

WAITING FOR A COSMIC CHRIST IN AN UNCREATED WORLD

• Peter Casarella •

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“All of creation is groaning in labor pains *even unto now*.”¹ St. Paul’s vision of creation’s transformation is not relegated completely to the future. The pregnant present in this verse represents both an endpoint and the birthpang of a future cosmos. Significantly, his vision of the freedom that will accompany eschatological glory is no less cosmic than anthropological (v. 21). In the verses of The Letter to the Romans that follow these, St. Paul introduces the gift of hope. The expected coming of God’s Spirit reinforces the non-immanence of the transformation, but the “firstfruits of the Spirit,” he states, have already been planted and are taking root in our midst. We wait for adoption “groaning within ourselves,” and this microcosmic transformation has already begun in those who have internalized the news of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. The object of hope is therefore both universal and personal, both already in view and not yet arrived.

¹Rom 8:22.

The present essay, a meditation on Christ and the cosmos, takes St. Paul's eschatology as its starting point. To relate Christ to a modern, evolutionary cosmology, the changes wrought in the present need to be viewed as traces of what God can accomplish in "the fullness of times." There is neither a theological method nor a scientific technique, in my opinion, that grants an immediate access to this view. The goal of the present essay is not to make yet another plea for the integration of Christian theology and scientific evolution.² The time for such synthetic efforts has both passed and not yet arrived. I am interested rather in the sapiential conditions for the possibility of dialogue between the science of theology and the natural sciences. Above all, I would like to recognize the inevitably "a-cosmic" world-view of the present age. The learned dialogue between theologians and scientists comes to nought, I think, if there are no practical measures for perceiving the form of Christ as the form of the world.

Neither the widespread proliferation of ecological spiritualities nor the rapid advance in the realms of biology and physics has significantly reversed modernity's eclipse of cosmic theophany. A sign of a truly advanced culture, so it seems, is the frank admission that one's path to the transcendent is inward and "spiritual," not outward and practical. Willy-nilly, we conceive of the human person separate from the cosmos as a whole. Practical "atheism" is a distinct corollary of the decline of the cosmic view. Without a palpable sense that all of creation is gift, other aspects of faith's vision are easily distorted into unappealing and unrecognizable forms.³ In such instances, it is absurd to think that a deeply spiritual interiority can somehow be appended to a world that was never created. Such a bracketing of the hidden presence of the divine has a real appeal and tangible side effects. For example, the vision of God's traces in the world can be shunted off to deeply provocative but socially marginalized forms of discourse. Nowhere in everyday life can one take it for granted that God has left a decipherable imprint on what he created. Presently, an ecological orientation is almost mandatory in theology and the Church, yet pleas for a fusion

²See, for example, Henri de Lubac, S.J., *La pensée religieuse de Père Teilhard de Chardin* (Aubier, 1962).

³Cf. Kenneth Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982).

of spirituality with an ecological awareness exacerbate the problem if they do not face the depth of our present a-cosmism.⁴ The challenge of the present is *not* to strike the right balance between an overly spiritualized and a naively materialistic theology. It is to decry both at the same time.⁵

In what follows I lay out some elements of a spiritual theology that gives an account of Christian hope in the transfiguration of the created order. The starting point is the wisdom of Scripture, without which there can be no hope for creation's redemption. On this basis, we then present a classical, cosmic synthesis, i.e., St. Bonaventure's vision of the cosmic Christ. What the Seraphic doctor perceived so acutely could be reinstated as normative, I argue, if only the human person were still thought to be the microcosmic center of all living things. Consequently, in the third section I explain how the birth of the modern age made this classical spiritual vision problematic. As an initial response to this quandary, we will examine John Paul II's address of 1996 to the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences. Here a possible basis for a new integration of Christian faith and certain aspects of evolutionary science are acknowledged. I conclude with some reflections of how the cosmic, liturgical vision entrusted to the eyes of faith might deepen the contemporary scientific endeavour.

Throughout I assume that theology and science are neither outright enemies nor distant partners engaged in a carefully monitored dialogue. The religious person and the scientist gaze simultaneously in wonder upon the "cruciformity" of the cosmos and do so from different vantage points; however, neither benefits from

⁴For an early attempt to redress the balance, see Karlfried Froehlich, "The Ecology of Creation," *Theology Today* 27 (1970): 263–276.

⁵Joseph Ratzinger, "Afterword to the English edition," in idem, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 273: "Hardly anyone seems to recognize today how vital it is to guard against a false physicalism in the interests of defending the frontiers of authentic religious expression. There is a great danger of so withdrawing faith from material reality that one will end up with a new Docetism, beginning with christology and ending with eschatology. As far as the form of Christ's self-presentation is concerned, only his word will be of consequence and not his flesh . . . There is no room left in the divine promise for history or materiality. One of my principal concerns was to find the right intermediary course between physicalism on the one hand and Docetism on the other."

the view that their distinctive perspectives yield wholly juxtaposed images.⁶ In other words, I avoid what Holmes Rolston, III calls “a two-languages view” of the relation of science and religion.⁷ Nature, ultimately, is a single reality. Both contemporary science and Christian faith need to recover the bases for their own theories of perception. The burden of the present, we are sometimes told, is that only those with overly “spiritualized” interior lives can visualize the grandeur God has wrought. Thus arises the practical suggestion that religion and science construct internally consistent but rival metaphors for imagining the real.

On the contrary, whatever wisdom we grasp of nature’s unitary processes and goals is more present at hand than a mere paradigm or metaphorical construct. Neither scientists nor theologians have a monopoly on the experience of God’s wisdom in the natural order. For example, the American writer Annie Dillard describes her reasons for retreating to an island on the Puget Sound:

I came here to study hard things—rock mountain and sea salt—and to temper my spirit on their edges. “Teach me thy ways, O Lord” is, like all prayers, a rash one, and one I cannot but recommend. These mountains . . . are surely the edge of the known and comprehended world. They are high. That they bear their own unimaginable masses and weathers aloft, holding them up in the sky for anyone to see plain, makes them, as Chesterton said of the Eucharist, only the more mysterious by their very visibility and absence of secrecy.⁸

Wonder and awe at the mysteries visibly disclosed in nature are key ingredients in St. Paul’s eschatological vision.⁹

Scriptural fragments of a sapiential cosmology

Modern exegesis, typified in Rudolf Bultmann’s program of de-mythologization, has sometimes excised the Biblical cosmos from

⁶On the notion of a “cruciform creation,” see Holmes Rolston, III, “Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?” *Zygon* 29 (June 1994): 218–29.

⁷*Ibid.*, 207.

⁸Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

⁹Cf. Rom 1:20.

a serious encounter of faith. Certainly not all aspects of Biblical cosmology beckon our attention equally, yet the cosmic dimension of God's Word in Scripture is more existentially relevant than ever before.

In the Old Testament the wise order and intrinsic goodness of creation are affirmed beyond the first two chapters of Genesis. Wisdom accompanies the Creator from the inception of the world. In the book of Proverbs, wisdom is incarnated in the form of God's eternal companion: "From of old I was poured forth, at the first, before the earth. . . . Then was I beside him as his craftsman, and I was his delight day by day."¹⁰ Throughout the wisdom literature we also find jubilant expressions such as Psalm 104:24: "How manifold are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you have wrought them all—the earth is full of your creatures" God's wisdom is more practical than speculative.¹¹ Wisdom is apparent in the fabric of things. Divine justice, according to the book of Wisdom, is meted out not only in human trials but in the very nature of all things: "But you have disposed all things by measure and number and weight."¹² The power of divine wisdom is immense; it is to be measured by a cosmic rather than a human scale.

