural becoming and a concrete involvement in the variegated, constantly changing reality of actual events”.³⁰⁵ Thus Maximus provides us with a way to view every being as fallen and subject to the frustration of creaturely existence and yet already and always emanating from and returning to God. Christ both demonstrates and fulfils creation’s orientation to God which is entirely proper to it from its foundation. I am, however, anticipating my argument. Before we can understand the way in which Christ fulfils the being of the cosmos we must address Maximus’ understanding of humanity.

Anthropology

I have argued that creation reflects the divine glory in its being and in the particularities of its various modes of being. This is also true of humanity. Human beings, however, are set apart from non-humans in that they bear the image of God. Yet all creation, in a sense, images God in as much as it shows forth the divine splendour. What is it about humanity’s bearing of the *imago Dei* which sets it apart from non-human creation? Maximus answers, “Love alone, properly speaking, proves that the human person is in the image of the Creator”.³⁰⁶ Thus humanity’s praise is a song of love, of love of God and love of the other. This praise is humanity’s true self since,

³⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 179.

³⁰⁶ St Maximus the Confessor, *Epistle II* (PG 91:396C) in Andrew Louth (ed. and trans.), *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 86.

being made in God's image, humanity has, from the beginning, a natural inclination and movement towards God and so towards love.³⁰⁷

We remember at this point that the purpose of this chapter is to develop the scheme of chapter two along Christological lines. In fact I have stated that our eschatology and anthropology will also be grounded in Christology. Thus we may take note of Barth's conviction that "no anthropological ... statement is true in itself and as such. Its truth subsists in the assertions of Christology, or rather in the reality of Jesus Christ alone".³⁰⁸ For Barth, whatever orientation the human being might have towards God, it is only intelligible in the light of Christ's orientation to God. Our line of argument, following Maximus, need not diverge from this statement since, as we have seen, Christ is the logical culmination of the history of humanity. (Once again though, it is important to note that my aim here is to ensure that the different strands of my argument hold together, rather than anything as ambitious as a synthesis of Barth and Maximus.) As we shall see below, Maximus' understanding of humanity's orientation to God is grounded in and fulfilled by the incarnation.

Because humanity is made in the image of God it has its own particular role to play within the created order. Maximus believed, after the Greek tradition, that humanity was a microcosm of the cosmos and that the cosmos was a macrocosm of the human being. This conviction, when brought to bear upon Maximus' commitment to the *imago Dei*, leads him to state that humanity exists at the midpoint of God and God's creation, being both a creature amongst creatures and made in the image of God. Thus, it is, according to Andrew Louth, humanity's particular task to be the "bond of the cosmos".³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Ibid. (PG 91:396C), p. 87.

³⁰⁸ Barth, *CD* II/1 §26, p. 149

³⁰⁹ Andrew Louth, 'The Cosmic Vision of St Maximos [sic.] the Confessor', in Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (eds.) *In Whom we Live and Move and Have our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 184-198 (p. 187).

This position, as Lars Thunberg notes, is not simply a notion of status but a conviction concerning humanity's active role within the created order. Humanity's identity as microcosm must be enacted.³¹⁰ It is humanity's vocation to draw together the disparate elements of creation and so make possible the unification of those elements with each other and with God. In particular, Maximus speaks of a series of divisions, including that between created and uncreated natures and heaven and earth, which humanity, in its unique position at the midpoint, must mediate and transcend.³¹¹ Thus, Maximus says,

“humanity clearly has the power of naturally uniting at the mean point of each division since it is related to the extremities of each division in its own parts. Through that capacity it can come to be the way of fulfilment of what is divided and be openly instituted in itself as the great mystery of the divine purpose”.³¹²

Humans are able to fulfil this role because they are rational beings. The meaning of such a claim must be carefully stated: the word translated here as 'rational' is the Greek *logikoi* which, as Louth argues, connotes something broader than the modern English term 'rational'. Thus, the rationality of the human being is not a detached and neutral assessment of the cosmos. Rather, in being *logikoi* human beings are given a particular connection to the Logos which allows them to discern and comprehend the *logoi* of the creation which surrounds them. “They are capable of discerning the *logoi* of creation, the whole depth of meaning that can be found in creation in all its manifold splendour.”³¹³ Thus humanity's mediation is a task of awareness, a task which calls us to see the cosmos as it truly is and present it to God as an act of worship. It is, as many Orthodox theologians have argued, a task of priesthood. Thus Paul

³¹⁰ Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 148.

³¹¹ There are five in all with the addition of the divisions between paradise and the inhabited world, between intelligible and sensible and between man and woman.

³¹² Maximus, *Ambiguum 41* (PG 91: 1305B) in Louth (ed. and trans.), *Maximus the Confessor*, p. 157.

³¹³ Louth, 'Cosmic Vision' p. 89.

Evdokimov states that “the world, for St. Maximus, is a ‘cosmic church’ in which man exercises his priesthood. As the priest of nature, he ‘offers it to God in his soul as on an altar’”.³¹⁴

Yet the image of God in the human person (and, therefore, humanity’s priesthood) is impaired by the fall. In this event, Maximus believes, the devil has succeeded in dividing our nature at “the level of the mode of existence, fragmenting it into a multitude of opinions and imaginations”.³¹⁵ Thus, instead of a single inclination towards God, humanity now turns to its own desires; instead of being oriented solely toward divine love, humanity now indulges in self-love. This has distorted the entire human person and caused it to abuse the powers which God gave it in accordance with its bearing of the divine image and possession of divine love. Maximus identifies three such powers – reason, desire and the incensive power – which, afflicted by sin, cannot aid our turning towards God as they should.

“For reason, instead of being ignorant, ought to be moved through knowledge to seek solely after God; and desire, pure of the passion of self love, ought to be driven by yearning for God alone; and the incensive power, separated from tyranny, ought to struggle to attain God alone.”³¹⁶

Thus humanity, its natural inclination toward God distorted and misdirected, does not bear the image of God as faithfully and fully as it ought. In order, therefore, to restore the image of God in humanity God became incarnate in the person of Christ. Thus, says Maximus,

“another way was introduced, more marvellous and more befitting of God than the first, and as different from the former as what is above nature is different from what is according to nature. And

³¹⁴ Paul Evdokimov, ‘Nature’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18: 1 (1965), pp.1-22 (p. 2).

³¹⁵ Maximus, *Epistle II* (PG 91:397D), in Louth (ed. and trans.), *Maximus the Confessor*, p. 87.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.* (PG 91:397B), p. 87

this, as we all believe, is the mystery of the mystical sojourn of God with men".³¹⁷

Thus, in Christ, a new way of uniting humanity to God came to be. In their original state human beings bore the image of God and so were possessed of certain natural powers by which they might ascend to God. In Christ a human being is born who not only bears the image of God but is very God in human form. In the Incarnation a new way of ascending to God is opened as humanity and divinity are united in one person. God "united our nature to himself in a single hypostasis, without division and without confusion, and joined us to himself as a kind of first fruits."³¹⁸

Thus divine love finds its zenith in the Incarnation which gathers together all good things, fulfils the law and the prophets and "out of human beings makes us gods".³¹⁹ This, then, adds a new and greater dimension to humanity's being. For since God became human so too may human beings ascend to God and, in unity with God, become godlike. For Maximus says that "God and man are paradigms one of another, that as much as God is humanized to man through love for mankind, so much is man able to be deified to God through love".³²⁰ For humanity to be itself is for it to bear God's image by loving God and others. This image, damaged by the fall, is restored in Christ. More than this, the Incarnation of God in Christ results in the deification of the human person.

In claiming that the Incarnation results in the deification of humanity, Maximus is drawing on a long patristic tradition. Daniel A. Keating provides a helpful summary of this thought in his book *Deification and Grace* which will be useful to consider before turning to Maximus' thoughts on the subject. Deification is, according to Keating, a 'graced

³¹⁷ Maximus, *Ambiguum* 7 (PG 91:1097CD) in Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (eds. and trans.), *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St Maximus the Confessor* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 71.

³¹⁸ Ibid. (PG 91:1097CD), p. 70.

³¹⁹ Maximus, *Epistle II* (PG 91:393C), in Louth (ed. and trans.) *Maximus the Confessor*, p. 85.

³²⁰ Maximus, *Ambiguum* 10 (PG 91:1113B), in Louth (ed. and trans.) *Maximus the Confessor*, p. 101.

exchange' in which "the eternal Son of God became what we are so that we could become what he is".³²¹ This basic idea is found throughout patristic texts³²² and, although it had been all but forgotten in much Western thought, it has been regaining importance in recent theology.³²³

Keating points to various New Testament passages which use a formula of exchange: "For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9); "But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Galatians 4:4-5 AV).³²⁴ These passages and others³²⁵ suggest some kind of exchange of properties between the human and the divine and are read by the Fathers as such.

It is with the addition of Christ's reference to a Psalm ("I say, 'You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince'" [Psalm 82:6-7]) that the Fathers develop their thought from this formula of exchange toward a doctrine of deification.

Jesus answered, 'Is it not written in your law, "I said, you are gods"? If those to whom the word of God came were called "gods" – and the scripture cannot be annulled – can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, "I am God's Son"?' (John 10:35-6)

This verse, Keating argues, led many of the Fathers to begin identifying Christians as gods. Furthermore, the fact that the text to which

³²¹ Daniel Keating, *Deification and Grace* (Naples: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2007), p. 11

³²² Keating discusses Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose of Milan and Ambrose amongst others, cf. *Ibid.* p. 11ff.

³²³ See Gösta Hallonsten, 'Theosis in Recent Research: A Renewal of Interest and a Need for Clarity', in Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (eds.) *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 281-293.

³²⁴ I use the King James translation and the gendered language of 'sonship' here to make plain the connection between the sending of the *Son* and the making of *sons*.

³²⁵ Keating also addresses Romans 8:14-17, 29 and 1 John 3:1-2, as well as the theme of Christ as the new Adam in Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:44-49; 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Ephesians 1:10.

Christ alludes (Psalm 82:6) identifies the 'gods' as 'children of the most high' allowed the Fathers a "biblical bridge between our adoptive sonship and our being called 'gods' in a clearly defined and delineated way".³²⁶

The earliest use of this 'bridge' and the term 'deification' (*theopoiēsis*) is found in Clement of Alexandria:³²⁷ "Being baptized, we are illuminated, illuminated we become sons; being made sons, we are made immortal. 'I' says He, 'have said that you are gods, and all sons of the highest'".³²⁸ Carl Mosser argues, from the text surrounding this passage, that Galatians 3-4, with its reference to sonship, is the background to Clement's use of the psalm.³²⁹ This being the case, the formula of exchange, which allows for our sonship on account of God's sending of the Son, is connected to the Christian's identity as a 'god' with the use of the psalm.

Note that Clement attributes the saying to Christ but uses the words from Psalm 82, adding the important term 'sons of the highest' to the use of the text in the Gospel of John. It is not the case, therefore, that Clement has arbitrarily connected gods and sons, but rather that he has used the connection between gods and sons already present in the psalm, via the words of Christ, to connect human beings as gods and Paul's claim in Galatians that human beings are the adoptive sons of God in Christ. Thus Clement is able to say that "the Word of God became man, that you may learn from man how man may become God"³³⁰

Having referenced the psalm, Clement proceeds to say:

"This work is variously called grace, and illumination, and perfection, and washing: washing by which we cleanse away our sins; grace, by which the penalties accruing to transgressions are

³²⁶ Keating, *Deification and Grace*, p. 33.

