

# THE GOD OF COVENANT AND CREATION

Scientific Naturalism and its  
Challenge to the Christian Faith

T&T CLARK THEOLOGY

LARRY S. CHAPP



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Christian Faith

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*Dedicated to my wife, Carrie*

My love

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## INTRODUCTION

The rise of modern natural science is, arguably, the single most important cultural development of the past millennium. Beginning with the rise of mechanistic forms of science in the seventeenth century and continuing today with the Quantum revolution in physics, the success of natural science as an explanatory framework for the data of human experience is both stunning and unprecedented. What this explanatory success has created is an epistemic condition in modern society wherein naturalistic explanations are given pride of place in any debate over the nature of reality. In short, our world-view is now dominated through and through by the epistemic value of naturalism as an explanation of reality. Furthermore, this naturalism is accompanied by a philosophical evidentialism that considers any question that does not begin with a presumptive favouring of naturalistic explanations as philosophically suspect. Efficient causes are taken to be the only real forms of causation and any appeal to metaphysical notions of final or formal causation are taken to be philosophically illegitimate attempts to reintroduce supernaturalism through the back door.<sup>1</sup> The philosophical and scientific demotion of the classical forms of metaphysical causation (material, formal, final and efficient) in favour of mechanistic notions of efficient causality alone had already begun by the end of the high medieval period and continues, unabated, even to the present day. Science and religion debates have often fixated on specific scientific theories such as Darwinism as the neuralgic point in the discussion. But the endless debates between biblical literalists (e.g. young earth creationists) and ideological evolutionary reductionists (e.g. Richard Dawkins) are but a mere sideshow and a distraction to what is the central challenge posed to religion and theology by the rise of naturalism: the destruction of metaphysical notions of causality and the consequent – and I would say inevitable – distortion of the classical Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Matthew Bagger, *Religious Experience, Justification, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Bagger characterizes the heart of the modern ethos as the rejection of all explanations that do not have a naturalistic root. This then further entails the rejection of all forms of non-human authority as these come to be embodied in religious institutions. Finally, Bagger argues that naturalism renders meaningless all questions that seek after non-naturalistic explanations. For example, the classical ontotheological question, 'why is there something rather than nothing?' is labelled by Bagger as a pseudo-question. The conclusion that Bagger reaches is that this presumption in favour of naturalism is now a permanent feature of the human condition. The interesting aspect of his argument, however, is the manner in which he simply equates notions of metaphysical causation with supernaturalism. This is an idea we will examine in depth.

concept of divine agency in the world. We can go on prattling all we want about 'anthropic coincidences' and the new possibilities for cooperation between science and religion created by quantum physics, but it is all ultimately pointless chatter until we grapple with the deeper metaphysical issues raised by a purely naturalistic conception of causation.

In response to this situation, theology since the time of Newton has sought to give an account of the divine self and divine agency that does justice to the seemingly closed nexus of physical laws that govern the universe. Two strands of theological thought emerged after the collapse of the traditional notion of metaphysical causality: deism and pantheism. However, both of these positions are predicated upon a fundamentally dualistic conception of the God-world relationship. Deism posits a distant and heteronomous God, whose actions in the world are viewed as intrusive, requiring the assertion that God was simply the initial designer of a cosmos that now works efficiently on its own without any need of further divine causality. Of course, so long as early mechanistic science saw the clock-like precision of nature as evidence of an Infinite intelligence behind the machine, deism could appear as a most favourable development after the religious fatigue that must have plagued Europe following the sectarian conflicts of the sixteenth century. Confessional forms of theological discourse were viewed as hopelessly divisive and incapable of peaceful resolution. The new mechanistic science seemed to offer theology a way out of the confessional cul-de-sac, by way of a non-confessional natural theology that appealed to foundational notions of reason and empirical evidence that were, in theory, open to any person regardless of faith commitment. The problem, however, is that deism creates a God who is not so much the metaphysical cause of the cosmos as simply the first efficient cause. But since the whole notion of causation has been levelled-out to a single notion of efficient agency, the first efficient cause cannot help but appear as a finite part of the cosmos. The essentially mythological nature of this conception of God was not lost on the intellectual classes and was gradually abandoned. Furthermore, insofar as theology had abandoned genuinely theological principles as its guiding methodological criteria, it was now open to the charge that it had nothing specific to offer beyond appeals to gaps in the nexus of naturalistic causes. As the gaps closed, theology was forced to retreat in disgrace into what was assumed was safe territory: the depths of the human psyche.

Pantheistic systems, ironically, also begin with a dualistic framework and therefore adhere to the idea that, if God is active in the world, then God must be identified with the world. In other words, there is no way God can be ontologically distinct from the world *and* act in the world; therefore, since God does act in the world, it must be the case that God *is* the world. In short, the dualistic conception of the God-world relation that has dominated the consciousness of the West since the late medieval period leads us into a theological dead-end where notions of transcendence and immanence, as well as of time and eternity, are played off against each other as opposites. God will either be viewed in such a scheme as heteronomous – leading to the protest atheism of the great nineteenth century humanists – or God will be collapsed into an identity with the world, leading eventually to the apotheosis of the self and the romantic glorification of

the cult of blood and soil. In either case the result is the nihilistic materialism of late modernity, where only the continuing material affluence of the first world masks the deep desperation of the human family for something beyond the cold, impersonal facticity of our now de-sacralized world.

In what follows, therefore, my chief aim is the overcoming of the false and alienating dualistic dialectic that pits immanence against transcendence, time against eternity, and historical contingency against rational necessity. The entire history of theology and philosophy since the advent of the mechanistic view of the cosmos has been marked by these various dialectical pairs, as European intellectuals attempted to salvage something of God, free will and religious experience from the wreckage of the medieval ontotheological synthesis. The mechanistic nature of the cosmos was simply assumed to be true, and much ink was spilled on the issue of cosmic design; fervent scientific atheists obsessed over trying to prove that the universe does not need God and that God is therefore a cosmic redundancy, while equally fevered theists tried to poke holes in various scientific theories in order to find something for God to do. In between these two extremes we find a host of contemporary scientists and theologians joining hands to hail the anthropic tendencies of the laws of physics as a sign that maybe God had something to do with the universe after all. Unfortunately, they all still share the mechanistic prejudice in favour of efficient causality because the primary motivation behind the quest is a search for empirical certitude concerning God's existence. This emphasis on empirical verification for God's existence in the science and religion dialogue distorts theology because it places the warrant for the claims of the Christian faith in a source outside the faith itself. There is a further distortion of theology in this quest in so far as the desire to prove the biblical God's existence through the application of the Enlightenment's canons of rationality is anachronistic; the design argument, though present in the biblical record in both testaments, is not central to the Bible's notions of how God's revelation to us is verified. Philosophical argumentation is rare in the Bible and, where it does show up in the wisdom literature, it is somewhat ancillary and *ad hoc* to the main thrust of the Bible's covenant theology. As Michael Buckley points out, the argument from design, so beloved among the seventeenth and eighteenth century deists, comes back to haunt believers when Darwin destroys the notion of the fixity of species and natural selection opens up a whole new set of theodicy problems.<sup>2</sup> The modern obsession with anthropic coincidences and the like, though interesting, nevertheless does nothing to change the ground rules for the dialogue away from efficient causality, design, the desire for empirical verification of theological claims and the dialectical vacillation between deism and pantheism.

What is needed, in my opinion, is an approach that is at once more modest and more radical. More modest because what is sought is not the kinds of comfortable certitudes provided by the exact sciences in their quantification of material reality. More radical because it flows from the *radix* or root of the Christian claim and

<sup>2</sup> Michael Buckley, 'The Newtonian Settlement and the Origins of Atheism,' in *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, Robert J. Russell, William R. Stoeger, SJ, and George V. Coyne (eds), Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, pp. 81–102.

therefore leads us to examine how the *primary truths* of the Christian faith give us insight into the nature of reality. Even if we can prove the existence of God rationally – a point of view I do not reject – we have still not proven the Christian God, or any other God for that matter, beyond the God of the Deists. The Infinite Being or Infinite Intelligence that can be established through philosophical enquiry and empirical observation of design is still a highly abstract reality that tells us little, frankly, about the God or gods in most of the world's religions. Most certainly, the science and religion dialogue can move forward quickly with very few snags if the God or religion with which we claim to be engaging is a completely *ersatz* reality, devoid of any real point of contact with the actual truth claims of the world's great religious traditions. How pyrrhic our victories in this dialogue will be if we simply create an abstract and denatured God in advance, and then rejoice at the newfound harmony between science and our new enlightened religion. My point here is simple: if science is to engage with Christianity, then it must attend to the central truth claims that are at the heart of the Christian faith. What I am calling for, in other words, is a dialogue between science and a full-bodied confessional Christianity. This dialogue will not be marked by the quest to prove empirically the Christian truth claims, but rather to seek out the many ways in which the scientific vision of reality and the Christian vision can cross-fertilize one another, leading to an integrated vision of existence so desperately needed by our culture. I don't know where this quest fits in Ian Barbour's famous models for the science and religion dialogue – the integration model, I assume.<sup>3</sup> But I am not big on typologies and taxonomies of that sort. What the current work seeks is simply wisdom in the old-fashioned sense of an integrated vision of reality that makes sense and speaks to the heart as well as to the mind.

Of course, no single work can take up the entirety of this task. The current work focuses on the implications of the Christian claim that God is trinitarian. The deep significance of the trinitarian vision of God has remained underdeveloped, for the most part, in the Christian tradition. Specifically, there has been a tendency to fence in or domesticate the full ramifications of this doctrine by placing it within the broader context of Hellenistic notions of the immutability of God, as well as the legitimate fear that the Judaic sense of the oneness of God will be compromised. Certainly, as Christians, both the oneness and the changelessness of God need to be affirmed. But there is no denying the fact that the doctrine of the trinity alters our perspective on these issues by changing the starting point for our reflection. As important as the oneness and changelessness of God are, for the trinitarian Christian the category of relationality must comprise a co-equal starting point in our reflections upon the nature of God. For the Christian, the oneness and immutability of God cannot be construed as rendering God into a distant, uncommunicative, expressionless, isolated monad. Relationality as a theological starting point radically changes how we view the unicity and immutability of God and opens up a new range of possibilities for how we envision God's relationship with creation.

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, pp. 77–105.

Thus the current work seeks to develop the manner in which the trinitarian-relational view of God helps us to overcome the false and alienating dialectic between deistic and pantheistic notions of divinity. In so doing we will also explore the fruitfulness of this conception of God for dialogue with some of the non-mechanistic views of nature now emerging in both physics and biology. The trinitarian-relational view of God allows for a more sophisticated model for the God-world relationship that transcends heteronomy and identity as models for the same, opening up new pathways of dialogue with non-reductionist and non-mechanistic forms of science.

Section One will analyse the triumph of a mechanistic view of nature and science within the context of the degraded theology and philosophy of the late medieval period. Chapter 1 involves an analysis of the fundamental epistemic values of the medieval world-view. Central to this world-view was a concern for the organic wholeness of reality. The world was viewed as the sacramental image of God, awash in an intelligibility imparted to it by the creator. For this reason, concepts had ontological and not merely psychological status. In the Middle Ages, there was an emphasis on the interrelatedness of all things with the development of a theology of creation based upon intelligible forms and their heavenly exemplars in the divine Trinity. The doctrine of creation also provided a Christian model for the appropriation of an integrated view of metaphysical causation. As long as this synthesis held, modern reductionist and mechanistic science could gain no foothold. There was, as yet, no sense of nature as a self-enclosed reality, completely independent of theological or metaphysical determinations. The intellectual plausibility structures of the medieval mind were characterized by a concern for causal explanations that went well beyond efficient causality, opening up instead the whole realm of transcendent metaphysics as an explanatory vehicle of depth and power.

Chapter 2 attempts an explanation of how this rich explanatory world, centred around the idea of intelligible forms, disintegrated under the weight of its other-worldly asceticism, as well as its overemphasis on the universal and the abstract over the concrete and the individual. What emerges in late medieval culture, therefore, is a series of ruptures in what had been heretofore a fairly seamless world-view. That is not to say that the medieval world was monolithic in its vision, but as in all eras there were broad areas of commonality that the late medieval world now exposed as vulnerable. Specifically the unity of the various academic disciplines under the one umbrella of theology was torn asunder. This then led to a split between theology and spirituality that paved the way for the subjectification of religious experience and the objectification of a kind of deductive rationality from theologically certain first principles. Philosophically the whole concept of intelligible form came under attack, threatening the metaphysical linchpin that held the entire medieval picture together. The ground was now prepared for the seeds of a new mechanistic naturalism where the realms of nature and grace were viewed as separate and alien spheres of causation.

Chapter 3 explores in more detail the exact contours of the rise of mechanistic naturalism and the consequences this had for theology. As naturalism advances, the whole realm of metaphysical causation vanishes, replaced by a sole focus upon

efficient causality. The cosmos is demystified and all supernaturalist explanations of reality lose their epistemic value. The rationalism and empiricism of the era join forces to create an epistemological climate in which strictly evidentiary forms of argumentation are held to be the only meaningful forms of truth discourse. The theological deism that results from this pushes theology in the direction of a kind of neutralist foundationalism that further undercuts religious truth claims precisely in so far as the evidentiary claims of naturalism are viewed as both a) normative and b) offering an alternative and rival account of causation to that of the theologian. Thus theological claims lose their warrant insofar as they are Christological and confessional. The theologian is thus forced to adopt extra-theological criteria for judging the truth of theological claims. The result is the rationalistic natural theology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, theology which is in turn forced into retreat with the advent of Darwin, whom we will discuss in Chapter 4.

What interests me in this history is the manner in which theological and religious accounts of reality came to be counted as irrelevant among the intellectual classes as a consequence of the rise of naturalism. Furthermore, the problem is deeper than is often thought: the neutralist foundationalism of much theistic natural theology can only show, at best, the reasonableness of a very generic – and hence distant and unreal – concept of God, and at worst, through the very acceptance of the ground rules of the evidentialists, that theology must be very thin gruel indeed. Moreover, should one decide to opt for a more fideistic approach, one is conceding that the world of ‘out there’ is indeed best described by the naturalist, while the theologian should content him/herself with only those explanations that science has not yet pronounced upon. Worse, the fideist may decide to reject modern naturalism altogether and seek to replace it with either an ecclesial or biblical empiricism that simplistically seeks to replace naturalistic explanations with supernaturalistic ones, a move that ironically buys into the same root idea at the heart of the modern project itself; namely, that naturalistic and theological explanations are indeed rival accounts of reality.

It is my hope that this brief historical account of the rise of naturalism will prepare the reader for the theological discussion of the second part of the book in two ways, one diagnostic and the other constructive. As with any telling of history, one is attempting to diagnose how we got into our present historical circumstances, in this case, the modern rejection of the public truth claims of theology in favour of naturalism. More importantly, however, one is also retelling that same history in order to focus on some neglected aspect of the story that can serve as the springboard for a constructive project, in this case, the need to develop a theological approach to naturalism that does not fall into the false nature-supernature dialectics of the past. This will be accomplished through the development of specifically theological models for truth that do not take for granted that the only normative construal of naturalism is the reductionist version.

Section Two will begin the analysis of the trinitarian concept of God in strongly personological and relational categories. As I have already noted, it is my contention that relationality as one of the fundamental predicates for God creates new metaphysical categories for describing the universal and fundamental properties of being; the One, the True and the Good have to be supplemented

with the Relational and the Beautiful as fundamental transcendental properties of being. The trinitarian-relational view of God and the relational-aesthetic vision of finite existence it entails will be applied to the philosophical question of the God-world relationship in order to get beyond the impasse created by the false deism-pantheism dialectic.

This section will then apply the metaphysical insights in Chapter 6 to the dialogue between science and religion on the question of time and eternity. History as a fundamental category for the natural world will be shown to be good theology and good science. The deep consonance between evolutionary accounts of existence, the relational nature of God and the fundamental importance of narrative and dramatic role in human existence will be analysed. Emphasis will also be given to the essentially doxological quality of human life and how this idea might be developed in the light of certain accounts of the anthropic principle. Thus the proper theological use for the anthropic principle is not the attempt to prove God's existence, but to point out the fundamentally doxological and liturgical nature of human existence.

The final chapter of the book will engage in a cultural analysis of the technocratic Liberalism of the modern West and examine the challenges it poses to Christian faith. It will be argued that there is a *de facto* atheism at the heart of the modern Liberal project that is the direct result of the alliance between technocratic science, capitalism and Liberal political theory. In all three of these cultural realities there lurks a not so hidden presumption of a reductive naturalism at the heart of reality. By definition, therefore, the question of the truth of God is excluded from the outset as a culturally constitutive reality. Thus the cultural choice we face is an apocalyptic one in the precise theological sense of that term: a clear decision for or against the Christian God that will have far-reaching consequences for the future of the human race. The question we face is the question of the eclipse of God in modern culture, the role science and theology have played in this situation, and whether or not the eclipse of God necessarily implies the concomitant abolition of man.

Finally, a word about some of the guiding assumptions behind my argument. It is my firm conviction that all life's great questions are, at root, theological in nature. The sharp divide in modern thinking between the religious and the secular is, as I hope to show, the product of unique historical circumstances that arose initially as a response to certain theological disputes. Indeed, it was the very failure of Christian theology to hold together the Catholic/medieval synthesis that led to all the great divisions in Christendom in the West. This in turn gave rise to a movement within European cultures that sought a firmer intellectual foundation for social peace than Christian theology could provide. As such, the modern project is a kind of simulacrum of the Church, complete with a rival soteriology, narrative tradition and eschatology. This is the view of William Cavanaugh, who also argues that the modern debate about the relationship between the secular and the religious is really, at root, a theological debate. He states: '... the state, civil society and globalization [are] three disciplined and interrelated ways of imagining space and time. Far from merely "secular" institutions and processes, these ways of imagining organize bodies around stories of human nature and human destiny which have



deep theological analogues. In other words, supposedly “secular” political theory is really theology in disguise.<sup>4</sup>

Thus we are now at a great watershed moment in our culture where the continuing relevance of Christian theology for the very foundations of our society is being called into question in a truly radical way. This is unfortunate since, in my view, the only answer to our deep cultural spiritual crisis is a return to a healthier sense of the importance of theological reflection for our common life together. We are caught on the horns of a great cultural dilemma: we have rejected the necessity of theology for our social well-being as we embark on the adventure of a brave new techno-secular world, even as we remain haunted by the theological questions that lurk in the background of all our thinking. The responsibility, therefore, of modern Christian theology to our culture has never been clearer: provide modern thinking with an intellectually cogent theological vision or perish, along with that same culture, in the wasteland of our nihilism.

In what follows I make no claim to originality or profundity; whatever there may be of either of those qualities in the book is due to the insights of others.

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<sup>4</sup> William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, London: T & T Clark, 2002, pp. 1–2.

## SECTION I

### THE TRIUMPH OF MECHANISM

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,  
And first my lord Brother Sun,  
Who brings the day; and light you give to us through him.  
How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendour!  
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

*St. Francis of Assisi*

My aim in this is to show that the celestial machine is to be likened not to a divine organism but rather to clockwork. Moreover I show how this physical conception is to be presented through calculation and geometry.

*Johannes Kepler*

Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.

*Bertrand Russell*

If we cast a look a century ahead and assume that my assassination of two thousand years of opposition to nature and of dishonouring man succeeds, then that new party of life will take in hand the greatest of all tasks – the higher breeding of humans, including the unsparing destruction of all degenerates and parasites.

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

## PROLOGUE TO SECTION I

### *In defence of theological intellectual histories*

In what follows I will attempt a partial intellectual reconstruction of the history of the rise and fall of the medieval Christian world-view and the manner in which this historical process paved the way for the rise of naturalism and modern science. Before proceeding, a word is in order on the whole idea of the legitimacy of these kinds of intellectual histories. My defence of the current project is simple and unsophisticated: ideas have historical consequences; therefore theological ideas have historical consequences. Even though it is notoriously difficult to pin down an exact historical location for the rise of modern thinking and natural science, it is only an overly socio-economic and psychological reading of that history that can account for the modern tendency to disparage intellectual histories in general, and theological intellectual histories in particular.<sup>1</sup> It would indeed be surprising if there were a single linear cause for the shift from the classical-medieval to the modern-scientific world-view or if the ideas of the period were not influenced by socio-cultural factors and vice versa. Indeed, cultural changes of such magnitude require sophisticated multi-disciplinary approaches to discern even the barest of historical outlines for their origin.<sup>2</sup> Nothing in this brief essay is meant to imply otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Alisdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990. MacIntyre takes note of the criticism of intellectual histories to the effect that they misconstrue history by overlaying a modern intellectual schema of some kind on the reading of that history. However, MacIntyre responds, 'What this retort ignores is first of all that the history of all successful enquiry is and cannot but be written retrospectively; the history of physics, for example, is the history of what contributed to the making in the end of quantum mechanics, relativistic theory and modern astrophysics. A tradition of enquiry characteristically bears within itself an always open to revision history of itself in which the past is characterized and re-characterized in terms of developing evaluations of the relationship of the various parts of the past to the achievements of the present.' p. 150. What emerges in the telling of these histories from the differing perspectives of rival intellectual traditions is that the retelling of history is more than an exercise in remembering for the sake of remembering. The manner in which the past is remembered both embodies and then helps to shape the kind of rationality that the discourse tradition telling the history represents. In other words, rationality is always a traditioned rationality and thus intellectual histories are the absolutely necessary exposition of how a particular kind of reason has played itself out in time and place.

<sup>2</sup> Thus I would agree with the following observation of Stanley Hauerwas in his Gifford Lectures:

However, embedded in the Enlightenment's retelling of the narrative of Western culture is a partial denial of just such multi-disciplinary approaches, precisely insofar as theology as an authentically speculative discipline has been excluded from the mix in most secularist readings of the period. In such narratives, religion is treated as an agent of social division that requires the benign and neutral secular state to take over the role previously held by the Church as creator of social unity and amity. Theology is then viewed as the propaganda wing of whatever ecclesial body it is serving, further necessitating that the secular study of religion should replace theology as the primary academic vehicle for making sense of religion in a properly neutral manner. Natural theology emerges as an attempt to bridge this gap and to provide a secular-scientific warrant for some basic theological claims. In this narrative the best religion and theology are those that are rooted in the foundations of secular reason and whose God has become a distant, non-intervening engineer and/or the God of the inner self, eternally plastic and subservient to the ever-changing vicissitudes of history. Finally, in this view, a theological claim that is rooted in a highly specific religious doctrine or practice is considered to be a non-public form of speech which is given the pejorative label 'sectarian.' Thus theological readings of history are held to be thinly veiled ideological justifications for various ecclesiastical social ambitions. Only secular history is thought to be sufficiently untainted by ideology to justify itself as a form of public speech.<sup>3</sup>

Wherever this narrative holds sway, the history of the rise of science is also tendentiously put forward with no regard for the theological causes that played a role in

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'Although I am sure that ideas matter and that it may take centuries for the results of a mistaken idea to bear fruit, I remain suspicious of attempts to lay the birth of modern thinking at the door of Scotus or Suarez. That we live in an age in which the church is but another voluntary association, and theology, at best, one subject among others in the curriculum of universities, is the result not just of mistakes in the thirteenth century but of the effect of innovations such as the clock that intellectuals ... are prone to discount.' *With the Grain of the Universe*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001, p. 35. My intentions here are not to try to trace a linear path from the intellectual shifts in medieval culture to the peculiar institutions of modernity. My aims are more modest. I seek to counteract what Hauerwas characterizes (also in the Gifford lectures, p. 31) as the 'false humility' of modern theology in the face of the secularist re-reading of history. History is complex, but it isn't utterly opaque either, and we ought to be able to discern the broad outlines of the intellectual dynamism of an era without choking the analysis with the kudzu of overly thick descriptions. As Hauerwas himself points out: 'Some people may think my attacks on modernity lack a complex view of the reality "modernity" seeks to name, but I am ready to take that risk. Too often, attempts to characterize modernity die the death of countless qualifications.' (p. 32, n. 42).

<sup>3</sup> Even though postmodernism has unmasked the naïve pretension of such a view, it does so precisely by undermining all intellectual history, including the secular Enlightenment variety, as a linguistic power game. However, I am not persuaded that postmodernism has, as yet, displaced the Enlightenment narrative on matters pertaining to science and religion in the popular consciousness of the average citizen, or in the mentality of most working scientists. Nor am I persuaded that postmodernism is anything but an extension of modernism in a different modality. Cf. Kenneth Schmitz, 'Postmodern or modern-plus?' *Communio: International Catholic Review*, (Summer, 1990), pp. 152–166. Schmitz points out that insofar as post-modernism shares the anti-metaphysical ethos of modernity, it still remains at least partially within the historical dynamic created by the latter's rejection of spiritual transcendence as the ultimate *telos* of existence.

its emergence. But the flawed nature of this reading of history goes well beyond the simple exclusion of theology as an agent of social change; for once theology is excluded from the mix, the reading of this history shifts to a simplistic account of the triumph of secular, scientific enlightenment over the obscurantist forces of religion/superstition. Christianity, once stripped of its inner theological moment as a truth claim, is treated as a superstitious praxis, characterized by an authoritarian need to impose by force what its various mystifications could not achieve through rational persuasion. Thus this secularist history invariably focuses upon certain highly stylized and mythologized incidents of conflict between the Church and science to illustrate the lesson being taught, i.e. that religion and theology are agents of authoritarian repression of free thought, soon to be vanquished by the alliance of science and liberal democracy.<sup>4</sup> In short, the exclusion of the role played by theological truth claims in the unfolding of Western history already assumes what the telling of this history is meant to establish: that the progression of Western history represents a kind of inevitable development from the religious to the secular. No consideration is given to the idea that all of modernity may rest on a flawed and socially distorting sublimated theology because the conclusion has already been reached in advance that all real problems are at root naturalistic and not religious.

What all of this amounts to is the reaffirmation of the truth that winners write history. The winners in this case are the various empiricists, rationalists, positivists and reductionists who have alternately controlled the discussion over the proper interpretation of naturalism and its relationship with theology. In what follows, therefore, I propose the barest outline of a counter-reading of one part of this history: the dissolution of the medieval intellectual synthesis and the rise of mechanistic science. There are four goals I seek to achieve in this brief historical reconstruction of the intellectual genealogy of the rise of the mechanistic world-view. First, to demonstrate that modernity evolves quite naturally out of the latent tendencies and tensions of the classical-Christian world-view – indeed, that modernity is a secularized version of Christianity and is therefore, in this sense, a truly post-*Christian* world-view.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The type of narrative I have in mind here are the histories of science put forward by some of the leading lights of the modern reductionist-materialist establishment: Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking, Stephen Jay Gould, Carl Sagan, Stephen Weinberg *et al.* It has become fashionable among scholars writing in the field of the history of science to be somewhat dismissive of these authors as popularizers of a kind of scientific mythology for the masses. However, many of these so-called popularizers were/are sophisticated scientists of note and are deeply representative of a consistent and pernicious strain of thought in Western culture that cannot be ignored. Theirs is a reading of history that resonates with the anti-clerical sensibilities of modern liberal democracy and provides a philosophical, historical and scientific legitimization for the triumph of technocratic instrumentalism over any humanism grounded in a transcendent metaphysics and/or a theological anthropology.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Peter Henrici, 'Modernity and Christianity', *Communio: International Catholic Review*, Summer, 1990, pp. 141–151. I concur with the thesis of Henrici that secularity is not a sociologically neutral concept that can be applied in a univocal manner no matter where it manifests itself. A more sophisticated analysis of modern Western secularity – one that goes beyond purely sociological categories to analyse theological and philosophical issues – shows us that this type of secularism has a decidedly post-Christian essence that cannot be ignored. Modern Western culture simply cannot be understood apart from its historic roots in the

Second, to demonstrate that despite the fact that the modern mechanistic approach evolved out of the Christian world-view, mechanistic views constitute a decisive rupture with Christianity, and that there is an irreconcilable contradiction at the heart of the difference between these two perspectives. Third, that the theological response to mechanistic views in the form of a deistic natural theology has led to a heteronomous view of God that only reinforced, through theological legitimation, the radical split between the orders of nature and of grace, leading to the *de facto* atheism of contemporary culture. And fourth, to show that the rise of modern mechanism and naturalism did not happen in the historical manner usually envisioned in modernity's myth of origins; namely, that the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century did not happen by magic, as if human beings suddenly woke up from their ecclesiastical slumber (some versions of the myth would say nightmare) and liberated their true rationality from its Babylonian captivity in Christian exile.<sup>6</sup> The true historical roots of the scientific revolution are much more complex than this myth, created by the anti-Christian Enlightenment polemicists, would have us believe. For better or for worse, the true origins of the mechanistic world-view lie shrouded in the mist of some rather esoteric medieval debates over relatively few philosophical concepts; this section will focus its analysis on the nature of these concepts. These key concepts are all intrinsically related to one another and all bear upon the eventual degradation of our theological concepts of God. They are, in their order of treatment, the concept of intelligible form as a constitutive idea in both the classical and medieval world-views, the concepts of causality inherited from Aristotle and modified by medieval theology and finally, the manner in which changes in these two concepts led to a rupture between the realms of nature and grace, setting the stage for the rise of a concept of nature independent from theological determination, a shift which then paves the way for a purely mechanistic view of the cosmos.

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Christian Church. Thus the question of whether or not modern Western secularism is, in fact, the product of distortions within Christian theology is a valid one. It also underlines the importance of theological intellectual histories.

<sup>6</sup> Little public notice has been given to the efforts by the late John Paul II and other Christian leaders in Europe to have the new charter of the European Union mention the historical role played by Christianity in the formation of European civilization and values. These efforts have been met with bitter resistance from the secularists who now dominate European politics. Indeed, the new charter never mentions Christianity at all and moves swiftly from a discussion of Greco-Roman culture to a discussion of the values of the Enlightenment in its treatment of the foundations of European civilization. Thus, the myth of origins that I am criticizing here is not a straw man, nor is it an arcane piece of academic trivia; as this very real political debate in Europe shows, how we describe our intellectual past is enormously important in how we seek to shape our future. Likewise, within the narrative of the emergence of naturalism as the prime methodology for modern science, it is extremely important that we avoid the superficial reading of this history that would have us believe that reductionist, metaphysical naturalism was an intrinsic part of the European liberation from ecclesiastical oppression. Too often in modern public policy debates, ranging from issues such as stem cell research to euthanasia, when religious voices are raised in objection to some technological practice that threatens the dignity of human life, the religious party in the dialogue must seek to justify his or her presence in the discussions among those who now automatically assume that religious people are the inherent enemies of scientific progress and, by extension in our scientific-minded age, the inherent enemies of progress as such.

## Chapter 1

### THE CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL WORLD-VIEW: THE THEOPHANIC COSMOS

#### *Introduction: The Problem: a Genealogy of Modernity*

Perhaps no single intellectual disposition so characterizes the spirit of modernity than the shift from the medieval theophanic view of the cosmos to a mechanistic view of the non-human universe, a shift that was nearly complete by the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> In the span of a few hundred years, the ontotheological synthesis of medieval Europe – a synthesis that tied together God, cosmos and the self in a single, unifying Christian metaphysical vision – morphed into a fragmented ideological cacophony held tenuously together by the weak unifying force of a mechanistic view of nature and a rationalistic understanding of God and the self. The fallout from this shift was pervasive and continues to wield its influence even today, for good and for ill. For as David Tracy points out, despite the noteworthy achievements that the shift to mechanism in modernity achieved, we now find ourselves confronted by the negative legacy of the intellectual and social cul-de-sac that it created: an alienated self which seeks meaning in possessive individualism, an unprincipled and ethically out of control technology that continues to treat nature as a machine for our own unlimited use, the marginalization of religion, and the question of God to the sphere of the purely private and subjective, and finally the apotheosis of secular reason, once experienced as emancipatory in the era of ecclesiastical dominance, but now increasingly viewed as an Alcatraz from which there is no escape.<sup>8</sup>

As Tracy points out in this list of our modern cultural deficiencies, one of the primary casualties of the shift in world-view has been the importance

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<sup>7</sup> The historical origins of a mechanistic world-view are complex and hard to pin down to a single era. Certainly, as we shall see, the philosophical and even theological antecedents to mechanism began as far back as the thirteenth century, with the growing divide between the Platonizing theology of the monasteries and the increasingly Aristotelian theology of the schools. However, there is near universal agreement that by the time of Descartes and Newton, a full-blown mechanistic account of nature had emerged as a serious rival to the theophanic universe of the Middle Ages.

<sup>8</sup> David Tracy, 'The Hopeful Paradox of Dupre's Modernity', in *Christian Spirituality & the Culture of Modernity*, Peter Casarella and George Schnier, SJ (eds), Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998, p. 11.

accorded to how we conceive of God. The privatization of religion as a species of human subjectivity has created the pervasive attitude in modern times that what people think of God is of very little public importance. Those of us in the teaching profession often hear students remark about how unimportant someone's private beliefs about God are to that person's overall goodness and worthiness. This pervasive relativism is a direct result of the marginalization of God to the hinterlands of the universe as a consequence of the rise of a mechanistic and closed concept of nature. It shall be my contention, however, that ideas about God do have serious social consequences and therefore that the dualistic theology that arose in modernity as a response to mechanism must be overcome.

The question of how we got ourselves into this predicament is therefore more than academic. If we are to develop a new synthetic world-view with a non-dualistic conception of God, it is important to diagnose the problem accurately and to do this we need a workable intellectual genealogy of the rise of mechanism as a defining feature of modernity. Obviously there will be sharp differences of opinion as to what constitutes the difference between pre-modernity, modernity and late (or post-) modernity. There will also be disagreements over whether or not these differences constitute an antagonism or simply a natural development. For example, Heidegger and Nietzsche see all western philosophy since Plato as a seamless declension caused by Plato's logocentric conceptualization of Being. Still others see a rupture between pre-modernity and all that comes after, but disagree as to where the rupture is to be located.

Louis Dupré, for example, argues that modernity begins when the late medieval nominalist denial of universals combines with the creative freedom of the Renaissance humanists, undermining the medieval ontotheological synthesis and unleashing reason from its union with mysticism and religion.<sup>9</sup> However, Dupré would also argue that the shift to mechanism was not an inevitable byproduct of the classical world-view, and that the early moderns of the fifteenth century – thinkers such as Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) and Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) – give us truly creative syntheses that are at once marked by a modern originality and yet maintain a link with the ontotheological world of classical culture. In other words, the turn to mechanism was not necessary for the modern project to succeed, and much more attention needs to be paid to the religious roots and vision of most of the great Renaissance humanists and the manner in which they can act as possible models for how modernity could have turned out, but didn't.