In the Old Testament Yahweh has full dominion over creation and establishes a covenant with his chosen people.¹³ Closely associated with the latter is the promise of fertile land.¹⁴ Simply put, the blessing of progeny and fertile land are included among the rewards for covenant obedience. The land promised to the faithful Israelite provides more than just milk and honey. Yahweh guarantees that it "is a land of hills and valleys that drinks in rain from the heavens, a land which the Lord, your God, looks after."¹⁵

¹⁰Prov 8:23, 30.

¹¹Joseph Jensen, O.S.B., *God's Word to Israel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1970): 233.

¹²Wis 11:20.

¹³The scope of this essay does not allow me to develop any thoughts on the relation of creation and covenant.

¹⁴For more details, see Richard Clifford, "The Bible and the Environment," in *Preserving the Creation: Environmental Theology and Ethics*, eds. Kevin W. Irwin and Edmund Pellegrino (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 1–26.

¹⁵Deut 11:11–12.

Accordingly, human redemption is inseparable from tillable topsoil.¹⁶ The former is not possible without the latter. The latter is a sign of the former.

The Lord's speech to Job "out of the whirlwind" is a song of praise to the artistry of the created world. However inexplicable the root of Job's anguish, his experience of God's withdrawal cannot be attributed to a clockmaker God. Even in the face of natural evil, the mystery of cosmic redemption is quietly at work in nature's forces. The Lord asks the righteous Job to attempt to fathom the cosmic proportions of the architecture of matter:

Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding, who determined its size; Do you know? Who stretched out the measuring line for it? Into what were its pedestals sunk, and who laid the cornerstone, while the morning stars sang in chorus and all the sons of God shouted for joy?¹⁷

Yahweh's continuous creation permeates the realm of living organisms to the same degree:

Do you hunt the prey for the lioness or appease the hunger of her cubs, while they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in the thicket? Who puts wisdom in the heart, and gives the cock its understanding? Who provides the nourishment for the ravens when their young ones cry out to God, and they rove abroad without food?¹⁸

The Lord whose voice echoes from out of the whirlwind is a living God. As Pope John Paul II stated in his address of 1996 to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, "'life' is one of the most beautiful titles that the Bible attributes to God."¹⁹ The God of life attends the cycles of nature neither to domesticate their inherent wildness nor to promote an infinite diversity of biological forms. Traces of his

¹⁶See Wendell Berry, "Two Economies," in: Richard Clifford, *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 54–75.

¹⁷Job 38: 4–7.

¹⁸Job 38: 39–41.

¹⁹Cf. John Paul II, "Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences," *The Quarterly Review of Biology* (December 1997): 379.

hand are visible in the creation, nourishment, and sustenance of life. Where he is present, life abounds.

One would be remiss to leave the confrontation with death out of the sapiential marvels in the Old Testament. Particularly striking are the meditations on death that pervade the Wisdom literature, i.e., what Joseph Ratzinger refers to as “those monuments to the Israelite enlightenment.” Here the classical Hebrew conception of eternal imprisonment in Sheol is submitted for the first time to a more deeply *theo*-logical analysis.²⁰ Qoheleth, for example, expresses a profound scepticism and the firm conviction that all is vanity, yet some of the Psalms suggest that death is no longer outside the orbit of the divine dominion. In Psalm 16: 10 (“Because you will not abandon my soul to the nether world, nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption”), Yahweh is not altogether absent to those consigned to the realm of the dead. Psalm 73:24 claims an outright nearness of the Lord with the departed shades. Death somehow is no longer a barrier to receiving Yahweh’s wise counsel:

With your counsel you guide me, and in the end you will receive me in glory. Whom else have I in heaven? And when I am with you, the earth delights me not. Though my flesh and my heart waste away, God is the rock of my heart and my portion forever.

Although traditional Christian interpretation took these verses as proofs of the soul’s resurrection, a more modest reading yields an even richer harvest. Yahweh recognizes the terrible toll of natural perishing, and he will not isolate himself from the corporeal condition of those who are faithful to his covenant. Communion with the Lord is more permanent than the biological rhythms of generation and decay, and the two realities are pitted against one another with frank realism.

In the New Testament Christ both crowns and indwells creation. He is the expressed image of a God who cannot be seen. He is creation’s “first-born” and thus “all things were created through him and for him.”²¹ In the prologue to John’s gospel, we

²⁰Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 82–92 .

²¹Colossians 1:20.

learn not only that the Word was in the beginning, but that “without him was not anything made that was made.”²² In the first letter of John, the incarnate Logos materializes in an especially “tactile” form: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and seen with our hands, concerning the word of life. . . .”²³ In all these texts the uncreated nature of the Word is unmistakable, but no less his mediation of material form and palpable presence in the created world. Platonic resonances notwithstanding, neither the prologue to the gospel of John, nor Colossians 1:14–20, nor Ephesians 1:3–10 refer to a creative principle that is above rather than within the world.²⁴ Like the transfiguration at Mount Tabor, the book of Revelation underscores the new form that the cosmos will take.²⁵ In each case, there is a concrete person in view, and his glorified body represents the totality of what is envisaged for the transformation of the created order. When it is said in Colossians 1:17 that all things hold together in him, this applies equally to the “new Jerusalem” and “new earth” of the book of Revelation. The Lord, “who is coming soon,” declares himself “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”²⁶ Cosmic balance relies not on purely inner-worldly forces. It hinges ultimately on the intervention of a God who redeems a corrupted, fragmented nature.

The book of Revelation is a sudden disclosure of a transfigured world, and the scope of this change surpasses the personal. To employ the language of Karl Rahner, there is an inner unity of the redemption of humanity and the final destiny of the whole cosmos.²⁷ According to Revelation 21:3, “God’s dwelling is

²²John 1:1,3.

²³1 Jn 1:1.

²⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Christ: Alpha and Omega,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* (Fall 1996): 465.

²⁵On the transfiguration, see the discussion of the sermon of St. Bonaventure below.

²⁶Rev 22:13.

²⁷Karl Rahner, “Immanent and Transcendent Consummation in the World,” *Theological Investigations* 10 (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1973): 273–89, originally published as “‘Immanente’ und ‘transzendente’ Vollendung,” in *Teilhard de Chardin und das Problem des Weltbilddenkens* (Freiburg 1968): 174–184 and

with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and himself will always be with them.” The passage speaks of the transformation of a city (“He took me in spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God”)²⁸ and of a new earth (“the sea was no more” and “the angel showed me the river of life-giving water as flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb”).²⁹ The theological aesthetics of Rev 21 and the beauty of the city argue against a dematerialized cosmos and exclude a beatific vision in which human souls are joined to the Body of Christ separately from the rest of creation.³⁰ The whole material universe follows the paschal route of the body of Christ, for

[t]he risen body of Christ guarantees that the material elements of our universe will be assumed into the new world. Christ’s risen body transformed from his earthly body is the foundation and the pattern of the new creation to be completed at the end of times.³¹

The resurrection of the flesh, rooted in the new power of unification apparent in Christ’s resurrected body, is the reversal of a cosmic process whereby temporally conditioned matter is severed from spirit and fragmentation ensues.³² “Only where creation realizes such unity can it be true that ‘God is all in all.’”³³

The Lamb’s shedding of blood points to a permanent kenotic feature of the process of transfiguration. According to Revelation 5:6, the body of the Lamb appears to possess a slain body. This detail represents a significant departure from other accounts of ascent to

reprinted in *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 8.

²⁸Rev. 21:10.

²⁹Rev 21:1, 22:1. Note that the heaven is not a substitute for earth. Both are creatures of God, and both are renewed.