³²⁷ See Carl Mosser. 'The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origin of Christian Deification', *The Journal of Theological Studies* 56: 1 (2005), pp. 30-74; Maximus uses the later term *theōsis* after Pseudo-Dionysius; cf. Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 456.

³²⁸ Quoted in Keating, *Deification and Grace*, p. 32.

³²⁹ Mosser, 'Patristic Interpretations', p. 57.

³³⁰ Quoted in Keating, *Deification and Grace*, p. 12.

remitted; and illumination, by which that holy light of salvation is beheld, that is by which we see God clearly".³³¹

Thus, for Clement, deification is a gift of grace and is bound up with illumination, perfection and washing (meaning sanctification). As Mosser notes, these are not meant to be separable events but ways of speaking of "the one complex salvific event".³³² In fact, Mosser argues, Clement and his fellow early patristic interpreters of verses 6 and 7 of Psalm 82 understood it as a summary of the creation and fall of humanity: "You are gods ... nevertheless you shall die like mortals". Christ, as the new Adam, recapitulates this movement and reverses it, so that fallen humanity may once again attain to divinity. "Read in this way the passage was understood to describe summarily the entire sweep of salvation history."³³³

Describing the sweep of salvation history, such an understanding of deification recapitulates and redresses the fall. Christ is God's chosen Son and, in turn, Christ chooses to obey his Father. In Christ, therefore, the human choice to reject God is remade as a choice to follow God. By making that choice in and with Christ the believer may begin the process of deification. For deification is, according to Keating, a process. It begins with the indwelling of God in us, which is possible because of the work accomplished by Christ and by the gift of the Holy Spirit.³³⁴ Across the patristic texts there is an emphasis upon Baptism and Eucharist as the locus of this indwelling. This further emphasises that deification is a work initiated in the human person by God and one which achieves a real change in the being of that person.

"The immersion of the body in the water of baptism, the anointing of the body with oil, and the feeding of the body with the body and

³³¹ Quoted in *ibid.* p. 32.

³³² Mosser, 'Patristic Interpretations', p. 56

³³³ *Ibid.* p. 59

³³⁴ Keating, *Deification and Grace*, p. 60.

blood of Christ signify the transformation of the whole human nature, body and soul, and foreshadow the resurrection of the dead.”³³⁵

Further to and, indeed, only because of the initiation of deification in the sacraments by God, the believer must continue in this work through Godly living. Such progress centres around our transformation into the image of Christ and Keating quotes 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit”. Keating comments: “We are to become what we behold, and we are to make progress in Christ, the image of God, into whom we have already been baptized”.³³⁶ Thus Christians on the path of deification are to grow in virtue, their character being continually transformed into that of Christ. This progress in deification is not achieved through the Christian’s own effort; rather, it is entirely dependent upon the grace of God. Yet this does not mean that it is an easy path. Many of the Fathers emphasise the importance of prayer and asceticism and, Keating argues, deification is fundamentally received as the believers take up their cross: “Because deification means being progressively conformed to the image of Christ, there is no route to this transformation apart from participation in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ”.³³⁷

Thus, with Keating’s help, we have outlined the doctrine of deification, particularly in its earliest forms. It turns upon the understanding that, in Christ, there is an exchange of human and divine nature. Human beings may become ‘sons’ of God just as God sent the Son to humanity. Deification is received as a process, given by the grace of God and participated in by the believer’s willingness to submit to Christ.

³³⁵ Ibid. p. 47.

³³⁶ Ibid. p. 76.

³³⁷ Ibid. p. 87.

It is important to understand, and Keating is at pains to point out, that deification is not an 'ontological promotion'. It does not result in the loss of anything that is proper to our nature, neither does it dissolve the distinction between God and the creature. "Rather, deification is the transformation and glorification of our nature, so that it can be what God intended it to be: a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."³³⁸

By the seventh century deification was established doctrine and it was a doctrine which captured Maximus' theological imagination. It is the Chalcedonian understanding of the relationship of human and divine natures in Christ that is the basis of Maximus' theology of deification. We have seen that deification is to be understood as a 'graced exchange' and the perichoretic exchange of properties at work in the Incarnation is Maximus' ground for *perichoresis* between humanity and God. In fact, Thunberg notes, Maximus rarely mentions the *perichoresis* of divine and human natures in Christ without also addressing the deification of human beings.³³⁹ Thus we return to a key passage from *Ambiguum 10*, the beginning of which was quoted above, in which Maximus states:

"For they [the Fathers] say that God and man are paradigms one of another, that as much as God is humanized to man through love for mankind, so much is man able to be deified to God through love, and that as much as God is caught up by God to what is known in his mind, so much does man manifest God, who is invisible by nature, through the virtues."³⁴⁰

Thus we find the formula, characteristic of Maximus, that God has become human as far as humans have become gods and humans have become gods as far as God has become human. The Incarnation is presupposed in such a statement and conditions it. As Thunberg comments: "Man becomes god as it were, in proportion to God's

³³⁸ Ibid. p. 110.

³³⁹ Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 27.

³⁴⁰ Maximus, *Ambiguum 10* (PG 91:1113B), in Louth (ed. and trans.) *Maximus the Confessor*, p. 101.

becoming man, and he is elevated for God's sake to the extent to which God has emptied himself, without change, and accepted human nature".³⁴¹ Maximus' understanding of deification is one of active reciprocity between divine and human nature in which the Incarnation is proof that these two poles may be fittingly drawn together. As such, deification and the Incarnation mutually condition one another; in fact, they presuppose one another such that God and humanity are 'paradigms one of another'.

This is certainly a radical thought and the idea that humanity and divinity could be so closely related might seem to threaten the transcendence of God. Yet, as we have seen, Maximus' thought is deeply rooted in orthodox Christology and its conviction that the two natures of Christ are unconfused. As such, the irreducible and undiminished difference between God and humanity is not only maintained in deification but is actually essential to it. The integrity of divinity and humanity is as important to Maximus' anthropology (his account of deification) as it is to his Christology (his account of the hypostatic union), and for exactly the same reason.

Thus von Balthasar quotes Maximus: "The unity of God and man 'is achieved through the preservation [of differences], guaranteed by guaranteeing *them*. For the unification of the two poles comes to full realization to the exact degree that their natural difference remains intact.'" ³⁴² This means that God remains God and does not lose anything of God's divinity. It is also the case that, for Maximus, humanity loses nothing of its essential nature in deification. Thunberg writes: "Everywhere Maximus wishes to underline both the "newness of this redemptive union *and* the fact that it implies precisely a true development of what is peculiar to human nature."³⁴³

³⁴¹ Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 33.

³⁴² Von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, p. 257.

³⁴³ Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 32.

Thus deification is certainly a progression of human being, a new dimension of human existence, but it does not imply a radically different state of being. As Michael Gibson argues, Maximus' "concept of theosis does not posit a *blending* of God and humanity into each other, where all differentiation is lost".³⁴⁴ Deification is entirely proper to human being and is a realisation of a latent potential which is pre-existent in the human person. Maximus uses the analogy of iron which glows when placed in fire. The iron's glow is entirely dependent upon the fire and yet quite proper to the iron, a potential already latent within it.³⁴⁵ Thus, von Balthasar notes, Maximus, following in the footsteps of other defenders of the Council of Chalcedon, takes on one of the Council's key words: 'save' (*sozein*). Von Balthasar writes that, "for Maximus, this word becomes the most central concept in the whole order of redemption, for it unites in itself both aspects of Christ's saving work: healing and rescue on the one hand, and preservation and confirmation on the other".³⁴⁶

Thus, for Maximus, 'salvation' means rescue from the Godless state into which humanity has fallen and healing of the maladies that this fall has entailed. This salvation brings about a new way for humanity to be; it brings about a deified humanity in which its being is raised up to unity with God. Yet this salvation is not an entirely new state since it is a recovery of the image of God which had originally marked humanity. Precisely because this image was original to human being, deification entails preservation and confirmation of that image. In this union nothing is lost of the integrity of the particularity of either member. That which is new in deification, the raising of being to participation in God, is precisely that which is written into the being of humanity at the foundation of the universe. Yet deification is truly new since, though it fulfils a potential already present in human being, it is a work only affected through the

³⁴⁴ Michael D. Gibson, "The Beauty of the Redemption of the World: The Theological Aesthetics of Maximus the Confessor and Jonathan Edwards", *Harvard Theological Review* 101: 1 (2008), pp. 45-76 (p. 68).

³⁴⁵ See Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 31.

³⁴⁶ Von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, p. 257.

grace of God in the Incarnation of Christ. In a more Barthian vein one might say that the creation of humanity is the external basis for the covenant of deification in Christ, and deification in Christ the internal basis of anthropology

Deification is a work of divine grace but also a work which genuinely takes place in human nature; just as the human nature of Christ is not a passenger in the Incarnation so human nature is deified through its participation as willing and active in the grace of God. Vishnevskaya comments:

“The mutual partaking of the other bears witness to, on the one hand, a God who, through the Incarnation is fully invested in the human being, the recipient of the abundance of divine grace, and, on the other, the believer who is free, by nature to orient his or her being toward God and become like him in divinisation.”³⁴⁷

We might add that the giver and the recipient do not stand over against each other, but that this freedom, proper though it is to human nature, is revived and enabled by God’s prevenient grace.

Deification then is a radically asymmetrical process but one involving both the free action of God and the free action of human beings none the less. It is not merely a process which humanity passively undergoes; it involves the freeing and fulfilling of humanity’s proper, natural, willed and active orientation toward the divine. Yet it is simultaneously the work of divine grace, entirely unearned. Thus, Thunberg comments, Maximus is able to say, “on the one hand, that there is no power inherent in human nature which is able to deify man, and yet, on the other, that God becomes man *insofar as* man has deified himself – obviously on the basis that man has a natural desire to find his pleasure in God alone”.³⁴⁸ Thus deification is an active, not a passive, process, in

³⁴⁷ Vishnevskaya, ‘Perichoretic Embrace’, p. 134.

³⁴⁸ Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 458.

which humanity participates as active and desiring but which nevertheless is impossible without the work of Christ's Incarnation.

This brings us back to the passage from Maximus concerning deification, quoted above. Having stated that God is humanized through love and that humans are deified through love, Maximus continues to say that "the Saints, turning unerringly with a yearning for God, worthily draw near to God". This turning, this deification, Vishnevskaya describes as "perichoretic embrace".³⁴⁹ Deification in Maximus is, then, a radical union of God and humanity. It is a genuine partaking of each in the other; it is a *perichoretic* union. As extraordinary as this union may be it is, for Maximus, an entirely fitting consequence of the Incarnation. Once the miracle of the union of the two natures is achieved in Christ it is entirely fitting and right that it should occur between individual believers and God. In all of this it is the love of God – love from God displayed in Christ and love towards God inherent in human nature – which overcomes the fall and unites Creator and creature. "Infused with the divine ways of love," Vishnevskaya comments, "the faithful wilfully exchange self-love for the love toward God and the created order".³⁵⁰

The deification of humanity is consequent upon the unconfused union of human and divine nature, occasioned by grace, in the Incarnation. Because that union does not require the dissolving of human nature in divine nature – rather it underlines and preserves the integrity of human nature – deification, likewise, involves the preservation, indeed the healing, of everything that is true and good in human nature. Humanity's participation in the process of deification is through the love and desire for God which are quite natural to it. Thus we see that deification is the natural fulfilment of Maximus' understanding of the human person, outlined above. Humans are made in God's image which means that they

³⁴⁹ Vishnevskaya, 'Perichoretic Embrace', p. 132.

³⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 135.

are characterised, at the deepest level of their being, by love. This love is that which orients their being towards God and leads to their completion in him. This love, though it is corrupted in humanity's besmirched divine image, is restored by grace and, through the way made open by the Incarnation, leads the Christian into deification and union with God's being.

It is not simply the human will that is caught up in the process of deification, but human intellect too. The capacity of humanity to discern the *logoi* of Creation, discussed above, is central to its deification. The passage quoted above, concerning human deification and the yearning of the saints for God, continues to state that this desire for God is practiced in natural contemplation. There are, Maximus says, "three different ways of the godly life, the discipline proper to each of the three universal laws. By universal laws here I mean the natural law, the scriptural law, and the law of grace".³⁵¹ Each of these, nature, scripture and grace call and guide the Christian into love of God. Thus contemplation of the non-human is, for Maximus, a central part of the Christian's progress in deification. Considering these 'three universal laws' von Balthasar states,

"The first is engraved in nature – not simply in the human soul, but in the whole cosmos and every one of its parts. Through the contemplation of nature, the wise person acquires a natural knowledge of God, of his righteousness, wisdom, and goodness, and this knowledge is in the true sense a kind of 'vision', a 'contemplation'."³⁵²

So it is that Maximus finds implicit value in the non-human world, not in terms of its material uses for humans but in its intrinsic capacity to reveal the divine. In this, von Balthasar argues, Maximus is distinct from his theological predecessors. Origenist and Augustinian theologies had set

³⁵¹ Maximus, *Ad Thalassium* 64 (CCSG 22:233), in Blowers and Wilken (eds. and trans.), *Cosmic Mystery*, p. 167.

³⁵² Von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, p. 291.

the law above nature and, in turn, grace above law. In contrast to this, Maximus

“presents the natural law and the scriptural law, revelation in nature and revelation in history, as a tension between poles of equal value that mutually complement each other. The third law, which Christ gives and embodies, brings both of them to fulfilment and final unity, in that it simultaneously removes the limitations of both.”³⁵³

Let us turn, therefore, to consider the way in which Christ brings to fulfilment creation’s witness to God.

Christology II

Maximus gives an allegorical reading of the Transfiguration which is important to furthering our reading of his Christology. The disciples, upon beholding the transfigured Christ, received a clear and true revelation of God, being given knowledge of the ‘spiritual meanings’ of what they saw. These meanings correspond to the three universal laws. Christ’s face shines with a brilliant light which is the light of the revelation of the glory of God. Christ’s robes also shine and they represent the scriptures and the creation. In this way Maximus identifies creation as the garment which is worn by Christ and, therefore, as revealing the glory of Christ. Maximus concludes: “So the two laws – both the natural law and the written law – are of equal honour and teach the same things; neither is greater or less than the other, which shows, as is right, that the lover of perfect wisdom may become the one who desires wisdom perfectly”.³⁵⁴

³⁵³ Ibid. p. 292.

³⁵⁴ Maximus, *Ambiguum 10* (PG 91:1128D) in Louth (ed. and trans.), *Maximus the Confessor*, pp. 109-110.

In the radiance of Christ's face we see the theme of apophatic theology which we picked out in chapter two. The light is both revelatory and blinding; the disciples are dazzled by the glory of God. Furthermore, it is not difficult, Louth argues, to see that the Transfiguration may be linked with Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai and its interpretation as the soul's ascent to God. In both cases we are met with the revelatory light that blinds, on the mount of God's revelation and the mount of the soul's search for God.³⁵⁵ The Transfiguration is the moment at which the union with God for which the soul was made and for which it longs becomes visible. In Christ we see the true glory of God and our true destiny revealed.

Yet in the Transfiguration Christ does not leave the creation behind and in contemplation of Christ neither does the Christian. Louth underlines two ways in which Maximus' understanding of the Transfiguration displays his conviction of the integrity of the non-human world. First, the image of the mountain signals the cosmos as the location of the believer's encounter with God. The vision of the transfigured Lord brings a new perspective on creation itself, cleansing the Christian's sight. Secondly, as seen in Maximus' interpretation of the shining robes, contemplation of nature reveals Christ himself; they bear witness to the glory of God which is revealed in Christ.

To illustrate the vision of God which contemplation of nature may bring, Louth turns to the personal experience of Sergei Bulgakov. Bulgakov had lived for a decade without faith and gives this evocative account of the first stirrings of an experience of God:

“One evening we were driving across the southern steppes of Russia, and the strong-scented spring grass was gilded by the rays of a golden sunset. Far in the distance I saw the blue outlines of the

³⁵⁵ Andrew Louth, “Between Creation and Transfiguration: the Environment in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition”, in David G. Horrell et al. *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), pp. 211-222 (p. 215).

Caucasus. This was my first sight of the mountains. I looked with ecstatic delight at their rising slopes. I drank in the light and air of the steppes. I listened to the revelation of nature. My soul was accustomed to the dull pain of seeing nature as a lifeless desert and of treating its surface beauty as a deceptive mask. Yet, contrary to my intellectual convictions, I could not be reconciled to nature without God.”³⁵⁶

Louth offers this passage as illustrative of Maximus’ theology. “I could not be reconciled to nature without God”, Bulgakov writes. It was not possible for him to take in this beauty without understanding it as revelatory of God. It is also the case, then, that nature played a crucial role in Bulgakov’s reconciliation with God. It was through natural contemplation, through beholding the shining white robes of Christ, that he came to experience the glory of the transcendent God.

In this, it seems to me, Maximus offers us something of the greatest importance. Here we find a way of understanding nature as revelatory of the divine, confirming and deepening the claim in chapter two that creation reveals the glory of God. In Maximus’ thought creation is not revelatory simply by virtue of its being created, but by virtue of its being the location and adornment of the transfigured Christ. Thus Christians can gaze upon the non-human world around them without fear of idolatry, knowing that it is the garments of the transfigured Christ which they behold. The beauty of the natural world is seen by Christians to be the glory of God made known to all creation in the transfigured Christ. Creation in all its great diversity, in all its flora and fauna, in its earth and sky, is his shining white robe. In beholding this glory Christians may be captivated by Christ and may develop the yearning for God of which Maximus writes. Then they may turn, by their natural desire for union with the source of that glorious light, and become united with God.

³⁵⁶ Quoted in *ibid.* p. 220.

The Transfiguration, therefore, is not only a localised event within the narrative of Christ's life. Rather it opens to all humanity the chance to witness the undimmed glory of God in creation. The disciples witness this revelation and, following them, humanity continues to witness this glory as they discern the Logos in the created *logoi* which surround them. Thus Christology becomes the basis for claiming that humanity and non-humanity are linked for reasons other than the utility of the non-human for humanity's physical requirements. Humanity's impaired ability to discern the Logos of God in creation has been assumed and redeemed by Christ who became human and restored humanity's vision.

Moreover, Christ's Transfiguration deepens the capacity of the non-human to display the glory of God. We may see this in parallel to the deification of humanity. Just as Christ fulfils and perfects that which was already potential in humanity but had no reality without Christ, so too Transfiguration brings something that is both new and yet entirely proper to creation. Creation has always existed after the divine Logos by virtue of its own *logoi*, yet it was not until the Logos was incarnate that the true meaning of the *logoi* could be discerned. Thus we may see that the Incarnation brings about ways of being for all of creation which are both radically new, in that they are impossible and incomprehensible apart from the coming of Christ, and the logical culmination of creation's being, in that they fulfil that for which creation was always and already created and towards which it was always and already oriented.

The coming of Christ not only renews human and non-human creation alike, it also renews the relationship between them. Non-humanity is essential to the divinising of humanity since it is only by contemplation of Christ's glory displayed in the non-human world that humanity learns the fullness of that glory; humanity is deified only in communion with non-human world. Conversely – though this is as yet more mysterious, and will need unpacking – by becoming divinised and

fulfilling their God given image, human beings fulfil their priestly role in creation, uniting it and presenting it to God, and so participate in the process by which creation is drawn towards its fulfilment in communion with Christ and Christ's people. Thus there is a mutual reciprocity between the two. Yet this reciprocal relationship in no way functions without Christ. Rather, it is in the Incarnation that the relationship is forged, and in the Transfiguration that it is made visible. It is through contemplation of nature (and scripture) that the Christian contemplates the transfigured Christ; it is in the transfigured Christ that Christians see the non-human world as truly displaying the glory of God; it is in their contemplation of the non-human world as displaying this glory that they glimpse and anticipate the redeemed community, human and non-human, into which they are being drawn in Christ. Thus Christ's work does not achieve the deification of humanity without achieving the deification of the non-human world, and vice versa.

I have described above Maximus' own way of explicating this: his understanding of humanity as the bond of the cosmos, such that it is through Christ's fulfilment of this bonding and mediating function that the cosmos receives its final unity. In *Ambiguum 41* Maximus discusses at length the ways in which humanity unites the disparate elements of the created cosmos. This is done by holy living, by the imitation of the incarnate and crucified Christ.

Thus, the heavenly and earthly realms are united by the Christian by the living of a life which is "identical in every way through virtue with that of the angels".³⁵⁷ Similarly, sensible and intellectual knowledge are united by achieving, "equality with the angels in the manner of knowing".³⁵⁸ The uniting of creation is achieved by godly living, by Christian's attainment of the height of their perfection, a perfection given

³⁵⁷ Maximus, *Ambiguum 41* (PG 91:1308A), in Louth (ed. and trans.), *Maximus the Confessor*, p. 158.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

to them by God as their own particular *logos* and fulfilled by their deification in Christ. Humanity's role of mediation is one of godly living and ascent to God.

Maximus describes the Christian as proceeding through the five divisions, uniting each one and so drawing closer to the divine source of being. Maximus' vision is that of the spiritual ascent already well known to the Church Fathers writing before him. It is the journey up Mount Sinai which ends in cloud and fire, a journey into the light of God, a light so bright it is blinding. In ascending to the heights of its own being, and into God, humanity draws with it the whole of creation. We have noted, in chapter two, the way in which everything by turning to its own being turns to God, and this is no truer in any created thing than in the human. Being in the likeness and image of God human persons are able to ascend through their own being to unity with God.

The culmination, therefore, of Maximus' vision of humanity's uniting of the cosmos is the uniting of the created world with the uncreated God:

“The human person unites the created nature with the uncreated through love (O the wonder of God's love for human beings!), showing them to be one and the same through the possession of grace, the whole [creation] wholly interpenetrated by God, and become completely whatever God is, save at the level of being, and receiving to itself the whole of God himself, as the end of the movement of everything that moves towards it, and the firm and unmoved rest of everything that is carried towards it, being the undetermined and infinite limit and definition of every definition and law and ordinance, of reason and mind and nature.”³⁵⁹

It is interesting to note that, as in Dionysius, Maximus' language seems to move beyond theological prose and take on a poetic and even hymn-like

³⁵⁹ Ibid. (PG 91:1308B), p. 158.

quality. Humanity's uniting of the cosmos to God is a source of joy and wonder for Maximus.