A related reading of modernity comes from the late Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar. Balthasar also views the mechanistic world-view of the modern project as a declension from the unified theological-philosophical vision of classical Christian culture. In Balthasar's reading, Christian revelation only makes sense when it is approached as a holistic form (*Gestalt*) that glows with

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<sup>9</sup> Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay on the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. Parts I and II.



the luminous beauty of the divine glory.<sup>10</sup> Christian revelation captivates because of the manner in which this form can synthesize within itself all worldly forms without a) compromising the otherness and infinity of God, and b) compromising the integrity of the worldly forms precisely as worldly. The ontotheological vision of the Middle Ages, therefore, could only be held together as long as this largely aesthetic approach to revelation was maintained. However, the growing divide between the theology of the monasteries and the theology of the emerging universities initiated a fateful split between spiritual and academic theology. This split was followed in turn by the degradation of the Thomistic synthesis in the empiricism of the nominalists, the rationalism of Descartes, and finally the anti-philosophical emphasis of the Reformers with their insistence that Revelation be viewed as a pure event of grace. The late Enlightenment can then be viewed as the dogmatic ossification of this state of fragmentation and the glorification of secular reason as the only sure foundation for the future. Balthasar therefore identifies the loss of an aesthetic appreciation of the role of form in theology and philosophy as the primary cause of modernity's peculiar cast of mind, while identifying the exact place of the rupture between modernity and premodernity in a variety of locations.<sup>11</sup>

### ***A. The Classical Greek World-view: The Dominance of Intelligibility and Form***

It is hard for modern people to grasp the fact that before the rise of modern science, most people did not consider nature to be primarily a realm of objective facts to be dispassionately studied for the sake of gaining power over the material world for the betterment of humankind. The contrast between the contemporary and the medieval world-views could not be more striking, particularly with regard to their respective views of nature, God and humanity. The Enlightenment's bifurcation of subject and object – and its corollary, the divide between fact and value – has retained its status in the plausibility structures of modern culture long after the deconstructionists have, rightly, pointed to its naïve and deficient view of reason and knowledge. Despite our intricate knowledge of the unbelievable complexity

<sup>10</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. Volume I: Seeing the Form*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982. Balthasar develops his theology in the form of a grand trilogy: a theological aesthetics, a theological dramatics and a theological logic. This trilogy corresponds to three transcendental properties of Being: the beautiful, the good and the true. It is no accident that the theological aesthetics comes first in the trilogy. The English edition of the aesthetics comes in seven volumes under the title *The Glory of the Lord* followed by volume number designations. We will be relying heavily on Balthasar's analysis throughout this text. Henceforth all references to the aesthetic will be abbreviated as GL followed by the volume number.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Cyril O'Regan, 'Von Balthasar's Valorization and Critique of Heidegger's Genealogy of Modernity,' in *Christian Spirituality and the Culture of Modernity*, p. 145. O'Regan points out that Balthasar never tries to reconcile his identification of the various loci for the emergence of the anti-aesthetical turn in modernity. One is therefore left to wonder if this is done on purpose in order to reinforce the historical complexity of the situation or if Balthasar was simply unaware of his own inconsistencies.

and vitality of living organisms, as well as the vast and beautifully chaotic cosmos, we still tend to view the entire world of the extra-mental as a coldly impersonal lottery: good to a few, cruel to many, and unbendingly futile in the end. We suspect that Arnold Toynbee was right: nature is both mother and monster, giving us no rationale for why it is one or the other at any given moment.<sup>12</sup> When we actually do experience something of the intrinsic goodness and beauty of existence, the experience is short-circuited by our deep suspicion that it is all a projection from the deep structures of the mind. Thus in the end the most we hope for is that our minds do in fact correspond with basic empirical reality, although the cogency of this correspondence lacks any moral appeal, since our world-view gives us no metaphysical warrant for why it is in fact a *good* thing that our senses at least can be trusted. What we are left with as a consequence is the cold instrumentalism of technology and some vaguely defined ideas of a scientific-technological utopia, which, it is hoped, will fulfil all of the eschatological hopes that Christianity failed to deliver. In an odd sort of way, the instrumentalism of modern secular reason is a form of epistemological correspondence, since it mirrors what we construe to be the efficient, if not the cruel, utility of nature.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, medieval thought inherited from classical, mainly Greek, culture an entirely different approach to nature, God and humanity. For the Greeks the entire universe is expressive of an essentially divine core and is swimming in an intelligibility imparted to it by this divine element. Unlike medieval Christians, the Greeks conceived of nature as the all-encompassing and fundamental reality, making them in a limited sense more similar to the modern scientific view than to the Christian conception of nature as the creation of a transcendent God. However, unlike the moderns, the Greeks considered nature to be divine, which means that they were not monistic in their conception of the world; nature is comprised of both material beings and spiritual realities such as the soul and the gods. It is precisely this spiritual dimension that allowed the Greek mind to view the world of phenomenal appearances as windows into a deeper and richer world of divine intelligibility. Furthermore, the appearances can serve this function precisely because they are themselves *epiphanic* expressions of a deeper world of metaphysical substance. For Plato and Aristotle the world apprehended by the senses does not

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1956, pp. 18–80. Toynbee makes this observation as part of his general analysis of the origin of religion in the dual potentiality of nature worship: nature as monster evolves into the worship of humanity in the form of the apotheosis of the organizational power of the ruling classes, while nature as mother evolves into the benevolent and transcendent deity.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *GL I*, p. 19. Balthasar nicely sums up this whole line of thinking: 'Since nothing else remains, and yet something must be embraced, twentieth-century man is urged to enter this impossible marriage with matter, a union which finally spoils all man's taste for love. ... In such a world the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. Man stands before the good and asks himself why it must be done and not rather its alternative, evil. ... In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency. In other words, syllogisms may still dutifully clatter away like rotary presses or computers which infallibly spew out an exact number of answers by the minute. But the logic of these answers is itself a mechanism which no longer captivates anyone. The very conclusions are no longer conclusive.'

give us a complete picture of the truly real. Indeed, what is most fundamentally real is not what is given in the immediate, empirical knowledge of the senses, but in the metaphysical foundation of the object being perceived. In other words, to get at the truly real you must get beyond the level of appearances and penetrate to the intelligible depths. Here we discover the intelligible form or idea that makes the object what it is. Everything that exists does so as an expression of an idea that is grounded in a divine archetype.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the goal of all human knowing is not correspondence to the quantifiable aspects of reality, but the participation of the mind in the intelligible forms of the phenomena, and hopefully to proceed through these forms to the divine archetype of which they are the epiphanic appearance. This kind of knowledge is possible because the human mind is an expression of, and participates in, exactly the same intelligibility that pervades the cosmos and provides existence with its formal, intelligible structures. Therefore the human mind has an affinity with the objects of its perception and actually participates in the same intelligibility that gives them reality. In a very real metaphysical sense, the knower and the known are united in the act of perception; we do not simply recognize the intelligible forms of existence through some power or ability that we possess, rather, we actually participate in their intelligibility through our own involvement in the divine *logos* that permeates the world. Furthermore, when this notion of participation is wedded to a metaphysical vision that entails a hierarchy of being, then the affinity of the mind for the objects of perception cannot be viewed univocally: the soul seeks its own level, and many of the Greeks, including Plato, construed knowledge as an erotic ascent to higher and higher levels of being, where the goal is a final contemplative union of the soul with the highest formal levels of existence.<sup>15</sup>

One important consequence of this is the affirmation of the validity of our

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Jeremy Naydler, 'The Regeneration of Realism and the Recovery of a Science of Qualities', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, (June 1983), pp. 155–172, esp. pp. 155–56.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Balthasar, *GL IV*, p. 181. Balthasar points out that for Plato true knowledge consists in the mind perceiving that in every transient object there is an eternal element. This eternal element shines forth with a kind of intelligible light that engages the soul and creates in it the eros for an ascent to the higher levels of being: 'That an ascent has taken place is clear, as it is that, for Plato, no philosophy can exist without it: it is just in the ascent to the Idea, supremely to the light of the Good, which establishes everything, that understanding is made possible. It is therefore impossible for Plato to do as the moderns would like and make a sharp distinction between scientific understanding and mythical statement. Everywhere the establishment of truth transcends so-called exact science.' There is, however, according to Balthasar, a crippling ambiguity in Plato's philosophy of ascent. Lacking Christian revelation, the term of the ascent remains vague and is constantly threatening to fall back either into myth, with its clear delineation of the gods from humanity, or idealism, where the relationship between the soul and the music of the spheres is reversed; the soul, formerly thought of as mimetically reflecting in microcosmic form the macrocosmic harmonies, now comes to be viewed as the projector of harmony through human concepts. Here we see that Balthasar gives a more sympathetic reading to Plato than does Heidegger, the latter accusing Plato of being the father of all attempts to reduce Being to a domesticated, reified status in the conceptual realm, whereas Balthasar affirms that, at the very least, Plato affirmed that the ascent of the soul to something metaphysically higher was real.

mental concepts as true accounts of reality. If the knower is in touch with the same intelligibility that informs reality, then the concepts we develop of the intelligible forms will be viewed as universally valid. To be sure, the Greeks were aware that an intelligible form that exists in the mind as a concept does so in a different modality than it does in the object itself. Nevertheless, the difference in its modality as a concept in no way compromises the certainty of its validity. Hence the Greeks were confident that the conceptual realm could put us into contact with the universal archetypal forms that comprise the fundamental intelligibility of existence. Of course, Plato and Aristotle differed on how the forms were apprehended – a point we do not need to rehearse here – but they shared a fundamental conviction that the mind passively receives the forms rather than creatively developing them out of the mind's own resources. Therefore, as Jeremy Naydler points out, for both Plato and Aristotle: 'Thoughts were felt to be objects that are intuitively apprehended in the world in a manner similar to the way objects of sense-perception are apprehended, and with the same immediacy. ... (Plato and Aristotle) shared the same attitude that in our perception of these principles there can be no doubt or uncertainty.'<sup>16</sup>

The importance of this Greek emphasis on the primacy of form cannot be overstated. As Dupré points out, for the Greeks '*to be* consists in an aboriginal act of expression.'<sup>17</sup> Lacking a concept of creation *ex nihilo*, nature was viewed at one and the same time as the fundamental metaphysical reality that generates the forms of the cosmos and the result of that generative act itself. Plato held that soul or spirit were ontologically prior to materiality, but the realm of soul was itself viewed as part of the cosmos rather than transcendent to it.<sup>18</sup> Therefore the question of 'what or who accounts for the existence of something rather than nothing' meant little to the Greeks. Instead, the ultimate archetypal Form was viewed as the confluence of the Good and the Beautiful, with the Good conceived of as self-diffusive by nature. Thus the emergence of material forms from the archetypal Form is a necessary consequence of the very fabric of reality. The generative act was mythically imagined as the emergence of order or form from the primeval forces of

<sup>16</sup> Naydler, 'The Regeneration of Realism' p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> In the *Timaeus*, Plato states: 'But, albeit Soul comes second in our discourse, yet was she not created by God younger than Body; for of these two which he joined together he would not have suffered the elder to be governed by the younger.' It must be kept in mind here that when Plato speaks of a personal God (the Demiurge) in the *Timaeus* myth, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not this was expressive of Plato's own religious convictions, or if it was merely a literary device for conveying philosophical truths to minds that were not philosophically inclined. As I have noted earlier, Balthasar sees an ambiguity in Plato precisely because it is unclear if the philosophical ascent to the Good is an ascent out of the self and into a true Transcendence of spirit, or if the ascent is really a camouflaged journey inward, back into the deep structures of the human mind. Plato, of course, would not have posed the question in this fashion, but the ambiguity of the relationship in Plato's works between the more philosophical notion of the Good and the more mythopoetic notion of a personal God does lead one to wonder whether or not Plato was as religious as his later Christian commentators would have us believe. It is instructive here to remember that Aristotle, Plato's pupil, rejected both the idea of a personal God as well as its correlate, the personal immortality of the soul.

chaos. In this sense, the Greek world-view differed little from the various cosmogonic myths of most ancient cultures.<sup>19</sup> The fundamental metaphysical insight of these myths is that it seems to be part of the very nature of being to manifest itself in a manner that brings order and form out of chaos. Indeed, the very word *kosmos* originally meant, 'order'. Thus the forms we perceive in the world are a given part of the structure of existence, they are real, and they are not the subjective projections of the transcendental categories of the human mind. For the Greeks, to be real is to have form, with form being the defining characteristic of divinity itself. This largely aesthetic view of reality means that nothing is more real than form. As Dupré concludes: 'The greater the formal quality, the more a thing deserves to be called real.'<sup>20</sup>

Without anticipating too much our later discussion of how all this contributes to the rise of modern science, we should point out that the emphasis upon the deep intelligibility of nature lends itself to the development of a science of nature as such, for without the basic confidence in the intelligibility of the world, and of our own epistemological participation in that intelligibility, no such science is possible. The deductive orientation of Greek thought precluded, for the most part, the development of a truly experimental science based upon empirical observation. But both Aristotle's taxonomic observations of the natural world and the Pythagorean insight into the importance of mathematics show us that the Greeks were interested in developing systematic reflections upon the ordered intelligibility of nature. This intellectual rigour would pay off at a later time in the history of the West.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> This is not to imply that there are no significant differences between the various cosmogonic myths of origin. Plato's myths, for example, are far more positive in their delineation of the relationship between order and chaos, good and evil, than are the ancient Sumerian-Akkadian myths. In the *Enuma Elish*, for example, chaos and evil continue to wield enormous power among the gods even after the deaths of the primordially evil parent deities, Tiamat and Apsu. Marduk, the vanquishing god-son commits further deicide in order to create man out of the blood and bones of a murdered god. Thus are cosmos and humanity the result of warfare and murder among the primordial forces of reality. Contrast this with Plato's trilogy of the *Republic*, the *Timaeus*, and the *Critias* where the entire theme is the almost natural – dare I say necessary – emergence of order out of chaos in the creation of a symmetrical and beautiful cosmos, wherein humanity is the microcosm of that macrocosmic harmony. And just as divinity creates the cosmos, so humanity creates the good State. Dupré states: 'That *eucosmia* entails *eunomia*, that the laws of the *kosmos* run parallel with the laws of the mind and the city, constitutes one of the central insights of early Greek thought. It rests on an unwavering belief in the basic unity of the three different aspects of nature: the physical, the theonomic and the anthropic. It is also the point on which modern thought most radically differs from the ancient.' *Passage to Modernity*, p. 24. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967, pp. 175–191.

<sup>20</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 18. Dupré concludes, speaking of classical Greek culture: 'Form was divine and the divine was form.' p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 23. Dupré states: 'For Greek thinkers of the classical age, nature is saturated with mind, and this ... is what made a science of nature possible in the first place.'

## ***B. The Medieval World-view***

This then is the classical world-view inherited by the medieval intellectuals. Obviously, the relationship between ancient Greek culture and medieval Christianity is much more complicated than we can do justice to here. However, what is pertinent to our genealogy of the intellectual shift from a sacramental-sacred view of nature to a mechanistic-secular one is the fact that in the Middle Ages, the Greek emphasis on intelligible form, causality and the theophanic nature of the cosmos was for the most part, adopted. Certainly, the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* eliminated any concept of a divine cosmos and led to subtle changes in notions of causality. However, Christians continued to hold that nature is a sacred reality that analogously manifests the glory of the divine. The archetypal ideas that in-form the finite objects of the world of creatures are themselves expressions of the various predicates attributable to the divine nature, leading to a nature mysticism with Neoplatonic elements that often steered perilously close to emanationist theories of creation. Thus despite the differences between the Christian and Greek view of creation, there remained a deep affinity between the two world-views. The continuing emphasis on intelligible form as one of the fundamental metaphysical characteristics of material existence, the emergence of these forms from the expressiveness of the world of divinity, the ability of the human mind to form true and universal concepts of these forms due to the mind's own participation in the intelligibility that pervades the cosmos, and finally, the greater importance given to final and formal causality over efficient and material causality all point to this affinity between medieval thought and the classical tradition it inherited. This dual medieval emphasis upon the concept of intelligible form and the unitary nature of all the forms of metaphysical causality allowed the theology of the time to develop an architectonic vision of God, nature and humanity. As we shall see, this vision was as vulnerable to degradation as were the normative ideas that created it.

### ***1. The Importance of Form and the Unity of Causation***

Let us begin by examining in greater detail the medieval appropriation of Aristotle's unified account of causality. The salient feature of this appropriation for our purposes is precisely the unitary nature of all the various types of causation. Medieval thinkers accepted Aristotle's basic articulation of four types of metaphysical and physical causes: efficient, formal, material and final. However, whereas modern science places great weight on explaining phenomena only in terms of efficient causality, distrusting other types of causes as untestable and subjective, the medievals, like the Greeks, would not be content with such a paucity of explanation: to give a true account of something, you need to offer an explanation that takes into consideration all four causes in an interrelated fashion. However, that does not mean that all four causes were treated as equal in giving causal explanations of phenomena, and most certainly medieval thinkers seemed to place great weight on formal and final causes. I make this observation with some trepidation since to say that medieval thinkers gave priority to formal and

final causes over efficient causes can give the impression that each of the causes was viewed in isolation from the others. Nevertheless, medieval science had an essentially aesthetic-theological orientation that did give greater weight to questions of essential form and teleological purpose.

The contrast between modernity's approach to causality and that of the classical-medieval world can be viewed in microcosm by looking more closely at the ancient view of efficient causality. Aristotle never used the term 'efficient cause' but preferred to use the phrase 'that from which movement begins' to describe the first kind of cause. Notice too that for Aristotle, the First Cause of all existence is called the Prime Mover. So Aristotle seems more concerned with the idea of change, becoming and movement rather than with later ideas of pure efficient causality. But the advent of the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* necessitates a broader idea of causality. Etienne Gilson defines the medieval concept of efficient causality as, 'any cause which, be it by making, by acting or by moving, ultimately causes something to be.'<sup>22</sup> Thus the Christian doctrine of creation created in the medieval mind a greater need to view God as the Pure Act of existence, whose proper act is the conferring of existence (*esse*) on others (though not by necessity), rather than as an eternal storehouse of archetypal exemplars that are used as models for creation. That is not to say that the medieval mind rejected the notion of archetypal and eternal exemplars that existed in the mind of God and were used by God in creating the cosmos. The difference, rather, between the Greeks and medieval thinking was a matter of emphasis. The Greeks, lacking a clear doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* never got beyond the concept of the cosmos as an eternal and total system. Medieval thinkers, by contrast, while still appealing to an exemplarist notion of creation, nevertheless began a movement whereby the concept of efficient causality was taken with greater seriousness due to its perceived role in the theology of creation. It is interesting to note in this context that the medieval mind wrestled with the notion of efficient causality when it applied to creatures as secondary causes, because it seemed to threaten the primacy of God as the sole, sovereign creator of being. If I cause something to come into existence, am I not the creator of its *esse*? The very association of efficient causality with the divine act of creation creates theological problems for how this concept can be applied to human beings as agents of causation. There was, therefore, a certain ambiguity in the classical and medieval concept of efficient causality. For the Greeks, the concern was with how things change, how they go from potency to act, rather than with how they came into existence as such. For the Christians, the concern was with how creatures can seemingly confer the act of being upon another creature without thereby transgressing upon the prerogatives of divinity.

The solution Aquinas offers to the theological ambiguity of efficient causality is deeply instructive because it shows the manner in which, for the medieval mind, all of the various causes are related to one another. Gilson points out that the doctrine of creation formed the paradigm for the medieval discussion of efficient causality: God does not create out of any inner necessity, but out of the free generosity and *excessus* of his Being. As Ken Schmitz puts it, the Creator is the 'most

<sup>22</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Elements of Christian Philosophy*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1960, p. 206.



liberal giver.<sup>23</sup> What the Creator creates is most appropriate to his nature as pure existence: the Creator brings other beings into existence. One of the characteristics of the divine act of existence is its desire to give itself away, to create beings that mirror the divine perfection and participate in it. Although there is a strong emphasis in medieval thought on the pure freedom and transcendence of God in the act of creation, it should be of little wonder that Neoplatonic theories that emphasized an emanationist doctrine based on the necessary self-diffusiveness of the Good would be so attractive a temptation for the medieval mind. Aquinas, of course, avoids this pitfall and, based on the analogy with God's act of causation in creation, emphasizes that in any finite efficient cause something is communicated from the cause to its effect, and that which is communicated creates a likeness or similitude between the cause and the effect. Most importantly, there is nothing even faintly blasphemous about such a claim, since what has been communicated to the creature by God in the creative act is precisely the act of being, an act which, by its very nature seeks to create other beings like unto itself, not out of necessity, but out of its deepest freedom as a real existent being with its own metaphysical interiority. Thus, the human ability to act as an efficient cause is a direct consequence of humanity's status as a creature endowed with an act of existence from God and therefore desiring to give itself away. Gilson summarizes this succinctly:

It belongs to every being, inasmuch as it is act, to desire to communicate its own perfection and to do so by causing effects similar to itself. And this is the very meaning of efficient causality. A universe of beings imitating God in that they are and are causes, such is the universe of Thomas Aquinas. In it, the actuality of being is an ontological generosity: *omne ens actu natum est agere aliquid actu existens*; that is to say: 'It is natural, for all being in act, to produce some actually existing being.'<sup>24</sup>

What we see in all of this is that in contrast to the modern view, the medieval approach to efficient causality is characterized by an emphasis on the communicability of a metaphysical interiority. Returning to the paradigm of God's creative activity, we see that the communication of the act of existence is an act of pure generosity, a pure gift of the divine will. What God shares with his creation is precisely that act that is most proper to the divine nature, the act of existence as such. In other words, when God grants to creation the gift of existence, he is imparting to it something of his own inner perfection; creation, therefore, though ontologically distinct from God is not extrinsic to the divine nature and participates in and relies upon the divine act of existence. Likewise, when finite objects act as efficient causes they communicate something of their inner perfection to the effect. Here it is important to point out how the approach of Thomas Aquinas differs from that of Aristotle. For both Aquinas and Aristotle, every being that exists is a combination of matter and form. However, whereas in Aristotle an object's form is identical with its act of existence, Aquinas distinguishes between the form and the act of existence that makes it real. This act of existence is a direct

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Schmitz, *The Gift of Creation*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1982, p. 87. Also, Schmitz states later: 'We are born of His riches, not of our need.', p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> Gilson, p. 208.



result of the creative agency of God, who communicates something of the divine act of existence to the creature, in such a fashion that the act so communicated, though rooted in God, is truly the act of the creature as such. As Aquinas states: "The act of being is the most intimate element in anything, and the most profound element in all things."<sup>25</sup> The significance of this is that creaturely agents, analogous to God's creative agency, can communicate something of their own act of existence in all their causal actions. Gilson summarizes this point:

The universe, as represented by St Thomas, is not a mass of inert bodies passively moved by a force which passes through them, but a collection of active beings each enjoying an efficacy delegated to it by God along with actual being. At the first beginning of a world like this, we have to place not so much a force being exercised as an infinite goodness communicated. Love is the unfathomable source of all causality.<sup>26</sup>

However, finite objects are not just pure existence but exist as a determinable, limited form or essence. Thus finite beings communicate something of their form in every act of efficient causation, with simple inorganic beings communicating on a level that can seem very extrinsic due to the simplicity of their form, while entities with a complex formal structure such as human beings communicate from the depths of an interior freedom. The higher in the hierarchy of being a form is, the more it approximates the divine freedom and the more perfect becomes its co-presence as agent with its effect. However, this co-presence should not be viewed as necessarily entailing the creation of an isomorphic situation between the agent and the effect. As Ken Schmitz points out:

The degree of unlikeness that can be tolerated between agent and recipient may be very great indeed. Thus, the sun reproduces its 'likeness' in the greening of the plants. The burgeoning plant is not at all like the sun in any strict sense of a figural resemblance; it does not even behave like the sun. Nevertheless, there is a communication between them.<sup>27</sup>

What is communicated, therefore, is the presence of the form in its effect, not in the sense of creating a static imitation of the agent, but in the broader sense of communicating something of the form's very act of existence an act that is teleologically orientated through its form to give itself away in these specific ways. With the rise of mechanistic views of causation, this medieval concept of a metaphysical interiority that communicates itself and sets up a real metaphysical co-presence between cause and effect was lost. Ironically, this diminution of the metaphysical aspects of causality has led to the very idea of causation itself being called into question. Once again, Ken Schmitz summarizes:

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 8, a. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994, p. 183.

<sup>27</sup> Schmitz, p. 124.

Causality was no longer understood to be the communication of act in the constituting of a being, and came to be understood, rather, as the initiation of a displacement by impulse. As a result, causality itself became so reduced that it became strictly unintelligible within the reduced horizon of discourse, and eventually lost its explanatory power. The formulation of laws replaced it as a mode of explanation.<sup>28</sup>

Before we move on to a discussion of the other types of causality and how they form a unified totality with efficient causality in the medieval mind, I would like to pause here and reflect on the significance of this communicative notion of efficient causality for our discussion of mechanism. The medieval preference for formal and final causality, as opposed to efficient causality, is often an anachronistic exaggeration. It is anachronistic because this assertion often presupposes a modern conception of efficient causality as its frame of reference: a causative agent acting upon its effect through power and force from a distance. This notion of distance in the modern conception is important because it implies an ontological separation between the cause and its effect that admits of no communication of interiorities; the causal relationship is viewed extrinsically as one body acting upon another in such a way that certain material changes are brought about, but without any real metaphysical communication taking place between the two beings. Of course, metaphysical communication presumes the truth of the classical notion that the sensible appearance of a phenomenon does not give us the full reality of the object, but we must look to its immaterial intelligible form as the foundational act that makes it real. Thus every material object has an immaterial interiority that is communicated to another in every causative act. In the modern conception of efficient causality, no interiority is shared because there is nothing to share; lacking any concept of metaphysical interiority, the neutered objectivity of the mechanistic view renders all relationships into extrinsic arrangements of power, coercion and manipulation, and that is as true for our dealings with other persons as it is for our dealings with the material environment.<sup>29</sup> One could summarize the significance of the difference between the medieval view of efficient causality and the modern view, therefore, in the following manner: medieval thinkers believed that even in an act of efficient causality something of the metaphysical depth of a being is communicated, while for the moderns, nature is essentially incommunicative and metaphysically monadic, lacking any relationship to other beings not reducible to force and power.

Finally, the differences in the respective approaches to efficient causality can be seen in the fact that the modern conception of causality in general admits of no kind of cause other than efficient causes, a further atomization of an already

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<sup>28</sup> Schmitz, p. 122.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Schmitz, *At The Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993, p. 132. He states: 'The interiority of being, already recognized and present in traditional metaphysics, came to be excluded from the external world, which was then handed over to the ideal of a neutered objectivity.'

truncated idea. Now it is to be granted that this truncating of the notion of cause has brought with it greater precision of scientific explanation and greater control over our material environment. In fact, it was probably a necessary step in order to liberate experimental science from the shackles of theology.<sup>30</sup> But the question that needs to be asked is whether or not the precision of modern science has been purchased at the expense of notions of metaphysical causality that need to be looked at once again as one of the fragments of our tradition that may help us retrieve a more well-rounded world-view. Namely, to what extent can we retrieve some notion of the metaphysical communicability of individual beings in their relations with one another? We will return to this point in section three.

We are now in a position to understand the importance of the medieval connection between efficient causality and the other three forms of causality listed by Aristotle. Specifically, we have seen how the medieval concept of efficient causality is intrinsically tied up with the communication of form. Because the medieval concept of efficient causality was based upon the idea of a true communication of metaphysical interiorities and not just extrinsic relationships of power and force, we can see how all four types of causation were considered necessary as a unified field of explanation. We can see further why formal causes were considered real metaphysical causes and were not viewed as mere fictions of the mind; for as we have seen, the form is what makes a thing be what it is: the pure potentiality of matter (the material cause) becomes a particular thing based on the archetypal idea that in-forms it (formal cause). Thus, in terms of a cause, the form of a thing is absolutely essential to understanding why it behaves the way it does. A rock falls to the ground from a height, not because of the law of gravity, but because it is in the nature of the rock to seek out its proper place, which is the earth. A bird does 'bird' things because of its form, and so forth. Of course, this is simply a tautological way of saying that a thing does what a thing does. However, there is a deeper meaning and significance here than what we might at first surmise. The form of a thing not only gives it an affinity to behave in a certain way that we can then describe after we see it behaving in that way, but it also gives an object a goal or a purpose (final cause) that is the meaning of that object. The final and formal causes are therefore deeply related to one another and give to everything that exists a spiritual location in the hierarchy of creation.<sup>31</sup> Far from being tautological, the coming together of the formal and final causes gives an object its only possible significance, the only

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Schmitz, *The Gift of Creation*, p. 123. Schmitz makes this exact point: 'Much of this has had its positive results, for our theoretical understanding as well as for our practical use. ... At the beginning of our modern age a new possibility of analysis and a new mode of discourse claimed a certain freedom from the metaphysical analysis and the ontological discourse in order to serve other interests and to perform another work. But interests can develop discourse that either rules out or makes all but impossible the horizon needed for the discussion of questions at once deeper and broader than those that have occupied much of our intellectual effort since the early modern times.'

<sup>31</sup> Naydler, p. 160. He quotes C.S. Lewis, 'In medieval science the fundamental concept was that of certain sympathies, antipathies and strivings inherent in matter itself. Everything has its right place, its home, the region that suits it, and, if not forcibly restrained, moves thither by a sort of homing instinct,' *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964, p. 92.

possible reason why we should care about it. In other words, there is an inherently aesthetic element in the medieval apprehension of reality: there is a place for everything in God's creation and everything is in its proper place, lending to the whole a beautiful attractiveness that we also perceive as good; or, put another way, lending to the whole a sense of purposiveness of which we are a part and thereby providing us with our place in the drama and the only possible reason for why we should care about the world at all.<sup>32</sup> Therefore what makes efficient causality efficient is precisely the communication of form and purpose, rendering all concepts of efficient causality as pure force, devoid of formal and final specifications, incomprehensible to the medieval mind. Even if, for the sake of argument, one could show to a medieval thinker that efficient causation is nothing more than physical force acting from a distance, the medieval thinker would probably ask, 'Then why care about it at all?' Ian Barbour summarizes this point nicely:

This was the total plan, the coherent pattern into which all things fitted and from which they derived their significance. It was a unified hierarchical order in which every being plays its part. All nature serves humanity, and humanity serves God. The social order, too, was fixed and hierarchical. Science, cosmology, society, history and theology all expressed the same pattern of meaning.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Medieval Science and the Concept of Exemplarist Form

Medieval scientific explanation, therefore, tended to be 'form-based rather than law-based'.<sup>34</sup> But what kind of science are we talking about if the emphasis is upon formal causality rather than the modern mechanistic notion of efficient causality? In order to answer this we must begin by pointing out that for medieval thinkers

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<sup>32</sup> The problem with so much modern reductionist science is precisely that its popularizers lack this sense of the overall intrinsic purpose of things. Yet they insist on speaking in the language of beauty and poetry even when their aesthetic rhapsody about the beauty of evolutionary materialism appears entirely *ersatz* and unconvincing. They want to have their cake and eat it too: Nature is an impersonal and chaotic jumble of random events happening for no higher purpose and striving after no apparent goal, and yet somehow we are supposed to be inspired by the lofty beauty of the universe's magnificent indifference to anything and everything. For example, Richard Dawkins, the consummate British reductionist, atheist and high priest of the religion of scientism, after years of castigating religious believers for their naïve belief that the universe may have a goal or purpose, waxes evangelical about the 'inspiring beauty' of evolution as an explanatory hypothesis: 'Not only does the Darwinian theory command superabundant power to explain. Its economy in doing so has a sinewy elegance, a poetic beauty that outclasses even the most haunting of the world's origin myths. One of my purposes in writing this book has been to accord due recognition to the *inspirational* quality of our modern understanding of Darwinian life. There is more poetry in Mitochondrial Eve than in her mythological namesake.' (emphasis added) Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, New York: BasicBooks, 1995, pp. xi–xii.

<sup>33</sup> Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Naydler, p. 160.

philosophical realism did not mean entirely the same thing that realism means today. In modern parlance, 'realism' has an empiricist connotation where truth is defined as the mind's correspondence (with all the appropriate nods to Kant) with the basic material reality of an object, as this object presents itself to the senses. Medieval realism, on the other hand, is truly incoherent without reference to God. The medieval realist, like the Greeks, was interested in getting beyond the sensual appearance to the intelligible form of a thing. It is important to realize as well that 'intelligible form' did not mean for medieval thinkers, 'sensual shape'. The material shape of a thing still resides in the realm of the appearance and is utterly quantifiable by the methods of empirical science. Intelligible form is only known through the development of a concept of the inner essence of a thing.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the medieval realist sought the definition of a thing, with the mental concept that embodies that definition corresponding to the intelligible idea that in-forms the object. But from where does this idea come? It comes from the creative activity of God, who embodies in the divine self all of the fundamental archetypes that act as the exemplars for all worldly forms.

The classic expression of this medieval exemplarist approach can be found in St Bonaventure (1221–1274), the spiritual child of St Francis of Assisi. In Bonaventure's Neoplatonic trinitarian theology (influenced by Pseudo-Denys and the Greek Fathers more than he was by Augustine on this point), the heavenly Father is the principle and source of all divine fecundity. Indeed, fecundity for Bonaventure appears as the Christian theological correlate to the Neoplatonic concept of the self-diffusive nature of the Good. In his classic work *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (The Soul's Journey into God), Bonaventure states, 'Good is said to be self-diffusive; therefore the highest good must be most self-diffusive.'<sup>36</sup> Thus the self-diffusive and eternally fecund Father pours himself out into his perfect expression or Word, the divine Son. The Holy Spirit then proceeds as the divine personification of the love between the Father and the Son. The interesting thing here, however, is that the Son, being the perfect and eternal manifestation of the Father's fecund expressiveness, contains all the possible archetypes for everything God can create. Ewert Cousins has captured the essence of Bonaventure's thought on this point:

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ric Machuga, *In Defense of the Soul: What it Means to be Human*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002, chs 2 & 4. Machuga contends that many educated people reject the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of intelligible form because they mistake it for the sensual notion of shape; since modern science has shown us the materialistic foundations for the shape of things, there is no longer any need to refer to a thing's form. However, this is a fundamental misunderstanding. Machuga defines the difference between form and shape as follows: 'All things are composed of both form and shape. "Form" is that which makes something what it is. "Shape," as we are using the term, refers to the totality of a thing's physically quantifiable properties, i.e. its physical shape and size, height, weight, chemical composition etc., in its most complete description.' p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, ch. 6, #2, in Ewert Cousins (ed. and trans), *Bonaventure*, [part of the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series], New York: Paulist Press, 1978, p. 103. Cousins translates *mentis* as 'soul' rather than 'mind' because he finds soul to be a more expansive term than mind that therefore captures more of the medieval flavour of the term.

Although the divine fecundity is not dependent on the world for its actualization, the world itself is an overflow of the expression of this fecundity. When the Father generates the Son, he produces in the Son the archetypes or *rationes aeternae* of all he can create. When God decrees to create *ad extra* in space and time, this creative energy flows from the Trinitarian fecundity and expresses itself according to the archetypes in the Son.<sup>37</sup>

The implications of this are clear. If all of nature is the sacramental expression of the exemplars contained within the trinitarian God, then contemplation of worldly forms can act as a kind of Platonic ascent to the deep mystery of God. More important for our discussion, however, is the fact that the only way fully to understand worldly forms is to contemplate the divine form as this is revealed by God in the full economy of salvation history, culminating in the Incarnation of Christ. Furthermore, since knowledge of divine things is not accessible to our finite minds, the deep, spiritual knowledge required to grasp divine revelation – and by implication the worldly forms that are the expression of this divinity – must be the fruit of the illumination of the mind brought about by supernatural grace. That is not to say that medieval thinkers believed that reason alone, without the aid of revelation, was powerless to perceive form. They did believe, however, that the light of our intellect, in order to ascend properly to true wisdom, had to be gradually elevated and illuminated by grace. Ironically, the higher a thing is in the hierarchy of being, and therefore possessing a super-abundant level of formal intelligibility, the less intelligible it becomes to the unilluminated human intellect, due to the fundamentally sense-based orientation of the human mind.<sup>38</sup> Medieval

<sup>37</sup> Ewert Cousins, *Bonaventure*, Intro., pp. 25–6. It should be noted that this notion of the divine fecundity at the root of the exemplarist tradition represented by Bonaventure is not radically different from the more Aristotelian teaching of Aquinas we have just outlined. For Aquinas, as we have seen, the efficacy of secondary causes is analogous to the creative efficacy of God. But the efficacy of God is related to the infinite fecundity of God, the excessus of divine love; i.e., even God's efficient causality is not simply an act of raw power or a voluntarist act of an arbitrary divine will, but an expression of his Goodness and his Love. Thus the fact that Bonaventure roots the intelligible form of creaturely existence in the divine exemplars complements rather than contradicts the emphasis in Aquinas on the communication of act, and refutes the superficial attempt to see in Bonaventure a more static Platonic view compared with the more Aristotelian act-centred and dynamic view of Aquinas. The common thread is their mutual emphasis upon the loving fecundity of God. Gilson summarizes Aquinas on this point as follows: 'Beneath each natural form lies hidden a desire to imitate by means of action the creative fecundity and pure actuality of God. ... Thus if a physics of bodies exists, it is because there exists first a mystical theology of the divine life. The natural laws of motion, and its communication from being to being, imitate the primitive creative effusion from God. The efficacy of second causes is but the counterpart of His fecundity.' Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas*, p. 184

<sup>38</sup> Gilson, *The Elements of Christian Philosophy*, p. 209. Gilson, summarizing the Thomistic view, says: 'Our intellect is at home in the study of physical substances ... as well as in their abstract mathematical formulation. It already feels less at home in metaphysical problems, among which imagination is a nuisance instead of a help. In its attempts to reach the highest intelligible objects, particularly the first principle, our understanding is blinded by an excess of intelligibility. The difficulty proper to metaphysical meditation is not due to any obscurity on the part of the subject; on the contrary, it arises from more light than the human eye can see without suffering from it.'

science, therefore, had no independent reality of its own and was always viewed in conjunction with its religious ends and purposes. Worldly forms could only be properly understood by defining their intelligibility properly, with their orientation and finality intrinsically tied to the mystical contemplation of God. The ultimate goal of medieval science was therefore explanation that leads to wisdom, rather than the explanation that leads to control and quantification. The latter was viewed as utterly foolish without orientation to the former.