³⁰Rev 21:11: “It gleamed with the splendor of God. Its radiance was like that of a precious stone, like jasper, clear as crystal.” Cf. Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1982), 594–8.

³¹Roch Kereszty, O.Cist., *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology* (New York: Alba House, 1981), 363.

³²Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 191–2.

³³*Ibid.*, 192. Cf. 1 Cor. 15:28.

heaven in early Jewish mysticism and apocalyptic literature.³⁴ In 1:17–18, the blood of the Lamb alludes to the redemptive character of Jesus’ martyrdom: “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” These verses recall the sacrificial images of Christ in The Letter to the Hebrews and elsewhere.³⁵

The cosmic symbolism of Revelation 21 is meant to surpass the commemoration of sacred historical events that took place in the Passover meal. The eternally slain lamb is also more than just a reminder of the cross. Chapter 11 mentions witnesses, perhaps Peter and Paul. After they have finished their testimony, the beast comes up from the abyss and kills them. After they are carried up to heaven in a cloud, a tenth of the city fell into ruins, showing God’s wrath against those who persecute the Christians. Thus, the book of Revelation bears a profound theology of Christian martyrdom, and the martyr’s blood saturates history with redemptive significance.

The slaying of the lamb, an image as natural as it is covenantal, also expresses the cosmic liturgy of kenotic love. The Lord’s intimacy with his people is revealed through a Paschal lamb.³⁶ As Paschal lamb, God stands in solidarity with human suffering of all kinds.³⁷ The slain lamb is the new visible expression of the Lord’s saving presence to his people. The image signifies a concrete reality; its expressiveness cannot be reduced to abstract, mythical archetypes or mechanisms of scapegoating.

Christ dies an utterly realistic death in darkness and Godforsakenness, a death that makes him . . . possessor of the key to every death and all the darkness death contains . . . Indeed, “he entered once and for all” before God with “his own blood” (Hebrews 9:12), thus overtaking every other blood-letting and death that the world and its history have known.³⁸

³⁴Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, “Revelation, Reading guide,” *The Catholic Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), RG 574.

³⁵Cf. Rev 5:9b: “. . . for you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue, people, and nation.”

³⁶Rev 21:3.

³⁷The mini-drama of a woman clothed with the sun conquering the great dragon in chapter 12 makes this prophetic message even more emphatically.

³⁸Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Christ: Alpha and Omega,” 466.

Christ's martyrdom is a blueprint for self-sacrifice as both a natural and spiritual act. Cosmic slaughter figures God's own victory over death as an integral element in a realistic narrative. By the same token, the eternally slain lamb is the sacrifice of Christ made present with each celebration of the Eucharist.

Christ, the hidden center of all things in St. Bonaventure.

St. Bonaventure wrote in defense of the absolute predestination of all things in the person of Christ, and in this sense he stands in a long Christian tradition.³⁹ His scholastic rendering of the cosmic Christ differs from the classical Patristic syntheses of, for example, Irenaeus of Lyons or Maximus the Confessor in that it assumes a sharp, Anselmian distinction between creation and redemption. On the other hand, St. Bonaventure retains a mendicant's version of the Scriptural and Patristic vision of a creation that is awaiting its consummation through Christ's paschal victory.

The dominant influence on St. Bonaventure's cosmic Christ is the perspective of *il poverello*, the holy man from Assisi who saw beauty itself in beautiful things.⁴⁰ St. Francis, according to Bonaventure's biography, "followed his beloved everywhere, making from all things a ladder by which he could climb up and embrace him who is utterly desirable [H]e perceived a heavenly harmony in the consonance of powers and activities God has given them."⁴¹ Francis' life embodied the pursuit of wisdom, and

³⁹See, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie. Das Weltbild Maximus des Bekenner* (Johannes: Einsiedeln, 1961) and Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator. The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Copenhagen: C.W.K. Gleerup, Lund and Einar Munksgard, 1965).

⁴⁰*Legenda Maior*, 9, in *Bonaventure*, Evert Coursins, trans. and ed. (New York: Paulist, 1978), 263. On this point and many others, my reading of St. Bonaventure was greatly aided by an unpublished manuscript of Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., entitled "The Cosmos, a Symbol of the Divine." This paper was originally delivered as an address to the United States Catholic Conference at the meeting in Washington, D.C. in June, 1997.

⁴¹*Bonaventure*, 263.

Francis' holiness led St. Bonaventure to the conclusion that the logic of following Christ was not just a pattern of human activity. St. Bonaventure was so convinced of cosmic theophany that he thought the world could be seen as a ladder by which the soul ascends to the bedchamber of its beloved.

We live in a media age in which the printed book is quickly becoming a relic of the past. St. Bonaventure lived well before the age of print, but he revered the image of the book.⁴² His fascination with the spirituality of reading may derive from the relative novelty of the medieval book or it may be related to his initiative to laud the ancient monastic tradition of *lectio divina* even while transforming it into an apostolic life more visible on the streets. Quite often he refers to two books or at least to two ways of understanding the book: one written within (*liber scriptus intus*) and one written without (*liber scriptus extra* or *foris*). The penultimate stage of *The Mind's Journey into God*, for example, consists of a perfect illumination of the mind. Contemplating Christ as an image of the invisible God, one sees him not in an unknowable distance but as an expressed likeness (*similitudo expressiva*). The insight into God's expressivity yields a new view of humanity and creation. To the mind is disclosed:

our humanity so wonderfully exalted, so ineffably united, and . . . at the same time it sees united the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and the center, the Alpha and the Omega, the caused and the cause, the Creator and the creature, that is, the book written within and without.⁴³

Interior writing refers to the dynamics of the incarnation as God's fecund and original capacity for self-communication. In the *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure equates this with God's eternal Art and Wisdom.⁴⁴ Exterior writing is found in the perceptible world. It is

⁴²Cf. Winthir Rauch, *Das Buch Gottes: eine systematische Untersuchung des Buchbegriffes bei Bonaventura* (München: M. Hueber), 1961.

⁴³*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, VI, 7, in *Works of St. Bonaventure*, II, Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M., trans. (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1990), 95.

⁴⁴*Breviloquium*, II, 2, in *The Works of St. Bonaventure*, II, José de Vincek, trans. (Paterson, NJ: St Anthony Guild Press, 1963), 72.

the same divine image hypostatically impressed upon the product of his creative love.

For Bonaventure the inner and outer book share a close kinship. In the twelfth collation on the six days of creation, Bonaventure explains how the two forms of writing coincide “in the sacramental Scriptures.”⁴⁵ The book written without is “shadows, a way, a trace.” A refulgence of the divine exemplar is in view here, but “it resembles some kind of opacity combined with light.” “The creature,” he says, “exists only as a *simulacrum* of God’s wisdom, as if represented in a plastic form (*quoddam sculptile*).”

The interior book, by contrast, is open to those highest contemplatives who advance from shadow to light, from trace to truth, from the imprint in a book to “true knowledge which is in God.” Interior writing is inscribed directly onto the soul, “for the whole world is described in the soul.” Interior writing is therefore not a private language of the mind. It is rather the human soul understood as the enfolded unity of all things. Scripture consists of writing that is *both* exterior and interior. St. Bonaventure compares Scripture to God’s heart, mouth, tongue, and pen: “For the Father speaks through the Son or Tongue, but that which fulfills and commits to memory is the Pen of the Scribe.”⁴⁶ The narrative structure of Scripture and its teachings regarding the properties of things constitute the outer book. Its multiplicity of mysteries are the inner book. In other words, in Scripture God has provided humanity with a form of writing whose nourishment is delectable in clearly perceptible ways but whose truth surpasses the literal sense.