Thus humanity's great privilege and joy is to serve this special function in God's healing of the cosmos. This is the priesthood of humanity discussed above; humanity offers the praise of creation on the altar of its heart (and so anticipates the fulfilled communion of all things with Christ). Yet, as we have seen, the image of God in humans – and, therefore, human beings' capacity to mediate – has been impaired. Humanity can only fulfil their function because of the assumption of their nature in the Incarnation. Thus Maximus stresses the pivotal role of Christ in bringing about the union of creation. Christ, who has restored the image of God in humanity, leads creation's movement towards God: "He fulfils the great purpose of God the Father, *to recapitulate everything both in heaven and earth in himself* (Eph. 1:10), *in whom everything has been created* (Col. 1:16)."³⁶⁰

Yet this does not entail the bypassing of humanity in the process of the uniting of the cosmos in God. In undertaking its task of priesthood, humanity works not by its own power but by participating in the work of Christ. It is because Christ has restored the impaired image of God in humanity that humanity can once again undertake its task, following the way made open by Christ. Thus humanity's being itself plays a part in the process by which the rest of creation is drawn into deeper fulfilment of its being. Christ's uniting of the cosmos is realised, in part, in and through the human being by grace. This, of course, is finally possible because Christ has already united humanity and divinity in himself. It is in the unconfused yet undivided unity of God and human being that the entire cosmos sees its final completion and unification. The deification of humanity as I have described it above is, therefore, essential to the deification of the cosmos.

³⁶⁰ Ibid. (PG 91:1308D), p. 159. Italics original.

Thus the final end of the created world, through humanity, is a real union of its being with the being of God. As priests of God's creation human beings are the key to this final consummation. It is in our particular position, as created beings able to discern God's Logos at work in creation, that humans are able to raise to God that which has come forth from God. In this final unity nothing of what is diverse and particular in creation is lost, rather it is consummated as its relation to itself and to God is completed. All of this is done to the final glory of God, so that all of creation may spend eternity in the complete, undivided and undiminished ecstasy of praise.

This, then, is how the rest of creation is connected to and reliant upon humanity in the fulfilment of its praise. In discerning the *logoi* of created things humanity draws them together and presents them as beings of praise to God. Creation praises by being itself. Central to what it means for creation, as a whole, to be itself is for its praise to be gathered, unified and focused by human beings as its priests; priests not from without the created congregation but from within. In receiving this deification they draw the rest of creation, which they mediate, further into the divine being than it has ever been. Thus, through the Incarnation of Christ and through the priesthood of humanity, creation receives union with God. This is not to say that everything participates in God in the same way. Neither is it to say that things participate in God to different degrees. Rather, every created thing participates in God in the way that is appropriate to its own particular being. At the centre of this divinised cosmos is the true redeemed humanity of Jesus Christ. Creation redeemed, creation in the fullness of its praise, is Creation with its being grounded in the being of God and witnessing to the union of divinity and humanity. Creation's praise is praise of and through the incarnate Christ.

Eschatology

We have discussed at some length what it means for humanity to be itself and have concluded that it includes a discernment of the glory of God manifest in creation. We have also described the priesthood of humanity and the way in which it gathers the praise of creation and presents it to God. Furthermore, we have described the way in which humanity, progressing in deification, unites the whole cosmos. We have seen, also, that the Incarnation is the grounding possibility of all of this. These arguments return us to our question concerning the eschatological fulfilment of creation. The Incarnation is the basis of non-human fulfilment, but how does it condition that fulfilment and how is that fulfilment in continuity with the lived character of the present creation?

Firstly, we may note that it has an aesthetic dimension. We have discussed Maximus' understanding of creation as the clothing of the transfigured Christ. Similarly, Michael D. Gibson describes Maximus' understanding of creation's participation in God as a fundamentally aesthetic vision. It is "the unmitigated participation in and enjoyment of the beautiful being of God".³⁶¹ Thus, Gibson argues, Maximus fashions his scheme of emanation and return as a process of the sharing of the divine essence with creation in the form of beauty. This process finds its fulfilment in "the 'return' of the image to rest in the unrestricted vision of the beauty of God, an eternal *stasis* in beatified deification".³⁶² Gibson comments: "The whole movement of redemption from beginning to end is the beauty of God's grace and the grace of God's beauty."³⁶³

Beauty is, therefore, not an accidental property of creation but essential to its being. It is not merely a description but a tangible quality which we see now only in part. The power of this beauty is displayed in

³⁶¹ Gibson, 'Beauty of Redemption', p. 47.

³⁶² *Ibid.* p. 59.

³⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 74.

the passage quoted earlier from Bulgakov. It is a power which causes humans to marvel but, because they are capable of discerning the Logos in that power, it makes creation not an object of worship but to an inspiration for worship. In this way, God's beauty, displayed in the cosmos, becomes the object of humans' worship. Thus Paul Evdokimov writes: "To sing to God, to sing his perfections, in a word to sing his Beauty, this is man's unique preoccupation, his unique and totally free 'work'".³⁶⁴

A Christian worshipper, then, recognises the beauty of God in all things. This is not a judgment of taste on the part of the Christian but recognition of the glory of God revealed in creation. This is well put by Graham Ward: "Beauty is an operation, a co-operation; it is not a property but an animator of the properties of any object".³⁶⁵ This, then, is part of what it means for creation to be fulfilled. It means that the glory of God shines through the beauty of creation. Creation finds its fulfilment in enabling and participating in the drawing of humanity deeper into praise of God.

Part of what the fulfilment of creation's praise will entail, then, is that it will be finally and fully heard. Chapter two discussed Psalm 19 and the words of creation which pour forth but go unheard. In the consummation of creation these non-human words will be heard and none of their meaning will be lost. Just as it is the non-human creation's privilege to have its praise offered to God by humans, the priests of creation, so is it humanity's privilege to hear the praise of the cosmic congregation in all its fullness. Thus the fulfilment of creation's praise is nothing less than complete unity. To participate in the full and uninhibited symphonic liturgy of praise is the destiny of all creation, whether human or non-human, animate or inanimate, living or non-living.

³⁶⁴ Evdokimov, 'Nature', p. 16.

³⁶⁵ Graham Ward, 'The Beauty of God', in John Milbank, Graham Ward and Edith Wyschogrod (eds.) *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), pp. 35-65 (p. 38).

Secondly, as we have seen, Maximus' Chalcedonian Christology influences all his theology and this is no less true for his vision of the future of the cosmos. He writes of a cosmos which is bound together, all of one whole, yet without losing the integrity of its particularity. We also find that the destiny which awaits human beings is, in some measure, the destiny of the entire cosmos. The possibility of humans being united with God such that their being is deified is an extraordinary one and Maximus is enraptured by it. Yet he goes further and extends this destiny to all of creation in a passage which is worth quoting at length:

“Even now in his providence [God] is bringing about the assimilation of particulars to universals until he might unite creatures' own voluntary inclination to the more universal natural inclination of these particular creatures toward well being, and make them harmonious and self-moving in relation to one another and to the whole universe. In this way there shall be no intentional divergence between universals and particulars. Rather, one and the same principle shall be observable throughout the universe, admitting of no differentiation by the individual modes according to which created beings are predicated, and displaying the grace of God effective to deify the universe.”³⁶⁶

This passage assumes the argument which we drew from Maximus in chapter two, namely that God creates the *logoi* of all beings. The *logos* of a particular thing guarantees its existence and locates its final end in God. It also defines the individual character of a thing, its subsistent being, making it particular and distinct from other things. All things, therefore, have a 'universal natural inclination' which is directed towards their well being, that is, directed towards their end in God. As well as this, all things being particular beings have their own 'voluntary inclination' which is directed towards the preservation of that which is particular about their subsistent being. These particularities Maximus calls the “individual parts

³⁶⁶ Maximus, *Ad Thalassium* 2 (CCSG 7:51), in Blowers and Wilken (eds. and trans.) *Cosmic Mystery*, pp. 99-100.

that are potential within them".³⁶⁷ This second kind of impulse, of the creature to its own particularity, will be united to the first kind, of the creature towards its well being in God. This, in turn, achieves the unity of the entire universe which, by the grace of God, is deified.

Notice that the particularity of the creature is not dissolved but rather united to creation's universal movement toward the divine. Maximus believes that God's power "contains, gathers, and limits" all things and, in God's providence, binds all things together with God's self and to one another. God is the "cause, beginning and end" of all things and draws them all together, though they are distanced from one another, by the power of their orientation to God as their origin.

"Through this force he leads all beings to a common and unconfused identity of movement and existence, no one being originally in revolt against any other or separated from him by a difference of nature or movement, but all things combine with all others in an unconfused way by the singular indissoluble relation to and protection of that one principle and cause."³⁶⁸

Thus the Chalcedonian creed of unity without confusion is put to work. The unconfused unity of human and divine in Christ becomes the template for the final unity of the entire cosmos. It is a unity which does not destroy the particularity of created beings but is, in fact, predicated upon that particularity. Finally it is only in relation to other beings that a being's particularity can be fulfilled and it is only in the fulfilment of the particularity of individual beings that the cosmos as a whole may be united. Thus creation's union with God brings unity to the creation itself, without destroying its particularity. If we understand, as I argued in the second chapter, that creatures' praise is given forth by their very being then we can understand this final unity of creation as fulfilment of praise.

³⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 99.

³⁶⁸ Maximus, *Mystagogia* in George C. Berthold (ed. and trans.) *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 183-225 (p. 186).

The whole universe is destined to give forth a united yet differentiated cosmic harmony, a harmony which we see in part as we contemplate creation in its current unfulfilled state.

Thirdly, we may push this eschatological question still further and ask to what extent creation will experience a physical redemption. I agree with Christopher Southgate that 'objective immortality' in which "creatures' experience lives in the memory of God"³⁶⁹ will not suffice. Such a proposition, according to Thomas Hosinski, would mean that "all creatures are not simply received into God, but are transformed, 'purged' and harmonized in the everlasting unity of God's life".³⁷⁰ It may appear that my argument, that all creatures find their fulfilment by the union of their being in the being of God, lends itself to a suggestion that the lives of non-human creatures are continued only in the memory of God. However, I have also argued that the particularity, materiality and individuality – the real nature of each creature – is not destroyed in this union.

The particularity of created things is undeniably physical and it seems to me that if creatures are to lose all physical existence of any kind then there will not be enough of them preserved for their particular existence to truly continue, giving its particular praise to God. Southgate rejects the idea for a different reason, with which I would also agree. He thinks that securing the eternal redemption of a creature's experience only in the memory of God simply does not do justice to the kinds of suffering which I addressed in chapter three. There are, he points out, creatures who, in life, knew little or nothing of the flourishing which was intended for their species. To suggest that these lives are redeemed in as much as those unfulfilled probabilities are eternally held in God's mind does not seem to offer much of use since those lives are gone, unfulfilled and never to be redeemed in their own physical particularity.

³⁶⁹ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 86.