Medieval science therefore represents the triumph of the definitional concept. The intelligible form that brings the potentiality of matter to full existential act is truly knowable in the modality of the concept and is universal in its application. The mind does not create the concept *ex nihilo* from its own resources alone, but is receptively responding to the true presence of the idea inherent in nature. Thus, the naming of objects in their full intelligible integrity was of paramount importance. Note too that this emphasis on defining the intelligible form leads to the privileging of our everyday sense impressions of objects over the atomistic desire to explain objects through recourse to their genetic origins in smaller and smaller parts.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, only the whole can explain the parts through the formal orientation it gives to them, whereas when we take a thing apart in order to analyze its constituent elements all we are left with is an incoherent pile of fragments, the remnants of a thing rather than the thing itself. Thus medieval science saw little need to go beyond the definition of a thing in order to seek out the antecedent material causes that led to its existence as a material object in the first place.

This brings us to the final point of this section. The rise of mathematics as the key descriptive tool for material reality during the time of Descartes creates a wedge between our everyday sensual experience of the qualities of an object and those quantifiable aspects of an object that are open to mathematical description. As we shall see in our discussion of the rise of mechanism, Descartes and others make a distinction in our knowledge of extra-mental objects between what they term the primary and secondary qualities of those objects. Primary qualities are those aspects of the object that are amenable to mathematical quantification and are therefore thought to be 'real' in a pre-eminent epistemological sense. In other words, primary qualities were thought to inhere in an object irrespective of our subjective experience of that object and therefore, universal qualities that can be verified by

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<sup>39</sup> In fact, one of the primary causes of the so-called conflict between the Church and modern science was the perception on the part of many thoughtful Christians that if the new science is true, then our ordinary sense perceptions of the true *Gestalt* of an object are false, or at least only partially true and in a very provisional sense. If the earth really does move around the sun, then common sense is no longer a reliable barometer of empirical truth. This is an important point, since much of the current mythology of the conflict between religion and science often construes religion as being afraid of science precisely because the latter threatens certain supernatural positions, dogmatically held. However, the deeper truth is that what most people felt to be threatened was simply the reliability of our everyday sense-based impressions of empirical reality. It was in fact the new science that pushed modernity in two directions at once – towards the reduction of all reliable knowledge to the level of knowledge of the purely empirical, denying the reality of a metaphysical level of existence, while at the same time insisting that the best way to describe this same material reality is through the abstract descriptions of mathematics.



any objective observer. Secondary qualities such as colour and temperature, on the other hand, were 'real' only in our subjective experience of the object and were not considered to be inherent in the object as such. Secondary qualities are the epiphenomenal products of the primary qualities, and we need to abstract ourselves from these subjective experiences of an object in order to get at the quantifiable substrate of its real substance. Thus, secondary qualities were not thought to be universal and were considered suspect as mere appearances.<sup>40</sup> Aesthetics becomes a purely subjective component of our perception of reality, and pure measurement takes its place as the primary epistemological category.

The difference between this point of view and the medieval approach can be seen in this use of the phrase 'mere appearance'. For medieval thinkers, the accidents of an object are not extrinsic to the substance, but share in its act of existence and are the qualities that bring the potential of the substance into full act. As we have seen, they view the sensible world as a quasi sacramental appearing of a metaphysical depth, whose very nature it is to manifest itself in intelligible form. The mechanistic view, by contrast, rejects the sacramental quality of existence and reduces the ontological status of secondary qualities to that of mere appearance. One consequence of this is that nature now comes to be seen as something that we can know only if we abstract from, and seek to ignore as much as possible, our normal everyday experiences and observations of the world. Furthermore, the underlying primary qualities are now viewed as rather inert and stolid, having no teleological orientation to appear as an intelligible form. Indeed, our everyday experience of the secondary qualities is now to be distrusted, and we must chase down the elusive primary qualities that hide behind the veil of our subjectivity to get at reality. I do not want to delve into this too deeply here since it is a theme we shall revisit shortly. My point in concluding the section on the medieval world-view with these short observations is that medieval science was a science that respected the manner in which human observers actually experienced the natural world. It was a science of qualities and not just quantities. Their scientists certainly held that one must ascend beyond the sensual appearance of an object in order to intuit, via a concept, the intelligible form. The difference is that they held that the only way to intuit this concept is *precisely in and through our experience of the sensual form*.

In short, reductionism is the antithesis of the medieval view of nature, not because it seeks causes while medieval thinkers sought meaning – they viewed the science of nature as very much tied up with a search for causes – but rather, because the medieval concept of causation, deeply tied as it is to a mystical-sacramental view of reality, is much broader in scope, and much deeper in its metaphysical roots, than is the mechanistic view that replaces it. Thus as many people have noted, and I will reiterate it here, the so-called conflicts that emerge between the Church and the emerging mechanistic science are not so much disputes over this or that particular scientific topic or some fine point of biblical interpretation as clashes of differing metaphysical world-views. That the issue was not fear over any particular empirical conclusion of science can be seen in the fact that even many members of the official clerical Church, including the Pope himself, found nothing

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<sup>40</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, pp. 74–79.



objectionable in the scientific theories of either Copernicus or Galileo. Indeed, as John Hedley Brooke points out, since the planetary realm was considered to be metaphysically superior to the earthly realm, the displacement of the earth to the status of planet in the new heliocentric theory was viewed by many as a decidedly upscale change in neighbourhood and fitted well with the new optimism of the Catholic Renaissance humanists.<sup>41</sup> The real discomfort arises when methodological mechanism, for the sake of greater scientific precision, gives way to a *metaphysical* mechanism that robs the cosmos of any immanent *Logos*, leaving us with an impersonal nature devoid of the all-pervading immanence of the Divine reason. I will therefore, conclude this section with a quote by Hans Jonas that captures the essence of the growing divide:

For the modern idea of understanding nature, the least intelligent has become the most intelligible, the least reasonable the most rational. At the bottom of all rationality or mathematics in nature's order lies the mere fact of there being quantitative constants in the behaviour of matter, or the principle of uniformity as such, which found its first statement in the law of inertia – surely no mark of immanent reason.<sup>42</sup>

### *Conclusion*

As we shall see, the heart of the mechanistic view of the universe resides in a dual methodological reduction: (1) the reduction of all existent beings from their status as metaphysical composites (matter and intelligible form) to the level of metaphysical monism (matter only); and (2) the concomitant reduction of metaphysical notions of causality to a truncated, extrinsicist concept of efficient causality. In this view, the objects of the natural world do not possess a metaphysical interiority such that, in the act of causation, something not purely reducible to quantifiable properties is communicated. In short, the mechanistic view of nature bequeaths to modernity a mute, non-communicative cosmos characterized by causal relationships of blind force. The universe is not possessed of an inner intelligibility in her individual members, even if the overall nexus of events is governed by a law-like power of some kind. The various laws that govern the interactions of things impinge upon

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<sup>41</sup> John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 85 & 88. He states: 'Even if men and women were removed from the centre of the cosmos, this was not necessarily to diminish their status. The centre of the geocentric cosmos had not been salubrious. It was the point to which earthly matter fell, the focus of change and impurity, the physical correlate of humanity's fallen state. To be placed on a planet was to move upmarket. It was to be delivered from a dump that was, in reality, diabolocentric. Galileo was certainly conscious of this, rejoicing that there was an escape from the refuse. Kepler, too, spoke of an enhanced status for the earth. At last it enjoyed legal citizenship in the heavens. Not surprisingly, John Wilkins was to say that a prevalent objection to the Copernican system was not man's dethronement but an elevation above his true station.'

<sup>42</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966, pp. 69–70. Quoted in Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 68. Dupré himself adds: 'This shift from aesthetic intelligibility to empirical rationality initiates a disenchantment of nature that will continue until the twentieth century.' p. 262, n. 8.

the objects of existence in the same extrinsic manner that someone playing billiards moves the billiard balls with a stick; the balls themselves are simply there, waiting to be moved about by an external force of some kind. There is no room in such a view for the idea that the billiard balls may possess an immaterial interiority that participates in the intelligibility of the game as a whole, not to mention being able to communicate this interiority in whatever rudimentary fashion. In other words, in the mechanistic view, if the universe has a soul, then it is the soul of an impersonal machine, and its maker is more of an engineer than a loving, personal providence. The final step that remained towards a full-blown atheism was the simple elimination of the divine engineer, replaced by the immutable laws of nature, now viewed as eternal and all encompassing.

I have anticipated somewhat our later discussion of mechanism in order to highlight the significance of our discussion in the current chapter of the related notions of intelligible form and metaphysical causation. The medieval universe, within the confines of its hierarchy of being, was relational, communicative, and teeming with a theophanic and sacramental intelligibility. It was therefore an aesthetic vision of wholes and qualities, of universal concepts coupled with a theological-cosmological drama. The universe, to use a modern term, was still enchanted and alive, not yet having been robbed of its metaphysical interiority. And if its innocence involved a necessary maturation process that involved a disenchantment of the world in order to create the naturalism required for science, there was nevertheless a whiff of decay in the air when the process was over, a melancholy sense that something had been lost forever. Perhaps the melancholy is related to the marginalized place of humanity in the new vision: in the medieval view human beings are the centre of creation and nature is of secondary importance, there to serve the needs of man. With the rise of naturalism the order is reversed: nature is now the truly real, especially in her quantifiable dimensions, and humanity is secondary at best, and an accidental epiphenomenon of nature's laws at worst. Worse still, if humanity is not the point of it all, if we are truly a mere accident of nature, then the very real possibility raises its head that even our reason is an illusion, leading to the modern philosophical obsession with epistemology and the crisis of truth.

This sense of loss will eventually spawn a romantic reaction. However, before we can discuss these further points, there remains the task of cataloguing the dissolution of the medieval world-view, of how we got from the theophanic universe described in this chapter to the metaphysical naturalism of modernity. To that task we now turn.

## Chapter 2

### THE DISSOLUTION OF THE MEDIEVAL SYNTHESIS: THE SEEDS OF MECHANISM

#### *Introduction*

There were several historical and intellectual factors that led to the dissolution of the medieval world-view. In what now follows I want to focus on those aspects of the history of theology that pertain rather directly to the rise of a view of nature as a relatively autonomous reality, free from theological determination. This obviously did not happen overnight and there is much debate as to how the various factors interrelated with one another. However, the guiding thread of the analysis offered here is that nature gains its autonomy from theology, not in a titanic clash between the forces of modern, liberated reason and the benighted remnants of superstition, but as part of an internal debate within theology itself. These theological debates may have had rather humble and somewhat arcane beginnings, seemingly too insignificant to be the instigators of so mighty a sea change in human consciousness. However, it must always be remembered that history is littered with seemingly insignificant issues and events that became momentous in their consequences once certain lines in the sand had been crossed. In what follows we shall analyse several of the crossings that may have seemed inconsequential at the time, but which nevertheless had lasting effects. We will begin with a brief analysis of the divide that develops between academic and spiritual theology. This divide finds expression in the subtle differences that develop between the theology of the schools and the theology of the monasteries. We will then trace the development of nominalism and the rejection of the concept of universal intelligible forms. This rejection of intelligible form is a signature moment in the rise of early modernity, since the denial of form brings in its wake the denial of a metaphysical conception of reality. This in turn gives rise to the hegemony of efficient causality and a purely mechanical understanding of the relations among beings. Finally, we will conclude with an analysis of how all this plays out in late scholasticism as a divide between the order of nature and the order of grace, a divide that culminates in the emergence of a destructive theological dualism. The alienating secularism of modernity thus emerges as a distinct form of Christian theological heterodoxy.

***A. The rupture between theology and spirituality***

We have been speaking up to this point of the medieval view of things in very generic terms, with little concern for the multiplicity of positions that actually existed. However, despite the fact that there was a legitimate pluralism within the medieval world on a whole range of issues, it simply cannot be doubted that there was in the medieval context an ontotheological synthesis that linked together God, humanity and cosmos in a cohesive interrelationship, centred upon the idea of a divinely imparted intelligibility in which creation participates. The related notion of universal intelligible forms, borrowed in part from the Greeks, most certainly played a determining role in both the theology of the emerging schools and the exemplarist creation-spirituality of the mystics. However, the fact remains that not everyone agreed with the often seamless manner in which the thought of pagan antiquity had been pressed into service to elucidate the inner credibility and rationality of Christian revelation. Nor, for that matter, did all agree with the creeping rationalism of the school theology, the syllogistic manner in which a question in a scholastic *disputatio* was resolved left many people with the lingering suspicion that God's omnipotent sovereignty had been compromised and his mystery domesticated.<sup>1</sup> Finally, for many others, the arid tone of the scholastics seemed bloodless and unbiblical in its cold abstraction, tending to push theology too far away from the vocabulary of the Bible and the fathers. To cite but one example, why is it that St Thomas provides us with no theology of history despite the central importance of the historical realm in the divine economy of salvation? Bonaventure does develop such a theology, due in large measure to the need to counteract the pernicious theology of history of Joachim of Fiore, then gaining strength within the Franciscan order. But Thomas,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'On the tasks of Catholic philosophy in our time,' *Communio: International Catholic Review*, Spring, 1993. Balthasar goes even further than saying that the medieval disputational form left people wondering if the mystery of the faith had been dissolved in endless rationalistic debates. He states that this form, geared as it is to answering the questions of students on the rather specific occasional questions of the day, lent itself to the fragmentation of a more aesthetical form of theology that sought after a sense of the whole. In the setting of the school, the pupil seeks answers from the master and there is a resistance to leaving any question open; the student desires an answer that can be easily mastered and encapsulated. Thus the theology and philosophy of textbooks encourages the premature closure of a host of questions leaving the impression that problems have been answered when, in point of fact, they have merely been glossed over. The end result is a loss of genuine theological mystery and the loss of real philosophical and theological dialogue about the mystery. Balthasar concludes: 'The school can tolerate only carefully measured doses of this process of leading the untrained thought, which is all too sure of what it possesses, to confrontation with the deeper questions, the indication of the true "tracklessness" which is the background against which it is possible to think of perhaps finding a path beyond the *aporia*, this art of the interiorization of thought through the destruction of premature syntheses and ready-made solutions. The permissible measure is embodied by the form of scholasticism's *questiones*, that certainly allows there to be a dialogue of question and answer, but still only a question put by the pupil which awaits the superior answer of the master in which the outward semblance of the question ... must be dissolved.' pp. 173–4. It is interesting to note here that Balthasar never taught in a university setting.

seeing no such threat, and leaning perhaps too heavily on Aristotle's ahistorical taxonomy of being, sees no need to develop a systematic theology of history, despite the central importance of the language of history and covenant in the biblical vocabulary.<sup>2</sup>

The point in all of this is that there were trends in medieval thought that were at odds with what was perceived to be by many as the overly rationalistic method of the scholastics. For the first time in the history of the Church, a rift begins to develop between theology, viewed now as a science, controlled by the first principles of revealed doctrines and proceeding deductively to reach ever more finely tuned distinctions, and spirituality, viewed increasingly as an interior relationship of the soul with God, carried forward through ascetic practices and devotional activities. Prior to the scholastic era most of the great theologians within the Church had also been for the most part bishops and pastors. They also tended to be men noted for their great personal sanctity and contemplative outlook. But with the advent of the schools, this unity is lost. Hans Urs Von Balthasar makes the following observation on this point:

In the whole history of Catholic theology there is hardly anything that is less noticed, yet more deserving of notice, than the fact that, since the great period of Scholasticism, there have been few theologians who were saints. ... If we consider the history of theology up to the time of the great Scholastics, we are struck by the fact that the great saints ... were, mostly, great theologians.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of this confluence of theology and sanctity was that it gave to the theology of the time a holistic tenor. When one reads an Augustine or an Irenaeus or a Maximus, one is immediately struck by the lack of a real distinction between theology and philosophy, or between the truths of reason and the truths of faith. There is a single, human existential condition that is being addressed from within the criteria for truth established by the fulcrum of history: the Incarnation. That is not to say that these thinkers replaced the existential structures of the world in favour of a theological monism that negated the inner integrity of the

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Aidan Nichols, OP, *The Shape of Catholic Theology*, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991, pp. 303–4. Also see: Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, Chicago: 1971. Nichols states: 'Indeed, Bonaventure in particular provided something, which in Thomas, if not absent, was only rudimentarily present: a theology of history. History was not a subject on which the Philosopher, Aristotle, had offered much guidance.' However, as Fergus Kerr points out, Thomas did respond indirectly to the challenge posed by Joachim's theology of history. When Thomas got to Paris he found an entrenched resentment against the Franciscan and Dominican friars from the diocesan clergy on the faculty. Thomas wrote many defences of the mendicant way of life in the face of this criticism. However, when a Franciscan friar named Gerard de Borgo San Donnino wrote a book claiming that the 'new age of the Spirit' had dawned – presumably signalled by the historical rise of the mendicant way of life – Thomas immediately challenged this position and pointed out that the fullness of the Holy Spirit had already been poured out at the advent of the New Covenant in Christ. However, Thomas does not take this opportunity to elaborate a full-blown theology of history; cf. Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity,' in *Explorations in Theology, I: The Word Made Flesh*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989, p. 181.

world. Rather, just as the humanity of Christ reveals the deep structures of our own humanity to us precisely by elevating it into a new divine realm, so too does the theology of the period seek to gain insight into the creaturely realm precisely by holding the structure of the world up in the light of divine revelation. The great scholastic theologians (e.g. Albert, Thomas and Bonaventure) continued this trend through the sheer power of their synthetic genius and achieved a true theological appropriation of the new insights brought by Aristotle.<sup>4</sup>

So as far as Balthasar is concerned, the introduction of Aristotle into the medieval world-view by the great scholastics does not as such constitute the primary reason for the growing divide between theology and sanctity. To be sure, Balthasar holds that the introduction of Aristotle had both positive and negative consequences: it led to both a legitimate advance in the methodological distinction between disciplines, as well as introducing for the first time a dangerous secularity into medieval thought. Despite his praise for the holistic nature of pre-scholastic thought, Balthasar concedes that there was a methodological naïveté in their thinking that needed correction in order for the legitimate autonomy of the various secular disciplines to be developed. Balthasar, once again:

As theology increasingly took on a scholastic form, and Aristotelianism burst in like an elemental force, the naïve unity hitherto accepted was gravely shaken. No one would think of denying that the gain in clarity, insight and mastery of the entire field was enormous. ... The mood which fastened on Christian thinkers was like the intoxication of victors after a battle, at the sight of booty far beyond their expectations.<sup>5</sup>

What then was the essence of the difference between the theology of scholasticism and the theology of the Fathers? Why does Balthasar deem the scholastic achievement to have had in the end such negative consequences for the relationship between theology and spirituality? It is due in large measure to the priority given to the growing importance of philosophy as a separate discipline from theology. Of course, as I have mentioned, Balthasar considers the methodological distinction between theology and philosophy to be a legitimate step forward. However, in the hands of lesser scholastic thinkers, the methodological difference evolves into a notion that was novel in Christian thought at that point: that philosophy and philosophical reason constitute autonomous paths to truth. This new-found autonomy for philosophy created an atmosphere in which concepts were valued for their own sake without any real reference to a theological warrant. For Aquinas, the inner *telos* of the intellectual life is a consummation in the supernatural realm of *Caritas*, transformed by the highest degree of human knowledge, mystical

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<sup>4</sup> Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity,' pp. 185–6. Balthasar states: 'The great Scholastic period of Albert, Bonaventure and Thomas was peculiarly fitted for theology to irradiate and transfigure the self-subsisting science of nature, raising it to the plane of the sacred, and so to impart to the secular sciences a real Christian ethos, one affecting the whole outlook of the scientific investigator.'

<sup>5</sup> Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity,' pp. 184–5.

union with God.<sup>6</sup> Thus for Aquinas, concepts enjoy only a relative autonomy from theological determination insofar as their ultimate *telos* is in the source of all truth that is God.<sup>7</sup> However, over time, this essentially theological *telos* of the concept is lost and what replaces it is a highly rationalistic theology in which the traditional structure of theology is set on its head. Instead of the realm of nature being analysed through the lens of Christian revelation, with all sensible objects of knowledge viewed as the first in a series of metaphysical steps towards the contemplation of God, knowledge of the world is now viewed as an end in its own right, with the ascent to God viewed as a secondary epistemological movement. What is now primary is the establishment of rational grounds for the very possibility of a divine revelation. Thus is born the late scholastic method of preparing for theology by first laying down the truths of reason that act as a preamble to the truths of faith – a move which, in itself, is not necessarily wrong, but can, and has, led to the reduction of revelation to a sub-category of human reason. Furthermore, the problem of the philosophical domination of theology is made even worse in the post-Thomistic era when the putative philosophy of Thomas is viewed as the *ancilla theologiae par excellence* and takes on the status of a rather frozen *philosophia perennis*. As Aidan Nichols puts it: ‘For the most militant Thomists, the philosophical part of Thomism constitutes a sort of eternal philosophy, *philosophia*

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959, pp. 5–7. Maritain describes the Thomistic approach to the consummation of the intellectual life as follows: ‘It is true to say, then, as a general thesis, that intellectual life is not enough for us. It needs a complement. Knowledge draws all forms and all that is good into our soul. But they are stripped of their proper existence and reduced to the condition of objects of thought. They are there as so many graftings upon us, but in a mode of being that is essentially incomplete. They demand completion. . . . We desire to rejoin them in their own real and proper existence, to possess them no longer in an idea but in reality. Love thus arising impels the soul to a union in the real order, a union which intellect, left all to itself, cannot achieve except in the extreme case of the vision of God. It is inevitable then . . . that intellectual life, as it is in us, must finally admit its poverty and, one day, pour itself out in desire. It is the problem of Faust. If human wisdom does not spill upwards into the love of God, it will fall downwards towards Marguerite. Mystical possession in Eternal love of the Most Holy God, or physical possession, in the fleetingness of time, of a poor fleshly creature . . . there lies the choice that cannot be avoided.’ p. 7. Aquinas, in describing the proper object of the contemplative life, says that what is contemplated is the truth that is God. Thus it would seem that it is largely a matter of the intellect only. However, he is quick to add: ‘From the very fact that truth is the end of contemplation, it has the aspect of an appetible good, both lovable and delightful.’ (ST. II-II, Q. 180, a. 1).

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas is at pains to point out that the primary object of contemplation is God. However, he does not wish to drive a wedge between the knowledge gained in the contemplative life and the normal knowledge of sensible objects in day-to-day life. Contemplative knowledge of God is rooted in sense-based knowledge in an ascending hierarchy from the material to the immaterial. Aquinas states: ‘These six denote the steps whereby we ascend by means of creatures to the contemplation of God. For the first step consists in the mere consideration of sensible objects; the second step consists in going forward from sensible to intelligible objects; the third step is to judge of sensible objects according to intelligible things; the fourth is the absolute consideration of the intelligible objects that are unattainable by means of sensibles, but which the reason is able to grasp; the sixth step is the consideration of such intelligible things as the reason can neither discover nor grasp, which pertain to the sublime contemplation of divine truth, wherein contemplation is ultimately perfected.’ (ST. II-II, Q. 180, a. 5).



*perennis*, a system of philosophical thought which cannot really be bettered except in details.<sup>8</sup>

This approach represents a distortion of Aquinas on three fronts. First, there is the false assumption that Thomas is sometimes engaging in a pure philosophy that is somehow totally separate from his theology. Second, there is the false assumption, building on the first, that Thomas' major works, e.g. the *Summa*, ought to be interpreted as following the methodological path of first doing philosophy and then building theology on this foundation. Finally, there is the false assumption that the reason why theology must build on philosophy is that it simply must await the foundation in reason that philosophy alone provides. Let us briefly examine each of these.

One of the best examples of the idea that Aquinas is doing pure philosophy at some point is the very beginning of the *Summa* where Aquinas begins with an analysis of what we can know of the unified divine essence through reason. Only after he discusses *De Deo Uno* does he then proceed on to a specific analysis of what we can know about God through Revelation in *De Deo Trino*. I do not have time to go into all the subtleties of this discussion. However, suffice it to say that there is now a growing chorus of voices that would point out that Aquinas himself never gives these sections of the *Summa* those titles (the followers of Cajetan and John of St Thomas do that<sup>9</sup>), and is actually engaging in a theological discussion of God throughout the entire section. The essentially Neoplatonic/Augustinian structure of the *Summa* is a better explanation for the schema Thomas adopts. The *Summa*'s main organizational principle is the concept of God as Origin and the concomitant notion that all creatures find their deepest reality only through an orientation back to the Origin. This roughly approximates to the *exitus-reditus* schema of the Augustinian Neoplatonists and gives to the entire *Summa* a theological purpose. Nicholas Lash summarizes this organizational principle:

We might almost say that, for Aquinas, the soundness of his educational method depended upon the extent to which the movement of his exposition reflected the rhythms of God's own act and movement: of that self-movement outwards from divine simplicity to the utterance of the Word and breathing of the gift which God is, to the overflowing of God's goodness in the work of his creation (*Prima Pars*); the return to God along that one way of the world's healing which is Christ (*Tertia Pars*); and because there lies across this movement the shadow of the mystery of sin, between the whence and the whither, the outgoing and return, of creaturely existence, there is

<sup>8</sup> Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy L. Smith, 'Thomas Aquinas *De Deo*: Setting the Record Straight on his Theological Method,' *Sapientia*, vol. 53, no. 203, 1998, pp. 119–154. Smith states: 'One of the most disastrous developments in the commentaries of the late nineteenth century was the labelling of the first two sections *De Deo Uno-De Deo Trino*. These titles are foreign to the text and distort Thomas' own words, yet they became almost synonymous with the text well into our time. The titles *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino* grew naturally out of the early commentaries of Cardinal Cajetan and John of St Thomas,' even though they did not actually use these terms.' p. 134.



the drama of conversion, of sin and virtue, of rejection or acceptance of God's grace (*Secunda Pars*).<sup>10</sup>

Thus it also becomes clear that Thomas is not structuring the *Summa* so as to do philosophy first before he proceeds on to specifically theological concerns. He begins with a consideration of God as unified Being simply because he views the divine simplicity as the principle of origin. This may open Thomas to criticism from those who desire a more substantive role for trinitarian relationality as the foundational principle – a point we shall examine in a later chapter – but it in no way should lead us to conclude that his typically Latin emphasis on the unicity of God (as distinct from the Eastern emphasis upon relationality) is evidence of an independent philosophical starting point. As Timothy Smith puts it:

The unity of this science, *sacra doctrina*, demands that all remain under or within the *ratio* of being divinely 'revealable'. As Thomas attempts to find a rational basis for some of those beliefs, he is pursuing a deeper understanding with the belief that the object of faith is intelligible in itself, if not to us in this life. ... Revelation provides, however, the more certain and complete knowledge. The argument from authority never gives up its place to rational argument, though rational argument may be employed where the authority of revelation is retained. As one commentator puts it, the whole of the first 43 questions of ST I are 'a single and unified treatise of revealed theology called *De Deo*.' The argument from authority, that is, from the authority of revelation, always reigns as the more certain and complete.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, as Stanley Hauerwas points out, even that part of the *Summa* most famously held to be an example of a strictly philosophical propaedeutic, the so-called proofs for God's existence in the five ways (*ST I*, q. 2), are no such thing. The presence of the five ways in no way implies that for Thomas the existence of God needs to be proven philosophically before one can go on to add theological modifications. Indeed, even if Thomas did hold that the arguments for God's existence act as a preamble to revelation, it does not follow that he held that this

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Lash, 'When did the Theologians Lose Interest in Theology?' in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, Bruce Marshall (ed.), Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990, pp. 138–9. One of the main purposes of Lash's presentation is the attempt to answer the criticism of Michael Buckley, in his magisterial tome on modern atheism, that it was Aquinas who introduced into Western thought the idea of a separate philosophical propaedeutic that must logically precede theology as its only possible rational foundation. Lash's appeal to the Neoplatonic underpinnings of the structure of the *Summa*, is therefore an attempt to counteract any idea that Aquinas is doing something other than theology throughout the entirety of the *Summa*. Timothy Smith points out that one must be careful to understand this *exitus-reditus* schema in Aquinas properly in order to avoid confusion. First, there can be no question of a latent pantheism, given Thomas's strong affirmation of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and of his metaphysical elaboration on the significance of this doctrine. Thus, the pattern of exit and return must be viewed not as referring to anything strictly chronological or emanationist, but as referring to our metaphysical dependence as creatures upon the divine act of existence. In other words, Aquinas is strictly concerned with the metaphysical meaning of our relation to God. Cf. Timothy Smith, Thomas Aquinas, pp. 125–133.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Smith, 'Thomas Aquinas,' pp. 135–136.

preamble was a necessary condition for doing theology, or that the knowledge that it gives is more certain than revelation. To the contrary, Thomas held that even if in theory people can come to a knowledge of God's existence through reason, our reason, clouded as it is by sin, only comes to such awareness with great difficulty, or often not at all. Thus Revelation is necessary even in those matters which our reason does have some ability to reach. It simply cannot be the case that our salvation depends upon our ability to reason, since this ability seems so often only to give us an opaque glimpse of ultimate reality. As Hauerwas states: 'The existence of God, then, which can be known by natural reason, is rightly understood as a preamble to the articles of the faith, but "preamble" does not mean that the truthfulness of the articles of faith must wait for such preambles to be established before their truth can be known.'<sup>12</sup>

My point in all of this is to underline that the medieval world-view, as exemplified in Aquinas, still held to an organic vision of Christian wisdom that did not make sharp distinctions between theological and philosophical forms of reason. However, as theology becomes more and more associated with the schools, its pedagogy changes, with greater weight given to the ability to reach rational closure in the *disputatio*, as opposed to the more contemplative openness to mystery in the older monastic theology. Thus does the school theology come to read Aquinas in an overly rationalistic manner, bifurcating his unified system into a philosophical propaedeutic and a theological elaboration upon that propaedeutic. Because theology was now viewed as reliant upon this philosophical form of reason for its inner justification, spirituality was banished to the realm of the interior affective dispositions. Balthasar concludes in a programmatic quote worthy of full citation:

For the most part [late scholasticism], confined itself to using a natural theology, antecedent to biblical theology, as a basis for a rational exposition of the latter. Moreover this was not without its dangers, especially when the philosophical propaedeutic came to be considered a fixed and unalterable basis, whose concepts, without the necessary transposition, were used as norms and criteria of the content of faith, and therefore set in judgment over it. Teachers behaved as though man knew from the outset, before he had been given revelation, knew with some sort of finality what truth, goodness, being, light, love and faith were. It was as though divine revelation on these

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<sup>12</sup> Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, p. 30. Another way of framing this is to point out that we cannot judge Aquinas's project anachronistically. As Fergus Kerr points out, we must not succumb to the temptation to read Aquinas through our post-Cartesian lens. Thomas was not battling the kind of philosophical scepticism that modernity represents. Indeed, it is wrong even to focus on Thomas as an epistemologist; once again, a modern prejudice. Rather, Thomas' entire philosophy of the mind is part of his theology of creation with its notion of metaphysical participation in the intelligibility of God, as this intelligibility is expressed in the intelligible species of creation; cf. *After Aquinas*, pp. 28–30. Likewise, Hauerwas points out that those later commentators on Aquinas who distort his system and separate his philosophy from his theology, misunderstand Aquinas anachronistically and see in his putative philosophical propaedeutic a kind of philosophical evidentialism. Hauerwas quotes Nicholas Wolterstorff's definition of evidentialism: 'belief is assumed guilty until it proves its innocence by evidence.' *With the Grain of the Universe*, p. 27.

realities had to accommodate itself to these fixed philosophical conceptual containers that admitted of no expansion.<sup>13</sup>

Thus we see that theology comes to be viewed more and more as dependent upon the foundation of a form of philosophical reason that is antecedent to, and materially independent of, Revelation. In consequence, the intellectual component of mystical theology is eclipsed by a newer and more putatively public form of reason. Whereas for Aquinas mystical contemplation was first and foremost an act of the intellect focusing on the divine truth, in the late medieval period mysticism comes more and more to be associated with the inward movement of the spiritual appetites. Thus mystical theology is forced out of public theological debate only to resurface as the privileged form of discourse for the soul's inward ascent to God; a discourse replete with detailed psychological descriptions of the proper manner for purging our affective life of an inordinate attachment to the things of the world. This shift also goes a long way towards explaining why religious feelings come to be associated more with the moral life – the realm of the will – than with the intellectual life, and how easy it was for Christianity to degenerate into the bourgeois domestication of good deeds.

A related theological issue that is paradigmatic of this divide between theology and spirituality is the question of which of the faculties of the soul is superior: the will, with its orientation to love of the good and ultimately to the love of God, or the intellect, which apprehends the good and thus provides the will with the proper concepts to be acted upon. Of course, in many ways this is a bad way of framing the question since it implies that the various faculties in the soul are compartmentalized from each other. However, the meat of the debate was really over whether or not theology should take as its hermeneutical key for understanding the faith a view of revelation as primarily a narrative of love to which we must respond in love with the narrative of our whole lives, or as primarily the imparting of divine truth, to which we must intellectually assent in obedience. The high scholastics maintained these two approaches in balance. Indeed, Aquinas shared the view of Augustine and others that in the highest order of the intellect, knowing and willing are coincident with one another.

In an interesting study Mark McIntosh points out that this view of the unity of knowing and willing was never based on a psychological analysis of the process of human knowing for in human beings knowing and willing do indeed often exist in a state of fragmented polarization. Rather, the assertion of a unity between knowing and willing had always been the result of a *theological* affirmation of their coincidence in God. The paradigm of a unified divine consciousness provided the condition of possibility for the unity of human consciousness, no matter how existentially fragmented our consciousness is in point of fact.<sup>14</sup> However,

<sup>13</sup> Balthasar, *Theology and Sanctity*, p. 186.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 201. Kerr cites the studies of David Burrell and agrees with his assessment that the controlling idea in Thomas' theology of God is the notion of God as pure act of existence. In God we have a perfect coincidence of Being and Doing. Thus, the divine activities *par excellence*, are the acts of knowing and willing (loving), acts which are not separate from the divine nature or to be conceived of as logically coming after the divine nature,

as McIntosh points out, 'a shift to a more anthropological analysis, a reading of the mystical life primarily in terms of the inner self is, not surprisingly, going to unravel the perceived unity.'<sup>15</sup> This shift in mystical theology away from what Walter Kasper calls a theological theology<sup>16</sup> and towards a psychologized theology contributes to the bifurcation between knowing and willing that will lead directly to the later scholastic overemphasis on the propositional elements of revelation. This then in turn leads to an overly rationalistic and deductive approach to the truths of the faith.