On another occasion Bonaventure speaks of a three volume work that begins with cosmogony and ends with a last act: the book of creation, the book of Scripture, and the book of life.⁴⁷ Each volume provides an increasingly efficacious testimony to the truth that God is triune. Creation contains two witnesses testifying to the truth—the material world bespeaking traces of God’s presence and the intellectual creature, who is his image. In the state of innocent

⁴⁵ *Collationes in Hex.*, XII, 14–16. *Collations on the Six Days*, José de Vinck, trans. (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1970), 179–181.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, XII, 16, p.180.

⁴⁷ *Quaestiones disputatae de mysterio Trinitatis*, q.1, art.2, resp. *St. Bonaventure’s Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, trans. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M. (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1979), 128–33.

nature, when this testimony had not been obscured, this book was sufficient. “But when the sins of man had weakened his sight, then that mirror was made dark and obscure, and the ear of our inner understanding was hardened against hearing that testimony.”⁴⁸ The testimony of Scripture is given by divine revelation and to heal those blinded by sin. It contains the implicit testimony to the Trinity in the Old Testament and the explicit in the New. The book of life is given “because not all listen to the Gospel.”⁴⁹ Here divine wisdom has provided an eternal testimony. Once again there are two paths to reading this book. To the Christians, Jews, Muslims, and even some heretics, the book of life shines through an innate natural light, for many can think in a lofty manner “that God can and does wish to produce one equal to and consubstantial to himself so that he may have an eternal beloved and cobeloved.”⁵⁰ The natural light finds its consummation in an infused light of faith. The infused reading of the book of life “takes our intellect into obedient captivity; in capturing the mind, it subjects it to God in worship and veneration.” The threefold imagery shows that no aspect of God’s creation is completely illegible. By the same token, sin distorts our vision and makes us put on faith’s glasses.

Each of the book metaphors testifies to the manifold disclosures of wisdom. In this sense, Bonaventure is wisdom’s phenomenologist, a keen observer to the variant profiles of the single, divine *sapientia*. The second of St. Bonaventure’s *Collations on the Six Days* is dedicated to manifold wisdom. According to St. Bonaventure, wisdom possesses four aspects or “faces.”⁵¹ To each of these modes of manifestation corresponds a different expression of the divine form.⁵² The first mode of manifestation is the uniform form (*forma uniformis*) found in the rules of the divine law that bind us. The second mode of manifestation is the pluriform form (*forma multiformis*) in the mysteries of divine scripture. The third mode of

⁴⁸Ibid., 129.

⁴⁹Rom 10:16.

⁵⁰*Disputed Questions*, 131 for this and what follows.

⁵¹On *facies sapientiae*, see *Collationes in Hexaemeron* II, 28, p. 35.

⁵²In these *Collations*, St. Bonaventure speaks of the *revelatio* or “unveiling” of wisdom. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Z. Hayes (Munich/Zurich, 1959), 56–94.

manifestation is the ubiquitous form (*forma omniformis*) or traces of God's work in creation. The fourth mode of manifestation is the formless form (*forma nulliformis*) in the elevations of divine raptures. The spirit of God's wisdom is expressed most concretely in the person of Jesus Christ, but his hidden presence can nonetheless be felt in all of God's multi-faceted appearances—the moral law, creation, Scripture, and mystical vision. The *revelatio* of Jesus not only occurs within history and is not only fulfilled in history but is the ever present ground of history. Christ indwells creation, and the symbolic, varied presence of his wisdom draws his followers more deeply into the crucible of the paschal mystery.

In a sermon on the transfiguration, Bonaventure maintains that all things are transfigured in the Lord' presentation of his future glory to St. Peter.

All things are transfigured in Christ's transfiguration since there was something from every creature transfigured in Christ. Christ as man communicates with all creatures . . . Since Christ is transfigured and since in his humanity there is something of every creature, they therefore say that all things are transfigured in him.⁵³

The Lord reveals to the eyes of St. Peter "the splendor of his virtue and intelligence." Together they share in the "mutual dwelling of mutual love" by virtue of this revelation. The communion that is thereby established between St. Peter and the transfigured Lord may be eminently personal, but this bond clearly surpasses the love of two individuals. What the Lord reveals to St. Peter is that even in the dire hour of his death all things are being transformed in him and will submit to his nourishing grace for the sake of those things that he wills for them.⁵⁴ Hence, the Lord's transfiguration is itself a cosmic theophany, and the transfiguration of the cosmos will be accomplished through his holding of all things together within himself.

St. Bonaventure was no less a theologian of the cross than a theologian of glory, and his vision of creation's inward

⁵³*Dom. II in Quad., Sermo I, Opera omnia*, (Quaracchi, 1901) IX, 218.

⁵⁴*Ibid.* Bonaventure bases this on an incorrectly cited reference to the Vulgate of Wisdom, 16:25: "Omnia transfigurata omnium nutriciae gratiae tuae deserviebant ad voluntatem eorum quae a te sunt desiderata."

consummation bears this out. Cruciformity is both a cosmic principle and a kenotic stance whereby the humble mendicant accepts the Redeemer's immense gift of love. The former—especially in its unity with the latter—is of great import for our present purposes. In the *Breviloquium*, he offers a succinct summary of how the whole organism of the universe (*tota machina universi*) is illuminated by Scripture through *the form of an intelligible cross*:

Scripture, then, deals with the whole universe, the high and the low, the first and the last, and all things in between. It is, in a sense, an intelligible cross in which the whole organism of the universe is described and made to be seen in the light of the mind. If we are to understand this cross, we must know God, the Principle of beings; we must know how these beings were created, how they fell, how they were redeemed through the blood of Christ, reformed through grace, and healed through the sacraments; and, finally, how they are to be rewarded with eternal pain or eternal glory.⁵⁵

The basic structure of salvation history, recapitulated in the individual story of each person who offers himself to the Lord's mercy, is written into the fabric of the cosmos. The personal sacrifice of crucified love leaves a veiled imprint on the things themselves: "[H]ow marvelous is divine wisdom for it brought forth salvation through the cinders of humility. For the center is lost in the circle, and it cannot be found except by two lines crossing each other at a right angle."⁵⁶ Sacred geometry, here, drips blood for the world.

The twilight of cosmic theophany

St. Bonaventure glanced at the finite order and immediately elicited a library of hidden truths, including the Creator's own poetic utterances.⁵⁷ But the finite, pre-Copernican world of the Seraphic doctor is decidedly not our own. Can the modern

⁵⁵*Breviloquium* Prologue, VI, 4, p. 208.

⁵⁶*Collationes in Hex.*, I, 24, p. 13.

⁵⁷On the world as poem, see *Breviloquium*, Prol. 4, p. 11.

inhabitants of an immense, boundless universe be attuned to this same reality? Or are we in a permanent state of looking at creation and thinking that what God has penned is written in a foreign language?

Friedrich Nietzsche's madman offered an astute diagnosis of the eclipse of the ancient cosmos. In the new view, the forms of the world are no longer ciphers of transcendence. Not once in the madman's celebrated speech on the death of God does he decry the absence of personal belief in a Creator God. Rather, he recognizes that staunch believers are unwittingly preparing for God's funeral because of their blindness to his disappearance from the cosmos.

"Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder?⁵⁸

The madman's universe is not just disordered; it is boundless, empty, and uninhabitable. To remove the idea of God is to scuttle the very possibility of reading the cosmos as a cipher of something beyond itself. When the idea of God passes away, nature as a reality imbued with ultimate meaning follows quickly in its path. As Heidegger remarks: "The pronouncement 'God is dead' means: the suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life."⁵⁹ Ironically, a recognition of the cosmos' lack of limits shrinks man's possibilities for meaningful action in the world. For Nietzsche a-cosmic life is characterized by metaphysical homelessness and a necessary disorientation in one's own abode. There is simply no place for the human in the new cosmos except as another element

⁵⁸*The Gay Science*, #125, as cited in *The Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann, tr. (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 95.