³⁷⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*

Instead Southgate believes that resurrection awaits animals after their deaths. In ways appropriate to each creature, the physical particularity of their lives will find its place in God's redemption, uninhibited by those things which prevented its flourishing in life.³⁷¹ He admits the difficulty of imagining what such redemption might mean and what it might look like. He believes that there will be no pain or suffering in heaven. At the same time, however, he suggests that much of what makes a creature biologically recognisable must remain in order for those creatures to really persist in their redeemed states. Southgate therefore asks, "Does ... heaven involve some sort of self-transcendent [animalness] that is [hard] for us to imagine, perhaps even involving an experience for the redeemed prey-animal that delights in the beauty and flourishing of the predator and vice versa?"³⁷²

Such a question recalls the poetic vision of Isaiah: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6-7). Southgate questions the usefulness of this passage, however, arguing that it is very difficult to see how these creatures could be in continuity with creatures as we know them in the present. "What these tantalizing texts do not resolve is how eschatological fulfilment of creatures relates to their protological natures, how they were in the old creation."³⁷³

John Polkinghorne, in an attempt to imagine what non-human creation might be like in its redeemed future, argues that

"in so far as present human imagination can articulate eschatological expectation, it has to do so within the tension between continuity and discontinuity. There must be sufficient

³⁷¹ Ibid. pp. 87-88.

³⁷² Ibid. p. 89.

³⁷³ Ibid. p. 86.

continuity to ensure that individuals truly share in the life to come as their resurrected selves and not as new beings given the old names. There must be sufficient discontinuity to ensure that the life to come is free from the suffering and mortality of the old creation."³⁷⁴

Polkinghorne also ventures various elements of this continuity and discontinuity, drawing upon his scientific understanding of what defines creatures. He argues that eschatological existence will be embodied, though he thinks that examples of non-human life will be preserved rather than every individual.³⁷⁵ Since general relativity describes matter and time as inseparable, he believes that temporality is necessarily implied by embodiment. This temporality, however, is a new kind of time which possesses its own integrity distinct from current time.³⁷⁶ As for discontinuity, Polkinghorne notes that the second law of thermodynamics is the root cause of decay in this world. He therefore speculates about "a new kind of 'matter' endowed with internal organising principles of such power as to permanently overcome any tendency to disorder".³⁷⁷

Describing heaven in these terms, of continuity and discontinuity, might well cause us to find Isaiah's vision unhelpful. A lion which ate straw would obviously be discontinuous in the fact of its eating straw. If this step is made then we will struggle to maintain any continuity since, if a lion is to eat straw, its entire biology will have to change. If we attempt to read Isaiah's vision in such terms we begin to lose purchase upon what a lion actually is. Furthermore, describing heaven becomes a negotiation between continuity and discontinuity as we sacrifice degrees of one for the sake of the other. This would imply that if we could only accurately describe the various factors of continuity and discontinuity involved we might be able to provide an 'accurate' description of heaven.

³⁷⁴ John Polkinghorne, *Science and the Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality* (London: SPCK, 2004), pp. 152-153.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 152.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 156-157.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 164.

Yet we do not need to read the passages in this way, struggling to change lion anatomy whilst retaining the lion's particular nature. I would argue that Isaiah's vision should not be construed in terms of continuity and discontinuity, as though the only factor preventing a full biological description of this redeemed species of lion is our lack of knowledge of the degrees of continuity and discontinuity with a lion of this world. Instead of this negotiation I would suggest that we follow Maximus' lead and understand the redemption of the lion as both entirely new and yet fitting the particular being of the creature and, therefore, an entirely logical and fitting development for the lion. Such a claim should not be understood as an attempt to describe what heaven is 'really' like. Language which describes heaven as a physical place in which creatures live particular and located lives does not stand or fall upon its plausibility. To believe that lions may eat straw does not require us to be able to imagine how the world as we know it might be changed to achieve this alternative mode of being.

This is not to say that Polkinghorne's scheme of continuity and discontinuity is mistaken but to say that it is only the beginning of an attempt to construct appropriate theological talk of heaven. Much like the process of making cataphatic and apophatic statements about God, described in the first chapter, the purpose is, through such statements, to move beyond what may be said, either in affirmation or denial. This being the case, the lion is not characterised by *degrees* of continuity and discontinuity; rather it is exactly the same lion and yet, simultaneously, made completely new. Nothing of its nature is lost and yet nothing of its nature is the same; the redeemed lion *transcends* the difference between continuity and discontinuity.

The purpose of such language, then, is not to plot the geography or describe the biology of heaven. However, neither is it 'mere' metaphor, nor is it language which stands in for a reality which is beyond our

imagining. Heaven is not a place in which beings are simply pure being, spirits floating in the eternal ether. The created cosmos is the overflowing abundance of God's being, the spilling out of the eternal self-giving love of the Trinity. If this is the case then physical created matter is something very special indeed, something which must be worth preserving beyond the end of time. There is a certain Gnosticism about a denial of this matter and the replacement of it with a non-specific non-place which, however blissful, ought to be avoided. However naïve it may appear, I would argue that heaven can only be the true location of the eternal redemption of the world, the place in which creation's praise is fulfilled, if it is, in some very real sense, as the scriptures depict it – a real place with earth and water, birds, fish and animals.

Furthermore, it seems to me that this idea of animals delighting in one another, despite its incongruity with what we know of animals in the present, would be an appropriate extrapolation of what we have learnt from Maximus. The final unity of all creation does not destroy but fulfils its particularity and difference. For this to be true unity, it seems to me, then genuine delight in the other, rather than mere tolerance, is required on the part of all beings. This is not to say that heaven is not radically different from Earth; it is a place which experiences no suffering and no evil.

Therefore, rather than heaven being a mixture of continuity and discontinuity, I would argue that the true identity of heaven lies exactly at the point at which continuity and discontinuity entirely contradict. Heaven is, perhaps, the place where a lion eats straw and nevertheless remains truly a lion. It is important to underline that these images of heaven should not be construed as predictions; I claim no knowledge of our eternal future. Yet it seems to me unhelpful to censor our thinking about heaven for fear that we might do an injustice to its radical difference from material reality. To do so risks making the eternal bliss which God

has prepared seem far removed from our lives in the present. It is, in fact, the consummation of everything that is good and beautiful about the world and is merely a lifetime away. The prophetic passages of the scriptures give licence to our imaginations and it seems to me right that we use them to contemplate what the fulfilment of God's creative work might be.

Ecclesiology

I believe that I have now gone some way toward answering the questions with which this chapter began. We have seen the way in which the Incarnation is essential to the fulfilment of creation's praise. We have also seen the important role that humanity plays in this scheme and the way in which it will be fulfilled in the world to come. It is important, however, that the vision of this thesis does not solely remain one for the future. For that reason I now turn to ecclesiology and consider what the church might do in the present to respond to and participate in creation's praise.

It is important to note that, whilst humans are the priests of creation, the non-human creation is capable of correcting our lack of praise when we fail in our worship and in our task as mediators. Part of what it means for humanity to join creation's praise is for it to accept the critique of a non-human world which praises when we fail. As I have argued in the previous chapter, creation praises God even on the frontier of nothingness. In doing so it strains towards the eschatological consummation of praise which awaits it. That praise is of particular value when it is undertaken in the context of humanity's destruction of creation and our failure to recognise the divine splendour which it displays. Thus

Karl Barth also recognises the capacity of creation, in praise, to critique our failures:

“Even the smallest creatures [praise God]. They do it along with us or without us. They do it also against us to shame us and instruct us. They do it because they cannot help doing it. They would not and could not exist unless first and last and properly they did this and only this. And when man accepts again his destiny in Jesus Christ in the promise and faith of the future revelation of his participation in God’s glory as it is already given Him here and now, he is only like a latecomer slipping shamefacedly into creation’s choir in heaven and earth, which has never ceased to praise, but merely suffered and sighed, as it still does, that in inconceivable folly and ingratitude its living centre man does not hear its voice, its response, its echoing of the divine glory, or rather hears it in a completely perverted way, and refuses to cooperate in the jubilation which surrounds him.”³⁷⁸

What might it mean for creation to praise ‘against us to shame us and instruct us’? We may glimpse creation’s capacity to praise God against our failure to do so in Jesus’ intriguing words of Luke 19:40.³⁷⁹ Christ rides into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey whilst crowds wave palms and shout, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’ Some Pharisees urge Jesus to silence the crowd but Jesus replies, ‘I tell you, if these were silent the stones would shout out.’ Most commentators note the parallel between this phrase and Hab. 2.11, in which the stones of the walls of houses cry out in protest against the corruption of their inhabitants.

The theme appears in a few other examples within biblical and extra-biblical material; stones and woodwork shout and even bleed in prophecy against evildoers. Thus, the cry of the stones in Luke 19 would seem to refer to a great cry of protest. Indeed, many commentators assume the reference is to the stones of the temple which, a few years after this

³⁷⁸ Barth, *CD* II/1 § 31, p. 648.

³⁷⁹ For a longer discussion see David G. Horrell and Dominic Coad, “‘The Stones Would Cry Out’ (Luke 19.40): A Lukan Contribution to a Hermeneutics of Creation’s Praise’ (forthcoming in *Scottish Journal of Theology*).

event, were to be torn down. Thus the cry of the stones is heard in the destruction of the temple. However, this seems to miss the fact that the stones' cry neatly balances the crowd's shouts of praise. Given that the stones' cry replaces the crowd's praise it seems reasonable to conclude that it is a shout of praise which is envisioned. Thus we are presented with two alternatives: the cry is either one of protest or of praise.

Yet it hardly seems necessary to choose one or the other. In the absence of the crowd's praise the stones take it upon themselves to fulfil that role, speaking judgment upon the people as they do so. The implication seems to be that the shouts of praise to Christ are so essential at this particular moment that the stones would break out of their particular pattern of being to replace the missing praise of the crowd. If we read this in the light of the scheme of universal praise which this thesis has sought to construct then we can understand this as an indictment of humanity's failure to fulfil their role within creation's praise. Could there be any single moment where humanity's task of voicing creation's praise is more important than the triumphal entrance to Jerusalem? In that moment Christ is recognised and crowned King and Saviour of the entire world, the small crowd shouts praise on behalf of the whole creation.

The few with the eyes to see the truth and the voices to express it do so on behalf of the cosmos, gathering up its praise at this special moment. At the time of the recognition of his true identity, marking the beginning of his passion, Christ must be praised. If there were no human beings to do it, the very rocks would be compelled to take humanity's place, shaming them of their failure in the process. The crowd's shouts of praise were not prevented and the rocks did not break out of their given patterns of being in worshipful protest. Nevertheless, the passage may provide us with a warning: we are not creation's priests by right but by grace. We do not own or control creation's praise but we have the privilege of gathering and presenting it to God. Our failure to do so will

diminish but not prevent creation's praising which will continue – over and against us if necessary.

A further point may be made following these reflections. I stated in my introduction that this thesis would neither assume that humanity is the pinnacle of creation nor eschew anthropocentrism altogether. This chapter has explored in some detail the way in which the creation is properly anthropocentric, with humanity as the bond of the cosmos. However I have also highlighted the importance of each particular being and its intrinsic value. Our discussion of the stones in Luke's gospel has gone still further in complicating a straightforward anthropocentrism. Everything plays its part in the symphonic liturgy of creation's praise, which means that every created being, whether it is a chimpanzee or a dung beetle, a human or a stone, is absolutely, irreducibly and irreplaceably essential to the created order.