In reaction to this rationalism, we see that on the level of popular piety many simple Christians, which included many priests and women religious, now came to view theology as utterly devoid of practical meaning for their lived Christian existence. They sought instead a more immanent and less conceptual experience of God in the inner immediacy of the soul. Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* stands out as one example of this approach. The *Imitation* is noteworthy for its almost total lack of any sort of reference to Christian doctrine, preferring instead a simple Biblicism and a religion of the heart. Indeed, Thomas was a member of Gerard Groote's Brothers of the Common Life, who were devoted to leading a life similar to that of the first apostles as narrated in the Bible. Even though the brothers ran many schools throughout Europe and had a strong devotion to learning, there is little doubt that the entire movement represented something of the monastic distaste for the growing scholastic rationalism of the universities. This could account for why such noteworthy thinkers who broke out of the late scholastic mode, such as Nicholas of Cusa and Erasmus, had a strong affection for the Brotherhood.<sup>17</sup> Even the nature mysticism of Francis and the German Rhineland contemplatives was indicative of a desire to experience God in a more direct fashion through everyday apprehension of the world.

This desire for a more immediate experience of God led to the misinterpretation in an individualist and experiential direction of even some of the Church's more noteworthy mystical theologians. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux is rightly regarded as one of the greatest writers on the spiritual life that the Church has ever produced. He wrote at length on the soul's experience of God, but always with an eye to the communal expression and possession of these experiences; spiritual experiences are never to be sought after or dwelt upon as ends in themselves, but

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once the divine nature has been established as a more static substance of some kind. In God, knowing and loving are the very *actus* that describes the divine essence. Kerr states: 'The plan of the *Summa*, Burrell thinks, is to show how human beings, created by God, find their way to ultimate beatitude by the activities of knowing and loving.' Thus Kerr, Burrell and others would seem to concur with McIntosh's point that, for medieval thinkers, the unity of knowing and loving in the human economy was in no way dependent upon recognizing such unity psychologically in the human condition. Rather, the entire movement of thought here is based upon the theological affirmation of the unity of knowing and loving as the proper acts of the divine nature.

<sup>15</sup> Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Kasper, 'Postmodern dogmatics: Toward a renewed discussion of foundations in North America,' *Communio: International Catholic Review*, Summer, 1990, pp. 189–191.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Harold Gardiner, SJ, 'Introduction' to *The Imitation of Christ*, Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1955, pp. 5–19.

must always be referred back to the communal Christian context that nurtures them. However, the desire for a more immediate experience of God causes later distortions in the interpretation of his theology, with great emphasis being placed on the affective dimensions of these experiences and their roots in an increasingly psychologized analysis of the various states of the soul. Thus is born the era of the great mystic who is now viewed as a kind of religious genius endowed with various spiritual aptitudes for which the more pedestrian among us can only hope. The trend shifts away from an integrated mystical theology where speculation on the truth of Christian doctrine is united with the depths of spiritual insight and towards a bifurcation between theology and mysticism, where the mystic is rarely called upon as a theological resource due to the perceived esotericism of the mystic's psycho-spiritual experiences. McIntosh concludes:

At this point the 'mystic' has, in Western culture more generally, become something of a marginal eccentric at best, whose peculiar inner experience ... has come to seem a thing of pious curiosity perhaps, but clearly of little relevance for the serious task of academic theology. One has only to think of the unbridgeable gulf separating such fellow Christians and contemporaries as Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–97) and Adolf Harnack (1851–1930). The 'story of a soul' and the history of dogma seemed to have become ... fundamentally and mutually exclusive projects.<sup>18</sup>

We have spoken of the manner in which the communal mystical theology of Bernard and others is transformed by later interpreters into a more private and psychological affair, contributing to the divorce between theology and spirituality. The dangers of this divorce, however, go well beyond a simple shift from the corporate to the individual in matters theological. After all, the shift to a heightened awareness of the individual affective dimensions of Christian experience is not, in and of itself, completely wrong or deleterious. But a further difficulty arises when the apophatic theology of the Fathers and of later thinkers like pseudo-Dionysius is misappropriated in an agnostic and anti-intellectualist manner. For example, in the spiritual dialectic of our ascent to God spoken of by Dionysius, the intellect transcends itself as it enters into the blinding, incomprehensible light that is God. Indeed, the darkness of our spiritual experience of God is not the result of a lack or a void, but rather of an *excessus* so overwhelming that the intellect must leave itself behind in an act of self-transcendence. The dialectic spoken of here is not therefore world-negating or even the repudiation

<sup>18</sup> McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, p. 69. Balthasar also makes this exact point. Many of the great post-scholastic mystics, such as John of the Cross, Francis de Sales, Thérèse of Lisieux and John Vianney, are criticized by Balthasar for not attempting to be more theological themselves. It could be, Balthasar states, that the scholastic terminology that was available to them to express their mystical experiences was simply too clumsy and foreign a vehicle for so sublime a task. Nevertheless, Balthasar concludes that the end result is baneful: 'When the main emphasis is transposed to an inner experience, ... dogmatic theology is relegated to the background. A close connection with the doctrinal teachings on God, the creation and the redemption ceases to be evident; whereas, often enough, the connections ... with religious phenomena outside Christianity are correspondingly more frequent and prominent.' 'Theology and Sanctity,' p. 191.

of intellect in favour of love. Rather, it is the recognition that our intellectual life finds its natural *telos* in this very act of self-transcendence, an act best characterized as a kind of intellectual *caritas*. But with the rise of a more affective mysticism, the apophatic experience of self-transcendence is made difficult by the fixation on the self and on the actual experience of negation for negation's sake. As McIntosh puts it: 'the ascending dialectics of love and knowledge in Dionysius have ... been "replaced with a simple bi-polarity of knowing and love. ... It is therefore an apophaticism which ... is pregnant with the possibilities of an anti-intellectualism."' <sup>19</sup>

The significance of all this is that once this divide in theology is wedded to a later view of nature as autonomous from theological determination, scholastic dogmatic theology will tend towards a revelational positivism that finds the warrant for the truth of Christian doctrine in the simple assent of faith to the raw authority of God as a trustworthy revealer. This in turn plays right into a more voluntarist conception of Revelation, showing how rationalism and voluntarism are but two sides of the same coin; cut off from the communal spiritual sources of a more integrated theology where experience and speculation are wedded in the same Christian wisdom, theology degenerates into the pure logic of a deduction from first principles that simply have to be believed for no other reason than the fact that it is God who asserts them. Spiritual theology, on the other hand, is forced to retreat into the soul as the last refuge for the divine presence in the world. Put another way, with both poles of Christian theology cut off from one another, they are both, ironically, forced into a kind of fideism that privatizes the truth of the Christian faith in the subjective assent of the individual believer, leaving secular reason to tend to the affairs of day-to-day living in an increasingly desacralized cosmos and society. Ironically, the desire to create a separate philosophy that can act as a rational foundation for theological assertions only underscores the essentially fideistic manner in which theological statements were viewed; there is no inherent logic or grammar of truth in theology itself, only propositional statements requiring corroboration from sources outside the theological realm as such. If such warrants are absent or of a doubtful quality, one is left with the raw authority of God's Revelation, a Revelation that is then mined for nuggets of certain and infallible truths. Note the tone and tenor of theology in this period: if one cannot find certain propaedeutic truths in philosophy, then one can find certain truths of another kind in Revelation. Either way, the key to the quest is the search for some kind of clear, concise, deductive certitude in matters pertaining to faith. Thus we see already in late medieval theology the seeds for the later European obsession with the epistemological foundations of truth.

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<sup>19</sup> McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, p. 72. McIntosh is quoting here from Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 193–4.

***B. The rise of nominalism and the rejection of universal intelligible form***

The seeds of what would later become a full-blown rejection of the Thomistic and, following that, the medieval synthesis, were already present in the monastic contemplative traditions which emphasized the centrality of love as the central motivation of all Christian devotion. Once again, Bernard of Clairvaux is an important figure in this trend. In the twelfth century Bernard developed a sophisticated mystical theology centred on the bridal imagery of our relationship with God, commenting at length on such favoured texts as the *Song of Songs*. God is love and what he most desires from us is a loving response through our contemplative devotion to the paradigmatic expression of this love in the incarnation of Christ. Thus Bernard begins a medieval movement away from an exclusive fixation on divinity in the abstract, and towards a more focused concentration on the concrete historical form of Jesus of Nazareth. Prior to this time, due in large measure to a hangover from the iconoclastic controversies, there was still great reluctance to place too much emphasis on worldly forms as images of the divine, including (and perhaps especially) the concrete form of the humanity of Jesus. Philosophical consideration of intelligible form as the backbone of an exemplarist, cosmic mysticism had been considered safe as long as it was conceived as a kind of spiritual ascent that gradually distanced one from the worldly forms and transported the soul into the realm of pure divinity. Bernard himself was noted for his asceticism in this regard and many medieval thinkers had harboured faintly dualistic notions of the need to proceed immediately from the created forms (viewed Platonically as pale images of divine forms) into the realm of uncorrupted spirit. In line with this, there was a general squeamishness about extending the mystical contemplation of nature's forms to an explicit focus on, and most particularly, devotion to, particular images that could be construed as privileged loci of the divine presence. Therefore the growing mystical focus upon the image of the sacred humanity of Jesus, and of the acts of his public ministry, began an important and definitive shift away from the last vestiges of iconoclasm and towards a renewed focus upon the concrete, individual image.

This contemplative devotion to the life of Jesus finds further reinforcement in the religious and theological sensibilities of the new Franciscan movement. A lived expression of this new sensibility can be seen in the example of Francis of Assisi. It was Francis who popularized the devotion to the baby Jesus and all of the attendant images that surround the nativity. Francis encouraged devotion to the sacred humanity of Jesus in order to foster the lived *imitatio* of Jesus' life. Likewise, Bonaventure's theology of the divine exemplars, despite its Neoplatonic heritage, furthered this growing trend towards an increased focus upon the individual man, Jesus. Bonaventure developed his exemplarist theology in conjunction with his elaboration of trinitarian doctrine. The divine Son, being the perfect image of the Father's eternally generated and fecund, self-manifesting Word, contains within his person all the possible archetypal forms God would use in creation. But Bonaventure was not content to leave his consideration of these eternal archetypes in the realm of the immanent



trinity. The focus instead shifted to the manner in which the incarnate *Logos*, the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth, concentrates these forms in his historical existence. The economic trinity is the manifestation of the immanent trinity, and the eternal archetypes of creation now take on historical concretization in an individual, historical man. Thus true knowledge of the created forms of the natural world can be gained through spiritual contemplation of the concrete figure of Christ.<sup>20</sup>

This confluence of Trinitarian and Incarnational elements gives Bonaventure's theology a truly transitional quality. In the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, the Christ upon whom we are to meditate is the mystical Son of God who came to Francis of Assisi in his famous vision of the cruciform, winged Seraph. Bonaventure begins the *Itinerarium* with an allegorical reflection on the meaning of the six wings of the Seraph: they are seen as representing the six stages of the soul's ascent to God. Hence the six chapters of the *Itinerarium* that detail the stages of this ascent culminate in Chapter 7 where the soul achieves mystical ecstasy and union with God (literally, 'passing into God'). It is in Chapter 6 that Bonaventure gives us his meditation upon the eternally fecund Trinitarian relations and the self-diffusive nature of the good. The tone and tenor of the *Itinerarium* is therefore still somewhat Neoplatonic, with an emphasis upon exemplary form, the self-diffusiveness of the good and mystical ascent.<sup>21</sup> However, the *Itinerarium* must be read in conjunction with Bonaventure's meditation upon the concrete, historical life of the man, Jesus, in *The Tree of Life*. In *The Tree of Life*, we see the typically Franciscan emphasis upon the concrete humanity of Jesus, viewed as the sacramental manifestation of all of the *rationes aeternae* in the mind of God. The synthetic genius of Bonaventure allows him to weave together his Trinitarian and Incarnational theologies into a seamless account of how the eternal God takes on the form of a human being. Others before Bonaventure had created similar theological syntheses. However, what was new in Bonaventure, and in the Franciscan movement in general, was the unabashed emphasis upon the concrete earthiness of Jesus, upon his status as truly one of us. To the extent that this shift in focus represents a genuine move away from the iconoclastic squeamishness of the past toward earthly images of Jesus, we can say that the new Franciscan theology represents a greater appreciation

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, pp. 35–8.

<sup>21</sup> Even in the *Itinerarium*, however, we see the beginnings of natural theology in Bonaventure's desire to ascend to God precisely through a meditation upon the traces or vestiges of God in the natural world and in the faculties and powers of the soul. In Bonaventure we see a kind of presentiment of the later Ignatian incarnational emphasis upon concrete images in meditation and, most particularly, of the importance of meditating upon the Jesus of the Gospels. However, care must be taken here not to read this trend anachronistically as the expression of a more contemporary approach that would view spiritual growth as the smooth progression from the natural to the supernatural, or from foundational reason to faith. As Ewert Cousins has pointed out, for Bonaventure, the soul's ascent to God could just as easily begin by plunging headlong into a meditation upon the divine names, or upon the nature of the Trinity, as it could by starting with the natural world or some rationalistically conceived notion of foundations (cf. *Bonaventure*, p. 23). However, this caveat does not negate the fact that there is a definite Franciscan emphasis here upon looking for God in the natural structures of creation.



for nature and history as well. All of this is signalling that something significant is brewing in the medieval sensibility toward nature.<sup>22</sup>

However, despite this shift to a stronger emphasis upon the concrete humanity of Jesus, there was still a broad consensus that this new religious sensibility could be easily reconciled with the medieval belief in the reality of universal intelligible forms. Bonaventure had given a greater trinitarian and Christological focus to the concept of form and its role in creation, but continued to trade in the ancient currency of universals. However, there is no denying that the incarnational concentration of the notion of creative form signals a shift to a more empirical and less abstract approach to the mysteries of the life of Jesus. But this shift in focus does not seriously rattle the medieval cage until it gains momentum in the strong philosophical realism of the Franciscan John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308), culminating in the full-scale rejection of universal intelligible forms in William of Ockham (c. 1285–1349) and the whole school of nominalist philosophy that follows in his wake. What was at stake in this shift was more than a simple move from an abstract to a concrete approach to nature, although this was certainly one of its consequences. Rather, the neuralgic point of these debates is the role of form in the Christian doctrine of creation and the relationship between the divine creative will and these same archetypal forms, the *rationes aeternae* of Aquinas and Bonaventure. As we shall see, the end result of this transformation in medieval thought was an exaggerated emphasis on the sovereignty and freedom of the divine will vis-à-vis the forms, culminating in a complete denial of the metaphysical legitimacy of the entire exemplarist tradition. Modernity emerges as a historical epoch distinct from the medieval world-view as soon as the role of form is lost in favour of the dual emphasis on the raw omnipotence of the divine will and the radical contingency of creation.

Parenthetically, this shift to a greater emphasis upon the concrete elements of history in Revelation received a boost from the pronouncements of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) on the theology of creation. The council took pains to reassert in a solemn teaching that the cosmos was not eternal and that it was God, and God alone, who had created the world *ex nihilo* for no other reason than God's superabundant love. The council was not articulating a new teaching here, but simply reaffirming the Church's timeless doctrine on creation in order to counteract not just Aristotle's teaching on the eternal nature of the cosmos, but

<sup>22</sup> There are those who would go so far as to say that the Franciscan emphasis upon the concrete and individual paved the way for a new philosophy and theology of nature, which in turn paved the way for the rise of modern science. For example, in an older work representative of this school of thought, George Boas states: 'It is worth pointing out that Franciscan philosophy as a whole tended to put more emphasis upon the observation of the natural world than its great rival, Thomism, did. ... Indeed, one might without too much exaggeration maintain that the impetus to the study of the natural world through empirical methods came from the Franciscans.' George Boas, 'Introduction' in *The Mind's Road to God*, trans. George Boas, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953, p. xix. I think very few would hold to this strong view of the historical link between the Franciscans and modern science. Nevertheless, at the very least it makes the point that with the Franciscans there is a definite shift to a more historical and concrete mode of thinking that had an effect on later thinkers.

also any residual Neoplatonic emanationist tendencies. In a sense, it could be said that the council was retrieving certain ideas of the Fathers concerning creation that had been eclipsed by the Western church's tendency to exaggerate the concept of God as pure rationality. In such a view the tendency was to see creation, in so far as it is an image of the Creator, as reflective of this supreme divine rationality, especially in the logical relations among creatures. Augustine had also emphasized the importance of the divine will, but by and large discussions of creation had come to be dominated by an overemphasis on God as the architect of an orderly cosmos, with creation viewed as a kind of divine artifice. Lost in this, despite certain countervailing mystical trends, was the patristic trinitarian-Christological orientation, as well as the notion that God had created the world out of an utterly gratuitous love.<sup>23</sup> If God creates for no other reason than his inscrutable love, then any emanationist or rationalist tendencies that seek to deduce the necessary (and static) structures of existence from certain first truths of philosophy and theology become suspect. In short, the council is asserting that there is a theological link between the gratuity of creation and its contingency that had yet to be worked out in full – a link that unfortunately becomes so exaggerated in the radical voluntarists that any analogical relation between creation and creator is denied. This in turn once again leads to fideism and the concomitant need to seek a warrant for theological statements outside the theological realm as such.

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<sup>23</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998, p. 117. It must be pointed out here that this is in no way meant to imply that post-Augustinian western theology had lost the connection between God as rational creator and God as loving Father, especially as this western tradition culminates in the putatively rationalistic-Aristotelian philosophy of Aquinas. It must never be forgotten that Aquinas was a theologian first and a philosopher second and that these two aspects of his *Summa* constitute an organic whole, the methodological distinction between philosophy and theology having not yet reached the full-scale division it would later become. As I have previously noted, citing Gilson's analysis of Aquinas, there can be no sense in which we can superficially play off Bonaventure against Aquinas, or the mystics against Aquinas, imputing to the latter a rationalistic view of God that takes no note of how Christian philosophy is rooted in theology and the insights gained from the economy of salvation. The point of this section is less ambitious than a wholesale critique of the influence of Augustine or Aquinas or Aristotle. Rather, it is a simple historical observation that by the advent of the thirteenth century, Christian theology had lost some of its patristic trinitarian-Christological orientation and had begun to speak in its reflections on creation in proto-deistic fashion in the language of a generic monotheism, with trinitarian and Christological considerations acting as a kind of Christian addendum to the more primary theological category of 'God'. All that being said, even the grand synthesis of Aquinas cannot escape some of the blame for this situation, since even he, in his discussion of creation, places almost exclusive weight upon the creation narrative in Genesis, with little consideration for how the New Testament gives the doctrine of creation a Christological radicalization.

*C. John Duns Scotus: the individuation of form*<sup>24</sup>

John Duns Scotus, as Dupré points out, ‘understood that a theology based on the primacy of love must appraise the individual differently than one based on the ancient priority of universal cognition.’<sup>25</sup> What Bernard and Bonaventure had emphasized – an exemplarist Christological doctrine of creation and the construal of creation’s relationship with God as a loving bridal covenant – was now modified by Scotus to include a renewed emphasis upon the importance of the individuality of the objects of creation. For if God creates out of love and bestows on creation the gift of existence, then what God loves is precisely the individual as such and not simply an intelligible archetype in the divine mind. Scotus did not like some of the implications of the Thomistic-Bonaventuran elevation of the forms used in creation to the status of eternal ideas existing in the divine mind as part of the divine nature. This, it seemed to Scotus, undermined the patristic notion of the omnipotent infinity of God as the source for the radically contingent world, i.e. if creation *ex nihilo* means anything at all, it means that there were no prior constraints upon God’s creative will (unlike pagan cosmogenic myths), and that the forms used to create the individual objects of creation were themselves a part of this creative act and just as contingent as the rest of creation.<sup>26</sup> Thus Scotus wants to place more emphasis upon the infinite, loving will of God as the prime motive behind creation, with a concomitant reaffirmation of the contingency of creation – including the individual forms of finite things – since the contingency of the world as existing for no reason only underscores the purely gratuitous nature of the divine generosity in creating. What God knows is his own essence and this divine essence is the only thing that God knows necessarily. The generation of finite essences is a logically posterior act that God is in no way constrained to carry out. There is only one reason

<sup>24</sup> It must always be kept in mind that we know very little about the life of Scotus. Even his dates of birth and death are in question. Furthermore, many of his extant writings seem to have been reworked by others following his death. For example, one of the works traditionally ascribed to him, the *Theoremata*, which was chiefly responsible for Scotus’s reputation as an opponent of scholastic metaphysics, is now considered by many (e.g. Gilson) not to be an authentic work of Scotus. One of the most reliable sources, coming at the end of his life and representing his mature thought, was his *Quodlibetal* in Paris. See, *God and Creatures: The Quodlibetal Questions*, Felix Alluntis, O.F.M. & Allan Wolter, O.F.M. (trans.) Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, New York: Random House, 1955, p. 461. Gilson states: ‘We have seen that, while maintaining the divine ideas, Scotus stresses their ideal posteriority with regard to the thought of God. In this sense Duns Scotus was less of a Platonist than St Thomas had been. But once the essences are posited in the divine intellect, Duns Scotus attributes more proper and distinct entity to forms than Saint Thomas had done.’ It is important to note here that Scotus remains within the medieval world’s fundamental orientation towards form and was not, as many of his critics claim, an empiricist who destroyed metaphysics. His disagreement with Aquinas on this point has to do with the complicated question of the proper manner of making distinctions between the various divine attributes and the relationship between the divine intellect and the divine will. For our purposes we do not need to engage these questions.

God creates and that is that he *wills* to do so. Why does God will to do so? That is something we cannot know, beyond the mere affirmation that God wills it because he wills it. But once God does will it out of love, it becomes a part of the divine mind and is known by God (keeping in mind that notions of before and after here are purely formal distinctions).<sup>27</sup>

This in turn creates a shift away from abstract universals eternally existing in the mind of God, as part of the divine nature, to a greater epistemological emphasis upon particularity as an expression of the divine will. This shift increases the importance of particularity because we can no longer ground the essence in a necessary idea, i.e. in theory knowable through religious contemplation of the divine form in Christ, and must assert instead that a thing is what it is simply because God wills it. The common thread in Scotus' thinking is the radical contingency of all created forms. Colin Gunton points out that what this shows is that for Scotus, 'The ultimate reality of a thing is to be found in its being what it is rather than in its instantiating general notions or forms.'<sup>28</sup> For Scotus then, individuation is not a composite addition to form, creating the concrete entity, but a formal determination within the essence itself. As Dupré puts it, for Scotus:

What distinguishes one being from another of the same kind and makes it this rather than another – the *forma individualis* – is itself a form, rather than being a mere quantification of a universal species singularized by the principle of indeterminacy ... The singularity of the individual adds a formal characteristic to the universal forms of genus and species. Individuality, then, far from being a mere sign of contingency,

<sup>27</sup> Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy*, p. 461.

<sup>28</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, p. 119. Gunton, a Protestant, offers an analysis of the differences between Aquinas and Scotus that is insightful, but marred by his clear animus against the Catholic appropriation of the Aristotelian and Platonic traditions. He reads Aquinas as a crypto pantheist, citing Aquinas' overemphasis on an analogical concept of being, coupled with the various universal intelligible forms acting as quasi-eternal, semi-divine intermediaries between God and creation. He concludes his analysis of Scotus by asserting that Scotus' rejection of the analogical concept of being in favour of a univocal concept is tantamount to Scotus playing the role of a new Irenaeus in overcoming Gnosticism for the second time! (p. 120). The problem with this analysis is that it oversimplifies Gnosticism. Certainly, Gnostics believed in spiritual intermediaries between God and the world; but that was because God was considered to exist in a realm of spiritual purity that could not be defiled by contact with the evil material world. Furthermore, because of this distance God was viewed as utterly inscrutable, knowable only through esoteric revelations. For Scotus, the radicalization of the notion of contingency in creation brings with it the same kind of inscrutability, only this time located within our knowledge of the divine will. For as Gilson points out, 'In a doctrine which is based upon univocal being and not upon analogical acts of being, a dividing line other than the act of being must be drawn between God and creatures. The role played in Thomism by the existential purity of the divine Act of Being, is played in Scotism by the divine will.' (*History of Christian Philosophy*, p. 460). It is a short distance, as we shall see, from the utter inscrutability of the divine will, to an open agnosticism concerning the ability to know anything at all about God through observation of created realities. Thus the rejection of an analogical concept of being, while seemingly preserving our notion of God from any taint of Platonism, opens us up to the notion of a purely arbitrary God, trusted only fideistically and with the gnawing Cartesian fear that it is all a dream spawned by a demon.

constitutes the supreme form, and perfect knowledge consists in knowing this individual form.<sup>29</sup>

This greater emphasis upon particularity brought with it a heightened sense of the importance of the mind's knowledge of the empirical and individual object of perception. Scotus shared with Aquinas a basic epistemological realism and, like Aquinas, asserted that the true knowledge of an object is not reached until one has obtained a true definition of its form. Furthermore, Scotus broke with the Augustinian tradition of his Franciscan order in that he rejected the idea that knowledge of these forms was the result of either innate ideas placed there by God, or by a kind of direct divine illumination. The universal forms are real, and the intellect is capable of grasping these forms through a process of abstraction. In this sense, Scotus was a classic medieval scholastic, belying, at least partially, his reputation as the great destroyer of medieval metaphysics.<sup>30</sup>

However, Scotus broke with Aquinas on a fundamental epistemological point that had serious consequences. Aquinas had held that we do not have a direct mental intuition of the individual object known through the senses, but the

<sup>29</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, pp. 38–9.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Alisdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, pp. 152–6. MacIntyre offers an interesting take on the role of Scotus in the demise of the medieval ontotheological synthesis. According to MacIntyre, what characterized philosophy in its pre-modern context was its embodiment as an integrated part of an entire discourse tradition. In short, the rationality that any particular type of philosophy embodied was dependent upon its contextualization in a particular tradition with its own particular expression of what it means to be reasonable. Philosophy as a separate academic discipline in the university, embodying a kind of pure reason that was construed as neutral and objective vis-à-vis all particular value commitments, had not yet been invented. Scotus contributes to the demise of the ontotheological synthesis of medieval thinking in so far as he is at least indirectly responsible for aiding in the rise of the pseudo-objectivity of modern reason by arguing for the separation of philosophy from theology. Paradoxically, says MacIntyre, Scotus does this for purely theological reasons: he is trying to preserve the Augustinian theological system from the encroachment of the new Aristotelianism. This becomes clear in his difficulties with the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of the soul and its relationship to the body, which then leads to his famous assertions on the ability of the soul-intellect to apprehend individual objects through direct intuition rather than relying upon the mediation of the imagination, itself a function of the body. This then leads him to articulate a more strict separation between what can be known through philosophy and what can be known through theology. MacIntyre concludes: 'Paradoxically Scotus, whose philosophical enquiries were at every point controlled by his theological conclusions and whose primary interest was in protecting the autonomy of Augustinian theology from the inroads of either Averroist or Thomistic Aristotelianism, set the scene instead for the emergence of philosophy as an autonomous discipline or set of disciplines, with its own defining problematics. Much else of course had to happen later, both intellectually and in the curriculum. Nonetheless, from a Thomistic perspective, it is at this point that philosophy is redefined as an autonomous academic discipline. ... Thereafter, however, it is incidentally hospitable in a variety of ways to some of the concerns of a number of warring traditions, even if characteristically with the proviso that they present themselves only in terms acceptable to the academic conventions and genres of the discipline.', pp. 155–6.

mind abstracts the intelligible form from the individuality of the object, which is in turn then rendered into what Aquinas calls a 'phantasm' (image) in the mind through which we know the individual object. Thus all intellectual knowledge of individual things is indirect. Scotus seems to misunderstand the import of this Thomistic position and sees in it an overemphasis on the creative role of the mind in our knowing.<sup>31</sup> How, asks Scotus, can we abstract the intelligible form from the individuality of the object of our perception if we do not first have a rather direct intuition of the individual object as such? The category of experience is key here; for Scotus, as well as Aquinas, the assertion that all knowledge is ultimately rooted in the senses is tantamount to saying that all knowledge is rooted in experience. Our experience, says Scotus, is of individual objects, not just in our senses, but in the mental concept as well. Scotus thus ties the mental concept to the empirical sensible perception of the object more closely than does Aquinas. Frederick Copleston summarizes this line of analysis as follows:

He was not prepared to accept Aquinas' doctrine that the human mind does not know individual things directly or immediately. ... Scotus rejected this view in favour of the view that the mind does have a primary, though confused, intuition of the individual thing as such. How, he asks, could we abstract the universal from the individual thing without a previous intellectual intuition of the individual thing? If the mind abstracts, it abstracts from what it knows. Abstraction, then, presupposes this intuition of the individual thing; and if there were no such intuition on the part of the mind, there would be no guarantee of the objective reference and foundation of our abstract universal ideas.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Here, it seems, Scotus begins the process whereby the Thomistic notion of knowledge *through* the phantasm comes to be degraded into the idea of knowledge *of* the phantasm. The later nominalists clearly misunderstood the Thomistic phantasm as a reified intermediary between the mind and the object, and thus reject it as superfluous in favour of a more direct empirical knowledge of the object as such. Thomas, of course, never viewed the phantasm as a reified intermediary, but asserted instead that the knower and the known come into union with one another through the active intellect bathing the phantasm with the light of understanding. The metaphysical interiority of the object of knowledge, through the mind's power of abstraction, becomes part of the inner life of the knower. Certainly, it is not a direct conceptual intuition of the object, since what is known is known according to the modality of the knower, but this is not the same as later idealism, and is, ironically, a radically realist construal of knowledge insofar as it posits a real participative union between two intelligibilities; that of the knower and that of the known. Nominalism has the ironic effect of driving a wedge between knower and known and destroying such notions of shared intelligibility. Nature now comes to be viewed as more alien, and intelligibility is the province of the human mind alone.

<sup>32</sup> Frederick Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1961, pp. 108–9.

*D. William of Ockham and nominalism: the denial of form*<sup>33</sup>

Scotus may have begun the process whereby the reality of universal forms was called into question, but he remained within the fundamental categories of scholastic thought. His great contribution to the historical process that led from the medieval fascination with universals to the modern rejection of the same was his introduction of the notion of individuality as a formal determination within the intelligible species itself. Nevertheless, he was still an epistemological realist who held, even more strongly than Aquinas, that the mental concept of an object's intelligible form corresponds to something in the objective reality of the thing known. William of Ockham, on the other hand, was highly critical of this radical realism. Ockham begins with his famous rejection of the reality of the universal intelligible species and he ends with what can only be described as an instrumentalist view of reason. Although histories of the period often exaggerate the influence of Ockham's philosophy on the rise of modern science, there can be no doubt that his system is symptomatic of a change in the medieval outlook, signalling a shift to a more empirical and pragmatic cast of mind.<sup>34</sup>

The position for which Ockham is most noted is his rejection of the ontological reality of universal intelligible forms. What is known is the individual object as such, known precisely as a unique individual and not as the instantiation of some vague universal form. Universal concepts are but the *nomina* (names) we give to similar individual objects for the utilitarian purpose of classification, hence the term 'nominalism' to describe this philosophical movement. For Ockham and his followers, every substance is irreducibly individual and no single individual shares a common nature with another individual. When we know an object, it is primarily

<sup>33</sup> As we saw with Scotus, it must be kept in mind that Ockham never produced a series of systematized works that laid out his thought in a clear and linear fashion. Furthermore, a distinction must be made between his work at Oxford and his later political works, after his conflict with Pope John XXII over the issue of Franciscan poverty spilled over into open defiance and an apparent claim that the Pope was heretical and therefore illegitimate. This claim eventually caused him to flee to the protection of King Louis of Bavaria who was more than willing to help out due to his own on-going disputes with the Pope. Two of the most reliable theological and philosophical works we possess are from his early period before his conflict with the Papacy. His commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, the *Ordinatio Ockham* (finished before 1323) as well as his major work on logic and argumentation, the *Summa totius logicae* (1328) are rich sources of information on Ockham's thought.

<sup>34</sup> Naydler, 'The Regeneration of Realism,' Naydler points out that the influence of nominalist philosophy on the major thinkers of the scientific revolution is often much less than is commonly thought. Why then is the study of this period significant? For Naydler, 'Its significance lies rather in the fact that in nominalism there came to expression in philosophical theory what was already beginning to take place in the human soul, namely a *changed feeling* towards the natural world.' p. 163. I think Naydler is correct up to a point. Certainly, the social revolution that was modernity had no single cause. However, the conventional wisdom on the influence of nominalism is more to the point in matters theological than scientific. The early Reformers were clearly influenced by nominalism, as were many of the Augustinian radicals in the Catholic camp. The voluntarism and theological dualism of these movements opens up a space for the theological affirmation of the purely secular, a move, which opens the door for the rise of mechanistic naturalism in science.



through a simple intuition gained through sensual perception of the sensible aspects of the object without any intelligible form being somehow mysteriously transferred to the knower. Ockham did not reject the idea that human beings can form universal concepts. Indeed, he held that they are necessary in order for us to make use of nature and to make our way in the world. But these universals in no way exist anywhere but in the mind. The classical idea that in knowing an object a real union is effected between the knower and the known is thus lost, and our relationship with nature comes to be construed more and more in the language of efficient causality alone. Furthermore, in classical Christian thinking there had always been a systematic conceptual unity between the related ideas of the intelligibility of nature, the universal concepts in our minds and the exemplarist doctrine of creation. This systematic unity had formed the backbone for the ontotheological unity of God, cosmos and humanity. However, in one swing of the philosophical axe the nominalist rejection of universal form severs the thread that created this unity. In short order, nominalist thinkers move on to develop a univocal concept of being, an instrumental approach to nature, and a distant God who must now be sought in some form of religious immediacy, since finite mediations for God have been rendered suspect. Naydler once again summarizes this point nicely:

If matter is an entity in its own right, without needing to be infused with form in order to have actuality, then the formal aspect of the material world – i.e. that aspect that in medieval realism was regarded as having a special affinity with human thought – becomes superfluous to it. It becomes, as it were, creamed off and confined to the human mind, leaving a merely quantitative residue as the objectively real world. ... Thought, which previously had been felt to pervade the whole world, is now so to speak drained out of nature and concentrated inside the human skull.<sup>35</sup>

All this follows as a consequence of the rejection of form. Metaphysically, Ockham seemed to hold that the very idea of a universal form that can manifest itself in a multiplicity of individuals was incoherent. How, he asks, can the form be something distinct from matter without being an individual thing itself? And if it's an individual thing, then how can it manifest itself as a universal in a multiplicity of things?<sup>36</sup> Underlying this metaphysical position seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding of Aquinas' epistemological doctrine of the intelligible species, as well as displaying a certain nascent bifurcation between subject and object. Ockham here seems to be leaning on an epistemological argument against the intelligible species first articulated by the Dominican, Durandus. He held that it made no sense to say that we know individual objects through abstracting their intelligible species because this does not answer how we know the species. Is not another species required to know the first one and so forth? St Thomas, as we saw in our discussion of Scotus, did not hold that the species is a direct object of knowledge in its own right, mediating between two realities – the knower and the known – that are radically different from one another. Rather, Aquinas held that in knowing, there is a union between the knower and the known that the

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<sup>35</sup> Naydler, p. 164.