⁵⁹Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead,'" in *The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays*, William Lovitt, tr. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 61.

subject to organic laws of generation and decay. God's death seals the coffin of authentic humanism.

A common explanation for the hushing of nature is that modern physics exploded the closed world from which cosmic revelation originally emerged. Balthasar acknowledges the modern chasm between Christ's infinite expressiveness and the new nature's infinite silence. What Scripture affirmed of the iconicity of Christ, he says, no longer rings true as a cosmological starting point. Christian theology can no longer simply repeat what Scriptural wisdom and St. Bonaventure said about the cosmic Christ.

It is no idle exercise to recall these affirmations today. They might have appeared plausible to the ancients, who imagined the world as a compact, six thousand-year-old cosmos, where the murder of Abel, the sacrifice and Abraham, and the martyrdom of the Maccabees were close enough to be seen in a single glance and where there was as yet no post-Christian history. But for us, this world was blown apart into a terrifying immensity. We are lost in a universe measured in terms of myriads of light-years and in a planetary history numbering many millions of years. Man's origin lies in an immeasurably remote past, and his own history recapitulates at the level of self-consciousness the indescribable atrocities of the plant and animal world.⁶⁰

In this passage Balthasar seems to echo Nietzsche's resignation to disorientation. Both history and the cosmos have been extended infinitely. To claim man as the microcosm of the real now seems as remote an idea as to place the earth at the center of the universe. The problem is not that "God" is lacking as a metaphysical anchor to the real. The problem is that neither nature nor history possess a real center.

It is one thing to identify the epochal spiritual consequences of "unchaining the earth from its sun." It is quite another to explain how this came about. Given the practical scope of this essay, we must consider only a few salient points. Clearly, the new science of nature that emerged in the sixteenth century and then was carried forward into the Enlightenment played a role. Yet the modern disintegration of the integrated view of God, man, and the cosmos

⁶⁰Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Christ: Alpha and Omega," *Communio: International Catholic Review* (Fall 1996), 466. Cf. idem, *Love Alone: the Way of Revelation* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 11–24.

has clear theological antecedents that require an earlier focus on the high and late Middle Ages.⁶¹ What transpires in the new science of Descartes, Galileo, Bacon, and Isaac Newton cannot be properly understood without attending to the complex array of spiritual and ideological forces that preceded it. In fact, there is no one factor that explains the origin of the present predicament.

[The modern idea of science] was not the outcome of a single factor. It rested on a practical, voluntarist view of nature as well as on a theoretical, mechanistic one that related all parts of nature to each other. The two combined resulted in an instrumentalism that was fundamentally at variance with the ancient conceptions of *cosmos* and *techné*.⁶²

The Lord's speech out of the whirlwind to Job forced him to reflect on the ultimate meaning of what had been created. In the new view, by contrast, creation is a hypothesis that gradually proves its own dispensability. As Nietzsche stated, the idea of "the true world" was first promised to the sage, then it was considered (in gradual succession) incomprehensible, unattainable, indemonstrable, and finally superfluous.⁶³ Only in this final stage could the hypothesis be abolished. What forces this development is the inevitably theological idea that nature carries no necessity of its own. To this theoretical conviction the modern scientist adds experimental processes for studying nature's mechanical workings on their own terms. Pure faith, no matter how sincerely held, cannot refute the power and cogency of the modern explanations of the workings of nature as machine. As Michael Buckley has convincingly demonstrated, the arguments of the Catholic theologians that attempted to refute Descartes and Newton failed to gain hearing because they did not recognize the depth of the problem. The cosmic Christ of the Christian tradition was nothing if not "preeminently personal, intimately involved with human subjectivity and history."⁶⁴ Yet the

⁶¹See Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁶²*Ibid.*, 75.

⁶³*The Portable Nietzsche*, 485–6.

⁶⁴Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 363.

arguments put forward in favor of “theism” drew upon evidence that was wholly impersonal. “Theism,” constructed as a counterposition to the agnostic and naturalistic assumptions of modern science, effectively bracketed the full flowering of religious experience as it had been traditionally understood. In that process, theistic proofs came to share a common starting point with the innovations associated with the new science of nature. Ontotheology, i.e., the dependence of all things on God as an impersonal, self-causing principle, ruled, and before this god, Heidegger reminds us, men and women can neither fall to their knees in awe nor can they play music and dance.⁶⁵

This brief historical survey shows that atheism and a-cosmism are closely joined even though causal explanations of their interrelationship are seldom compelling. To place the blame for the death of God in Western Christianity on the new science of nature ignores the religious affirmations of the greatest scientific innovators, including Albert Einstein. To say that the decline of the cosmic perspective resulted from modern atheism fails to take into account the obvious fact that atheism never enjoyed a widespread popular following prior to the French revolution of the eighteenth century. After that momentous event atheism was no longer the leisurely pastime of an elite group. It was a social movement whose force did not diminish in the succeeding two centuries.⁶⁶

As important as history is the question of the logic of God’s creative act. God created a world outside of himself, but the degree of his difference from the world is also the depth of his non-alterity. Nietzsche asserted that God’s burial is the withdrawal of cosmic theophany, but he also could have cited the fragmentation of the universe as a source of modern atheism. In one important sense Nietzsche never questioned the impact of the Protestant Reformation on his own thinking. Martin Luther defended the distinction between *theologiae gloriae* and *theologia crucis* for the purposes of upholding justification by faith alone and unwittingly abetted the problem of modern a-cosmism. The assumption that the event of the cross represented a solution that fled from the terror of

⁶⁵Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen, 1957), 64–65. Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 35.

⁶⁶Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 27.

the world's emptiness was shared not only by Nietzsche but by most of Christianity's cultured despisers.⁶⁷ Any responsible Christian response to the religious predicament of an a-cosmic, uncreated world must recover Bonaventure's insight into the cross' intelligibility in the cosmic order. But before addressing this thorny issue, we must first return, albeit briefly, to the question of religion and science.

*A new dawn: "meta-scientific" evolution and
theandric sapiential humanism*

At the conclusion of his prophetic speech, Nietzsche's madman glares silently at the crowd. Neither side knows what to make of the other. The scene ends with the madman throwing his lantern to the ground. The lamp, the last accompaniment of the old religious humanism, is extinguished, and the madman issues these parting words: "I come too early My time has not yet come." The madman is singing the requiem of a God who is already decomposing, yet he himself recognizes the need for time to unveil the impact of this event. His time is not yet ready to listen to his diagnosis, but in his view there is not time left for taking a different path. The homeless voice announcing the withdrawal of cosmic theophany is also without a time of his own.

The rapid advances being made in the dialogue between religion and science, I think, still need to be measured by the madman's prophecy. Clearly, postmodern science has abandoned the mechanistic assumptions that aided and abetted the atheism of the early modern era.⁶⁸ Some see this as new beginning for the

⁶⁷See, for example, Richard Dawkins, "Obscurantism to the Rescue," in *The Quarterly Review of Biology* (December 1997): 397. "Unfortunately, the hope that religion might provide a bedrock, from which our otherwise sand-based morals can be derived, is a forlorn one."