It is in the light of this assumption that we understand the stones' shout to be an attempt to compensate for the absence of human praise. We are not required to think that the stones' attempt to compensate would be successful in order for the argument to be of value. The stones would not be able to change their being and successfully replace humanity, but this does not negate the severity of the situation which leads them to try. Furthermore, since creation's praise works by being the sum of all created beings, we can assume that the story could be reversed. Were we to find ourselves in a world in which stones were no longer praising God, it would be incumbent upon human beings to attempt to redress the absence of the stones' praise. That we can make no sense of stones praising in the place of humans or humans praising in the place of stones does not undermine the point: the praise of every created being is absolutely essential to the praise of the cosmos, so much so that the absence of one could lead others to attempt to fill its place.

There is no replacing humanity and there is no replacing a stone. Whatever we might decide about the relative value of each, the difference between them is nothing in comparison to the absolute value of their existence in the first place. Stones and humans are irreplaceable and their value *as stones* and *as humans* is absolute. Therefore we may say that cosmic worship without the participation of humanity is infinitely less complete than creation's praise with the participation of humanity. By the same token, cosmic worship without stones is infinitely less complete than creation's praise with the participation of stones. This way of imaging the cosmos is useful because it does not attempt to judge the relative value of human beings and stones. Rather it simply makes the point that a cosmos without stones or polar bears or fruit bats or the Amazonian rainforest is really and absolutely less valuable than this one. However valuable we might think stones are relative to the rest of creation, we can be sure that a cosmos with stones is infinitely more valuable than a cosmos without stones.

With this reading of the stones' crying out we have begun to see how the admittedly anthropocentric nature of this thesis is complicated by its assumptions about the particular integrity of individual beings' praise. The scheme can be further complicated by the Christological discussions of this chapter. This discussion has placed humanity at the mid point between God and the cosmos. Anthropocentrism is, then, in a sense, precisely the correct term to apply. Humanity exists at the centre of the cosmos, uniting in itself all of its disparate elements. However, this particular role and task, as we have seen, is one of priesthood. Since this is the case, the role is not simply one of domination. Since each element of creation praises God by existing in its own particular way and because without each of these specific ways of praising God's glory is diminished, every thing which exists within creation has its own particular value.

Furthermore, this value does not exist beyond the comprehension of humanity, a value which is only recognised by God. Rather God calls humanity to recognise and draw together all of this value. This is why an understanding of humanity's priesthood is such a rich and promising resource for Christian talk of the environment. It is not simply that the world, by virtue of being God's creation, has an intrinsic value which humanity must, at its own inconvenience, respect. Rather, the world has a value which, though intrinsic, is nevertheless a value which needs to be recognised and perceived by humanity. In perceiving this value humanity participates in it, gathering together creation's praise and offering it to God. Creation's value is both independent of and inseparable from humanity. Since humanity's priestly role is one which draws together and completes the praise of the non-human world, it must surely be a work of service not of dominance. It is the difference and diversity of creation which is drawn together in humanity and so humanity's role as priest must in no way jeopardise that otherness.

Moreover, as we have noted, humanity's priesthood is made possible by and, indeed, participates in the high-priesthood of Christ himself. This being the case, humanity's work is most certainly a work of service, even suffering, of self-giving love. It is only through death and resurrection that Christ makes possible the unification of the cosmos and its drawing together in praise of God. If humans are to act as priests, presenting this praise to God, then this requires participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. Following the example of Christ, we must take our priestly role, royal though it may be, to be one of costly service. Indeed, for much of human history working with creation has been hard. We have developed the technology to make that work much easier for ourselves, but it has all too often been to the detriment of the land. We must be careful to ensure that our technology is not simply employed to allow us to cut corners. Tending land for produce whilst keeping it

healthy seems inevitably to be physically demanding and time consuming. Results which come without cost to the consumer or the owner of capital tend to come at the cost of the worker and the land. Similarly the conservation which so many of the planet's ecosystems need involves patience and perseverance; there are no quick fixes. Understanding our role as priestly, however, we need not undertake our work rueing the curse of Genesis 3, but rejoicing in our act of service and its participation in the work of Christ.

In bringing creation's praise to God, participating in the work of Christ, humanity brings something quite particular which is different from itself. We have seen Maximus' emphasis on the diversity of creation and his insistence that its unification in God does not threaten this diversity. For humanity's priesthood to be successful and genuine, it must be understood as pertaining to an act of worship that is beyond itself. Jeremy Begbie states that "through the human creature, the inarticulate (though never silent) creation becomes articulate".³⁸⁰ Such a suggestion, however, implies that humanity's role is one of translation; that creation needs humans to render its praise intelligible. My understanding of creation's praise seeks to retain the integrity of the particular way each creature glorifies God and recognise that as entirely acceptable to God in its own right. I prefer, therefore, Evdokimov's suggestion that humanity's role is one of presentation.

Thus, humanity has no ownership of creation's praise of God. Although humanity is called to draw that praise together this in no way diminishes the fact that the praise is a genuine gift and offering of the non-human creation to its God. Without humanity that praise is left disparate and un-united but it remains praise nonetheless. This being the case, as I have argued, creation's praise of God must be heard by human ears as a challenge to participation. When we fail in our appointed task, creation's

³⁸⁰ Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), p.177.

praise continues despite and even in critique of humanity's neglect of its task.

In recognising our capacity to fail in our priesthood of creation we must recognise the impact our fallen state has upon our task. For Maximus the fall impaired humanity's *logikoi*, our capacity to identify God's Logos within creation. This is a problem for our carrying out the task of priesthood, since that task involves discerning the creation around us, recognising its praise and offering it to God. Our natural knowledge of God's creation is clouded; we do not see as easily as we might. Thus it is through contemplation that we learn to see the Logos in the *logoi* and so ascend ourselves towards greater knowledge of God.

For humanity to undertake the task of priests of creation is to undertake contemplation of the non-human world. In doing so we come to recognise the great diversity and wholeness of God's order. More than this we take it into ourselves; it is offered up upon the altar of our hearts, as Evdokimov says. Science, of course, is an enormously valuable resource in this task, ever opening the world to us in new ways and helping us to discern the *logoi* of creation. Yet it is also a task which is beyond the power of science, beyond the task of cataloguing, describing and explaining. It is a task which requires that the human being take the rest of creation into itself, becoming soaked in it and penetrated by it. It is, in fact, the opening of our own being to the being of the non-human world. In this we actually find a certain mutuality with creation as our knowledge of our own *logos* is deepened through encounter with other *logoi*.

This thesis, I would argue, is characterised by an anthropocentrism which reaches beyond itself towards relationship with the non-human. The account that I have outlined understands humanity as the bond of the cosmos and Christ as the perfect human. Through Christ, the entire cosmos is drawn into a union with God which fulfils rather than destroys its particularity. Drawing on Maximus, I have hinted that this results in a

union between all creatures, a new reign of peace. These hints need to be built upon lest our scheme remains one in which each particular being is drawn into union with God upon its own line of ascent, more or less irrespective of its fellow creatures. To do this I turn to St Paul and his discussion of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12.

1 Corinthians 12 is of particular help to us because it concerns unity within the church and offers radical responses to the hierarchies of value and honour existing in the Corinthian church. These responses are grounded in Paul's conviction that Christ's death and resurrection imply a new value system for those who are members of his body. Anthony Thiselton summarises as follows:

“the unifying theme of the epistle is a reproclamation of the different value system of grace, gifts, the cross, and the resurrection as divine verdict, criterion, and status bestowal within the new framework of respect and love for the less esteemed ‘other.’ Glorifying in the Lord and receiving status derived from identification with the crucified Christ (1:30-31) lead to a new value system demonstrable in a wide array of life issues.”³⁸¹

The challenge will be to argue that Paul's claims can be extended beyond the human objects of his theology. However, before we address this challenge we must attend to the argument of Corinthians. I will do this with particular reference to Dale B. Martin's book, *The Corinthian Body*. Martin argues that the Corinthian church was divided by differing ideological constructions of the human body and the analogous social body. Martin believes that the 'strong' and the 'weak' of the Corinthians were a minority richer class and a majority poorer class within the church. The higher status minority would have constructed their understanding of the individual and social body in reference to their Greek philosophical schooling. Thus they characterised the body and society as a combination

³⁸¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 40.

of higher and lower status parts. This is emphatically not a Cartesian dualist cosmology in which the natural, characterised by body, matter and the non-human, is opposed to the supernatural, characterised by mind, spirit and will.³⁸² In contrast to this, Martin argues, ancient thought is characterised by a hierarchical, rather than a dualist, construal of body and society.

This thesis has drawn upon theologians who assumed a Greek hierarchical understanding of the cosmos. Thus the scheme of the thesis has, in its background, a broadly similar understanding of a hierarchical world to the assumptions which characterised Paul's context. I have already done much work to emphasise the importance of the particularity of each member of the cosmos and to disrupt any understanding of humanity as the pinnacle of a cosmic hierarchy. I have argued that humans are the bond and priests of the cosmos and that their role involves service. By applying Paul's argument about the Corinthian body to the cosmic body, we may further complicate the centrality of humanity in this scheme.

The Greco-Roman view of the body was diverse and complex but was generally characterised by a 'hierarchy of essence' in which there is no absolute division between physical and spiritual.³⁸³ Martin demonstrates this with various references to Greco-Roman authors who are able to refer to physical elements of the body and cosmos in language that moderns would associate with the 'spiritual'. Even Plato, he says, envisioned the individual as a 'spectrum' between soul and body such that some physical ailments might have a psychological cause and some physical pain may have psychological effects.³⁸⁴ Furthermore, according to Plato, the body was hierarchically arranged; the head ruled the rest and the midriff partitioned the superior and inferior innards.

³⁸² Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 3-6.

³⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 14.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.* pp.11-12.

The hierarchy of the body was reflected in the hierarchical society. Thus social metaphors were used to describe the body: "The body's parts, humours, fluids and forces were pictured as agents or aspects of a social economy, and their interactions were described in terms of political power struggles."³⁸⁵ Conversely, society is portrayed as a body made up of higher and lower status parts, each fulfilling a function essential to the maintenance of the body. Rhetoric of the time regularly urged the lower status parts to submit to the higher for the good of the whole. Martin refers to an example from Livy in which a senator attempts to persuade striking plebs to go back to work. He tells a story in which the members of a body go on strike, complaining that the belly does no work but receives the fruit of their labours, leading to the death of the whole body. The polis is thus construed as a body in which the majority do the work and the minority circulate the product.³⁸⁶ Should the members of the social body rue their lot and revolt the whole body, including themselves, will be destroyed. Martin comments: "Each body held its hierarchy within itself, and every body occupied its proper place in the hierarchy of society and nature. Health was threatened when the hierarchy was disrupted".³⁸⁷

With the background that Martin provides we turn to consider chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians in detail. The context of Paul's remarks about the body seems to be dispute and disruption in the Corinthian church. Nigel Watson highlights three assumptions which, it may be inferred from the letter, the Corinthians held. First, the Spirit was given for the personal benefit of the individual, disconnected from the community (cf. 11:17-34). Secondly, the Spirit was chiefly present in 'spectacular manifestations' (such as tongues, cf. 14). Thirdly, the Spirit was the possession of the spiritual elite.³⁸⁸ Against these Paul makes counter claims. First, that a *charisma* (gift of Spirit) results in the service of others (cf. 12:4-6). Secondly,

³⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 31.

³⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 93.

³⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 34.