<sup>36</sup> Naydler, p. 164.



intelligible species brings to light. We do not know a thing by first knowing its species as a reified direct object of perception. In knowing, there is a sympathetic coming together of the metaphysical interiority of the object with the conceptual intelligibility of the mind, a coming together that is not effected by the species as a direct object of perception that then mediates between the subject and object, but known through the species in an act of intellectual understanding.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most serious consequence of the nominalist rejection of form, and the consequent destruction of the medieval ontotheological synthesis, was that it led to an exaggerated sense of the inscrutability of the divine will. Once the link between the creative providence of God and the intelligibility of nature was severed, there was no longer any analogical link between God and the world. God becomes a distant and inscrutable omnipotence, defined in terms of raw, unlimited power, whose ways are not our ways. The novelty of this position vis-à-vis what came before it can be illustrated in the manner in which the nominalists changed the medieval understanding of the relationship between God's immanent sovereignty and his outward economic actions. Traditionally, medieval thinkers had made a distinction between God's power as *potentia absoluta* (God's immanent power over creation as such) and God's power as *potentia ordinata* (the economic manner in which God has freely chosen to deal with creation.).<sup>38</sup> This distinction had always been thought of as a purely formal one, with the unity of God's immanent and economic actions affirmed. One would never have to doubt the trustworthy nature of God's actions because it was theologically assumed that God would always act towards creation in a manner that is utterly consistent with the divine perfections. For God to act in any other way would be tantamount to acting against his own divinity, which is absurd. However, nominalist philosophers took this medieval distinction and changed its traditional understanding from a purely formal one for purposes of understanding to a real metaphysical distinction within God. The theological unity between God's immanent and economic power is torn asunder as Ockham viewed the *potentia absoluta* as unlimited in power, constrained by nothing except what is logically possible. In theory God could choose to change completely the manner in which creation has been set up, including possible scenarios at odds with our current understanding of goodness. The *potentia ordinata*, therefore, bears no more than a logical connection with the *potentia absoluta*, e.g. God could have chosen to make what we now call 'good' into the 'bad' and vice versa as long as there is no logical contradiction involved. The moral order is therefore utterly dependent upon whatever it is that God deems to be good or evil. God is *causa sui* and is defined, simply, as 'incomprehensible power', a power constrained by absolutely nothing except pure logic, existing in a state of radical sovereignty and autonomy.

<sup>37</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 40. Dupré states that for Aquinas: 'In the species the real is united with the mind, and turns its potential intelligibility into actual understanding. Being the very union of the mind with its object, it is neither a copy nor a representative of the known object. Indeed, it is not known in itself at all, since no independent reality mediates between knower and object.' Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 85, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Dupré, 176–7.

It would seem on the surface that this exaggerated sense of divine omnipotence and the radical contingency of nature would lead quite naturally to a view of nature as rationally incoherent and arbitrary. This in turn would not have been conducive to the rise of a mechanistic, law-like view of nature. However, even though in the nominalist system God could change his mind at any time, the nominalists asserted, in an arbitrary move of their own, that once God ordains something, it becomes virtually unchangeable and therefore trustworthy. More important than this assertion, however, is the manner in which the nominalist construal of the divine will as an infinite autonomy lends itself to the eventual extension of this notion of power and will as autonomy to creaturely secondary causes as well. According to Ockham, God first possesses himself in the *potentia absoluta*, but then chooses in a secondary moment to extend this power to secondary causes as well.<sup>39</sup> With the destruction of the notion of form, the nominalists had already destroyed the metaphysically intimate concept of creaturely participation in the intelligibility of God, as well as the objects of our perception. Now, with the advent of a notion of God as raw power, nature becomes a simple product of God's efficient causality and takes on a relative independence of its own. Indeed, the very hallmark of creatureliness now becomes the self-sufficiency of secondary causes as effective agents of causation. Whereas Aquinas emphasized that all efficient causation was at one and the same time a completely human and a completely divine act, the nominalists sever this vertical connection to transcendence and construe all causation in a horizontal manner. Nature now takes on an independence never before dreamed of in the classical-medieval world-view, while God becomes less immanent and more external to creation. The nominalist God, therefore, has already begun the journey into the dualistic heteronomy that will so mark the theological and scientific debates of modernity.

The theologian John Milbank makes a similar point in his seminal study, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*.<sup>40</sup> Milbank's analysis of the rise of secularity is both bold and idiosyncratic. He holds that theology not only legitimates the growing secularity of late medieval society but rather, theology creates secularity. This is accomplished in those nominalist and voluntarist theologies that describe God's freedom precisely as a form of raw power and *sui generis* autonomy. Human freedom is therefore also most in the image of this God when it too is characterized by an autonomy that leads to power and control over nature. The biblical concept of Adam's dominion over nature was one of a participatory stewardship. However, late medieval theology replaces this with a later Roman concept of dominion as power and

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<sup>39</sup> Dupré, 177.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, pp. 9–26. Interestingly, the ethical vagueness of this project has not escaped popular imagination. Movies such as 'Mad Max' and 'Terminator' capture something of the public's anxiety over what can happen if human technical know-how advances without ethical orientation. In a kind of modern apocalyptic discourse, such futuristic science fiction is in reality a commentary on the need for contemporary decision: do we give a 'yes' or a 'no' to the seductive allure of unbridled power?

control of property. Thus human freedom is most like the divine freedom precisely when it exercises its rational faculty in the technical manipulation of the natural world for human benefit; the very secular autonomy of technical science arises out of a theological vision of freedom as autonomous power. The whole realm of the artifact is now imbued with a quasi-theological significance. This can be seen in the almost mystical modern apotheosis of technical progress as a form of religious-scientific utopianism devoid of any ethical constraint other than its own 'theological' imperative to 'go forth and multiply.'

### *E. The Separation of Nature and Grace*

As we have seen, the world did not have to wait for the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century to find the rudiments of a dualistic and heteronomous God. The seeds of modernity had already been planted by the nominalists. However, there were also other forces at work that conspired to drive a wedge between nature and grace, creating an intellectual atmosphere where the study of nature as an independent reality could increasingly move forward with minimal theological input. The dispute over the proper relationship between nature and grace might seem arcane to some, but it is the central theological issue for determining the outlines of the God-world relationship in general and is, therefore, of critical importance for our analysis here.

The introduction of Aristotle again looms large as one of the primary causes of this shift in thought. Aristotle had held, as we have seen, that teleology is the determinative characteristic of any object. For that reason Aristotle also held that it was of paramount importance that we hold to the principle that all objects must be endowed with teleological ends that are proportionate to the natural means at their disposal for reaching those ends. Applied to human beings, this means that human nature must contain within itself, as a constituent part of its make-up, the means for attaining the moral and social ends of human existence. This view presented a problem for the Christian expositors of Aristotle, since Christian doctrine holds firmly to the supernatural gratuity of grace and salvation. It simply cannot be the case that we have a natural right to grace, for that would mean that God would owe grace to us as a condition for the fulfilment of our natural teleology. The solution was to posit two related but separate ends for human nature. The first end was a purely natural one with purely world-centred goals. The second end was our supernatural calling to life with God. The question now becomes, what is the relationship between our natural and supernatural ends? Are they to be held strictly separate or should they be considered as two aspects of a single, concrete human nature?

Aquinas answers this question with his typical genius for synthetic construction. For Aquinas, the distinction between nature and grace is a purely formal one. We do not live in a state of pure nature (*natura pura*) without any reference to God, only to have grace added on to our nature as some alien

encrustation.<sup>41</sup> From the moment of our creation as material beings endowed with a spiritual soul created immediately by God, we have been gifted with a natural desire to see God (*desiderium naturale visionis dei*).<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Aquinas affirms that this supernatural vocation is the single final *telos* of human nature; it is the sole end that defines the form of human existence.<sup>43</sup> For Aquinas, 'To each thing a single end is naturally appropriate, which it seeks by a natural necessity, for nature always tends to one thing.'<sup>44</sup> Since the human soul is spiritual-intellectual, it follows that 'Every intellect naturally desires the vision of divine substance.'<sup>45</sup> Thus, it is important to note that for Aquinas the gratuity of grace is not constituted by the fact that its reality corresponds to no true end of human nature. Indeed, to turn down the gift of God's offer of grace is to court disaster in the form of eternal damnation. Thus the existential seriousness inherent in the Christian story of the drama of human salvation in no way allows us to treat our supernatural vocation as a completely extraneous add-on to an otherwise happy human condition.<sup>46</sup> Therefore whatever the

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, New York: Crossroad, 1998, esp. chs 4 & 5. De Lubac's analysis of Aquinas' theology of nature and grace, though not without its critics, is in my opinion, the definitive study on the topic. *The Mystery of the Supernatural* was first written in 1965 in order to answer some of the criticisms that had been made of his foundational work on this subject, *Surnaturel* in 1946.

<sup>42</sup> The centrality of this point for Aquinas can be seen in the numerous places in his writings where it is referenced. To name just two: ST I, q. 12, a. 1; I-II, q. 3, a. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Obviously this is a contested point in modern scholarship. There are currently two approaches to the thought of Aquinas on this point in modern Catholic theology: The Lubacian approach and the Neo-Thomist. De Lubac argued that there are two ends to human nature, one natural and one supernatural. The natural end is achievable by purely natural means and is our penultimate end. The supernatural end is a constitutive part of human nature as well, and is our true final end. The Neo-Thomists argue that this threatens the gratuity of grace and that Aquinas did not hold such a view. Rather, they would view Aquinas as arguing for our supernatural end as a new and gratuitous finality given to us through the merits of Christ. To say anything else is to imply that God has planted in human nature an end for which it has no capacity of its own to achieve, thus giving human nature a claim upon grace. De Lubac counters this argument by citing texts in Aquinas (e.g. *Ethic.*, vi, 13) that clearly state that even though God has given us a final end we cannot attain on our own, he has given us free will, which allows us to accept the help of God in a manner analogous to us receiving help from a friend. What we can do with the help of friends, in a certain secondary and qualified sense, we can do ourselves. The debate is far too complex to analyse here in any depth. Furthermore, it is not strictly speaking necessary to do so. The proper interpretation of Aquinas is an important topic in Catholic theology, but for our purposes it is sufficient to note that by the time you get to the interpreters of Aquinas, the view that there are two final ends to human nature – one natural and one supernatural – had gained wide acceptance in Catholic theology. However, I will say that my own interpretation is consonant with that of de Lubac and it shall therefore be the guiding assumption in my analysis. For an excellent overview of the debate see: Nicholas J. Healy, 'Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace: A Note on Some Recent Contributions to the Debate', *Communio: International Catholic Review* (Vo. XXXV, no. 4), pp. 535–564.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo*, q. 16, art. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk 3, c. 57.

<sup>46</sup> There are those who would hold (and perhaps Aquinas is among them) that we can abstract some concept of pure nature from our concrete mode of existence, but this abstraction is what Karl Rahner has referred to as a simple 'remainder concept' (*Restbegriff*). In other words, we

Christian doctrine of the gratuity of grace might mean, it simply cannot mean that the offer of divine life is somehow extrinsic to our fundamental natural constitution as spiritual beings. Since there is a cosmic element to human salvation – we do not, after all, live as isolated islands of engraced being in an otherwise theologically inert universe – it follows that the divine call of creation is also something intrinsic to the natural world as well, negating any possibility of a nature-grace dualism in the broader cosmos.<sup>47</sup>

But what then becomes of the gratuity of grace for Aquinas? According to de Lubac, the fundamental problem in our analysis of Aquinas has been the tendency of some to over abstract both the concept of nature and the concept of grace. De Lubac states that the best way to understand what Aquinas was trying to accomplish is to draw an analogy between the originating act of creation and the elevation of creation by grace. First, he points out that it is wrong to conceive of the originating act of creation as an act whereby God gives existence to something that is already there to receive it – our existence as such is given in the very act

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may distinguish between nature and grace for the sake of philosophical and theological clarity, as well as to preserve certain central Christian doctrines from misunderstanding (such as the gratuity of grace), but in the concrete reality of our lived existence, there is only one, singular existential condition that we all share: we all live within the economy of the 'Fall-Redemption' drama. So for Aquinas, our human nature, though deeply wounded by sin, nevertheless retains its fundamental orientation to a transcendent fulfilment. De Lubac notes that Aquinas did accept the famous *desiderium naturale*, the so-called 'natural desire' for God. However, de Lubac also notes that this term can be misunderstood in overly vague and generic categories, which is why Aquinas took pains to point out that our thirst for God is a desire *of* our nature as such (*naturae desiderium*), a very concrete and specific desire given to human nature as one of its constitutive elements at the moment of creation. (De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, p. 58.)

<sup>47</sup> Here I must take issue somewhat with an ambiguity in de Lubac's analysis of Aquinas. In discussing the supernatural vocation of the human being, de Lubac marshals as one of his theological arguments the dogmatic affirmation of the Church that each and every human soul is immediately and directly created by God. This is to affirm the essentially spiritual-intellectual nature of the soul and therefore, by extension, the spiritual vision to which the soul is naturally inclined by nature. However, de Lubac then goes on to make a distinction between the supernatural vocation of the human soul and the non-necessity of positing a supernatural vocation for those aspects of the material creation that are governed by the laws of physics and chemistry. He states: 'One can of course readily admit that the supernatural finality of our universe has no direct relationship with, for instance, the laws of physics or chemistry; and that therefore if (*per impossibile*) this universe should be suddenly deprived of any supernatural finality, those laws would remain unchanged.' (*The Mystery of the Supernatural*, p. 72.) This affirmation, it seems to me, reintroduces certain dualistic tendencies that the entirety of de Lubac's theology was meant to counteract. Indeed, the fundamental thesis of de Lubac's entire theological career was that the relationship of creation to the creator is to be characterized not as a nature-grace dualism, but as a paradox, i.e. the more I am united to God, the more truly myself I can be, because God is more intimate to me than I am to myself. On this point see the excellent introduction by David Schindler to *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (pp. xi–xxxi). Therefore, even though it might be hard for us to imagine, even the more 'law-like' aspects of nature would share in this paradox, keeping in mind as well that a large part of who we are as human beings, our bodily dimension, is also governed by fixed laws of nature. However, in fairness to de Lubac, it must be pointed out that his favourable studies on the thought of Teilhard de Chardin indicate a fundamental openness to a more expansive view of salvation.

of conferring existence. Thus creation is not a gratuitous action similar to human acts of gifting insofar as our gifts always already presuppose a relationship between the giver and the receiver, even if they are strangers to one another.<sup>48</sup> Here such commensurate comparisons simply do not exist; creation is an act of sheer gratuity or it is gratuity as such. There is no sense, in other words, in which I as a creature can lay claim to existence and say that it was in any sense owed to me. Likewise, even if, in the very act of creating, God endows some of his creatures with an intellectual soul, thus gifting them with a supernatural vocation, there can be no sense in which the creature can lay claim to this vocation as if it were owed to him. Thus, the distinction between nature and grace is a purely formal one and is necessary only insofar as there is a need to delineate between differing aspects of the one act of creation. Nevertheless, in the concrete act of creating, God has in fact, in a pure act of gratuitous love, endowed creation with a supernatural vocation and has subsequently granted to humanity the various supernatural gifts required for humanity to fulfill this calling. Human existence is therefore marked by a double gratuity, even as we acknowledge that there is nothing more intrinsic to me as a human being than my act of existence as such, as well as my vocation to a supernatural elevation.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> De Lubac does not elaborate on this point, but the thrust of this observation seems to be that all human beings, simply by virtue of our participation in the single, unified human family, have a relationship with one another. This analysis, therefore, should be read in conjunction with one of de Lubac's other seminal works, *Catholicism* (1937), in which he articulates a theological case for the unity of the human race and its history.

<sup>49</sup> De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, pp. 75–81. It must be pointed out here that de Lubac goes to great lengths to distance himself from any hint that the supernatural evolves quite naturally out of the latent potentialities of the natural. In other words, even though he is drawing an analogy between the act of creation and the act of engraced elevation, the analogy is purely on the level of the gratuity that is involved in both instances. To stretch the analogy too far, de Lubac is quick to point out, runs the risk of viewing the act of creation as including everything in seed form that we will later need to reach our supernatural vocation: all that is required is that I 'grow' into an understanding of my fundamental spiritual abilities and to make use of them. This is the immanentist mistake made by so many religious systems and against which Christianity stands in resolute opposition. Instead, all that de Lubac is arguing for here is that in the act of creation human nature is given a set of capacities for a supernatural fulfilment, but that these capacities can in no way be actualized by natural means alone. The gift of divine grace, though not alien to human nature, is nevertheless discontinuous with it and represents an eschatological radicalizing of our nature that only God can achieve. The exact contour of our supernatural elevation is not something that could have been guessed at by simply analysing the human condition, any more than the full revelation of God's plan in the Incarnation could have been precisely predicted by anyone with a knowledge of the Old Testament. The fact that Christology is contained in the Old Covenant in no way implies that the New Testament flows out of the old in a simple, linear and homogenous fashion. Therefore, the fact that grace is discontinuous with human nature does not mean that it is not, at the same time, the profoundest fulfilment of human nature. Just as, with the advent of modern scholarship, we now conceive of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments as less tight and linear than before, it is nevertheless precisely the element of discontinuity between the Testaments that allows the New Covenant to be an even more profound fulfilment of the Old than anyone could have imagined.

This rather simple answer to the problem of the gratuity of grace was shared not only by Aquinas but also by Augustine and virtually the entirety of the patristic tradition.<sup>50</sup> Neither the fathers of the Church, nor Augustine, nor the scholastics would have construed the relationship between nature and grace in any other fashion, namely, that God, out of the sheer gratuity of his love, has gifted the human race, in the very depth of its being, with a calling to a single, supernatural end: the beatific vision of the Eternal Trinity.<sup>51</sup> Nor would any of them have thought for a moment that the existential depth of this calling in any way called into question the utter gratuity of this condition, as if the only way to preserve the gratuity of grace is to point out how superfluous and utterly unnecessary for our natural happiness it really is. Those theologians who would argue that there is nothing within human nature as such that could be called a supernatural end run the risk of divorcing the Christian mystery from the mystery of creation. The Christological question then is this: does Christ truly reveal to humanity the true meaning of the depth of our nature, or does he merely reveal to us the true meaning of our nature in the light of its perfecting in grace?

However, as the history of theology shows us, the traditional synthesis on this issue did not last. Aquinas may have been able to import Aristotle's philosophical categories into a still largely Augustinian-patristic framework, but those who came after him were less gifted in their powers of synthetic construction.<sup>52</sup> As Yves

<sup>50</sup> On this point Nicholas Healy makes the interesting observation that in the debate between a Lubacian interpretation of Aquinas and that of the Neo-Thomists, the tendency of the latter is to focus so much on Aquinas as the developer of a new synthesis, and indeed the creator of a new intellectual tradition, that they miss Aquinas' own self-understanding as an ecclesial theologian operating completely within the on-going tradition. Indeed, Aquinas himself probably would never have wanted to be viewed as the *sui generis* wellspring of an entirely new commentatorial tradition. Rather, the proper hermeneutic for interpreting Aquinas is that of de Lubac, who situates Aquinas firmly within the patristic and Augustinian traditions. This approach has the advantage of situating our focus in the debates that swirl around the nature-grace dynamic on the question of what it is that Revelation teaches us in this matter, as this Revelation has been carried forward in the totality of the Church's tradition. In other words, even if Aquinas teaches that the supernatural end of human existence is not part of our created nature (a big if that I reject), there remains the possibility that he is wrong. Thus the matter is not settled theologically by simply asking the question: 'what did Thomas say?' And that, I would submit, would be a very un-Thomistic way of approaching the problem. Cf. Healy, 'Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace,' p. 557.

<sup>51</sup> De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, p. 96. De Lubac states: 'Nothing in fact could be simpler, and nothing would be simpler to understand and therefore accept, if the whole thing had not gradually been complicated and confused. The greatest doctors in the Christian tradition have never said anything else. They have said it and repeated it, very simply and quite clearly. The explanations we have to supply nowadays are intended as a return to their simplicity. They were able to see in a unified gaze the fullness of God's liberty, without attributing any arbitrariness unworthy of it to His work. The angle of vision is not exactly the same for them all; but their aim is the same nonetheless, and it leads them all to the same central point.'

<sup>52</sup> The fact that Aquinas made liberal use of Aristotle goes without saying. However, one of the problems that emerges in the commentators on Aquinas is an exaggeration of just how Aristotelian as opposed to Platonic-Augustinian Aquinas was. Numerous studies have now shown that Aquinas was deeply influenced by the Church Fathers and by Augustine in



Congar points out, there is a twofold movement at work here with regard to the interpretation of Aquinas. First, after his canonization there is a strong movement to elevate the theology of Aquinas to a very high place in the medieval curriculum, e.g. replacing Peter Lombard's *Sentences* with the *Summa* as the primary text for theological education. Second, as time goes on and the various ecclesiological controversies rip the Church's unity asunder, it does not go unnoticed by many in the Catholic camp that the Augustinian theological tradition had been put to liberal use by both the Reformers as well as later Catholic extremists, such as the Jansenists and the followers of Baius. In these various theologies, Augustine's theology of the radical corruption of the human condition by original sin is abstracted from its historical context as an exaggerated, rhetorical reaction to Pelagianism and put to use to attack the integrity of nature and free will. Congar summarizes this point:

Unquestionably, the authority of St Thomas after his canonization is affirmed and extended in an exceptional manner. His progress can be measured in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This general approbation accorded St Thomas will have great influence on the very conception of theology; first, directly, by the development of the tradition left by St Thomas; then, indirectly, by the elimination of another tradition from ecclesiastical circles, that is, the Augustinian line, especially after the Reformation and Jansenism. These were crises in which that tradition played a definite role.<sup>53</sup>

The net result of this dual movement is the elevation to a privileged status of a highly distorted version of the Thomistic synthesis, a distortion that disengages Aquinas' Aristotelian appropriation from its Augustinian-patristic roots. Aquinas himself had considered the hyper-Aristotelians of his own day to be a threat to his synthesis, and properly so. Influenced by the Islamic commentators on Aristotle, Avicenna and Averroes, many Christian intellectuals begin the process of drawing sharp distinctions between the truths of reason and the truths of faith, probably because their literal reading of Aristotle led them to take philosophical positions that contradicted some of the central truths of the faith, e.g. the eternity of the cosmos.<sup>54</sup> As Dupré notes, 'more literal followers of Aristotle's philosophy, such as Siger of Brabant or Boethius of Dacia, separated nature, the object of philosophy, from the content of Christian revelation, as if they were two different orders of

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particular. For a collection of excellent essays on this topic see: *Aquinas the Augustinian*, Michael Dauphinais, Barry David, Matthew Levering (eds), Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Yves M.-J. Congar, O.P., *A History of Theology*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1968, pp. 154–5.

<sup>54</sup> It is an open question as to the motivations behind the decision of some in the arts faculty at Paris to draw sharp distinctions between faith and reason. Some would argue that they really did reject certain core Christian doctrines but did not want to run the risk of being charged with heresy, so they maintained the fiction of a duality of truths. Others would argue that what is developing here is a kind of fideism where the truths of faith are viewed as raw assertions based on the authority of God having no grounding in reason. Cf. FC. Coppleston, *Medieval Philosophy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1961, pp. 100–6



being, thus preparing the later meanings of natural and supernatural.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, in 1277, shortly after the death of Thomas, the Bishop of Paris felt compelled to condemn 219 propositions that were allegedly being taught at the University of Paris. These propositions were the product of the Arts Faculty at Paris and seemed to embrace an extreme Aristotelianism at the expense of the Christian faith. Specifically, there is an exaggerated sense of the purity of human nature and reason, its relative immunity from the ravages of sin, and the superiority of philosophy over theology. Thus the propositions go on to assert that theology can tell us nothing new, and the life of the ascetic devoted to the pure pursuit of philosophical wisdom is superior to all other states of life.

What we see, therefore, is that when the *Summa Theologica* is placed within this historical context it begins to take on a whole new significance. Rather than merely baptizing Aristotle at the expense of biblical categories, as the stereotype of Thomas by his critics would have it, we see instead that the positions Thomas adopts are almost entirely at odds with those of the radical Aristotelians. The historical irony here is that the so-called pure Aristotelianism of thinkers like Avicenna and Averroes was in reality an admixture of Aristotle with certain writings of Neoplatonists like Plotinus that had, for a time, been mistakenly attributed to Aristotle. Thus one of the supposedly Aristotelian ideas that Aquinas was obliged to correct was the idea that the 'agent intellect' in human beings is in fact nothing more than our individuated participation in a quasi-hypostasized intermediary intelligence between God and the world. All human intelligence is therefore numerically one (indeed, identical) and the principle of individuation is nothing more than our idiosyncratic sense experiences. Aquinas' own development of the concept of the agent intellect is therefore far more true to Aristotle than was the position of the so-called Aristotelians.

It seems that Thomas sought to combat the baneful tendencies of the radicals by domesticating Aristotle through the lifting of his categories into a new Christian synthesis. This is the view of Fergus Kerr in his excellent analysis of the historical context for Aquinas' thought. Kerr acknowledges that there is a great debate over the true meaning and significance of the 219 propositions. As in all instances in the medieval world where certain teachings or doctrines are condemned, our chief knowledge of the condemned position comes from the very Church doing the condemning so whether or not the faculty at Paris was as radically Aristotelian as the condemnation makes them seem is a legitimate area of doubt. However, there can be little doubt that for the Bishop of Paris to act as he did – encouraged by no less than Pope John XXI – there must have been great controversy at the time swirling around certain exaggerated forms of Aristotelian thought. However, Kerr seems to adopt the position that these condemned propositions do reflect the general ethos of some strong elements in the arts faculty at Paris and that the presence of these radical Aristotelians gives us the best hermeneutical tool for situating the proper context of the *Summa*. Kerr concludes:

If, on the other hand, we read Thomas in the light of the ideal of the philosophical life that seems to have caught the imagination of some of the leading masters in the arts

<sup>55</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, pp. 173–4.

faculty in his day, we can begin to see how he distances himself from everything they say. Ironically, instead of almost replacing Christian doctrine by Aristotelianism, as critics sometimes say, Thomas was out, historically, to resist the 'wisdom-lovers' – the *philosophi* – in the arts faculty, by trying to transpose and integrate key Aristotelian terms into traditional Christianity.<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately, this historical context is eventually lost, and by the time we get to the sixteenth century we see Aquinas' organic vision of the relationship between nature and grace transformed into a real divorce between the two realms, now viewed as representing two independent orders. The basis for this divorce was Aristotle's understanding of the teleology of nature, where all objects must contain the natural means to attain their formal ends. The idea that human nature has but one final end – the beatific vision – gives way to the notion of a dual finality in human nature, one natural, one supernatural. This was done, as we have seen, partly as a reaction against the distorted Augustinian pessimism about nature so popular during that time, as well as to preserve the concept of the gratuity of grace, with Thomas' own thought on this issue turned on its head.

Historically, the corruption of the Thomistic notion that human nature has but a single, final, supernatural end found crystallization in the work of Cardinal Cajetan (1468–1534), one of the primary Thomistic interpreters of the period. Cajetan taught that it was Aquinas himself who had held that human nature had two final ends, one natural and the other supernatural, a position that many influential modern Thomists reject.<sup>57</sup> However, despite what appears to be a clear corruption of the relevant Thomistic texts, the position of Cajetan was taken up by later interpreters and became the standard view of Aquinas well into the modern period. It is difficult to comprehend how such a fundamental mistake could have been made. Perhaps, as de Lubac points out, some of the blame has to be shouldered by Thomas himself due to the ambivalence of his synthesis at certain key points: 'The ambivalence of his thought in unstable equilibrium, ransom of its very richness, explains how it could afterwards be interpreted in such opposed senses.'<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, pp. 7–11. De Lubac does point out that it is historically inaccurate to claim that Cajetan creates this corruption by himself. Rather, Cajetan brings to fruition a movement of thought that had already begun with the nominalists and some of the earlier commentators on Aquinas.

<sup>58</sup> de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Etudes historiques*, Paris: Aubier, 1946, pp. 435–6, quoted in Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 15. Balthasar gives a slightly different reading, more in keeping with his thesis of the divorce of theology and sanctity, of how Thomas' theology came to be corrupted. Balthasar has high praise for the Thomistic synthesis because he sees in its organizational structure, and the calm manner in which Thomas raises and answers objections, the operation of the supernatural gift of faith. Balthasar considers the chief *intellectual* characteristic of Thomas to be his sanctity: a reality that imparts a charism to Thomas that enables him to draw disparate ideas together in a broad synthesis. The genius of this synthesis is that it knows the limits to which various ideas can be incorporated into the Christian drama. Thus Thomas is comfortable with leaving many questions simply as open in their final determination, confident that grace will bathe even that which is opaque with a certain Christian light that will in turn lead to a wisdom at home with genuine mystery. Thomas never confuses the order of his work with any kind of philosophical systemization, and the various questions of the *Summa*, when taken as a whole

Nevertheless, as de Lubac bitterly points out, commenting on how the view persists even into the modern era that Thomas held that human nature has dual ends: 'a few lazy minds will soon be left alone in defending what they continue, despite all the evidence, to call "the common interpretation"'.<sup>59</sup> Thus, even if we concede a certain ambivalence in the formulations of Thomas, there is simply no proper way to interpret Thomas other than to say that he held that human nature has but a single, supernatural end. The net effect of the corruption of Aquinas was the introduction into Catholic theology of a nature-supernature dualism that eventually created an atmosphere in which leading Catholic thinkers found it both necessary and theologically proper to draw sharp and exaggerated distinctions between the secular and the religious, natural humanity and supernaturally elevated humanity, as well as between faith and reason. The integrated vision of classical and medieval culture – that reality is an organic interplay between God, cosmos, human nature and society – was now lost. The growing divide between nature and supernature introduced by Aquinas' commentators, coupled with the increased empiricism created by the nominalist denial of universals, created in the late medieval mind an entirely new idea: nature as a self-sufficient reality lacking a need for a theological legitimation as a separate realm of human study. The door is now open for natural philosophy to be recast as a science based upon pure reason reflecting upon pure nature. Dupré concludes:

Once the idea of an independent, quasi-autonomous order of nature gained a foothold in Catholic theology, it spread to all schools except the Augustinian, including some of Aquinas' commentators such as Sylvester and Cajetan. Thus the medieval synthesis came to an end, and a dualism between nature and a supernatural realm solidly entrenched itself in Catholic theology for four centuries.<sup>60</sup>

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and compared with one another, leave much room for a genuine openness to mystery and the rich texture of creation. However, those that follow Thomas lack his sanctity and thus reduce his aesthetic, supernatural wisdom to the level of a philosophical conceptual schema that seeks, rationalistically, to respond to all problems with definite answers. The very method of doing theology in the schools leads to the pedagogical tendency for premature closure and the tidying up of loose ends that should remain loose. This tendency toward simplification and schematization is precisely what causes the caricature of Thomas' categories of thought by his later well-intentioned but pedagogically misguided commentators. For example, where Thomas' actual thought on the relationship between nature and grace is complex and nuanced, later commentators, in a rush to simplify and categorize, trim-off the complexity and end up with simplistic nostrums about the now separate orders of nature and grace. Balthasar concludes: 'But where one can no longer presuppose the unity of such unique holiness with such unique prudence, where the supernatural gift of grace is imitated only in an external fashion, as if it were a technique that could be learned, this particular charism of the Angel of the Schools, this gift of clarification, of smoothing out and calming down, ... can become a disaster for thought.' Balthasar, 'On the Tasks of Catholic Philosophy in our Time,' p. 173.

<sup>59</sup> de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 178.

### **Conclusion**

The common thread that runs throughout each of these theological developments is separation: the separation of rational, deductive theology from inner, affective spirituality, the separation of philosophical reason from doctrinally oriented theology, the separation of the individual, autonomous existent from the metaphysical realm of participatory form, and the separation of the theological order of grace from the natural order of the world. What all of these separations create, ironically, is a *theological* desacralization of the world, the self, society and even God himself.<sup>61</sup> The motivation for these theological separations was not, as I have repeated often, a desire for a non-religious vision of reality where human beings could finally roam free in the meadows of a secular Eden, relieved of the burdens of theological expectation. Rather, the original motivation appears to have been a legitimate theological desire to counteract the static essentialism of medieval classicism as well as its otherworldly and ascetical ahistoricism. When one reads Scotus and Ockham in particular, one is struck by the ambient theological atmosphere of their writing, despite the popular stereotypes to the contrary. They could both be described (somewhat anachronistically) as theologians concerned with a proper phenomenology of how we know the particular, concrete objects of our perception. If, when all is said and done, they and the later misinterpreters of Aquinas end up laying the groundwork for the naïve empiricism and dualistic rationalism of the Enlightenment, it will not have been because they were secular rebels kicking against the goad of theological repression. Rather, we see that ideas do indeed have consequences: once we reach the late medieval rejection of the doctrine of universal form we have made one of those fateful historical crossings that takes on a logic and dynamism of its own; once objects are robbed of their metaphysical depths, destroying their capacity for metaphysical communication with other objects and their ability to be theologically in-formed and transformed by grace (necessitating a nature-grace dualism), the step towards a full-blown mechanistic naturalism is a short one. And it is to this step that we must now turn our attention.

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<sup>61</sup> By a 'desacralized God' I mean a God who has become so superfluous to the order of creation as its sustaining and conserving Origin that God begins to look like a vestigial organ i.e. God once served a vital function in the evolution of human consciousness, but must now recede and wither as humanity comes of age and claims its own rightful sphere of autonomy (Feuerbach). The focus here is entirely upon humanity. Indeed, God becomes so unreal in these schemes that the next theological move, assuming that one wants to salvage a God concept at all, is to posit the necessity of God coming to consciousness in the processes of history as such. The end result is an utterly desacralized God coming to reality in a historical process that is itself now viewed as properly secular and demystified.

## Chapter 3

### THE 'NEWTONIAN SETTLEMENT': THE DIVINE MECHANIC AND THE WORLD OF 'MERE MATTER'

#### *A. The Emergence of Modernity and the Role of Theology: Secular Rebellion, Harmonious Development, or Theological Paradigm Shift?*<sup>1</sup>

In the preceding two chapters I have attempted to outline the broad historical contours of an intellectual history. In that summary I have laboured to demonstrate three basic historical-intellectual truths: (1) the importance of the classical notion of form as the metaphysical foundation for the medieval view of creation; and (2) that the demise of the classical concept of form as a foundational concept was the product of a gradual shift in the theology of the schools; and finally (3) that the loss of a working concept of form gradually led medieval thinkers into a more bifurcated and dualistic frame of mind with regard to the relationship between nature and grace, spirit and matter, the supernatural and the natural. The agenda that lurks behind this re-telling of history is to demonstrate that the modern version of that same narrative is false in one of its primary assumptions: that modern natural science emerged as a conscious secular revolution against the authoritarian superstitions of medieval Christianity. However, it must also be pointed out that the point here is not to promote the opposite idea either, i.e. that science emerged as a natural outgrowth of the medieval world-view without major conflict or disruption. This more irenic telling of the narrative may have noble goals, but it is often so keen to ameliorate the baneful effects of the conflict model that it often glosses over the fact that there were, in fact, conflicts between Christian theology and the emerging empirical sciences. It has been my aim, rather, to show that modern science did emerge out of a theological sea change in which Christian thinkers themselves rejected the classical notion of form and its attendant Platonic-Aristotelian cosmological matrix, giving rise to a more empiricist frame of mind. This in turn unleashed a new naturalism that does, then, create problems for Christian theology. The intellectual adjustment to the new naturalism is the

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<sup>1</sup> While it is true that discussion of paradigm shifts since the advent of Kuhn's work have become somewhat tired, I think there is great merit in his fundamental insight that the collective assumptions of an era do take on a *Gestalt* of their own, adding an aesthetic element to the rational, which accounts for the often unthematic and apodictic manner in which the assumptions of an era are held with an almost religious fervor.

dominant theological story of modern times and continues on to this day with conflict and tension between theology and science as one of its on-again, off-again byproducts.<sup>2</sup> This tension and conflict between the scientific culture of modernity and confessional Christianity can only continue to increase until Christian theology can convince the modern reductionist that mere matter is in fact grounded in something that transcends it, giving to matter a formal, symbolic and sacramental status that it now lacks. The spiritual emptiness of modern existence is almost directly attributable to the fact that we have defined away the metaphysical depths of matter and replaced this idea with the stale porridge of reductionist naturalism.