⁶⁸See, for example, David Bohm, *Causality and Chance in Modern Physics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957) and Jean Guitton, Grichka Bogdanov, and Igor Bogdanov, *Dieu et la science. Vers la métaréalisme* (Paris: Grasset, 1991).

cosmological method in theology.⁶⁹ No one can deny that the starting point for the practice of science has been radically changed by the advent of postmodern approaches to the real in the natural sciences. I recently visited the campus of a large secular university in the United States and was told by a Catholic theologian in residence that the theological reflection undertaken by believing scientists was remarkably profound. Yet the sapiential conditions for engaging in a dialogue between religion and science are still not so clear. An authentic dialogue, I submit, cannot proceed if there is not first some idea that the participants on all sides desire a common wisdom.

In this regard, some of the pronouncements of Pope John Paul II on the question of science are quite instructive. Gone is the early modern attempt to provide an *apologia* for the idea of God in a scientific vein. By the same reasoning, Biblical literalism or “creationism” as understood by fundamentalist Christians is altogether absent. (The Pope is, after all, a former professor from the same university as Copernicus!) Nor is John Paul constrained by the highly cautious language with which Pius XII in *Humani generis* recognized the theory of evolution as a serious but unproven hypothesis.⁷⁰

The starting point for the Pope’s response seems to be idea that the entire destiny of the human person is contained within the mystery of the resurrected Christ.⁷¹ This special partnership of all who are created in the image and likeness of God in the paschal mystery could be interpreted anthropocentrically. That the Pope is also thinking about this new humanism in cosmic terms is clear from his first encyclical, *The Redeemer of Man*. There St. Paul’s assertion that “all of creation is groaning in labor pains even unto now” is taken as a cipher for modern science and technology.⁷² The Pope juxtaposes accelerated progress (space travel and other “previously unattained conquests of science and technology”) with modernity’s ills (the pollution that results from rapid industrialization, the

⁶⁹See, for example, *The Work of Love. Creation as Kenosis*, John Polkinghorne, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).

⁷⁰See “The Pope’s Message on Evolution and four Commentaries,” *Quarterly Review of Biology* (December 1997), 378.

⁷¹*Gaudium et spes*, 22.

⁷²*Redemptor hominis*, 8.

terrifying consequences of atomic warfare, and the lack of respect for the unborn). He then asks whether this coexistence of man's seemingly infinite potential to master nature and the unimaginable proliferation of death is not somehow akin to "the world 'groaning in travail' that 'waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God'?"⁷³ The spiritual emptiness of the new cosmos mandates that the christocentric humanism of the Second Vatican Council not degenerate into a merely personal relationship between God and individual believers.

In his 1997 address to the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences, the Pope again takes a sapiential approach rooted in the mystery of Christ.⁷⁴ In acknowledging the Church's new openness to scientific evolution, he underscores that any theory such as evolution is a "metascientific elaboration, distinct from the results of observation but consistent with them."⁷⁵ There is not just one theory of scientific evolution that needs to be tested both scientifically and against the data of Revelation but several. These are epistemological questions on which scientists, philosophers, and theologians need to labor collaboratively. In mentioning God's revealed word, however, he is under no illusion that Biblical truths can be added to empirical data under the guise of scientific facts. In the rhetoric of this address, the empirical investigation of nature and "metaphysical knowledge" almost begin to emerge as two separate languages for understanding the real. Any appearance of dualism, however, is sharply tempered by the theological conclusions. "The Bible," he says, "bears an extraordinary message of life. Inasmuch as it characterizes the highest forms of existence, it offers us a vision of wisdom."⁷⁶

Illuminated by the revelation of the God-man, the Pope's reflections before the Pontifical Academy are devoted equally to the mystery of the human person and to the mystery of God. First, the person created by God has intrinsic value. A person who reflects God's own image and likeness cannot be instrumentalized by either

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴"The Pope's Message on Evolution," #5, p. 379, again citing *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

⁷⁵Ibid., #4, p. 382.

⁷⁶Ibid., #7, p. 379.

science or society. St. Thomas Aquinas, the Pope adds, saw a special resemblance between God and man in the fact that the relationship of human intelligence with its own object of knowledge is akin to God's relationship with his creation.⁷⁷ Man's unique capacity for communion, solidarity, and self-giving reflects the imprint that God leaves on his soul. For this reason, the Pope challenges scientists to consider the difference between the human person and the rest of the physical universe: "With man we come up against a difference of an ontological order that one could even term an ontological leap (*un saut ontologique*)."⁷⁸ Empirical observation will not yield insight into the spiritual creature created by God. Modern science, he implies, needs to open itself up to the "findings" of philosophy, theology, and diverse forms of moral, aesthetic and religious experience in order to broaden the scope of its own research without becoming any less scientific in the process.

The Pope also adds conclusions regarding the way in which the mystery of God, understood as wisdom rather than science, could deepen the scientific endeavour. He first turns to the theme "life" in the gospel of John:

It is telling that in the gospel of John life refers to the divine light that Christ communicates to us. We are called to enter into eternal life, that is to say, into the eternity of divine beatitude.⁷⁹

In part this statement affirms the vertical meaning of human existence and counters the purely horizontal theory put forward by secular interpreters of evolutionary theory. On the other hand, by evoking the Johannine articulation of Christ's light ("this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness"), he echoes Bonaventure's christocentric understanding of the book written without and within.⁸⁰ Science indeed considers light and shadows. Can it also make sense of a gift of light as a living-giving reality? Here we encounter the necessary juxtaposition, to which we will return below, of science and human redemption.

⁷⁷ *Summa theologiae*, I-IIae, q. 3, a.5, ad 1.

⁷⁸ "The Pope's Message on Evolution," #6, p. 379.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, #7, p. 379.

⁸⁰ Jn 1:4-5. Cf. 3:19, 8:12, 9:5, 12:35, 46, 1 Jn 1:2, 2:8-11.

The final word of the Pope's address is also dedicated to the theme of life: "Life is one of the most beautiful titles that the Bible uses to recognize God. He is the *living God*." In the Pauline tradition, including the post-Pauline oral tradition, "the living God" is used to affirm the hope that is placed in God, "who is the saviour of all, especially of those who believe."⁸¹ The phrase points to the universal scope of God's offer of salvation as reflected in the missionary activity of St. Paul and is often interpreted in the later tradition as a name of God that signifies the gratuitous act whereby the Creator endows the finite order of things with its very existence.⁸²

Kenotic behavior in nature's travail?

In the Anglo-American intellectual milieu the dominant view of nature is atomistic and the dominant view of biological life accords with Darwin's most draconian interpretation of the survival of the fittest.⁸³ Views of nature that point to the type of redemptive activity we have been describing are seldom voiced. A new publication entitled *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, however, offers an alternative perspective.⁸⁴ In his contribution Holmes Rolston, III, offers a good example of how on the level of the "metascientific perspective" evolutionary theory is open to widely divergent understandings.

Holmes Rolston begins his investigation of "Kenosis and Nature" with an important qualification.⁸⁵ First, he recognizes that the scientific argument for a process of redemption in nature is not

⁸¹1 Tm 4:10. See 1 Tm 2:3–4 and Mark J. Goodwin, "The Pauline Background of the Living God as Interpretive Context for 1 Tm 4:10," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 61 (March 1996): 65–85.

⁸²Wendell Berry, "Life is a Miracle," *Communio: International Catholic Review* (Spring 2000), 83–97.

⁸³Continental philosophy of nature may be very different. See, for example, the brief survey in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik*, IV (*Das Endspiel*, Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1983), 60–65 and idem, "Christ: Alpha and Omega," 469.