³⁸⁸ Nigel Watson, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth Press, 1992), pp. 130-31.

he plays down tongues and places more spectacular gifts alongside the seemingly mundane (12:8-10,12). Thirdly, Paul is clear that the Spirit gifts all (12:7).

These disputes and problems must, Thiselton argues, be interpreted in the context of the letter as a whole. Thus, Thiselton argues, the passage is not merely “an ad hoc response to questions about spiritual gifts” but should be set firmly in the general context of the letters concern with the defence of the integrity of the church by its continued characterisation by “inclusive mutuality and reciprocity”.³⁸⁹ Thus, following Barth, Thiselton argues that the letter urges the Corinthians to glory in God rather than in their own spiritual achievement and status.

According to Thiselton, the preceding argument of 7:1–11:1 is Paul’s response to specific questions which the Corinthians have asked. In answering them Paul is careful and pastorally sensitive, recognising that he is dealing with ‘grey areas’.³⁹⁰ 11:2–14:40, Thiselton argues, are in direct continuity, turning to questions of public and corporate worship. The general tenor of the argument is that those who are in positions of power and freedom must curtail those privileges for the good of the whole church. Thus, “Love modifies ‘freedom’ and ‘rights’ if the good of the whole is thereby better served, and especially if the gospel is more effectively promoted”.³⁹¹

Returning to Martin, however, we may argue that love is to do more than ‘modify’ freedom. Rather, Paul challenges the entire structure of the Corinthian church. These images and rhetorical devices, Martin believes, lie behind Paul’s argument in chapter 12 of the first letter to the Corinthians. In verses 14-21 Paul appears to be making the common appeal to the ‘society as body’ analogy, urging the members to keep their place in the body. “God arranged the members in the body, each one of

³⁸⁹ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 900.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 483.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.* p. 799.

them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?" (12:18-19). Yet Paul goes on to disrupt the image by claiming that the lower status members are actually essential to the body and that the less honourable members of the body are, in fact, 'clothed with greater honour'. Thus, "God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another" (12:24-25). Thus, Martin argues, "his rhetoric pushes for an actual reversal of the normal, 'this-worldly' attribution of honour and status. The lower is made higher, and the higher lower".³⁹²

This disruption of the social hierarchy also applies to the hierarchy of the body. Paul's discussion of tongues in 14:13-19 draws a distinction between mind (*nous*) and spirit (*pneuma*). A dichotomy of *nous* and *pneuma* was, according to Martin, common to Platonic thought. The *pneuma* was considered to be the superior element, capable of receiving divine inspiration and practicing esoteric speech. The *nous*, in contrast, was considered to become inactive during ecstatic experiences. Yet Paul goes on to criticise the speaking of tongues in public on the basis that it excludes those who do not understand the meaning of the speech. He does not deny that speech in tongues is 'praise with the spirit', but urges the Corinthians to pray with their minds also, saying that "in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than speak ten thousand words in a tongue" (14:19). Thus, Martin argues, "by insisting that all discourse in the assembly be accessible to the *nous*, the 'common,' he raises the status of the common over the esoteric ... Thus Paul cedes to the lower member, the *nous*, the privilege of control over the higher member, the *pneuma*".³⁹³

³⁹² Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, p. 96.

³⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 101.

What implication do Paul's arguments have for our scheme of creation's praise, a scheme which places humanity at the centre? This thesis is concerned with particularity and, indeed, the centrality of humanity. As we have seen, it is through the priesthood and mediation of the non-human creation that creation's praise is united and presented to God. Furthermore, I have emphasised the particularity and integrity of each being's praise, praise which is independent of humanity. This raises a methodological point: we must maintain a balance between the conviction that humanity is able to discern creation's *logoi* and the inaccessibility of the other's being which makes contemplation so important.

My skin and my senses are the physical limitation of my self; the emotional and spiritual limits of my self are harder to define and more open to expansion but they are no less definitive of my being for that. I am me, I am not another; humanity is humanity, it is not dogdom.³⁹⁴ I cannot separate the cosmos from my experience of it and I will never truly know another person's experience in the way that I know my own; still less could I know what a dog's universe looks like. The way in which our particularity is constructive of our interpretation of the world around us leads us to recognise a radical ontological difference between the one and the other. Indeed, the fact that the particularity of created things plays a crucial role in the cosmological scheme of this thesis leads us to affirm and celebrate this difference.

There is, therefore, an overreaching of our particularity that must be resisted. The universe does not belong to us, and our responsibilities do not end with ourselves. The prioritising of the self over the other, of humanity over non-humanity, is destructive of the cosmos in which we find ourselves. A self-centred and anthropocentric conception of the universe may be epistemologically important but it must be transcended if

³⁹⁴ The word is borrowed from Kafka (and his translators) and refers not simply to the state of being a dog but of being a 'dog amongst dogs,' a 'member of the canine community.' Cf. Franz Kafka, 'Investigations of a Dog' in id. *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1931), pp. 83-126 (pp. 83 and 84).

we are to live in a world characterised by peace and prosperity. We reach out from our own particularity to the particularity of others, and it is in movement toward their otherness that our own self is chastised and affirmed. The divergence between one and the other cannot be dissolved. Rather, that difference is the object of the contemplation which leads us further on the path of deification and draws together creation's praise. We remember that in the Incarnation, the difference between one and another has been at once fulfilled and transcended. In union with Christ, the whole cosmos finds the difference inherent within it both confirmed and superseded.

Paul's argument, as described by Martin, provides a template for understanding how we may grasp the first fruits of this eschatological confirmation and transformation in the present. It does this because it not only challenges privilege *whilst* simultaneously affirming particularity but because it challenges privilege *by* affirming particularity. This is precisely the argument that I made above in my discussion of the stones. Each member of the body of Christ is essential and esteemed because it has its own particular function. In the same way, each member of the created order is essential and esteemed also because it has its own particular function.

Just as Paul accords honour to those parts of the body which seem lesser because they perform a function essential to the whole, in the same way each member of the cosmic liturgy fulfils its own function. We know from the observations of the natural sciences how well-balanced ecosystems are and how significant is the function of each of an ecosystem's parts. Yet the function meant in this context is even more basic – everything fulfils its role by being itself. This certainly includes the physical processes which contribute to its ecosystem but it is, as this thesis has endeavoured to show, much more than this. It is simply by being, the

pure and simple fact of existence as this and not another, that allows a creature to take its place in creation's praise.

In saying this, I do not argue that all creation ought to be considered part of the body of Christ, the church. However, I think that it is right to extend the analogy to suggest that the church exists within a larger body – a body that no less belongs to Christ. It belongs to Christ and Christ is its head in as much as Christ gathers all things in himself and reconciles them to his father. Creation praises God as part of this body and we praise too, fulfilling our unique bonding function within that body. If, in the human body, the *pneuma* must not exclude the *nous* as it reaches out to God then neither, in the cosmic body, must humanity exclude non-humanity as it reaches out towards fulfilment of its praise in God.

Conclusion

Humanity's priesthood of creation is carried out in and through true contemplation of nature. In this contemplation we come to discover God's life in new ways. In our particular God-given capacity to discern the *logoi* of creation we discover God's wonderful created order which praises by being itself. In encountering and entering into these other created selves we see the glory of God more clearly and take it into ourselves. In doing this we see our own being more clearly and offer it, along with all the praise of creation, to God. This is why it is not contradictory to believe both that humanity is the centre of God's creation and that human beings can encounter God in new and unforeseen ways in the non-human creation. It is in contemplation of the cosmos that humans begin to enact their roles as priests and, in so doing, turn their own beings further towards the being of God.

The call to humans to join creation in its praise of God is, therefore, a call to discover their own place within the great order of praise. This is, finally, a symphonic liturgy in which created beings are drawn up together into an eternal and perfect unity with God. The consummation of creation's praise thus consists in Transfiguration. Not in the loss of the old material way of being but in its being caught up into something new, changed from glory into glory. The work which has made this possible has already been done in Christ and must now be realised in the human priestly vocation. The Transfiguration of Christ shows us, ahead of time, that this promise can and will be fulfilled. As the human nature of Christ is transfigured so the whole world is caught up into perfect and unending praise of God.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to articulate a doctrine of creation centred upon the idea that creation praises God by being itself. This task was undertaken in the context of a heightened awareness of humanity's capacity to damage and destroy non-human creation. From its inception this thesis was motivated, not by a decision to consider specific questions of ecological ethics, but by a desire to write theology which would provide an orthodox, doctrinal foundation for Christian ethical practice.

I worked with the conviction from the beginning that Christians need to feel a deep connection to the non-human world in order to inspire such practice. The aim of this thesis, then, was to foster a sense of kinship between humanity and non-humanity. I believe that a bond is created when humanity turns to the non-human world in its duty of care. A still stronger bond may be created when humanity and non-humanity are, as it were, turned towards each other in realisation of the interrelation of their wellbeing and fate. I am convinced, however, that the potential for the strongest bond is to be found when human and non-human alike turn themselves towards God, standing as one creation before their creator.

This thesis has endeavoured to articulate this turn towards God as the most basic aspect of created existence. It is the praise which everything gives purely by existing. This is an egalitarian view of the cosmos which is grounded in an ontological connection to God more fundamental to being than reason, sense, growth, or even life. In this context the differences between created things (such as the presence or absence of the qualities I have just listed) become the basis for affirming the unity of creation, because they are fundamental to each individual's contribution to the praise which unites the whole. Thus, humanity's kinship with the non-human, a kinship in praise, is revealed in dissimilarity no less than similarity.

The reason that difference ultimately becomes the substance of unity rather than disunity is that uncommonality is essential to the success of creation's common purpose. It is only in the united praise of all the particular and diverse elements of creation that God is truly and fully recognised as God and worshipped as such. Christian discussion of the non-human world must first attend, therefore, to the united praise offered by creation. In undertaking this most important task we begin to see that humanity's role is to work for the fulfilment of this praise by the drawing together of these disparate created elements. We also see that, whilst this is certainly a task which is unique to humanity, it is a task of service, not domination. Creation's praise is a symphony not a concerto; the orchestra needs a leader not a soloist.

Yet creation's praise cannot be united easily; there are obstacles to this endeavour. The voices which praise God are stifled by the suffering and death which have become integral to their existence. The praise of creation is not always offered in freedom but often in the midst of that which attempts to destroy being and put an end to the worship of God. Furthermore, humanity, that part of creation which is given the task of drawing the rest into praise, is compromised by sin. In our desire for conspicuous consumption and our abandoning of responsibility we have failed to discern the glory of God which surrounds us and, worse, have actually contributed to the stifling of creation's praise. In sin and suffering creation's offering of praise, which should exist in glorious harmony, has become compromised by dissonance.

The solution to these problems is one and the same and has already been provided by God. In Christ creation is drawn into true and final unity beyond frustration and away from sin. Though creation's praise is yet to reach its final consummation, Christ unites the disparate elements of creation even as he unites humanity and divinity in himself. Thus, as creation toils, through adaption and sacrifice, to resist the nothingness

which threatens to overwhelm it, it does not do so in vain. Rather, in doing so it participates in the work of God which is completed in Christ. This work destroys death and transfigures all things into the glory of God, a transfiguration which does not dissolve but consummates all that is good about created life. This same work re-establishes humanity as the priests of creation, those of creation with the special capacity to apprehend the whole and see the glory of God in all. In this way humanity, despite its failings, has the privilege of leading creation into the everlasting glory of God.