This is an important historical point that often gets overlooked in our rush to downplay the conflict model in the history of the relationship between science and religion. Many modern writers in the science and religion field, determined to demonstrate the Greco-Roman/Judeo-Christian roots of modern science and to counteract the secularist narrative outlined above, are quick to point out that modern experimental science arose in the West, and not elsewhere, due in large measure to the confluence of the Greek emphasis upon the ordered rationality of the cosmos and the Christian doctrine of a contingent creation. Thus the emergence of modernity and science from the medieval world was much more harmonious than is often assumed. I will not dispute that thesis here since there is a great deal of truth in it. Nor do I wish to set up an overly simplistic straw man as a foil for my own more nuanced positions. Many of the modern histories of the period that wish to outline a more harmonious development do include a sophisticated treatment of the pros and cons of the medieval world-view for the rise of science.<sup>3</sup> However, despite these caveats, I would still contend that such approaches do tend to downplay the fact that this confluence of factors did not produce science as we have come to understand it until one other important feature was added to the mix: the *dissolution* of the very ontotheological synthesis that was putatively responsible for the rise of modern science. In other words, whatever merits the medieval synthesis

<sup>2</sup> I do not mean here that conflict is the dominant motif that characterizes the modern relationship between science and religion. Great intellectual strides have been made on both sides, where there is recognition of the complementarity of the two disciplines. However, many well-funded initiatives in this field also seem to be going out of their way to downplay the role that conflict has played and continues to play in the science and religion interface. I do not view such conflict as altogether bad. It seems to me to be the necessary by-product of a non-dualistic reading of the respective scientific and theological projects. From time to time, despite the essential complementarity of the two approaches, there will be an overlapping of concerns that can lead to conflict. This should be acknowledged openly and honestly rather than pursuing the path of a false irenicism.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Malcolm Jeeves and R. J. Berry, *Science, Life, and Christian Belief*, Leicester, UK: Apollos Press, 1998, pp. 15–31. In a programmatic statement the authors conclude: 'Attitudes towards the natural world began to develop during late medieval times and set the stage for the emergence of modern science. The two major influences were Greek and Hebrew-Christian. These two streams have flowed together for many centuries, interacted in numerous ways, and produced reciprocal alterations in each. In these two streams were the salient ideas which were to be essential to the rise and development of modern science, as well as other ideas which delayed the beginning of modern science as well as threatening its continuation and development.' pp. 15–16.

may have had for the rise of science, it was not until this synthesis unravelled – specifically as a *theological* synthesis – that we got a sufficiently autonomous and independent view of nature to disengage natural science from its theological moorings.<sup>4</sup> The fact that residual elements of the synthesis survived as intellectual fragments even in a later, more secular culture, only underscores that what was lost was precisely the synthetic quality of the medieval world-view. Many histories of the period are content to identify the three or four major ideas in the medieval world-view that contributed to the rise of science, while ignoring the fact that these ideas were able to act in this fashion only after they became disengaged from the overall synthesis that gave them birth.<sup>5</sup> The significance of this point can only be appreciated if one considers that, sociologically, ideas never exist in a free-floating cultural environment devoid of orientation to other ideas; as a cultural synthesis begins to emerge, old ideas change in subtle ways as they become a part of a new whole. Thus, even if we allow for the survival of certain medieval ‘fragments’ well into the modern period, there can be little doubt that these fragments have taken on new meanings as they have found a home in the modern mechanistic synthesis. To cite but one example, the medieval emphasis upon nature as the bridal partner

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<sup>4</sup> That does not mean, as I think Louis Dupré would like to emphasize, that a reductionist and mechanistic view of science was an inevitable by-product of a more independent view of nature. The Renaissance humanists and many of the early practitioners of science were not mechanists in the modern sense. However, it does seem to be the case that modern science as we know it is impossible without some kind of methodological naturalism and that this naturalism was not likely to take root in a culture dominated by the kind of ontotheological synthesis held by medieval thinkers. This is an important point that cannot be glossed over, since modern Christian theology cannot develop a new ontotheological synthesis unless it takes into consideration the legitimate naturalism of science. This is precisely why we cannot simply return to a medieval view of nature in our attempts to forge a new synthesis. The key issue confronting Christian theology on this topic is the development of a non-mechanistic and non-materialistic scientific naturalism. Cf. Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 1–90.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Alister E. McGrath, *Science & Religion: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 54. McGrath states: ‘One of the fundamental themes of a doctrine of creation . . . is that in creation God imposes order, rationality and beauty upon nature. The doctrine of creation *leads directly to the notion* that the universe is possessed of a regularity which is capable of being uncovered by humanity. This theme, which is expressed in terms of “laws of nature,” is of fundamental importance to the emergence of the natural sciences.’ (Emphasis added). Once again, I do not disagree with the fundamental insight of this passage, namely, that the Christian doctrine of creation played a role in the rise of modern science. I am more interested, however, in what this statement omits. McGrath implies that the doctrine of creation leads rather directly to the modern scientific concept of the ‘law like’ behaviour of the world. However, despite pointing out that there were factors within Christian culture that impeded the rise of science, for the most part he completely ignores the obstacles posed to the rise of ‘law like’ science by the medieval fixation on form, teleology and a metaphysics of participation. He ignores the mediating theological steps that have to be taken in order to get from the medieval world-view to the early modern rejection of form, teleology and participation, and the concomitant elevation of the mathematically and empirically established laws of nature to privileged status. Modern science emerges only after the four-fold structure of causality in medieval thought (material, formal, final and efficient causes) has been pruned back to include only efficient causality.



of an all-loving creator morphs in modernity into the perfectly designed world-machine of the divine engineer. The latter view purports to maintain faith in a creator God, while radically changing the context for such belief.

Finally, and this is the key point for our purposes here, what follows historically from this dissolution of the medieval synthesis was not a secular revolution against religious superstition but a *theological* sea change characterized by a new emphasis on spiritual inwardness and the importance of the individual, concrete existent vis-à-vis the abstract, universal concept. That is not to say that modern science arose out of a purely intellectual movement characterized by theological concerns. Nor does it mean that once science does emerge in full force that it is not dominated by a new secular ethos often in direct reaction against theological determinations. Nevertheless, it remains true that the shift away from religious otherworldliness to a greater emphasis upon nature for nature's sake first began as a subtle change in the medieval theological outlook.<sup>6</sup> Therefore it is anachronistic to read the history of the rise of science and modernity as a purely secular revolt against the inherently ascetic and otherworldly nature of Christianity. Theological change was in the air long before Copernicus braved his new interpretation of the cosmos.

The implications of these historical facts are of great significance for a proper analysis of the history of the rise of science. What it implies is that the relationship between the history of theology and the history of science is indeed complicated; the theological synthesis that created the intellectual antecedents that made a rational science possible in the first place, is the same theological synthesis that had to give way in order for mechanistic naturalism to develop. But the questions this raises are numerous and complex. Does science arise as a self-consciously secular reaction against religion, as the purveyors of the modern scientific narrative would have us believe? Or is the whole conflict model incorrect, with science viewed as arising rather harmoniously and painlessly from the fertile soil of a medieval Christian golden age, as some Catholic romantics maintain?<sup>7</sup>

Finally, a third possibility is that science emerges, at least in part, as the result of a theological development within medieval thought that eventually culminates in the dissolution of the medieval synthesis and the rise of a new theological paradigm that is more conducive to the modern scientific enterprise. The burden of the first two chapters of this text was to show how wedded the Christian world-view was

<sup>6</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*. Barbour states: 'Interest in nature for its own sake was in part a reaction against medieval thought. Rejecting otherworldliness, scholars of the Renaissance in the fourteenth century had begun looking with new excitement to the potentialities of life in the world.' p. 27

<sup>7</sup> Central to this view is the idea that the Thomistic synthesis contained all the theological and philosophical concepts necessary for the rise of a legitimately independent natural science, but distortions of Thomistic ideas by later scholastic commentators obscured the achievement of Thomas and hastened the secularization of natural science through an overly dualistic reading of his works. Many modern scholars, armed with a more historically nuanced understanding of Aquinas, are raising interesting questions about the proper historical retrieval of his ideas in an attempt to counteract some of the baneful effects of Thomas' imprisonment in the dungeon of scholastic misinterpretation. The works mentioned in the previous chapter by Henri de Lubac, Fergus Kerr and Stanley Hauerwas are excellent examples of this retrieval.



to the classical notion of intelligible form and the Aristotelian notion of causation, and that the gradual erosion of this metaphysical system began as a movement within the Christian intellectual world itself. Therefore if the scientific revolution could not have happened until naturalism became possible following the dissolution of the medieval synthesis, and if the medieval intellectual synthesis was largely a theological synthesis, then it makes no sense to ignore the changes in *theology* that contained the seeds of a more autonomous view of nature, unless one already shares the modern prejudice that theological arguments are always marginal to history. Indeed, it was not as if Renaissance thinkers simply woke up one day and decided that they had had quite enough of theological discourse. One of Louis Dupré's primary points, for example, was the thoroughly theological and Catholic orientation of the Renaissance humanists; intellectuals like Cusanus and Erasmus, far from rejecting the medieval synthesis in its totality, simply tweaked it in order to meet the more anthropocentric needs of their time. Even the heterodox thinker Giordano Bruno retains a fundamentally religious outlook. Dupré states:

Scholars who defend a total originality of Renaissance culture fail to account for its spiritual continuity, a continuity that does not consist in returning theological patterns thinly disguised under a secular surface – a thesis rightly refuted by Hans Blumberg – but rather in the persistence of a spiritual tradition. Nor must this persistent tradition be dismissed as a stagnant backwater bypassed by more secular waves of renewal. Quite the contrary, the mystical currents of the twelfth century were the very sources of that early humanism that marked the birth of modern culture.<sup>8</sup>

I am labouring over this point (which may seem self-evident to many of my readers) because I think it is vitally important to the future relationship between science and Christianity that we understand clearly what the neuralgic point in this dialogue is: How shall we construe the naturalism of modern science and the role of divine agency within this naturalism? The reductionist naturalism of modernity did not have to emerge as it did. Different models for a methodologically rigorous scientific naturalism could have emerged from the matrix of medieval and renaissance society. Different models are still possible today. Further, it is my contention that reductionist naturalism eventually emerges due to the waving of a theological white flag in the face of the new mechanistic science: unable to transpose the old metaphysics of intelligible form and participation in God's act of existence into the new language of mechanism, theology actually betrays its own foundation by parroting the ethos and language of the new science. Evidentialism in science becomes the paradigm for a new evidentialism within theology, leading to the demise of metaphysics – almost completely in Protestant thought, while remaining present in Catholic theology as a strange deductive rationalism that is simply evidentialism masquerading as metaphysics.<sup>9</sup> But what if Christian theology and

<sup>8</sup> Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent review and discussion of the intellectual history of the death of metaphysics in Western culture; see, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Volume I*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982, esp. pp. 45–79. Balthasar is concerned here more specifically with the loss of the concept of aesthetic form in Western society, but it is central to his entire project

philosophy had taken a different approach? What would have been the result for science and the modern world if theological voluntarism and nominalism had not won the day in Protestant thought and if nature-grace dualism had not distorted a proper Catholic theology of nature for centuries?

What all of this points to is the need to avoid essentializing the two entities known as science and religion. Before the rise of modernity, science and religion were not as yet hypostasized into separate spheres of inquiry. Before the dissolution of the medieval synthesis was complete, very few thinkers would have treated knowledge of the natural world and knowledge of the supernatural world as two unrelated spheres of interest. Indeed, it could be argued that there were in fact no hermetically distinct realities called 'nature' and 'supernature,' and in consequence no discernible cultural realities called 'science' and 'religion' at all. There was simply an integrated wisdom that sought answers to the deep questions of existence wherever they were to be found.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely the modern essentializing of science and religion that has created the new academic cottage industry devoted to hammering out in great detail the proper relationship between the methodology of religion and the methodology of science. But methodology too is a modern obsession, born in the heat of academic specialization and giving rise to the idea that the methodological naturalism of science can in no way countenance a strong interface with the methodological confessionism of any particular religion.<sup>11</sup> The history of ideas, however, can give us hope; in looking to the past we see that the concepts of science and religion were fluid and plural, and that even though

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to equate this loss of the concept of form with the demise of metaphysics in general since one cannot sustain a metaphysics of Being without some concept of aesthetic form. His ultimate aim is to show that only God's revelation in Christ can sustain a truly metaphysical concept of aesthetic form rather than a mere aestheticism that eventually degenerates into solipsism and nihilism. We shall revisit Balthasar's metaphysical project in more detail in a later chapter.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. William Cavanaugh, 'The City: Beyond Secular Parodies,' in, *Radical Orthodoxy*, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds), London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 182–200. Cavanaugh argues convincingly that religion, viewed as a completely voluntarist and private affair of the individual, is a decidedly modern creation of the State. The modern mythology that is employed to legitimate the State gives us a narrative replete with the dangers of religion and theocracy, necessitating the religiously neutral State to save humanity from the perfidies of the papists and the bible thumpers. Thus is religion domesticated and tamed, and the Church cleverly disarmed and rendered impotent as a rival social system to that of the State. Medieval scholars did not think of religion in this reified and privatized manner; for Aquinas and others, religion was simply that virtue that gave one the *habitus* of a particular public behaviour: participation in the sacramental and eschatological politics of the society of the Church. Thus, the hypostatization of 'religion,' 'science' and the 'State,' is but one of the false anachronisms created by the modern, secularist reading of history.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note the extent to which conferences and workshops devoted to the science and religion interface are almost totally devoid of a strong confessional Christian component. The emphasis instead is almost entirely upon mysticism, a vaguely defined religious sense in humanity, and the manner in which the broad ethical traditions of humanity, taken as a whole and whittled down into a kind of Enlightenment-based ethical-religious humanism, can contribute to the channelling of applied science in the proper ethical directions. However, even here, there is usually no hint that such ethical and religious limitations upon science should in any way be methodologically programmatic for science, since that would run the risk of returning us to the dark days of Galileo.

the increase in methodological distinction between the two spheres was necessary, we should be under no illusion that this distinction had inevitably to take on the form and tone that it has.<sup>12</sup> As John Brooke and Geoffrey Cantor point out:

At first sight it is difficult to believe that two such incompatible narratives could co-exist. In the one hand we have Christian theology and ecclesiastical institutions acting as a persistent obstruction to scientific progress. In the other – and it is often expressed this way – without a Christian doctrine of Creation there would have been no modern science. Both theses are vulnerable because they are selective in their use of evidence. They gloss over the diversity and the complexity of positions taken in the past. Each tends to assume that ‘science’ and ‘religion’ can be given timeless definitions and that there is some inherent, some essential, relationship between them.<sup>13</sup>

The first two chapters have examined the manner in which a more integrated vision was gradually lost through shifts in Christian theology and philosophy. In what follows we will examine in brief the manner in which this dissolution is rendered complete by the triumph of mechanistic science and the disastrous nature of the theological settlement that made its peace with the new science by way of a negation of its own metaphysical depths. It is in this theological settlement with mechanism that we see the rise of a pervasive and seemingly oxymoronic combination of religious faith and secularism in Euro-American society, never before seen in any culture of the world. Even among the vast majority of people who continued to believe in God, we see a secularist view of nature and of matter emerge. This, it seems to me, is the peculiar oddity of Euro-American modernity; every culture has had its atomists, materialists and various and sundry empiricists, but no culture has ever witnessed the juxtaposition of religious faith with an almost completely secular view of nature among most of its population. No culture has ever witnessed such an amazing disjunction between faith and reason, with its attendant bifurcation between the realm of spiritual interiority and the realm of the everyday world. As we shall see in what follows, it was precisely because the intellectuals of the period were well aware of the historical connection between materialism and atheism

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<sup>12</sup> That the methodological distinction between theology and science was necessary can be seen from the fact that the dissolution of a particular cosmology has often thrown theology into crisis. The integrated wisdom of pre-critical thought may have had its organic and holistic advantages over the fragmentation of modernity; nevertheless, when that wisdom created a tight fusion between theology and cosmology, the results were often disastrous for theology when the cosmology changed. Thus, as we shall see in a later chapter, the goal for Christian theology cannot be the creation of a new fusion of revelation and cosmology as we saw in the classical world. The task before us is precisely the creation of a new integration of theology and cosmology that respects the legitimate methodological distinctions between the two while allowing for the possibility of cross-fertilization. The difficulty that arises is that concerns over developing proper methodological rules for the science and religion interface often create a straightjacket that disallows any kind of cross-fertilization, most especially when it is a religious perspective that is threatening to cross-fertilize the scientific enterprise.

<sup>13</sup> John Brooke and Geoffrey Cantor, *Reconstructing Nature. The Engagement of Science and Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 20–1.

that we see the development of efforts to reconcile the new materialism with the Christian faith in order to make materialism more socially palatable.<sup>14</sup>

***B. From 'Thou' to 'It': The Reinterpretation of Nature and Form and the beginnings of Deism***

It would be historically misleading to imply that the concept of form simply vanished overnight, to be replaced by more mechanistic and atomistic theories. For as Norma Emerton has pointed out in a masterful study, the concept of form continued to exert itself on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers despite the rise of mechanistic theories in the new scientific consciousness.<sup>15</sup> Few thinkers were willing to embrace a strictly empirical atomism as the dominant paradigm for the new mechanism for two reasons. First, the only form of materialistic reductionism that they were familiar with, that of Democritus and some of the other ancient Greek atomists, could not explain chemical interactions where one element is combined with another to create an entirely unique admixture of the two. Traditional atomism viewed the basic material particles as largely inert and indivisible, interacting with one another by a random action whereby they would stick to one another or cause movement, but never transform themselves through admixture. On the other hand, the form theories of the scholastics offered a more promising explanation of what the chemists were doing due to the ability of form theory to develop sophisticated models for change. Alchemy, for example, was at least partially motivated by the idea that matter was either a largely passive reality that could be moulded differently based on whatever form could be imposed upon it, or that matter contained a variety of seminal forms that could be educed from it. Ironically, therefore, form theory seems to have persisted due to its superiority over atomism as a tool for scientific description.

The second reason that form theory persisted, however, may be even more important than the first. We must constantly remember the cosmological and theological context that made form theory attractive in the first place. The primary characteristic of all form theories is that they flow out of a view of the universe wherein everything is bathed in intelligibility and meaning. Nature is seen as suffused with the ambient light of reason, with a Logos, with a Demiurge, with Yahweh, with the Trinity. Natural processes were explained as the end product of a series or chain of supernaturally initiated events, whether directly and immediately as in miracles, or more indirectly through the agency of the various forms that the divine realm had implanted in the cosmos. Furthermore, this view of a more divinely imbued cosmos blurred the distinction, even for Christian thinkers, between those aspects of nature that were animate and those that were inanimate.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Brooke, *Science and Religion*. Brooke states this point nicely: 'The task was all the more pressing because, in the ancient world, the atomic theories of Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus had been associated with the belief that nature has no need of gods, that worlds had come into being by the chance collision of atoms.' p. 125.

<sup>15</sup> Norma Emerton, *The Scientific Reinterpretation of Form*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

The heavenly spheres were thought by many to have souls and that these quasi-angelic entities exerted an influence over human affairs – hence the popularity of astrology. Even the great medieval theologian Albertus Magnus attributed to the heavenly spheres the role of imparting form to earthly entities.<sup>16</sup> The key here, therefore, is that for most classical and medieval thinkers there is no autonomous entity called nature whose internal activities operate without divine input. Nature, for the medieval mind, was less of an ‘it’ and more of an analogous manifestation of a ‘who’.<sup>17</sup> That is not to say that medieval thinkers were pantheists – although many mystics of the period, influenced by Neoplatonism, had strong emanationist tendencies – but that for them, nature was more animate than inanimate in the modern mechanist meaning of those terms, and, thanks to divine providence, displayed many of the characteristics of personhood, e.g. form-giving intentionality, nurturing benevolence and intelligibility. Form theory was simply the philosophical face of this fundamentally theological outlook.<sup>18</sup> Atomism, on the other hand, was the classical world’s atheistic alternative to this theological/philosophical perspective. The universe, according to the ancient atomists, needs no causative explanation beyond itself; everything that exists is material and is the end product of the random interaction of particles. It is little wonder, then, that seventeenth-century thinkers were reluctant to adopt atomism as a scientific explanation. Despite the rise of more mechanistic views of the cosmos, there was a decided reluctance simply to abandon the idea of a more theophanic cosmos. World-views die slowly, and not without some resistance, and the classical-medieval paradigm was no exception to this rule.

However, under the weight of the Copernican revolution, this medieval cosmology gradually crumbled. As we saw in Chapter 2, there had already been a shift towards a more dualistic and empirical cast of mind among the medieval schoolmen. The grand synthesis of Aquinas had already begun to unravel with the rise of nominalism as well as the dualistic misinterpretation of his thought by later commentators. Many medieval thinkers, therefore, were already predisposed

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Emerton, *The Scientific Reinterpretation of Form*, p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 1–16. Saunders makes the point that there is no explicitly worked out ‘theory of nature’ in the biblical narrative. Indeed, there is no sense of an ‘autonomous nature’ at all in the modern sense of that phrase. That is not to say that there aren’t some inherent ideas concerning nature in the biblical record. For example, the Bible clearly rejects pantheism, as well as all the Near Eastern polytheistic cosmologies with which it was all too familiar. However, the Bible retains the ancient world’s belief that there is a strong connection between the activities of the natural world and divine action, i.e. there is no neat divide between natural laws and divine actions. The cosmos is not God, but it is definitely theophanic. Thus, the medieval view of nature as a ‘who’ rather than an ‘it’ is rooted in the world-view of the Bible.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, this point cannot be pressed too far. For example, many medieval thinkers, most notably Aquinas, did maintain a strong distinction between the animate and inanimate aspects of nature. For example, in his doctrine of motion Aquinas posits an ascending metaphysical hierarchy of beings, based on their relative abilities of self-movement. Cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV.11. However, this does not alter the fact that even the lower metaphysical orders, precisely through the fulfilment of the teleology of their form, do in some sense participate in an analogous way in the higher life of animate beings.

to a more autonomous, less theophanic view of nature. The great challenge of Copernican theory therefore melded nicely with the late medieval shift to a more worldly view of nature. Thus the real challenge of Copernican theory to the classical-medieval world-view was not that it called into question the allegedly geo-centric cosmology of the Bible, but that in so doing it tended to demystify the cosmos. The real shock wasn't that the earth was biblically out of position, rather, it was that the earth was now one of the heavenly spheres. But what could that mean? Is not the earth a place of sin and evil? Are the rest of the spheres, therefore, also morally ambiguous and non-angelic? Indeed, are the entire heavens just like the earth? As we shall see, European intellectuals of this period were still a long way from claiming that the universe is chaotic and random. However, there is no doubt that the Copernican revolution began a movement whereby the cosmos was gradually bleached of its ancient theophanic intelligibility; indeed, the universe came to be increasingly viewed as impersonal, imperfect and indifferent – an 'it' rather than a 'who'.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves somewhat. The fact remains that Copernicus and Kepler remained deeply religious men, each in his own way. In one of the great ironies of history, it is precisely the allegedly more spiritual Neoplatonism of the era, rather than the more secular Aristotelianism, that paves the way for the new scientific revolution. During the Renaissance there had been a resurgence of Neoplatonic thinking, especially in its Pythagorean form. Thinkers like Copernicus and Kepler were deeply impressed by Neoplatonism's emphasis upon the mathematical harmonies of nature. It was a deeply engrained medieval idea about nature that had a tremendous influence here: the dictum that nature is both harmonious and simple, i.e. nature, taken as a whole, gives evidence of a beautiful economy of effort such that everything seems to operate in the harmonious manner befitting God's creation. When this idea is coupled with the Pythagorean mysticism of numbers, what emerges is the idea that nature's harmonies are scripted in the language of mathematics. Indeed, Copernicus, who lacked real evidential corroboration that his heliocentric hypothesis was true, nevertheless held to its veracity due in large measure to its mathematical elegance compared with the ugly and clunky epicycles required by the Ptolemaic system.<sup>19</sup> Copernicus even had the illusory hope that his new theory would be warmly accepted, given its mathematical elegance and the beautiful economic harmony within nature that it revealed.

Kepler, even more than Copernicus, was bitten by the Platonic/Pythagorean bug, and was clearly motivated to prove the heliocentric hypothesis for spiritual as well as scientific reasons. Kepler found a deep appeal in the heliocentric hypothesis, in no small measure because of his own near apotheosis of the sun in a kind of nature mysticism. More importantly, however, it was Kepler who wedded the mathematics of Copernicus with the detailed astronomical-empirical observations of Tycho Brahe, creating – perhaps for the first time – a model for scientific

<sup>19</sup> Cf. E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2003, pp. 36–71. This work is now somewhat dated, having first been published in 1924. Nevertheless, I find Burtt's overall interpretation of the period compelling.

discourse that involved both theory and observational verification. Furthermore, it was Kepler who made the first fate-filled steps in the direction of distinguishing between the primary and secondary qualities in nature: primary qualities are those that are open to mathematical quantification and measurement, whereas secondary qualities are those aspects of nature that refer primarily to their effects in the subjective mind of the observer. Thus did Kepler now equate the harmonies of nature with the process of mathematical quantification. All good scientific hypotheses are successful precisely insofar as they reduce all observable nature to a series of mathematical relations. Furthermore, the more inclusive a hypothesis is, i.e. the more it is able to assimilate into a mathematical relation all the observable data, the more acceptable it becomes.

Kepler continued to hold to the Aristotelian idea of formal causes, but whereas Aristotle gave mathematics only a secondary role, privileging instead the nature of the qualities that form gives to matter and all the teleological orientations this implies, Kepler reduced the concept of formal cause almost entirely to the role played by mathematical relations as the determinative measure for why a thing is the way it is. Thus the Aristotelian notion of quality and teleology was collapsed by Kepler into the act of mathematical quantification. The shift in emphasis here is subtle, but of monumental importance; for it is but a short step from equating the truly real with the mathematical, to the idea that all certain and reliable knowledge is mathematical and not metaphysical/theological. As Kepler states:

There are, in fact, as I began to say above, not a few principles which are the special property of mathematics, such principles as are discovered by the common light of nature, require no demonstration, and which concern quantities primarily; then they are applied to other things, so long as the latter have something in common with quantities. Now there are more of these principles in mathematics than in the other theoretical sciences because of that very characteristic of the human understanding which seems to be such from the law of creation, that nothing can be known completely except quantities or by quantities. And so it happens that the conclusions of mathematics are most certain and indubitable.<sup>20</sup>

It cannot be emphasized enough what a radical shift this is. The medieval world-view not only held to notions of formal causality in the classical Aristotelian sense, but also to the belief that the heavenly spheres were quasi-spiritual beings responsible for the downward communication of form from God to the world. As we saw in the last chapter, one of the great debates that surrounded the teaching of Averroes centred precisely on the notion of Averroes that all human intelligence is the same intelligence, i.e. that we participate in the divine intellect precisely through an intermediary entity called the active or agent intellect. Granted, most Christian philosophers rejected this notion, but at the very least what it shows us is how amenable the medieval mind was to the idea that the cosmos is a vast area of spiritual intermediaries. What it further shows us is that the real crisis created by people like Kepler, and later Galileo, was not the oft-cited pseudo-crisis of geocentrism versus heliocentrism, but rather, all the attendant metaphysical entailments

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in *Burtt*, pp. 67–8.



of the shift to a mathematical/mechanical view of the cosmos versus a theophanic one. Those who opposed the new science may have been empirically wrong about the nature of the physical cosmos, but they were most certainly right to see in the new science a complete revolution in human thinking; a revolution that was desacralizing the old cosmos of the form-giving intermediaries in favour of a new model that, despite its cloak of Pythagorean mysticism, seemed for all the world to be devoid of a direct divine presence. The medieval mind saw the qualitative and teleological elements of form as a real representation of God's *agency* in the world, not just his image, and the reduction of formal causation to mathematical relations among natural entities seemed to call the entirety of God's agency in the natural world into question. Kepler and the other framers of the scientific revolution might all have been theologically sincere Christians, but there is no denying that their new approach challenged the reigning notion of divine agency in the world, *creating a true crisis within theology*, not a crisis between theology and science.

This demystification of the cosmos leads to yet one more shift in the concept of form. If there are no cosmic agents responsible for the mediation of form from God to matter, then that means that either God is directly imputing form into everything at the moment of individual generation, or that God somehow implanted all the forms into the universe at the moment of creation and that they are now unfolding in due course. Here is where the degradation of the concept of form, discussed in Chapter 2, becomes important. Under the influence of nominalist and scholastic-rationalist theology, the concept of form had come to be reified as an entity in its own right, created individually by God to inform just this particular bit of matter rather than some other bit of matter. What this does is to make the form into more of an efficient cause than a formal cause, robbing it of its true metaphysical meaning and its only valid explanatory purpose. But in the new mechanistic science, efficient causes were measurable and identifiable causes. One of the exciting elements of the new science was precisely its explanatory, controlling and predictive quality. But the actual efficient agency of a form could not be measured or observed. What then was its explanatory value? Thinkers like Giordano Bruno became highly critical of this degraded form of scholastic thinking and rejected it altogether as mere wordplay. If God is imputing forms into individual entities at the moment of their generation, where is the evidence that God is acting in such a direct fashion as an efficient agent? Unless we say that God's efficient actions are indistinguishable from the newly discovered laws of physics, it would seem that there is no evidence that God is directly imparting form into everything in an immediate manner. If we are saying that God's actions simply mirror the laws of physics, then what are we really saying that is of any theological or scientific value beyond the obvious?

Attempted answers to this problem came from several quarters, but most pertinent to our analysis here was the answer attempted by theistic thinkers with deistic tendencies. Robert Boyle (1627–91), the English natural philosopher, using his study of salts and other crystals as a jumping-off point, developed a corpuscular theory of form that attempted to combine an atomistic physics of fundamental particles (corpuscles) with the still lingering, but degraded, concept of intelligible form. In his study of crystals Boyle had noticed that even the most basic



of particles in a crystalline structure shared the same basic pattern as the whole. Thus, it seemed to Boyle (and some of his contemporaries) that the formal cause of any entity is nothing other than the form and shape of the fundamental particles. Norma Emerton summarizes Boyle's new theory of form as follows:

... attention had to be paid to the opinion of the mechanical philosophers, which Boyle shared, that all phenomena were explicable in terms of the sizes, shapes and motions of particles. ... He reconciled this opinion with the formal cause by his belief that the shapes and arrangement of particles within bodies were not random but regular, and that this regular internal structure embodied the form, causing the external shape and properties.<sup>21</sup>

Boyle's difficulty with traditional form theory was that it was difficult to see how the internal form principle could produce its effects in the object without being an efficient principle as well. But for Boyle, the efficient cause of an object's qualities was the mechanistic laws for the relations between particles worked out by Newton. Thus the role of form grows ever more truncated and relegated to the past: fundamental particles have the basic forms within them and these forms were implanted in the particles by God at the dawn of creation. At first glance, Boyle's theory appealed to those with a more Neoplatonic view of form since it seemed to confirm the reality of the seminal reasons that were latent within matter and which gradually developed over time. It also did not contradict the deep Christian conviction that creation is orderly and the product of a rational God with benevolent purposes. However, the inchoate deism is also unmistakable since any on-going and contemporary role for God in natural processes is definitively played down in favour of the imputation of form at the beginning of creation. Furthermore it is noteworthy that, for Boyle and the other corpuscular form theorists, the nature of the forms in the fundamental particles is somewhat vague. At times it appears that the form is nothing other than the structured order of matter itself. This perspective is reconcilable with a pure Aristotelian concept of form, since Aristotle too wanted to draw a close connection between form and matter, the two being co-principles of any existent being, neither of which can exist independently of the other. However, the corpuscular form theory of Boyle and others rarely reached the level of Aristotelian sophistication and tended instead in the direction of a vague mystification of matter in order to do justice to both the scientific and theological concerns of the age.<sup>22</sup>

All that remained for the final demise of form theory as a viable natural philosophy and for the rise of modern materialism was the demystification of matter. Both before and after the time of Boyle and the other corpuscular form theorists, there were those who simply ignored the role of form altogether as a theoretical redundancy. Why have recourse to the nebulous concept of form when the laws of nature seemed perfectly suited to explaining phenomena on a purely materialistic basis? Even Boyle accepted the mechanics of Newton, as we shall see,

<sup>21</sup> Emerton, *The Scientific Reinterpretation of Form*, p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> Emerton, *The Scientific Reinterpretation of Form*, pp. 73–5.

and coupled with the deistic tendencies of the time this produced an ever-shrinking sphere for the positing of divine activity. Over time, the divine role becomes so removed from the realm of contemporary natural processes that it becomes possible to discuss the workings of nature without recourse to any theological concept whatsoever.

Thus by the end of the seventeenth century there emerged the increasingly visible outlines of a secular and autonomous view of nature, i.e. natural events require only natural mechanical explanations and God's agency is limited to the establishing of an original set of conditions. Furthermore, due to the death of any meaningful notion of form and the concomitant elevation of efficient causality to the lofty status of sole cause, there is no longer any way to avoid viewing nature as a flat mechanical reality lacking any metaphysical depth or meaning. Divine agency, therefore, is viewed as problematical since it seemed that if God were to act in nature, he would have to do so as one efficient cause among many, a mythological and heteronomous view of God that necessitated the removal of divine activity from the normal course of events, and the positing of an originating act of creation wherein the Deity established at the beginning everything that nature would need to develop on its own. The strength of the magnetic pull of this new deism can be gauged in the fact that even the more traditionally Christian theistic thinkers like Boyle could not resist its temptation. Even where theology continued overtly to reject Deistic explanations, it was plagued by the same fundamental assumption that the realm of grace was fundamentally alien to the realm of nature, and was, wherever it was operative, a mere superadded power to nature that did nothing to restructure nature on a more constitutive level, *qua* nature.

### *C. The 'Newtonian Settlement': The Theological Project that Makes 'Newtonianism' Possible*<sup>23</sup>

Given the foregoing analysis it is simply wrong to view the rise of modern secularism as a flight away from religion. Rather, early modern secularism is better characterized as simply a new conception of God, where the divine is located, deistically, in a metaphysical zone that is separate from the mechanical world of matter. Thus secularism is not so much the absence of religion, but rather an altogether new form of religion whose focus is now clearly bifurcated between the natural and the supernatural. This new form of religion is the direct result of a theological settlement between the Christian faith and the new Newtonian science. Unfortunately, as we shall see, this settlement, though appearing to secure the intellectual moorings of Christianity in a new scientific situation, was in reality one of the greatest theological disasters in the history of the Christian faith. Therefore, in

<sup>23</sup> I borrow the use of the term 'Newtonian Settlement' from Michael Buckley, SJ 'The Newtonian Settlement and the Origins of Atheism,' in *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, SJ and George V. Coyne, SJ (eds), Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, pp. 81–102.

order to put a fine point on the rise of deism described in the previous section, it is necessary to explain in more depth the exact nature of this settlement.