⁸⁴*The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, John Polkinghorne, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁸⁵Holmes Rolston, III, "Kenosis and Nature," in: *The Work of Love*, 43–65.

a universally held opinion. In his view a more typical view is that of Richard Dawkins, who has argued strenuously against the possibility of natural altruism in the realm of genetics.⁸⁶ In fact, Dawkins also expresses condescending gratitude to the Pope for his rejection of creationism in the address on evolution to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. But the positive proposal regarding the special creation of a human soul Dawkins regards as hopelessly confused.⁸⁷ Pace Dawkins, Rolston would rather acknowledge the neutrality of nature with regard to many of the anthropocentric categories that are imposed upon it, including both altruism and selfishness.

Nonetheless, Rolston isolates several processes in evolutionary development that might be better explained in terms other than atomistic individualism or self-serving egoism. We could consider these activities to be intimations of redemption in the natural order. First, there is the process of adaptation itself. In Rolston's view it is no more absurd to attribute some form of "sharing" to genetic transmission than to assume that genes act selfishly.⁸⁸

Genes are a flow phenomenon. The genes are caught up in an impulse to thrust through what they know vitally to the next generation, and the next, and the next. Genes live in a lineage, dynamically evolving over time.⁸⁹

One could see the gene's participation in self-replication as a neo-Darwinian attempt to protect itself selfishly for the next generation. Alternatively, recognizing the danger of anthropomorphism in all such formulations, one could say that genes offer "slivers of self," for their adaptive value is passed on to succeeding generations to make a contribution that will enhance the possibility of survival of the species line. To be sure, biological life looks out for its own

⁸⁶Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁸⁷Richard Dawkins, "Obscurantism to the Rescue," *The Quarterly Review of Biology* (December 1997): 397–99.

⁸⁸Holmes Rolston, "Kenosis and Nature," 49.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 47.

survival. This patent and universally observable fact is not contradicted by the transmission of adaptive values in “the survival of the sharers.”⁹⁰

Oak trees and warblers cannot be altruistic, behaving so as to benefit others at cost to self, for, if they do, they go extinct. Meanwhile, the picture coming into focus does portray individual lives discharged into, “emptied into” these larger populational and species lines. Maybe some precursor of kenosis is beginning to evolve. Fitness means dying⁹¹ to self—newness of life in a generation to come.

If one applies the evolutionary perspective to an individual organism, life may indeed seem nasty, brutish, and short, but self-emptying behavior is not a totally unknown quantity to the system as a whole.

Second, biological systems tend to favor outbreeding, for pressure is built into nature to reproduce through one’s own kind but not with one’s own kin. According to Rolston, the non-egotistical element in the biology of sexual reproduction is present in the fact that creatures cannot naturally replicate identical copies of themselves.⁹² Female reproductive and child-rearing organs bring little personal benefit and much cost to the somatic individual. Viewed within the species, however, they serve the function of preserving the identity of the individual within the species and enable the individual’s genes to flow into the populational and species pools. The morphology and behavior of reproducing organisms, Rolston concludes,

are defending the line of life bigger than the somatic individual. The lineage in which an individual exists dynamically is something dynamically passing through it, as much as something it has. The locus of the value that is really defended over generations seems as much in the form of life, the species, as in individuals, since

⁹⁰Ibid., 49.

⁹¹Ibid., 50.

⁹²Ibid., 54.

the individuals are genetically impelled to sacrifice themselves in the interests of reproducing their kind.⁹³

Biological reproduction understood in strictly natural terms is therefore already a cosmic image of the dynamic process of the handing over of an individual self to a reality significantly larger than self.

Third, it has long been recognized that natural interdependencies arise in any given ecosystem. Symbiotic relationships are clear-cut examples of such behavior, but there are other, more subtle ways in which interdependency is a key factor in all biological systems.⁹⁴

Nothing lives alone. Any “self” is embedded in an environment. Only those organisms survive that find a fitness in a biotic community. The organism can only conserve what value it has, and none other. But the biological system, in which the individual self-actualizing and self-reproducing organism plays its role, is more comprehensive, more inclusive. The individual is immersed in a field of forces transcending its individuality.⁹⁵

One can think of the simple example of the dependence of plants on the carbon dioxide released by animals, and the dependence of animals on the carbon dioxide released by plants. While each organism does look out for itself, it cannot survive by ignoring its situatedness in an ecosystem and in a web of interdependencies that constrain its behavior. Rolston reviews the niches that different animals occupy in trophic pyramids and also the more recent discovery of organic gene exchanges that connect and reconnect the splits and branches in the tree of life. In sum, genes are interconnected (“cross-wired”) within individuals, within families, within populations, within species, and even within the ecosystems in which different species interact. In other words, nature’s story is not just about the isolated

⁹³Ibid., 56.

⁹⁴Ibid., 50–4.

⁹⁵Ibid., 50.

selfish gene. Life functions on many levels for the sake of a communal, organic body.

There is an interesting theological problem that arises if one considers nature's own kenosis as an expression—even if perceptible only in the barest of outlines—of love. When theologians consider kenosis, they are speaking of either the divine or human freedom to give of oneself in a way that expresses a freely chosen sacrificial offering. Rolston maintains that it is not clear what sort of freedom, if indeed there is any at all, operates in the non-human kenoses of nature. Theological freedom is nothing if not a personal reality, and the attribution of personal freedom to biological fitness, outbreeding, and interdependency seems like the crudest form of anthropocentrism.

Let's consider two concrete examples. The farmer's choice to practice crop rotation is of a different order of free self-giving than Christian martyrdom. In the first place, even if one abstracts from the long term reward of increased production, there is still an interplay of natural determinism and human freedom in the agricultural example. The farmer's choice could be motivated by more than greed. He could be genuinely interested in promoting the intrinsic goodness of the earth's fertility and decide accordingly to nourish the soil by planting a new crop. In any case, the fertility of the soil is enhanced by its "submission" to self-sacrifice, but this process still realizes itself without any interior freedom. Without the farmer's intervention, the soil will eventually become sterile. In the case of the martyr, we see kenotic freedom being exercised to the maximal degree and with the greatest amount of freely chosen self-determination. Any external coercion or internal necessity negates the freedom of the kenotic act.

The point of this exercise is to see the "ontological leap" between the human and the rest of the natural world. If Holmes Rolston is correct, there are indeed analogies between what he calls nature's "cruciformity" and genuinely theological kenosis, but there is also an even greater disproportion between the two. The author of the gospel of John was probably aware of this analogy with a difference when he wrote with a view to the Lord's passion: "Unless

a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”⁹⁶

Nature’s eucharistic transfiguration

We turn now, as a penultimate reflection, to the question of the redemption of the material world. The asceticism that surrounds us can blind us to this theological truth. In fact, this condition makes it all the more imperative to hear this message in a new key. Balthasar, for example, notes the connection between nature’s kenosis and the Eucharist of the celestial banquet:

Not only does every sort of sexual union offer a preliminary sketch of the definitive marriage of the Lamb, but the ultimate readiness of living things (despite all their necessary organs of defense) to be consumed so that others may live is also a kind of “rough draft” of the mystery of the Eucharist.⁹⁷

As with all labor, the things and activities of nature that are now groaning in travail will one day be transformed into pure praise of God. It is to the connection between these two views that we now turn our attention.

The first and most decisive clue lies in the transfiguration of Mount Tabor. Christ’s followers experienced a real pre-view of the glorified body of the Lord. At stake here is more than the divinity’s self-revelation. In overcoming the Gnostic temptation to separate what appears to the eye from what is held interiorly, the vision of the transfiguration becomes the basis for a new form of perception and a new mode of existence. Romano Guardini grants pride of place to this vision of the Lord.

In his corporal reality in his transfiguration he is the world redeemed . . . Through him transitory creation is lifted into the eternal existence of God, and God,

⁹⁶Jn 12:24.