Hence the argument of this thesis concludes on an eschatological note. The task for Christians becomes not merely one of deciding how to live in the present but of discerning the end ahead of time. This discernment must become manifest in the lived faith of all Christian people. My argument is only the beginning of a longer discussion about how Christian faith nurtures kinship with non-human creation. In concluding this thesis, then, I must consider what avenues of research are now opened up for me and for others. What should already be clear is that further work must have a direct impact upon faith and practice.

Going Forward into Further Research

My doctrine of creation was articulated with an eye to the environmental problems which face us today. I have not addressed any specific questions of ecological ethics and a clear area for further work would be to attempt to make arguments for particular ethical stances based upon this thesis. This would, I believe, have the potential to bring a fresh perspective to some long running debates. For example, a discussion of whether it is right to eat meat would consider the question of whether killing an animal for food has the potential to diminish or enhance creation's praise of God.

Clearly a strong case could be made against meat-eating based on the conviction that the loss of a life means the loss of a particular being which glorifies God by its existence. A more difficult case might be possible in favour of meat-eating in which one would need to claim that eating an animal is (at least in creation's present state) an appropriate way of contemplating nature and, therefore, of drawing creation together in praise of God. It should be clear, however, that this thesis could not be used to support a way of meat-eating that has no interest in the origin and welfare of the animal. I cannot see that it could be possible, for example, to claim that eating a battery-farmed chicken allows one to contemplate the particular integrity of the animal, since its life is hidden and distorted by that method of poultry farming.

Thus this thesis has the potential both to support important convictions within environmental ethics and provide a fresh context for the discussion of disputed issues. However, I believe that the full potential of this thesis may be realised not only in providing a context for ethical discussion but in encouraging ways of Christian living which are characterised by a habitual concern and care for the non-human creation.

This thesis argues that this may be achieved by cultivating a sense of kinship with the non-human in a joint project of praise. This implies that the potential of my argument cannot be realised apart from practices of Christian worship. The question, therefore, which most immediately presents itself upon completion of this thesis concerns how its claims may be fulfilled liturgically. What would be the consequences to patterns of worship if they were to reflect the fact that they are not only instances of human praise but in fact gather in themselves the praise of all creation?

Clearly the answer to this question will vary within different Christian traditions.³⁹⁵ I will, therefore, confine myself to my own context,

³⁹⁵ A discussion from a Lutheran perspective, for example, can be found in Paul H. Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

that of the Church of England. This involves paying particular attention to the Eucharist, which is at the heart of Anglican liturgical worship. Is this merely a human activity to which the rest of creation is irrelevant? The wine is 'fruit of the vine and work of human hands' but does creation do anything more than simply facilitate the Eucharist? For St Denys, the Eucharist exists as part of the earthly hierarchy; it has a special role to play in the glory of God and the drawing of all things into God. If the diverse and glorious created order includes this sacrament then might we find, in the Eucharist, a communion with all other created beings in that order, not only the heavenly beings but all the earthly ones too? How might the sacrament draw us closer to our non-human kin?

Just as the author of Psalm 148 understood the cultic practice of the temple to be at the centre of the created order so too may we consider the liturgy of the Church to be at the centre of a cosmic liturgy which encompasses all created things. At the centre of this liturgy stands the Eucharist and it is in this sacrament that we must be most conscious of our task as priests of creation. This is not a moment for the Christian to retreat from the Earth; rather it is the moment at which our responsibility to the whole creation community should become clearest. Further work would seek to make plain the significance of the Eucharist, both as the moment at which creation's praise is presented to God and at which God's grace is given to humanity to fulfil its calling in love of the non-human.

The challenge of that work would be to ensure that our participation in the cosmic liturgy, centred in the Eucharist, never becomes esoteric or Gnostic. Rather it must share those same qualities which I argued, in chapter one, characterise a mystical reading of Scripture. That is to say, it is vital that the kind of liturgical understandings and practices which are developed draw the worshipper out of themselves and direct them toward the rest of creation. Further work, therefore, must explore the conviction that for the Church's liturgical worship to participate in

creation's praise requires that it be grounded in real interaction with the non-human world. As such it will be fruitful to ask how Christian liturgy, though it has the Eucharist as its central sacramental act, may begin to understand the creation around it as liturgical and sacramental space.

This need not be considered to be a move away from or beyond the Eucharist. Rather, the Eucharist draws us into participation in the death and resurrection of the one who, as we have learned from Maximus, binds the cosmic liturgy together. The Eucharist re-enacts the moment at which God came to dwell in flesh and makes Christ present in the Eucharistic community. As discussed in the second chapter it is in the Incarnation, in the Logos becoming differentiated, that we see that the diverse particularity of all created things is summarised and united in Christ. As such, the Eucharist reveals God's presence in all things and directs us towards the glory of God revealed in creation.

This thesis has sought to provide a doctrinal basis for Christian regard and care for the non-human. Since this regard is found in the worshipful participation of all things in God, this doctrinal basis must be lived and practiced. Further work must attempt something more ambitious than a simple application of this idea to Christian practice. Rather, the challenge before us is to root kinship with the non-human deep in our being. This thesis should also be developed therefore by making contemplation of the non-human a habitual practice of Christian spirituality.

Contemplation of Creation

The task of contemplation involves recognising the non-human in all its particularity. This entails regarding the 'otherness' in the non-human. Praise, which is universal to all created things, is found in the

particularity of a thing's existence. It is precisely because a being is particular that we are able to recognise it as praising and, conversely, because praise is universal that we are able to recognise a thing as particular. It is in contemplation of this that we undertake our task of priesthood and carry out our most important responsibility towards the non-human creation, that of gathering its praise and presenting it to God.

I conclude with a brief consideration of what such contemplation might look like. To do so I turn to the Eighteenth Century poet Christopher Smart. Smart's *Jubilate Agno* is a long and extraordinary call to human and non-human creation to join in praise of God, strongly reminiscent of Psalm 148. It is remarkable for its attention to the characteristics of the created order. In particular there is a long section in which Smart considers his cat, Jeffry, in whom he finds occasion to praise God. The section of the work dedicated to Jeffry begins as follows:

For I will consider my Cat Jeffry,
For he is the servant of the living God duly and daily serving him.
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in
his way.
For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with
elegant quickness.
For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God
upon his prayer.
For he rolls upon prank to work it in.
For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider
himself.
For this he performs in ten degrees.³⁹⁶

The poem continues by listing ten further habits of Jeffry's morning routine including the cleaning of his paws and sharpening of his nails. All of this is understood by Smart to be a daily service to God which is duly blessed by the Almighty.

³⁹⁶ Christopher Smart, *The Poetical Works: I, Jubilate Agno*, ed. Karina Williamson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 87.

Smart strikes me as an excellent contemplator of nature. He invests Jeoffry with all kinds of human characteristics, describing him as considerate, patient, good and thankful. Furthermore, Jeoffry's whole life and being seem to be understood as taking place in a particular relationship to the divine. Yet rather than detract from the otherness of the cat this only seems to increase Smart's genuine other-regard for Jeoffry. He appears endlessly captivated and surprised by his cat's life and behaviour. He writes, for example, that "by stroaking of him I have found out electricity."³⁹⁷ Smart seems to have gone some way to the heart of what a cat truly is when, for example, he describes Jeoffry as "a mixture of gravity and waggery".³⁹⁸

If we limit our understanding of what animals are to those things that yield to human observation and investigation then Smart's poem will appear to anthropomorphise Jeoffry. If we assume, however, as Smart appears to, and as the argument of this thesis suggests, that Jeoffry is connected to God in ways that are not so easily observed and understood, then we may see that his poem displays a genuine sensitivity to what Jeoffry really is. It is important to notice that, though he uses anthropomorphic language, Smart has intimate knowledge of Jeoffry's feline behaviour and his poem celebrates the cattiness of this cat. Thus I believe that Smart has indeed seen something of the truth of an animal's relationship of praise to God when he states that: "He purrs in thankfulness, when God tells him he's a good Cat."³⁹⁹

Smart's poem is also interesting because of his rather tragic life.⁴⁰⁰ Marked by unrequited love and failed marriage, mounting debts and various imprisonments, Smart wrote *Jubilate Agno* in a private madhouse in Bethnal Green. The true cause of his mental breakdown is uncertain but his tendency to pray loudly and unexpectedly in public places was a

³⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 89.

³⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 88

³⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 88.

⁴⁰⁰ For a summary see *ibid.* pp. xv – xx.

notable symptom. To what extent Smart's illness is the cause of the uniqueness of the poem cannot be said. In any case, it seems fair to say that the work represents a significant departure from the way many artists have contemplated nature. As we have seen, he perceives in the activities of his cat the most wonderful encounters with God.

It seems to me that Smart's poem displays an unusual and inspiring awareness of Creation and its praise of God. This is not to say that the good of the poem somehow negates Smart's illness and the poor treatment he received. Rather it is simply to affirm that a great work of art was produced under these circumstances and that its greatness is inseparable from them. Perhaps in a society in which alienation from the non-human has become deeply imbedded it is fitting that we should look to the margins of society to find someone who had the resources to resist that alienation.

Smart's contemplation of the non-human is not undertaken in the abstract or from the outside. Rather, the poem is replete with references to individuals, whether it be "Mr Pigg of DOWNHAM in NORFOLK"⁴⁰¹ or "the Black Eagle, which is the least of his species and the best natured."⁴⁰² Furthermore, the individuals of the poem seem to exist in some form of community. Smart repeatedly couples particular creatures and particular people, calling them to join praise together. There is a long passage in which he pairs various saints with various fish, enjoining them to praise together. These include:

LET PETER rejoice with the MOON FISH who keeps life in the
waters by night.

Let James rejoice with the Skuttle-Fish, who foils his foe by the
effusion of his ink.

Let Jude bless with the Bream, who is of melancholy from his
depth of serenity.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid. p. 30 (author's capitalisation).

⁴⁰² Ibid. p. 21.

Let John, the Baptist, rejoice with the Salmon – blessed be the name of the Lord Jesus for infant Baptism.⁴⁰³

It seems to me that Smart has journeyed deeply into what it means for Creation to praise God. He sees nothing but rejoicing and reasons for rejoicing everywhere he turns. Furthermore he constantly makes connections which, though baffling to his reader, appear to make perfect sense to him. He seems to view the entire Creation as interconnected and teeming with life. All this life is protected and blessed by God and responds in grateful rejoicing. Smart led something of a sad life, dying at the age of forty-nine, and his mental breakdown and his mistreatment are tragic. Yet through his troubles he seems to have attained some measure of understanding of God, some strange and wonderful gift for discerning the *logoi* in Creation. Smart is an example, a strange and impenetrable example but an example none the less, of a human being open and receptive to the praise of Creation.

I end this thesis with Smart because he so wonderfully embodies in his art the kinship with the non-human that I have attempted to nurture. In his poetry, I believe, we may find inspiration for the kind of contemplation of nature that Christians need to incorporate into their faith and spirituality. If Christians can embody even a part of Smart's intimacy with and perceptiveness of the non-human then the Church may go some way towards granting the rest of God's creation the significance it deserves.

⁴⁰³ Ibid. Various lines selected from pp. 31-35 (author's capitalisation).

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