The conjunction between scientific and theological concerns among the great lights of the early scientific revolution is widely known and understood but gets very little play in the popular retelling of our myths of the origins of science. Indeed, Newton titled one of his most famous works, 'Mathematical Principles of Natural *Philosophy*' (1687, emphasis added), rather than 'Natural Science'. As John Brooke points out:

When seventeenth-century students of nature called themselves natural philosophers, they were identifying themselves with intellectual traditions in which broader issues than immediate scientific technicalities were discussed. Newton himself remarked that it was part of the business of natural philosophy to discuss such questions as the attributes of God and His relationship to the physical world. Very few physicists today would conceive their role in such terms. The point is that if we prejudge what we mean by science and religion, we might be in no position to appreciate the distinctiveness of Newton's vision. There would be a degree of artificiality in asking how Newton reconciled his 'science' and his 'religion,' if he saw himself pursuing a form of 'natural philosophy,' in which the two interests were integrated.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the two great intellectual heavyweights of the period, Descartes and Newton, both conceived their respective projects as being deeply intertwined with theological concerns. But whereas Descartes needed to prove the existence of God in order to guarantee the existence of the extra-mental world as an object of rational thought, Newton was more symptomatic of the age to come when he expressly declared that the 'world machine' that he was describing in his theory of mechanics would provide the Christian religion with the surest foundation yet devised for the full affirmation of the existence of an infinite Deity. In a European religious culture ravaged by the social upheavals caused by the Reformation, the idea that the emerging mechanistic science could provide Europe with the intellectual Esperanto needed to salvage both culture and religion proved too irresistible to ignore. The mechanistic science of Newton gave evidence of the marvellous symmetry and craftsmanship of the cosmos, leading Newton himself to devise various design arguments for the existence of God:

Whence is it that nature doth nothing in vain?; and whence arises all that order and beauty which we see in the world? How came the bodies of animals to be contrived with so much art, and for what ends their several parts? Was the eye contrived without skill in optics? ... Does it not appear from phenomena that there is a being incorporeal, living, intelligent?<sup>25</sup>

On the surface, then, it would appear that the advent of Newtonian mechanics should have been a great boon to the fortunes of the Christian religion in Europe. However, in point of fact it was a disaster for Christianity for two reasons: first,

<sup>24</sup> John Brooke, *Science and Religion*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Isaac Newton, *Optics*, New York: Dover, 1952, p. 344.

embedded in the new natural theology was a latent disrespect for the unique, differentiating aspects of Christian Revelation; and second the new natural theology brought with it a voluntarist/nominalist conception of God that radically altered the metaphysical landscape of modernity, making the maintenance of any semblance of a sacramental view of nature impossible for an increasing number of influential thinkers.

With regard – to the first reason – that the new natural theology contained a latent disrespect for Christian revelation – the historical context of the time gave most European intellectuals all the warrant they needed to move beyond the apparent Jabberwocky of competing Christian truth claims. Even though most thinkers of the period, Newton included, would not go so far as to drive a total wedge between revealed religion on the one hand and what we could know about God through pure reason on the other, nevertheless, given the denominational squabbles then raging in Europe, and given the impetus toward universalism created by the discovery of the New World, the new science of mechanics, expressed in the universal language of mathematics and buttressed by empirical observation and experimentation, was viewed increasingly as the only possible way to provide revealed religion with a rational foundation. The goal, therefore, was a kind of universalizing of Christianity that downplayed its idiosyncratic particulars in favour of a form of religion that was accessible to those structures of human nature that all human beings share in common. We could phrase this anachronistically and use a modern idiom to describe this process: beginning in earnest in the seventeenth century, there was a search for the transcendental structures of human existence and for a restructuring of the Christian faith to correspond to these universal structures. The words 'reason' and 'science' thus become code for 'that which anyone can know without recourse to Christian Revelation.' In contrast, traditional Christian Revelation seemed predicated on unprovable and highly esoteric historical events. What was worse these same historical events had also proven to be rather epistemologically opaque as to their proper interpretation. What this meant, therefore, was that the intellectual classes of Europe no longer believed that the Christian faith had any internal intellectual warrant of its own. Theology, as a discipline, was viewed increasingly as an in-house affair; good for elucidating the meaning of various doctrines, but virtually useless in grounding the credibility of those doctrines in anything remotely resembling the universality of science. Thus the new natural theology was viewed as a means of grounding religion in something independent of revelation as such, giving the latter a surer rather than a more dubious foundation. In short, the spirit of the age was marked by a concern for universality, rationality and certitude. Theology therefore needed to reach a settlement with this new spirit and so it readily turned to the new natural theology as an ally. As Buckley puts it:

The fundamental cognitive claims about the existence and nature of God are established by science or natural philosophy or a universal mechanics; that religion itself does not offer evidence of comparable cogency – indeed it may offer little evidence at all for such a basic religious commitment. The Newtonian Settlement as such does not

argue so extensive a position, but it does maintain that the arguments that come out of the new mechanics furnish religion with its first foundations.<sup>26</sup>

It is also pertinent here to note that Newton was a heterodox Christian who rejected the divinity of Christ and the Trinitarian conception of God. In point of fact, Newton was a classic Arian who argued that Christ was merely God's created agent for communicating His will to the created world. The historical Jesus was simply a prophet, in a long line of prophets, who gave voice to a theocentric perennial religion that was in many ways a kind of natural philosophy accessible to anyone with proper reason. Human beings had often fallen away from this rational religion into idolatry and so God had to send prophets to bring people back to their senses. According to Newton, the development of the classical Christian doctrines of the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity were just such instances of idolatry. Newton, after years of research into the biblical texts, reached the conclusion that the earliest Christians were not Trinitarian, nor were they worshippers of Jesus as God Incarnate. For Newton, Trinity and Incarnation were therefore two unbiblical doctrines developed by the Roman Church as part of its great betrayal of primitive-pristine Christianity. Newton therefore viewed his own heterodox theological views as the true orthodoxy and he fancied himself as part of a remnant of true believers who were now, through science and a renewed natural philosophy, retrieving the proper religion for humankind. We can see from this that the concern of Enlightenment thinkers to ground religion in human reason rather than in the positive aspects of the Christian revelation had its grounding already in Newton, who helped to foster the idea that the best way to secure, intellectually, the existence of God was to ignore Christian revelation in favour of arguments drawn from a kind of theologically neutral reason. Simon Oliver, in a masterful analysis of Newton's theology, summarizes this point nicely:

Newton became convinced that the earliest Christian Church held an uncorrupted non-Trinitarian faith which understood Christ as an exalted and yet created mediator between God and the universe. During the fourth century, however, certain corrupting self-interested forces within the Church, most notably Athanasius, introduced what Newton believed to be the idolatrous doctrine of the Trinity ... In a wider context, through his studies of ancient history, Newton was sure that there was once a *prisca fides et sapientia*, an ancient true religion found particularly in the figure of Noah (this religion also included a pure natural philosophy of which his own was a rediscovery) which over time had fallen into idolatry. ... The Lord God had intermittently sent prophets to draw people back from idolatry, Christ being just such a prophet. ... Christianity in its pre-fourth-century, prelapsarian form was therefore a mere re-instantiation of an ancient faith to which Newton wished to return and of which he was himself a tiny remnant.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore the natural philosophy and natural theology to which post-Newtonian thinkers turned was theologically justified as a turning away from a corrupted

<sup>26</sup> Buckley, p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> Simon Oliver, Motion According to Aquinas and Newton, *Modern Theology*, (17:2, April 2001), p. 179.

form of Christianity (the Roman variety) towards a renewed natural theology that would liberate the world from the shackles of Roman dogmatic obscurantism; the liberation would of course extend even to those Protestant churches still under the corrupting sway of Nicene orthodoxy. The significance of this is that this dynamic sets up the ironic situation where Christian orthodoxy is saved precisely by being destroyed. Newton and his followers in no way viewed themselves as destroyers of the Christian faith. Rather, as I have emphasized, their theology was self-described as an attempt to retrieve the true Christian faith from the distortions of the centuries. The affinities of this view with that of the classic Protestant reformers cannot be overlooked: in both instances there is a powerful belief that the Roman Church had corrupted an original and pristine form of Christianity that the reformers were now retrieving. Now, however, the very ecclesiological historiography favoured by the Protestant reformers came back to haunt them as the new natural philosophers determined that even most Protestant churches remained a part of the corrupted form of Christianity. What this fact highlights is a central truth inherent in all social/intellectual revolutions: once unleashed, the revolutionary spirit is hard to re-domesticate and recognizes no natural boundaries for its rapacious appetite to extend the revolution further and further into central social structures. Thus the Newtonian Settlement that gave Christian theology the appearance of being in consonance with the new scientific revolution was, in fact, a proverbial Trojan Horse that constituted the saving of Christian theology through an admission that the unique Christological particulars of classic orthodoxy were irrelevant at best, and idolatrous at worst. The essence of liberal Christianity was born in the heat of this moment as Christian theology veered more and more in the direction of downplaying the particularities of Christian revelation in favour of broad religious universalisms that are spiritually vague, moralistic and ultimately metaphysically superficial.

A second problem with this settlement between theology and the new mechanics goes beyond the question of how suitable it may have seemed as a tool for grounding the Christian faith. In many ways, the use of mechanics to show the need for a divine engineer was almost forced upon the intellectuals of the period because of the other, more primary effect of the new science: the desacramentalizing of the cosmos. Many thinkers of the period, of course, had taken note of the fact that the new science of mechanics seemed to leave us with a metaphysically flattened cosmos, bleached of its theophanic qualities. Indeed, such fears predated Newton and seem to have played a key role in the disquiet many leading churchmen felt in their souls over the teaching of Galileo. But these concerns by certain theologians and ecclesiastics were largely brushed aside as the new semi-deistic theism gathered strength as the preferred theological correlate to the new science. The fact that most of the leading scientific minds behind this revolution continued to be religious believers seemed to confirm the turn to natural theology as the best rational foundation for religion and the last bulwark against atheism. It also seemed to confirm that those theologians who were raising alarms were just that – alarmists – and were reacting out of irrational fear of things they did not understand. It was much easier to concoct the narrative of Roman obscurantism in largely Protestant countries like England than to try to swim against the incoming

tsunami of mechanistic science. Newton, for his part, stated expressly that one of the greatest benefits of his new mechanics was that it was the final blow against atheistic arguments: 'Opposite to the first [Godliness] is Atheism in profession, and idolatry in practice. Atheism is so senseless and odious to mankind that it never had many professors.'<sup>28</sup>

However, this so-called victory over atheism was financed, if you will, by first selling-off one of traditional Christianity's greatest theological assets: the doctrine of creation in and through the Logos (Christ), where the entire cosmos is viewed as the sacramental representation of the Christological archetype and exemplar. In order, therefore, to understand completely the specifically *theological* revolution in thought instigated by Newton, this doctrine of creation, especially in its medieval Thomistic garb, must be further elucidated.<sup>29</sup>

In the traditional theology of creation, all the various forms that constitute the natural world are themselves intelligible and hierarchically arranged participations in God, whose mind contains all of the exemplars through which God created the various elements of the cosmos. In other words, nothing was created that was not first an idea in the divine mind that formed the pattern or archetype for the created entity. The being of all existent things thus finds its origin and ultimate fulfilment in God, who alone is the Infinite and self-subsisting act of existence. All finite being is derivative and participatory ('non-subsisting' as the scholastics say), requiring a movement from 'potency' to 'act' in order to reach its teleological end. God alone is the pure act of existence, requiring no such movement from potency to act in order for God to be God. What this traditional scholastic terminology means is really rather simple: all finite beings are only partial possessors of themselves and require a movement outward from their own centre of gravity, first towards their natural ends in the world and then ultimately to their final end in God, in order to reach their final teleological fulfillment. The generic term used by medieval theologians to describe this process of teleological dynamism on the part of finite beings was 'motion', a term used first by the Greeks, but now pressed into service by medieval theologians to describe cosmic processes in teleological categories.

Thomas Aquinas sees in the doctrine of creation a teleological, and ultimately theological, explanation for all such motion in the cosmos. God, as such, has no

<sup>28</sup> Newton, 'A Short Schema of the True Religion,' in *Sir Isaac Newton: Theological Manuscripts*, H. McLachlan (ed.), Liverpool: University Press, 1950, p. 48, quoted in Buckley, p. 87. Buckley is somewhat dismissive of the concern of Newton and many of his contemporaries that Europe was being threatened by atheism. Buckley concludes that there were no large numbers of atheists in the seventeenth century and that the search for them was something of a witchhunt. However, I think Buckley ignores his own argument here. We should give the leading intellectuals of the era some credit for their intelligence, i.e. even if there were not as yet large numbers of actual atheists, the intellectuals of the period, understanding the logic of ideas, could probably sense the changed atmosphere of European culture and the danger posed by the demystification of nature. There was definitely something new in the air and the more prescient among the seventeenth century thinkers probably sensed that the all-pervasive cultural dominance of a Christian and supernatural view of the world was slowly giving way to something that was more secular and naturalistic.

<sup>29</sup> In what follows I am largely following the analysis of the topic by Simon Oliver in 'Motion According to Aquinas and Newton'.



motion since God is pure act. However, this divine Act is precisely a relational, Trinitarian reality wherein the Son is eternally generated from the Father in the unfathomable motionless motion of infinite love. Creation is located within this Trinitarian circumincession and finds therein the pattern for all its various forms. The form that God grants to the cosmos in the creative act is therefore not a purely arbitrary imposition of a divine whim – an imposition which would make all created entities extrinsic to the divine nature in an alienated sense, and thus render them utterly unintelligible and metaphysically opaque – but rather an analogical participation in the very form of the divine life. The second person of the Trinity, consubstantial to and coeternal with the Father even as He is generated from Him, is the very form of God's inner-trinitarian expressiveness and thus the archetypal pattern for all God's creative activity *ad extra*. Thus the forms of the created world are teleologically oriented to fulfilment in the Trinitarian paradigm and are hierarchically arranged and orientated based upon the level of participation in the divine life that they can achieve.<sup>30</sup> What this means is that all of creation is saturated with teleological and formal implications and that all the various forms of the world find their ultimate resolution in the theological affirmation that God is love.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in the very dynamism of their *telos*, the forms of the created world embody a sacramental presence of the Trinity. This sacramental view of the natural world was central to the medieval doctrine of creation and would never have suggested to the medieval mind that the objects of the natural world were merely a random aggregate of dissociated and discrete parts.

Furthermore, creation as such should not, according to Aquinas, be characterized as a movement like other worldly movements, since the latter presuppose an already existing entity in which the reduction of potency to act can take place.<sup>32</sup> For Aquinas, creation happens when the exemplars or forms that are in the divine mind (*ad intra*) are given a share in his act of existence and become real (*ad extra*) in a manner that is neither a movement in the worldly sense, nor simply some

<sup>30</sup> Simon Oliver points out that Aquinas adopted Aristotle's principle that 'whatever is moved is moved by another' (*omne quod movetur ab alio movetur*, Book VII, *Physics*). Therefore, strictly speaking, only God is capable of self-movement, although such movement must never be thought 'of as God moving from potency to act, but rather as a kind of 'motionless motion' where God, from all eternity, exists as a series of internal relations characterized as an 'emanation and return to self'. (Oliver p. 174). However, even in the finite world, there is a hierarchy of being such that as one ascends the ladder of existence, beings become more and more interior to themselves until one reaches the apex of material creation: human beings. The soul in human beings, being spiritual and immaterial, is not moved by anything other than itself when it carries out its proper functions. Nevertheless, the human soul is not the principle of its own existence and requires a creative act of God in order to come to be in the first place as well as to maintain itself in existence; therefore even the human soul is ultimately moved by another. Cf. Oliver, *Motion According to Aquinas and Newton*, p. 170; 172 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Of course, the assertion here that the forms of the world find their theological resolution in the affirmation that God is love requires some unpacking. We will examine this idea at great length in chapter 5. For now, suffice it to say that the assertion that God is love is the theological terminus of the internal logic of the idea that God is a series of personal relations.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II.17.



kind of first efficient cause in a temporal sequence of efficient causes.<sup>33</sup> God is the ultimate principle of all worldly motion in the sense that he grants to all finite beings real existence and a form that is an analogical participation in the infinite form of the divine life. Thus God is not the first mover in the clunky sense of the first domino in a series of falling dominoes. His relation to His creatures is far more metaphysically intimate than such mechanical metaphors would imply. Aquinas therefore does not speculate on the mechanics of creation, i.e. exactly how the creative act works, but chooses instead to emphasize creation as the coming into being of a new relation between God and the exemplars that are the object of God's knowing. In other words, despite the fact that what is created is not to be identified with God pantheistically, what comes into existence with creation are beings that carry within themselves a deep interior metaphysical relation to their origin; therefore everything that exists, insofar as it does exist, is a sacramental representation of the divine nature. What this further implies is that what comes into being is a true universe in the sense that all finite beings exist in a relation both to their origin and, by virtue of this relation to their origin, to all other existing beings as well. Creation is not merely a *mélange* of ill-assorted fragments arbitrarily brought into existence by an Infinite and inscrutable divine will, but rather an intelligible whole that reflects the wisdom of a benevolent Providence. Simon Oliver summarizes this line of thought in a succinct statement that merits full citation:

One can therefore see that the universe and its hierarchy of motions has as its origin the divine emanation, for in this emanation are all things known in God's eternity, a knowledge which is the cause of their flow from the divine being. From the perfect emanation of God from Himself and to Himself, one finds the form of the motion of the universe, its emanation from God and its return to Him through the action of His will and intellect. Ultimately, it is God's perfect fullness of life in the form of His complete subsistence and self-comprehension that constitutes the 'crown' of all motions. From inanimate beings to spiritual substances, all motions are a participation, an image, of the eternal self-movement of the Godhead in that motion is the passage from imperfect to perfect, a self-actualizing in different degrees which is achieved through varying degrees of self-knowledge in emanation. For Aquinas, therefore, time is truly 'the moving image of eternity', a self-actualization through self-knowledge which in creatures requires the passage from potency to act and therefore time, but which in God is achieved in all eternity in the perfect emanation of the Son from the Father, the 'self-motion' after which all self-motions are imperfectly formed as participations in the divine life.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Simon Oliver notes that Aquinas does hold that there is a sense in which one can say that God is the efficient cause of creation: 'This now allows Aquinas to demonstrate how the universe has the divine nature as its efficient cause. He states that "Effects proceed from an efficient cause because they pre-exist there; every agent enacts its like. Now effects pre-exist in a cause according to its mode of being. Since then, God's being is his actual understanding, creatures pre-exist there as held in his mind, and so, as being comprehended, do they proceed from him."' Oliver, p. 174. However, this does not mean that God is an efficient cause in the mechanical sense criticized above.

<sup>34</sup> Oliver, p. 177.

All this is in stark contrast to the doctrine of motion introduced by Newton and to the theological correlates that undergird Newton's revolutionary approach. It has already been mentioned that Newton's own theological leanings were decidedly Arian. What this means is that for Newton, the motion of worldly objects does not find its analogue in the emanation of the Son from the Father. The Son is not consubstantial with the Father nor does he emanate from the Father. Rather, the Son is a mere creature, albeit the highest creature, who carries out the divine will. Thus, the theological emphasis in Newton veers away from a concept of God as a loving series of personal relations and toward a voluntarist conception that emphasizes omnipotence and the divine will as primary. Put another way, for Newton, God's agency is characterized primarily as a kind of force rather than as love or even relation. God's action in the world, therefore, is inscrutable and the role of creation changes from a teleological participation in the trinitarian emanations to sheer obedience to raw omnipotence. The objects of the world are thus robbed of their inner metaphysical intelligibility both in terms of their relation to God as well as their relation to one another. The universe now becomes a mere aggregate of inert objects whose motion is explained as the result of one object exerting a force on other objects. Nature is now viewed as the strict provenance of law, where monadic particles are univocally related to an extrinsic force. This univocal nature of material relations replaces the hierarchical gradation of being and any sense of an analogical participation in the inner divine life on the part of finite entities. There is also a very real sense in which it can be said that Newton replaces the more co-operative view of worldly being espoused by Aquinas with a more violent and conflictual concept of motion as raw force.<sup>35</sup> As Simon Oliver concludes: 'Motion in this context is understood as a state belonging to discrete bodies which are apparently self-sufficient and self-explanatory. *Thus a secular cosmology of motion, lacking reference to the divine, becomes possible.*'<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps a further word on the meaning of theological voluntarism is in order here before we proceed further. Voluntarism was the by-product of the nominalist's denial that God created the cosmos according to the pattern of eternal forms. Forms and essences, as we saw in the last chapter, were viewed by the nominalists as impositions of the human mind. God creates unique individual entities out of His sovereign will and is not constrained by a pattern or form or any eternal idea in His creating. The emphasis here is upon the infinite power of the divine nature and of the completely unfettered nature of the infinite divine will. Hence voluntarists were of the conviction that God could do whatever God wanted, whenever he wanted and for whatever reason he wanted. Furthermore, God's motivations and reasons are beyond the ability of human rationality to scrutinize (one of the other unfortunate side-effects of the loss of a concept of intelligible form being the loss of a sense of analogy as well). Newton and many of the early natural philosophers were heavily influenced by this voluntarist theology. They could, therefore, even in the face of an apparently closed nexus of mechanical laws governing the motion of matter, preserve a more theistic conception of God through appeal to

<sup>35</sup> Oliver, p. 165.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

the constant and direct intervention of God as the chief cause of the very constancy of the mechanical laws in question. The laws of nature are constant because God is constantly about the business of making them constant, and in a voluntarist theology of God there seemed little problem in viewing God most fundamentally as an infinite, omnipotent force whose very nature is to act as an efficient agent imposing His will on nature.

In practice, however, more astute observers saw this appeal to direct divine agency as the *deus ex machina* that it was, and as it became more and more common to describe nature simply through recourse to various mechanical laws, a kind of practical *de facto* deism wins the day. As Michael Hanby notes, this is one of the logical consequences of Newton's reformulation of the God-world relation:

'This understanding locates creation "outside" of God's self-knowledge, and thus effectively relocates "God" to a remote and soon to be irrelevant position extrinsic to the cosmos, and makes room for the notion of universal law, imposed by divine fiat, that is so integral to Newton's reconception of the universe.'<sup>37</sup>

The metaphysical and theological confusion created by the semi-deistic implications of Newton's thought is incalculable; robbed of a genuine metaphysical immanence to the world, God can no longer be properly transcendent either, resulting in a view of the God-world relation as one of a mere juxtaposition between God and an eternal and absolute time/space. Thus, as Hanby concludes: 'It is therefore unsurprising that Newton found it difficult to conceive of God's genuine otherness, imagining absolute space, in the place of the *logos*, as co-eternal with the Father.'<sup>38</sup> Even Newton himself sensed the ambiguity in his thinking and stated in a letter to the classicist Richard Bentley, 'Gravity must be caused by an agent acting constantly according to certain laws, but whether this agent be material or immaterial I have left to the consideration of my readers.'<sup>39</sup> To quote John Brooke's fine study of the period one more time:

Newton's position has been described as one in which God had taken every precaution to minimize the destabilizing forces and yet had willed a world in which His intervention would also be required. There was no contradiction in such a view, but it smacked of an ambivalence that was always liable to be resolved in favour of divine foresight rather than divine intervention. For, as Leibniz objected, if God had to remedy the defects of His creation, this was surely to demean His craftsmanship.<sup>40</sup>

The epicentre of this turn toward deism was England, where many of the leading

<sup>37</sup> Michael Hanby, 'Creation without Creationism: Toward a Theological Critique of Darwinism,' *Communio: International Catholic Review* (Volume XXX number 4, Winter 2003), p. 669

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Newton engaged in a series of letters with Richard Bentley in 1692-3. This particular quote comes from his third letter to Bentley. Quoted in Brooke, *Science and Religion*, p. 145. Newton's correspondence with Bentley is also noteworthy for the seriousness with which Newton takes Bentley's theological insights. This is significant because it shows a Newton who is willing to modify his scientific thinking based upon questions furnished by theology.

<sup>40</sup> Brooke, *Science and Religion*, p. 147.

scientists of the age continued to refer to themselves as 'natural philosophers'. Calling themselves the 'virtuosi', they viewed the scientific task in an explicitly religious context. Robert Boyle, as Ian Barbour points out, 'said that science is a *religious task*, "the disclosure of the admirable workmanship which God displayed in the universe."<sup>41</sup> Boyle's approach typifies the thought of the era: the new mechanics justifies at one and the same time both the elimination of final and formal causality, and the celebration of the triumph of efficient causality as the defeat of atheism. Indeed, one of the peculiar features of the thought of many of the scientific natural philosophers was their firm conviction that one could combine an atomistic view of nature with faith in a creator God, as long as one removed God as a Final Cause – hence eliminating a strong teleological approach to nature – and limiting God's creative role to that of the First Cause. Certainly, Boyle and many of his theistic contemporaries continued to speak in the language of divine concurrence in creation and to allow for some kind of teleology in nature. However, as with Newton, the ambiguity of their theism resided in the increasingly vague sense of just what 'divine concurrence' could mean in a mechanical cosmos, beyond appeal to the arbitrary acts of the voluntarist God.<sup>42</sup> One could appeal to the analogy of the action of the human soul in the human body and say that God is operative in nature in a similar fashion. However, this was to court a double accusation; theologically it opened one up to the charge of Platonism and pantheism – two dreaded terms that were often used in the Protestant condemnation of Papist superstition – while from the realm of science it opened one up to the accusation that one was attempting to bring the world of occult forces in through the back door. Thus the new natural theologians were caught on the horns of a theological and scientific dilemma; a dilemma that only deism seemed to avoid. Deism becomes a theological inevitability once it is admitted that the only true form of causality is efficient causality, i.e. once the notion of what constitutes a cause is levelled out to efficient causation only, God's agency must be excluded, in an either-or fashion, wherever some form of natural causation is proven. Increasingly too, the very concept of an on-going divine agency in the world seems strangely alien and interventionist.

Following Boyle's lead, we see two striking examples of this kind of natural theology in the works of Richard Bentley and Samuel Clarke. Bentley was the first lecturer in the now famous series of lectures established by Robert Boyle. The title of his presentation, 'The Confutation of Atheism from the Origin and Frame of the World' (1693), shows clearly the concern of the time to find some way to combat the atheistic implications of the new secularism. Leading up to the lecture Bentley engaged in a lengthy correspondence with Newton, so it should come as no surprise that Bentley's fundamental thesis was that the new mechanics gives us

<sup>41</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*, p. 19

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Brooke, *Science and Religion*, p. 143. Brooke states this point nicely: 'Whatever Boyle's intentions, it was possible to read into his remarks a diminution in the scope of God's particular providence. Again, for all his insistence that nature is not autonomous, that the clockwork has an external source of power, he was driven on occasions to use a terminology that gave the impression that the Almighty had created the world and then retired.'

the greatest bulwark against atheism the world has yet seen. Indeed, Newton had written to Bentley, 'When I wrote my treatise about my system, I had an eye upon such principles as might work with considering men for the belief of a Deity; and nothing can rejoice me more than to find it used for that purpose'.<sup>43</sup> Following therefore in Newton's wake, Bentley's approach was predictably that of a classic argument from design which is succinctly stated in his thesis: 'Whether a world like the present could possibly without a Divine influence be formed in it or no'. He goes on to give many of the standard design argument examples and ends with a powerful appeal to how unlikely it was that the world had been formed through pure chance. The providential wisdom of the creator God is upheld and God is praised throughout for His abilities as an engineer.<sup>44</sup>

Samuel Clarke is even more forceful. Twelve years after Bentley inaugurated the Boyle lectures, Clarke presented his own lecture under the title, 'A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God'. In his lecture Clarke not only reiterated the Newton-Bentley thesis that the new mechanics gave us the greatest bulwark against atheism, but also that the new mechanics formed the very foundation for the credibility of religious claims. Religion cannot provide a proper warrant for its own claims in the face of the sceptical atheism of the era. However, the natural theology now possible in the light of Newton's system gives us a powerful tool for grounding the fundamental religious claim that all of reality is governed by a wise and infinite Deity. Indeed, Clarke goes so far as to emulate Newton's methodology and proceeds with an analysis-synthesis form of argumentation that takes shape as twelve progressive propositions. As the title of his lecture demonstrates, what it is that Clarke seeks to prove through the use of Newton's mechanics is nothing short of the Being of God and the fundamental attributes of His existence, which, as it turns out, are very similar to the attributes traditionally assigned to God in the Christian tradition: infinity, freedom, intelligence, wisdom etc. The fact that Clarke was invited back to give the Boyle lecture the next year gives further indication as to how popular this line of reasoning was becoming among theologians keen on combating what they perceived to be a wave of atheism on the horizon. Thus we see that the emerging Newtonian settlement among the theological classes was gaining steam and rapidly taking on the form of a genuine theological movement. Buckley concludes:

Clarke strengthens and draws out the lines of the Newtonian Settlement, establishing the ground or the foundations of religion. This does not reduce theology to physics nor does it elevate natural philosophy to religion. But it does maintain that there is a radically important relationship between religion and science, here mechanics; that the fundamental cognitive claims about the existence and nature of God are established by science or natural philosophy or (here) a universal mechanics; that religion itself does

<sup>43</sup> *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton*, H. W. Turnbull, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959, 3:233. Quoted in Buckley, 'Newtonian Settlement', p. 86.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Bentley, 'A Confutation of Atheism from the Origin and Frame of the World', in *Isaac Newton's Papers & Letters on Natural Philosophy and Related Documents* (I. B. Cohen, ed.), Cambridge, Mass. 1958, pp. 316 and 326.

not offer evidence of comparable cogency; indeed, it may offer little evidence at all for such a basic religious commitment.<sup>45</sup>

On the Catholic side, this shift to a non-theological foundation for theology takes the form of a philosophical propaedeutic that is viewed as the rational foundation for the truths of faith. Two Catholic intellectuals at the beginning of the seventeenth century set the tone for what was to come. The Jesuit Leonard Lessius of Louvain and the Franciscan Marin Marsenne of Paris both saw atheism as a real and increasing threat to the faith. However, neither thought that the faith as such had any internal warrant to fend off the rising tide of scepticism. However, rather than turn straight to the new mechanics to develop a natural theology, both desired to ground theology in philosophical proofs for the existence of God and the soul. But as Buckley points out, 'the arguments of both are constructed as if sixteen hundred years of Christianity had never occurred. ... Both treat the atheistic question as if religion had nothing to say to this issue short of categorical faith, that before this radical challenge to its cognitive claims religion stood empty-handed.'<sup>46</sup> This turn to philosophy finds its historical completion in the system of Descartes who was of the opinion that only metaphysics could ground the existence of God. Of course, in a sense the Cartesian project was the exact opposite of Newton's: whereas Newton saw the new mechanics as the means for grounding the existence of God, Descartes needed to prove the existence of God in order to establish that there was a world for metaphysics to reflect on in the first place. However, once the existence of God is philosophically established, there is no longer a need for theology to attempt the same. Thus despite their differences, Newton and Descartes were both of the opinion that religion needed to turn to something outside itself for its justification.

The question that now arises is whether or not the turn to natural theology and to philosophy as the first foundations of religion was not something of a Trojan horse in the theological camp. Was modern atheism caused by well-meaning Christian intellectuals who underplayed the intrinsic evidence offered by religious faith for its own justification and who turned instead to foundationalist arguments which, when discredited by advances in science and philosophy, took the faith with them into the dustbin of history? Did the Boyle lecturers, for example, create a situation in which the design argument was seen as so important that when Hume came along the whole game was up? And, did the turn to philosophical foundationalism harm the faith when it became apparent that the arguments were weak and freighted with too many Christian presuppositions? This seems to be Buckley's position. He notes that it was not long after the high point of natural theology in the seventeenth century that we find, in the Enlightenment, that it is a short step from natural theology to atheism. The Christian naturalism of Newton and Descartes is quickly transformed into the secular rationalism of people like M. de Laplace, whose famous, perhaps apocryphal, retort to Napoleon's question about where God fit into his system – 'Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis' – stands as

<sup>45</sup> Buckley, 'The Newtonian Settlement,' pp. 90–1.

<sup>46</sup> Buckley, p. 92.

the paramount example of how easy the shift was. Historians differ as to whether or not Laplace really made this statement. However, this is of little concern for our purposes. The point, rather, is that once it became apparent that natural events could be described by natural causes, the new naturalism pushed God further and further into the distance. The positing of a more dynamical model for matter, wherein the universe could be explained as the result of the random interactions of dynamic particles unfolding their inner potential, seemed to undercut the belief that the dynamism and change inherent in the universe required an immaterial agent acting upon matter. Furthermore, even the need for the deistic God as First Cause is called into question when it is hypothesized that matter, and hence the universe, is eternal.<sup>47</sup> God may still exist in such a scheme, but it seems, as the late astronomer Carl Sagan once noted, 'that there isn't much for a creator God to do'. Strictly speaking, even though Sagan was too metaphysically obtuse really to know what he was talking about, there is a sense in which he was right; for as long as God is viewed, in voluntarist fashion, as an Infinite efficient cause, then if it can be shown that nature itself has all the efficient causes it needs from within its own resources, then indeed, there is very little left for such a creator to do.

However, as John Brooke has noted, this is perhaps an overly simplistic reading of the history in question. It is unfair and historically inaccurate, says Brooke, to say that the Newton and Boyle lecturers, such as Samuel Clarke and Richard Bentley, placed all their eggs in the argument from design basket. Newton, for example, placed great weight on the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy – especially the prophecies of Daniel – as the foundation of the Christian religion. Although this may conflict with his other statements regarding the use of mechanics as the foundation of religion, it at least shows that he did not reduce the foundations of religion to the design argument alone. Similarly, Samuel Clarke and many of the other natural theologians used the design argument as one apologetical tool among many, rather than reducing apologetics to this one line of attack. It is true that Clarke, Bentley and Boyle all saw the new mechanics as furnishing religion with its greatest justification. Nevertheless, they were not so unsophisticated that they believed that the theologians should simply close up shop because they no longer had anything useful to add to the conversation. Brooke states flatly that 'it would be inaccurate to suggest that either Newton or the Boyle lecturers had reduced the Christian religion to the design argument. Their *apologias* were richer and far more diverse than this.'<sup>48</sup> Finally, with regard to the Catholic Marsenne and his turn to philosophy, Brooke points out that Marsenne wanted to use a philosophy based on the new mechanics precisely to argue for the position that it is possible to

<sup>47</sup> Buckley, pp. 94–9. Certainly, the idea of the eternity of the universe was not invented during this time. Its origins stretch far back into the classical era. Nor was it an idea that had once been entertained but had since been forgotten. Even Aquinas had to acknowledge that were it not for Revelation, there is nothing in philosophy that could dispute Aristotle's idea that the universe is eternal. The difference, however, is that the old idea of the eternity of the universe is now placed in a new intellectual context. When coupled with the new science of mechanics, it helped to further the growing suspicion that it simply was not necessary to invoke the agency of God on any level to explain the existence of the cosmos.