⁹⁷Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Christ: Alpha and Omega,” 469.

now invulnerable, stands in the world, an eternally fresh start Early modernism manufactured a dogma to the effect that Christianity was anti-corporal, that the body was the enemy of the spirit We know that all creation groans and travails in pain until now [R]edemption is more than an intellectual process, an interior disposition or emotion; we must learn all over again to grasp its divine concrete reality.⁹⁸

Because of the transfiguration, we have a body language to see the unity of matter and spirit in light of the new theandric reality. Redemption is as much about the destiny of all flesh, which itself entails a theory of perception, as it is about extricating ourselves from the sinful condition in which we find ourselves.

The role of material elements—bread and wine—in the earthly liturgy are also significant clues to future glory. Many elements (e.g. water, oil) taken from the earth are used in liturgical rites, but these two are unique, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, because the completion of the sacrament lies in the change of the material element.⁹⁹ The transubstantiated presence of bread and wine in the Eucharist is in some ways a reversal of what takes place in the transfiguration.¹⁰⁰ In the transfiguration the substances remain the same but the appearance changes. In the Eucharistic transformation the elements look no different but are substantially changed. Both events express the glory of the Lord, but where one sees glory's splendor the other views the Lord's humble condescension.

“Bread and wine, the work of human hands, are our humble gift to God.”¹⁰¹ Few symbolisms in the liturgical experience are as rich with cosmic significance. The manufacturing of the bread and wine are themselves ciphers

⁹⁸Romano Guardini, *The Lord*, 483–4.

⁹⁹*Summa theologiae*, III, q. 73, 1 ad 3; q. 74, a. 2 ad 3; q. 78, a.1.

¹⁰⁰Robert Sokolowski, “The Eucharist and Transubstantiation,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* (Winter 1997), 880.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 879.

for co-creative stewardship.¹⁰² An agrarian cycle of planting and harvesting as well as the work of human productivity are both presupposed. The process whereby human work co-participates in nature's "dying and rising" reaches its culmination in the doxological offering of humanly shaped products to the One responsible for their very existence. God's own creatures only "pro-duce" out of what he has created, and the fruits of this labor naturally flow back to their source in God.

As Balthasar notes, the theme of the "cosmic good gifts" should neither be excessively emphasized nor excluded as an alien element.¹⁰³ In the Eucharist the gifts are offered and disappear substantially into the sacrifice that Christ offers. The kenosis of the gifts imitates and presupposes the submission of all finite being with the virgin Mary to the dramatic action that will come to pass in the Son.¹⁰⁴ What Balthasar terms Marian *Geschehenlassen* reverberates through the cosmos and history in the offering of the gifts. The offering of gifts is a distant reflection in a living image of the one truly decisive act in the Eucharist, namely the sacrificial offering of the Son.

This analysis confirms that the Lord's presence in the elements of bread and wine can never be separated from the phenomenon of offering, for the Eucharist is equally meal and sacrifice.¹⁰⁵ The horizontal activity of sharing an experience together at one table is vacuous without the vertical activity of God's self-offering. Here the offering of the cosmic good gifts joins with the Son's own *eucharistia* to the Father.

The Son gives thanks to the Father for having been so disposed as to be able to give himself for the sake of a universal offer of salvation Because the Son

¹⁰²Cf. Kevin W. Irwin, "The Sacramentality of Creation and the Role of Creation in Liturgy and Sacraments," in *Preserving the Creation*, 71.

¹⁰³Peter Casarella, "*Analogia donationis*: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Eucharist," *Philosophy & Theology* 11 (1998), 161 for this and what follows.

¹⁰⁴Robert Sokolowski, "The Eucharist and Transubstantiation," 879.

¹⁰⁵Peter Casarella, "*Analogia donationis*," 166–7.

adopted total abandonment as his own, he becomes in his eucharist the sacrificial victim poured out as pure libation As bread to be eaten and wine to be poured out, Christ's kenotic condition . . . confers on the table guests an active and absorbing role. Not without their assent Christ actively joins the guests into his mystical body. The convergence of sacrifice and meal lies in the uniqueness of the divine self-offering of love and the particular expression it gives to the real, spiritual incorporation of each isolated, abandoned individual (male and female together, each embracing Marian receptivity) into the fluid, equally receptive body of Christ.¹⁰⁶

In sum, the interlocking of our offering of cosmic gifts with the unique sacrifice offered by the Son forms the real basis for a eucharistic spirituality of cosmic unity in and with Christ.

These diverse meditations on the final destiny of the material world can be tied together by considering heaven as a fundamentally Christological disclosure. In the words of Joseph Ratzinger, the cosmic Christ is "a cultic space for God."¹⁰⁷ The transfiguration, the Eucharist, and heaven itself consist in nothing if not the praise that joins the Son to the Father through the Spirit's bond of love. Cardinal Ratzinger's use of the metaphor "space" deserves some attention, for heaven in his estimation cannot be above in a spatial way.¹⁰⁸ In fact, he transposes the very notion of space into a trinitarian reality. What does "above" mean? The body of Christ is essentially above because of the eternal eucharistic form of the Son's offering to the Father. His paschal sacrifice fills this realm and is present there in an enduring fashion. Using the spatial metaphor to indicate transcendence does not deprive this space of its connection to the cosmos. In a sense, the disclosure of a heavenly christological body of Christ forces us to reconsider in a new

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 167.

¹⁰⁷Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 234.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 237.

way the metaphorical dimensions of all space.¹⁰⁹ For Ratzinger “[heaven] lies neither inside nor outside the space of our world, even though it must not be detached from the cosmos as some mere ‘state.’”¹¹⁰ Heavenly “space” is filled by the communion of saints, which is itself a fulfillment of the communion and solidarity of men and women on the earth. In heaven being transfigured is one with being in communion.

Conclusion

There is no science or privileged knowledge (even of Scripture or the Church’s teaching tradition) that will of itself bring our waiting for a cosmic Christ to an end. Standing with Nietzsche’s madman at the end of modernity’s confident blindness and before the beginning of any new synthesis, it is more a question of reformulating spiritual exercises. Unlike the widely disseminated and sterile methods of affective training that bracket reason, these exercises would subject the mind no less than the heart to the indifferent crucible of divine love. What sort of attitude is necessary in this situation? Even patience would not be the proper virtue if it implied a gradual evolution towards enlightened knowledge of God and the world. The scriptural mandate to remain watchful is more appropriate.

In this renewed state of vigilance, an approach to perception can be learned. Simone Weil lauded the spiritual value of school exercises such as geometry since they at least taught her to be attentive to something outside of herself.¹¹¹ Attention is more than conscious awareness; it is a letting come to pass of what is real. Bonaventure said that the method of reading the book of creation is that of the highest

¹⁰⁹Cf. Philip Sherrard, *Human Image: World Image. The Death and Resurrection of Sacred Cosmology* (Ghent, New York: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1993).

¹¹⁰Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 237.

¹¹¹Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in idem, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 105–116.

contemplatives and not the natural philosophers since the latter know the nature of things *but not as a trace*.¹¹² You cannot see a trace unless your gaze is clearly focused on real things. Bonaventure's point is that scientific analysis alone will not yield a vision of the trace; wisdom is needed as well. With Bonaventure, we need to attend to the traces of God's wisdom in its myriad manifestations in the created order. Finally, to see the trace of God's creative wisdom in the work of nature also requires guidance. St. Bonaventure looked to St. Francis, the *alter Christus*, to learn how to read the books of creation, Scripture, and life. Who will be our guide? □

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¹¹²St. Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hex.*, XII,15, *Opera omnia* V, 386b. Italics added.