<sup>48</sup> Brooke, *Reconstructing Nature*, p. 151.



differentiate between the truly miraculous and the purely natural. Marsenne had become concerned that some of the new scientific naturalists were imputing to matter all kinds of properties that could be used to explain away true miracles as mere natural phenomena. Armed with a philosophy based on the insights gained from the new mechanics, Marsenne thought he could rein in some of the more outlandish claims made on behalf of the powers of matter, and thereby safeguard the realm of the miraculous from the encroachments of a reductionist science. This concern for the reality of the miraculous hardly marks out Marsenne as a closet deist.<sup>49</sup>

The fact of the matter is that the design argument was not invented in the seventeenth century, and it continues to be a staple in the arsenal of religious apologists even into our own century. Authors such as William Dembski and Michael Behe have spearheaded the so-called 'intelligent design' movement that utilizes advancements in the sciences of information systems and the mathematical detection of design to argue for the non-random nature of whatever biological mechanism created the wonderful biodiversity of our planet.<sup>50</sup> Are they unwittingly causing atheism by buying into the game plan of the evidentialists? Perhaps they are, but it is by no means self-evident that this is so. Christian thinkers have often taken the very advancements of science used by sceptics to debunk Christianity and turned them to their own purposes as an argument in favour of the faith, thus turning the table on their interlocutors and putting the sceptics on the defensive. It cannot be contested that Newton and the Boyle lecturers were at least in part simply trying to use the knowledge of their time to bolster the Christian faith in the face of increasing scientific scepticism concerning the claims of religion.<sup>51</sup> Therefore Brooke is dismissive of the idea that this turn to natural theology is the primary cause of the rise of modern atheism as, he claims, Buckley maintains. There are better historical suspects for the rise of atheism than natural theology, the most notable being changes in economics, politics and the petty disagreements among the warring Christian factions.

In defence of Buckley, however, it is a caricature of his position to claim that he is maintaining a direct line of causality between the natural theology of Newton and the Boyle lecturers and the rise of modern atheism. Brooke seems to be missing the essential historical point that Buckley is making, namely, that whatever the multifaceted historical origins of atheism may have been, the turn to warrants outside the faith to ground religion, however well-meaning and motivated by confessional concerns, only increased the alienation of the Christian religion from its own sources and roots, a process that began in the late medieval period and was now reaching a state of crisis. Far from being a simple and historically common

<sup>49</sup> Brooke, *Science and Religion*, pp. 125–7.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. William Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science & Theology*, Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999; Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*, New York: The Free Press, 1996.

<sup>51</sup> Brooke, *Reconstructing Nature*, p. 151. Brooke states: 'It is sometimes necessary to counter the criticism that a particular scientific theory destroys the credibility of belief. The typical riposte might be that even if the theory were true it would not have the implications for belief that the sceptic or atheist maintains. In this way one pulls the teeth of one's attacker.'



attempt to use the knowledge of the time to buttress the faith, the new natural theology had definitively ratified the growing dualism between reason and faith and had unwittingly granted to the sceptics the truth of the claim that faith as such was entirely within the realm of the private subjectivity of the believer, unless it could be shown that it was grounded in something 'real': the 'real' now being defined as that which could be measured and quantified by the scientists. Theology therefore proved itself to be an unwitting ally of the sceptics who were only too happy to accept the idea that science provided us with the primary barometer for what counted as true. Certainly philosophy, science and all the branches of human learning must be used by theology in its analysis of reality. But that is not what Buckley is contesting. Rather, his claim is that the theologians did not use the new learning to aid their theological analysis, but used it instead as a substitute for theology, thus marginalizing their own discipline both within the academy and in society at large. As Buckley puts it, 'The origin of atheism in the intellectual culture of the West lies thus with the self-alienation of religion itself. ... The problem with the Newtonian Settlement is not that philosophy was present, but that religion was absent.'<sup>52</sup>

Finally, Brooke seems to ignore his own historical analysis that shows how deeply intertwined religious concerns were with the new science. Thus he tends to underplay the significance of the deep cultural decline of religion occasioned by the rise of a new science unconcerned with theological determinations. What Brooke seems to miss here is that the self-alienation of Christianity was not one cultural fact among many, leading to the rise of modern atheism. It was *the* cultural fact of the millennium. Once the Christian faith became alienated from its own sources and bogged down in endless internecine squabbles over the roles of those sources, it was only a matter of time before Christianity was viewed not just as alienated from itself, but as alienating in general. Just as the Christian churches were coming to be viewed as ever more alien to the true aspirations of culture and modernity, theological deism stepped into the fold to give us a distant and alien God who appears as more of an absentee landlord than the providential deity of traditional faith. Thus did theology and religion come to be viewed as the caretakers of the trivial, while science took on the ever-increasing role of definer of the truly real.

This increasing distance between theology and science did not go unnoticed by the men and women of the time and created the uneasiness about science that led to such notable historical debacles as the Galileo affair. As impressive as Brooke's analysis of the confessional concerns of Newton and his collaborators is, it should not be used to clutter the historical field of vision with overly thick descriptions of what was going on. The turn to a more deistic form of religion was palpable and pervasive. If theology could do no better than construct *ad hoc* scientific and philosophical arguments in an attempt to ground the existence of a vague, abstract and distant Deity, then it only provides further evidence of how alienated theology was from its own proper sources. Theists and deists continued to debate the where and when and how of God's agency in the world, with Newton once

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<sup>52</sup> Buckley, p. 99.

again leading the way, since he embodied elements of both. The fact of Newton's mixing of deistic and theistic forms of thought serves to point up that in terms of first principles there was very little difference between the two approaches; given the internal logic of the accepted grounds for the discussion – that there is only one form of causation (efficient) – the outcome of this debate was already determined in advance in favour of the deists. In other words, most theists were closet deists in their basic assumptions, even while they continued to weave arguments in favour of a more active Divine Providence in the world. The theology of the period could therefore not create a viable intellectual alternative to the growing reductionist naturalism of the age: quite the contrary was true. The shallow and defensive theology of the period was now at the mercy of philosophical sceptics like Hume and Hobbes who were only too quick to point out the contradictions and inconsistencies of such an approach. In short, what the theology of the period proves is that the chief enemy of the Christian faith was not the sceptic, but rather a theology that no longer trusted in the evidential power of the fundamental religious sources in which it purported to be grounded.<sup>53</sup>

Ian Barbour agrees with this analysis and sees in the theological obsession with the Creator God, rather than the more Christologically grounded Redeemer God, a latent disrespect for revealed religion in favour of the allegedly more universal God of nature and reason. Thus he concludes:

In all these areas the virtuosi moved away from the Christ-centred orientation of the Middle Ages and Reformation. 'Rational religion' had been intended as support for the essentials of Christianity, but by the next century it was to become a substitute for them. Reason, originally a supplement to revelation, began to replace it as the path to knowledge of God. *The change did not come about initially by open conflict but by the reinterpretation of Christianity from within.*<sup>54</sup> (emphasis added)

#### ***D. 'Mere Matter' and the Loss of the Realm of the Personal***

Largely ignored in this rush to prove the reasonableness of Christianity through recourse to secular philosophical reason and scientific naturalism was what was happening to the concept of 'matter', as well as the notion of what constituted the reliably real. Thus while most thinkers of note were grappling with the tug-of-war between theists and deists, the most important issue of all, the one that drove the debate between theists and deists without ever being clearly seen as *the* issue, was being largely ignored: the question of matter *qua* matter and the nature of its interactions. In many ways, Newton was the Grand Master of this new view of matter and so we began with an analysis of how theology had to settle its accounts with its

<sup>53</sup> The lack of trust in theological justifications for the faith is neatly summarized in a statement from Descartes: 'I have always been of the opinion that two questions – those dealing with God and with the soul – were among the principal ones which should be demonstrated by philosophy rather than theology.' In René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Laurence Lafleur (trans.), Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978, p. 7. Quoted in Buckley, p. 92.

<sup>54</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*, p. 21.

Newtonian interlocutors. However, in still other ways it is in the figure of Galileo that we have the iconic representative of the culmination of a long historical process of change in the view of matter and the final reversal of the classical view of nature. Galileo had no time for the concept of form or for the idea of occult forces at work in nature. This is precisely how he advances the cause of modern science beyond that of Kepler, who continued to hold to the view of formal causation in however attenuated a form. For Galileo, all the processes of the natural world are the product of particles in motion and can be understood properly only in the mathematically quantifiable aspects of their relations. Thus does Galileo make his own the now infamous distinction between the primary and secondary qualities of natural objects, first proffered by Kepler: primary qualities constitute the truly real and are comprised of the quantifiable aspects of matter, while the secondary qualities are the purely subjective constructions of the human mind and are, therefore less objectively real. As Galileo puts it:

I do not believe that external bodies, in order to excite in us tastes, odours and sounds, need anything other than size, figure, number or slow or rapid movements; and I judge that, if the ears, the tongue, and the nostrils were taken away, the figure, the numbers and the motion would indeed remain, but not the odours nor the tastes nor the sounds which, without the living animal, I do not believe are anything else than names, just as tickling is precisely nothing but a name if the armpit and the nasal membrane be removed.<sup>55</sup>

Here we see the foundations for the modern scientific method in all of its stark contours. If the strictly quantifiable aspects of nature constitute the truly and objectively real, then it follows that only mathematics and empirical, experimental science can put us into reliable contact with this reality. Kepler, among others, had said this before, but it was Galileo who gave the view historical flesh through actual demonstration. Philosophical and theological understandings of nature came now to be viewed suspiciously as mystifications of a fundamentally quantitative reality that only the new science could properly understand. However, the problem this poses to theology is intensified when one realizes that the elevation of quantification to such a rarefied status was not simply an attempt to guarantee the autonomy of science from theology, but rather a totalizing epistemological claim in its own right: only science gives us access to the kind of truth that really matters. Thus the bifurcation between subject and object that so typifies this approach is nothing short of the denial of the importance of the realm of the personal in scientific investigation in particular, as well as for the pursuit of all religious and philosophical truth in general. This helps to explain why the putative objectivity of the modern academy was thought to require secularity as its necessary condition of possibility; religion, by definition, is a distorting and biased subjectivity that allows the realm of the personal to intrude into the pure pursuit of objective truth, creating in the scholar a false academic consciousness marred by a dogmatic subjectivism. Secularity, in contrast, was (and is?) viewed as methodologically

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<sup>55</sup> *Il Saggiatore*, quoted in Naydler, 'The Regeneration of Realism,' p. 165.

neutral since it makes no specific faith claims, and relies instead on the canons of rationality established by the objective sciences. What emerges from this witches' brew of rationalism, empiricism and positivism is the deep modern conviction that science, and all real learning in general, progresses only as long as objective distance is maintained from all things pertaining to the realm of the personal, from the realm of the macro world, from the realm of 'qualities'. True knowledge of a thing does not come from an understanding of its total *Gestalt* or our perceptions of its overall relationality to ourselves and to the broader world. Rather, true knowledge only arises when the secondary qualities have been bracketed and the object of perception has been dissected into its constituent parts. In short, the true nature of reality is subpersonal and therefore the entire realm of the *humanum* is increasingly viewed as a meddlesome epiphenomenon that must be disregarded if we are to have a truly scientific understanding of our cosmos. Jeremy Naydler summarizes this point nicely in a paragraph worthy of full citation:

In the new metaphysics of scientism, the foundations of which were laid in the nominalism of Ockham and in Galileo's mathematicization of reality, the human being is systematically excluded from the world accessible to 'clear and distinct' knowledge. Whereas in the traditional metaphysics, it was felt that within the human subject there existed an impartial and transcendent 'active intellect' ... through which it was thought possible to participate in the 'intelligible forms' of the object investigated – and thus to obtain 'objectivity' in a quite literal way by sharing in the essential being of the object – in the new scientism, the concept of the human subject acting as a kind of mirror of the Ideas and Forms underlying reality disappeared. Rather, objectivity was to be gained by a progressive disengagement of the scientist from his own subjectivity. ... In the new outlook of scientism, the human subject becomes an 'irrelevant spectator' of processes of which he is deemed but an insignificant effect. For if the world is 'really' composed of primary qualities ... then veritably the human being has no place in it.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, what this shows us is that modern science, as typified here by Galileo, often acts in ways that are counter to the plain evidence of our senses. In classical thought, what the senses give us are perceptions of a macro world of forms and essences and purposes. Our senses place us into contact with a world of interacting wholes, and not the abstracted parts of experimental science. Our senses were thus viewed as existing within the total structure of a living organism, not to be abstracted from the organism, i.e. there is in this view an assertion that there really is no such thing as the abstraction we often refer to as the senses, but rather, there are simply organisms engaged in the act of sensing. Thus the senses are themselves operations in a living *Gestalt* and are the means by which the organism engages with – and expresses itself as a part of – a world of relational wholes. But science in the mode of Galileo is keen to point out that our senses are deceiving since they do not show us what is truly real: the fundamentally quantifiable aspects of the particles that make up everything and the quantifiable forces that guide their interactions. The irony of course is that science is often portrayed

<sup>56</sup> Naydler, 'The Regeneration of Realism,' p. 167.

in the modern Enlightenment myth as the champion of common sense whereas religion is all about pie in the sky illusion. In point of fact, however, it was modern science that seemed to be the champion of the truly bizarre and the counterintuitive, whereas religion was attempting to preserve the reality and truth-bearing content of our everyday experience of the world. What was at stake here, and what Galileo, Newton and their religious interlocutors clearly understood, was the very definition of what constitutes the truly real. Classical Christian philosophy, with its essentialist and teleological leanings, continued to view the real as the macro-world presented to us by the senses and arranged in a hierarchy of being. The new science, in contrast, rejected this entire world-view *tout court*, and counted the truly real as only the sub-sensual and sub-personal realm of sheer mathematical quantity. It must be stated here that this difference in approach represents a true conflict between the Christian faith and the epistemology of early modern science. Sophisticated Christian thinkers of the period understood quite well what metaphysical losses the new science entailed, rendering their oft-maligned and stereotyped opposition to it somewhat justified.<sup>57</sup>

What we see, therefore, is that modernity represents a fundamental reversal of the relationship in our consciousness between the realm of the living and the non-living. The Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas, in an insightful analysis, points out that for ancient and classical culture the fundamental category for understanding the foundation of reality was life. Everything that exists is characterized by some kind of animation, including the nonbiological aspects of the cosmos, and that it was in fact death that represented the anomaly that needed explaining. In other words, if the cosmos as a whole is a quasi-living entity, why then must things die and pass out of existence? Does not life contain an inner imperative towards continuing existence? And if it does, why then does death mark its boundaries? The ritualizing of death in even Stone Age cultures points to this fundamental dynamic at work in human consciousness. However, with the rise of modernity this relationship is reversed. Now the cosmos is viewed as a fundamentally non-living and inert reality with life representing an anomalous speck in an otherwise dead cosmos. Indeed, even modern biology no longer studies organisms from the perspective of their total *Gestalt* precisely as a living entity, but rather as the epiphenomenal expression of an even more fundamental chemistry and physics. Therefore the goal of the new science to seek the truly real in only the quantifiable aspects of existence represents in one sense the triumph of the sub-personal and the non-living as the essential mark of truth.<sup>58</sup>

Of course, such exaggerated emphasis on the realm of the sub-personal and non-living may have been a necessary step to take in order for modern science to disengage itself from Christian theological moorings. Perhaps, as E. A. Burtt points

<sup>57</sup> If I may be permitted a tangential commentary: those in the modern science and religion dialogue who want to downplay the conflict between science and the Christian faith need to take this fundamental metaphysical rupture more seriously in their historical analysis of this critical period.

<sup>58</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001, pp. 7–26.

out, 'it has ... been worth the metaphysical barbarism of a few centuries to possess modern science.'<sup>59</sup> However, the nihilistic implications of this move cannot be ignored and remind us once again that even the greatest human accomplishments are often a two-edged sword, with the law of unintended consequences looming in the background. It further points to a glaring need for modern intellectuals to reassess the real role science has played in the forging of our culture, foregoing the usual apotheosis of science for realistic appraisals of its negative as well as positive impact on the ethos of our era.

Returning to our main theme, does all this mean that European intellectuals became atheists and materialistic reductionists during this period? The answer to this question is a simple 'no'. However, if we focus exclusively on the atheism or theism of the science of this period, we are in danger of missing the point. The important question is the extent to which the new science had bleached the material universe of its theophanic qualities. To the extent that the science of quantities had banished the realm of the personal from the cosmos, just so far does it render the difference between faith and unbelief irrelevant. If the realm of the non-human is a strictly quantifiable reality devoid of personal characteristics, then the religious quest to find meaning and purpose in the cosmos is but a subjective projection on to an otherwise purposeless and indifferent world. The collapse of the classical metaphysics of form, beginning with the decay of the Thomistic system in nominalism and progressing through the deistic atomism of post-Newtonian theologians, culminates finally in the naturalism of the science of quantities. In this system God may exist, and He may even have created the cosmos, but this reality is of no real significance since it is of no explanatory value in the realm of the quantifiable. The universe is demystified and depersonalized, leaving only the cold residue of mere matter as the barometer of the truly real.

Here, it seems to me, Buckley's thesis that the deism of the age played right into the hands of the enemies of theology is borne out. Simply put, the deistic theologians who accepted the new science of mechanical quantities as the starting point for discussing the agency of God in the cosmos lacked, in virtue of their very acceptance of atomistic mechanism, the requisite metaphysical sophistication required to develop anything other than a false either-or between the agency of God and the agency of nature. So where the science of quantities advanced as an explanatory tool for natural phenomena, the agency of God had to recede. Good church-going theists were now free to live their lives as if God did not really matter, since the realm of the everyday world was now empty of any providential significance.

To be sure there were a prescient few who saw the writing on the wall and raised the alarm; but these few tended to come from the ranks of the theologians, poets and philosophers and were easily pushed aside to make room for the now unstoppable tsunami of mechanistic law as the primary metaphor for existence. Most theologians, as has already been noted, saw in the new science of mechanics not a threat but a blessing, and set about the task of developing a natural theology that created a new doctrine of God that de-emphasized the traditional Christian

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<sup>59</sup> Burtt, pp. 305–6.

category of God as a dynamic person, a loving Father, in favour of the 'Divine lawgiver'. But this is a move fraught with momentous consequences, for there is now also a shift in emphasis from a theology that views God as a font of wisdom that our own reason can participate in through mystagogy, sacramental participation and a life of virtue, to a theology where the very wisdom of God is precisely nothing more than his arbitrary power. The nominalist undertones of this reduction of wisdom to power are not very subtle and are fraught with social as well as theological implications. Laws are to be obeyed and have an air of normative force to them that often borders on the violent and capricious, as opposed to the God of Christianity who comes to us as a gift to be received in a loving embrace. The French historian and philosopher Rémi Brague, in an insightful analysis, summarizes this point nicely:

The laws of nature are laws that God imposed on His creatures, and the absoluteness of the power of God has an effect that the orders that He gives cannot help but be followed. ... This voluntarist conception of the law found expression in Duns Scotus ..., then in William of Ockham ..., for whom all law, divine or human, is positive. That conception fits within an overall movement that shifts the centre of gravity of the divine attributes from wisdom towards power. ... Omnipotence became independent and general, splitting off from the paternity that it originally qualified, as expressed in the *Credo*, which confesses 'the Almighty Father (*patrem omnipotentem*).' It was henceforth considered as the general regime of the relationship of God to the created; it designated the immediate, therefore irresistible, character of divine intervention in nature. ... Consequently, the divine law was understood above all as the expression of the will of God imposed on things already created, and no longer as the impression of divine wisdom on the very nature of the created. ... Before, what was stressed was man's acceptance of entering into filial relation with God, an acceptance freely exercised, before freeing liberty itself to higher flights. Now the relationship of God's creatures to God consisted in a simple obedience in which the created bows before the divine commands.<sup>60</sup>

The new emphasis on the divine lawgiver also has unintended consequences for the concept of a natural teleology in the cosmos. As we have seen, the new mechanical science spoke in the language of law, and the deistic natural theology that followed in its wake dutifully developed a modified concept of God that placed omnipotence front and centre. However, it is somewhat misleading to speak about the law of nature in the singular; rather, the new science spoke of a variety of laws in the plural, each governing a different aspect of the natural world. In the world of Newton and Galileo, where time and space are absolutes, and the atomistic stuff of materiality exists in discrete, billiard ball isolation from all others, the laws of nature were not viewed as unified in a heuristic super law of some kind. Instead, the individual units of matter that make up physical entities were viewed as related to one another through an extrinsicist understanding of mechanical forces; these forces are as existentially discrete as the bodies they govern. The result is that the divine architect is now imagined as the 'first force' in the sense that He

<sup>60</sup> Rémi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp. 236–7.



is the creator of all the various forces that govern nature. But just as the various laws that govern nature are discrete and bear no internal intelligible orientation to one another, so too the divine power that created these laws is now viewed as equally inscrutable with regard to the inner intelligibility that guided the divine choice in creating them. The laws of nature, and the divine will that brought them into existence, are from an epistemological standpoint positivistic and voluntaristic in nature. Thus it is hard, in the midst of this dual emphasis on omnipotence and inscrutability, to escape the conclusion that the reason or purpose for these laws to be the way they are, rather than another way, is simply that God chose them to be this way. But this immediately renders the notion of teleology otiose to any viable scientific description of nature. Indeed, the plural nature of the laws of the cosmos underscores once again that modernity will have difficulty maintaining the notion of a 'uni-verse' at all in the classical sense of a hierarchically arranged and ordered whole. Once again, Rémi Brague summarizes this point:

The law of God is identified with the laws of nature, and it too moves to the plural. ... The idea of a law of nature existed before this revolution, but in the singular. Its shift to the plural implies the disappearance of the idea of a global order, replaced by a collection of constant and observable relations. Science after Galileo even reflects on what is implied by the ideas of the laws of nature; it gives up the search for causes. Science in the modern age, as Auguste Comte writes, has quite deliberately substituted for the 'inaccessible determination of causes ... a simple search for laws – that is for the constant relations that exist between observable phenomena.' With positivism, however, the indistinct figure of the clockmaker God invoked by the deists of the eighteenth century became superfluous: there was no longer any need to claim to found observable regularities in nature on the divine; soon, what is more – beginning in the nineteenth century – thinkers preferred not to speak of 'laws' at all, instead simply writing the equations that were a condensation of such laws or speaking vaguely of 'formulas' or 'principles'.<sup>61</sup>

Jumping ahead to our own era, we can see that the second tragedy in all of this is that the reduction of physical phenomena to mechanical manifestations of the laws that govern natural relations has inexplicably led to the delusional and silly romanticism of modern scientism. In the midst of the modern boredom and nihilism created by the concept of 'mere matter' we are admonished by the naïve and culturally obtuse purveyors of scientism (e.g. Samuel Harris and Richard Dawkins) to find a sense of joy and inner contentment from the great drama that is the cosmos of modern reductionist science. The scientistic mythology one sees in shows on American public television such as 'NOVA' wax poetic and rhapsodic about the 'meaningless meaning' of the cosmos and why we should all be excited about the utopian technocratic eschaton that awaits us around the corner. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your perspective) the average person sees through such semantic legerdemain, and feels painfully the loss of a deeper metaphysical meaning to the cosmos. However, the plausibility structures of modernity militate against the idea that the science of 'mere matter' is

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. pp. 235–6.



wrong, leaving most people with an inner spiritual tension: they desire to affirm God, but the only God they know is the alienated deity of modern, denatured, bourgeois Christianity. God is either in the depth of my soul, to be found through a retreat from the material world into a vague interiority, or God is distant from the operations of the cosmos, to be found in agnostic rational speculation about 'limit questions'. But God is not found in nature, unless one opts for the ersatz, boutique shop, pantheism of consumeristic New Ageism. The bottom line is always the same: the great, providential and personal God of classic Christianity cannot be located in our modern accounts of nature, leading to the nihilistic crisis of the present moment. Balthasar summarizes the current situation as follows:

The world, formerly penetrated by God's light, now becomes but an appearance and a dream – the Romantic vision. . . . But where the cloud disperses, naked matter remains as an indigestible symbol of fear and anguish. Since nothing else remains, and yet *something* must be embraced, twentieth-century man is urged to enter this impossible marriage with matter, a union which finally spoils all man's taste for love. But man cannot bear to live with the object of his impotence, that which remains permanently unmastered. He must either deny it or conceal it in the silence of death.<sup>62</sup>

But how did we get into this nihilistic predicament? How did we go from the seventeenth and eighteenth century deistic settlement with Newton and Galileo, with all its talk of the 'world machine' and the 'Divine Architect', to the view that nature is fundamentally devoid of meaning and completely indifferent to the human condition? In this chapter we have been primarily concerned with the cosmology of the early founders of modern science and the voluntaristic theology they all shared. However, in order to complete the Copernican revolution, the same scientific processes that were operative in the cosmic sphere had to be applied to the biological sphere as well. In order for the triumph of mechanistic nihilism to be complete, the acid of quantification and reduction had to be applied to the realm of living things. Obviously, this will be accomplished in Darwin's revolution, or as the philosopher Daniel Dennett describes it: 'Darwin's dangerous idea'. So before we begin the more constructive project of developing a Trinitarian ontology that will undergird a new theology of nature, we must first examine one last development in the rise of science: the final destruction of form-based teleology in the biological sphere and the end of the idea that the ordered laws of the cosmos reflect the wisdom of a divine architect. This is accomplished through the rise of evolutionary theory and the new world-view propounded by its more fevered apologists. To this we now turn.

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<sup>62</sup> Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, pp. 18–19.

## Chapter 4

### DARWIN'S REVOLUTION: THE END OF TELEOLOGY

#### *A. The continuing importance of 'form' in biology*

One of the chief consequences of the rise of mechanistic science in the wake of Newton and Galileo was the elevation of the concept of 'law' as the governing metaphor for nature's operation. Gone were all the forms and other occult forces that purported to have been the causes of nature's motion and *telos*. Gone as well were the four types of causation delineated by Aristotle and medieval thinkers. Instead, we now see a universe that operates according to fixed laws internal to nature itself, all of which were viewed as operating within the realm of efficient causality alone. However, even within the scientific guild an exception continued to be made for the organic forms of biological life, which were viewed as qualitatively different realities from the non-living aspects of nature. The heavenly spheres and even the earth itself might operate according to the laws of Newton's mechanics, but surely, it was reasoned, the realm of life gave evidence of an altogether different order of reality, a reality much closer in kind to the spiritual domain of souls and forms. Thus essentialism was still the dominant biological, theological and philosophical attitude when it came to interpreting the structure of organic entities.

Furthermore, most scientists during this period still thought of themselves as natural theologians who had a vocation as *scientists* to make visible the glorious handiwork of the Divine Designer. The natural world may operate according to fixed laws, but it was God who created those laws and who providentially implanted in the cosmos a wonderful harmony, even as teleological interpretations of the cosmos became more and more attenuated. Indeed, as we have seen, many scientists believed that the new science only strengthened the evidence for a rational Creator as they constructed arguments for God's existence based on the regularity of nature's laws. William Paley's classic work, *Natural Theology* (1802), is the archetypal expression of this view and gained wide acceptance and popularity within the scientific community as well as the general public.<sup>1</sup> A few decades later the influential *Bridgewater Treatises* were also published, a collection of essays by noted philosophers and scientists written with the express purpose of showing how

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<sup>1</sup> William Paley, *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, Hartford: S. Andrus and Sons, 1847.

modern science deepens rather than diminishes our appreciation for God's design in nature.<sup>2</sup> Some versions of evolutionary theory had begun to be formulated, but they were highly speculative in nature and lacked empirical scientific evidence. Even the great geologist Charles Lyell who was one of the first to begin to question the youth of the earth, and who championed the idea of a very old earth indeed, continued to believe that God had implanted in nature the capacity to bring about all the species of life the earth had ever seen, even while he rejected the more common notions of special creation extant in the natural theology of his day.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the young Darwin read and greatly admired Paley's work, and that of many of the other natural theologians as well, seeing in them a wonderful testimony to the beauty and symmetry of life.

Thus despite the well-publicized case of Galileo's trial, most Christian theologians had come to accept the new science as a positive boost to faith in God, with natural theology gaining in importance with every new scientific discovery. So long as living things, and humanity in particular, retained their privileged status in scientific research there seemed nothing to fear in the new science and much that was to be admired. The essentialist concept of the fixity of species played an important role in this positive theological evaluation of science, since it was still the reigning scientific view of the plant and animal kingdoms and seemed to lend support to the Genesis narrative of creation. One of the reasons for this was that if science could show us that the species barrier is fixed and immutable, then it really does raise the question of biological origins: if the various species are fixed, they therefore had no antecedents within nature itself, a fact that added scientific credentials to biblical notions of special creation. Furthermore, the concept of the fixity of species still resonated with the old medieval concepts of form and soul giving living things an apparent on-going teleological connection with the divine plan for creation. So long as the form of each fixed species retained a sense of essentialist teleology that transcended the closed nexus of Newton's mechanics, then it seemed that God's providential agency in the natural world was preserved.

This emphasis upon the role of form in biological entities was reinforced by scientific observation of the development of living things from embryonic simplicity to full-blown organic structure. There seemed to be no way to account for this development along the lines of simple mechanics, and some kind of formal cause continued to be viewed as the most reasonable assumption, even among scientists. In his analysis of the significance of the rise of Darwinism, Hans Jonas notes how dominant the sense of formal cause continued to be in nineteenth-century biology:

<sup>2</sup> These Treatises were published in eight volumes by various authors over a span of about ten years. For a recently republished version of some of these essays see: Francis Henry Egerton Bridgewater, *The Bridgewater Treatises on the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God, as Manifested in Creation*, Charleston, SC: Bibliolife, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Anne Clifford, 'Darwin's Revolution in the *Origin of Species*,' in *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, SJ and Francisco J. Ayala (editors), South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, p. 291.

In terms of the cause-effect relation, then, the parent accounts not only for its offspring's existence but also for its offspring's *form* by its own possession of the selfsame form. This is a pattern very different from the mechanistic chain of cause and effect and strongly suggests the operation of a *causa formalis* in addition to a *causa efficiens*, or the existence of substantial forms, which were otherwise banned from the whole system of natural explanation. In short, the very concept of development was opposed to that of mechanics and still implied some version or other of classical ontology.<sup>4</sup>

This continuing emphasis upon formal causation in the biological sphere was seen as a further boost to the aims of Christian natural theology, since in the classical ontology of form the cause of the form must itself be greater than that which it causes: the lower formal reality cannot produce from itself a higher form since it was thought that it had to possess, in greater or equal quality than the effect, the perfection that it was imparting: *nemo dat quod non habet* (you cannot give what you do not have). This seemed to argue powerfully for the existence of an infinite uncaused cause which contained within itself all the formal perfections on display in the natural world. Once again, as Hans Jonas points out: 'It had mostly been assumed that there must be not only more power but also more perfection in the cause than in the effect. The originating agency must possess more reality than the things originated by it. It must also be superior in formal essence, to account for the degree of form that the derivative things may enjoy.'<sup>5</sup>

Thus as the nineteenth century progresses it does not at first glance appear as if there is any great theological crisis on the horizon with regard to the new sciences. Why very few people could see the writing on the wall is anyone's guess; the extension of mechanical naturalism to living things was just around the corner, but most theologians and scientists seemed content with this fundamental bifurcation in their thinking for reasons that probably had more to do with antecedent theological commitments than any realistic assessment of the situation. As Anne Clifford points out: 'Since the seventeenth century the educated persons of Great Britain had accepted a compromise between the naturalistic and theistic viewpoints that reserved mechanical laws for physics, chemistry and geology on the one hand, and divine purposes for biology on the other. No natural laws could explain living organisms, including and especially the human species.'<sup>6</sup> The upshot of this compromise was the continuing relevance of the mutually conditioning concepts of form and teleology in the biological realm. Thus despite the upheavals caused by the rise of Newtonian science, there remained a palpable sense of God's agency in the world; in the non-living world God's agency continued on as a kind of engineering marvel, and in the biological sphere God's agency was still viewed in the classical manner as the impartor of substantial forms and teleological orientations. But all that was about to change.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, p. 42

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 40

<sup>6</sup> Clifford, p. 294.

***B. Darwinism and its Social Context***

In the historical narrative concerning the rise of Darwinism there are two aspects to the story that are of particular interest to my analysis of the rise of modern science as the triumph of a mechanistic and theologically nihilistic world-view and the defeat of the last vestiges of a teleological/theophanic world-view. First, there is the story of Darwin's scientific theories that concern the naturalistic origin of the apparent design of biological entities. Darwin's primary scientific concern was to place the study of biological origins on a par with the hard science of Newton's mechanics through the development of natural laws in the biological sphere that were every bit as quantifiable and empirically verifiable as physics and chemistry. Darwin understood that it was necessary to give evolutionary theory a more solid scientific foundation. Influenced as he was by William Paley's argument from design for some kind of special creation, Darwin knew full well that the only way to establish scientifically the truth of evolutionary theory, and thereby to disengage the study of biological form from its theological entanglements, was to provide empirical and testable evidence that the design we see in nature was in fact the product of the laws of nature alone, without any supernatural intervention.

What the implications of this view might mean for theology was of little concern to Darwin, who often confessed ignorance on these matters despite his early training for a clerical life in the Church of England. He may have privately harboured truly sophisticated theological opinions, but if he did he chose to keep them a closely guarded secret so as to focus all his energies on his primary scientific goals. Thus Darwin, at least in his public statements, was not the great slayer of God and religion that he is often made out to be by Christian fundamentalists, at least for the reasons they think, nor does he seem to have had a burning desire to turn his scientific theories into a great social cause of any kind. Perhaps most importantly, he does not seem to have been an advocate of a secularist revolution that sought to overturn millennia of cultural/religious practice in the name of some vague, progressivist notion of social improvement. His epigones would display such naïveté and hubris in the coming decades, but Darwin himself seemed to be singularly focused on establishing the truly scientific (Newtonian) foundations for his theory. Darwin's true danger to theology resided in the fact that his construal of evolutionary theory embodied, at least in part, a truly theological anti-theology, however paradoxical or even contradictory such a claim may sound.

The second aspect of the narrative that concerns us here is the social and theological context within which Darwin framed his revolutionary theory. The theological context in the middle of the nineteenth century was, for the most part, a rather shallow Anglican deism, with its obsession with a kind of natural theology that was always on the lookout for demonstrable proof of the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent creator. To be sure, there were other, more traditionally Christian, theological voices as well. But Darwin was trained in, and had the greatest affinity for, the deistic brand of theology; therefore it would be surprising indeed if its vapid metaphysical categories played no role in how Darwin shaped the intellectual context in which his theory was framed.

Socially, nineteenth-century England was enjoying the fruits of its imperial

labours: industrial capitalism was surging, the colonial ambitions of the empire were still firmly in place, and increasing numbers of British intellectuals were dreaming grand visions of a new sociopolitical utopia, and the perfectibility of man that would be brought about by social engineering, modern science and proper manners. Unfortunately, all this also came with the baggage of a rigidly structured class-based society, the growing poverty of the urban poor, and simplistic racial theories that concluded (surprise!) that the Anglo-Saxon race was superior to all others. Darwin was most definitely influenced by all these social factors and there is little doubt that they too played a role in how he formulated his theory, both in its particulars and in its broader intellectual context. It is to this narrative that we now turn.

### *1. 'Darwinism'*

The story of Darwin's life has been so well rehearsed that there really is little point in going into his biography in any great detail here. However, there are a few salient features of his life narrative that are specifically pertinent to the topic at hand and deserve special attention. First, Darwin's religious convictions seem to have evolved slowly over his lifetime from an initial conventional Anglicanism (most likely of the deistic variety) to a reluctant and waffling agnosticism later in life. The story of his religious development mirrors closely the story of his scientific career. As we have seen, early in his life he was greatly influenced by Paley's argument from design and he had little trouble reconciling his largely deistic Anglicanism with his growing interest in biology. Darwin remained influenced throughout his life by these initial impressions of design in nature, and once he became convinced that evolutionary theory was true, his chief objective in the development of the theory of natural selection was to explain how nature itself, and not a direct divine creation, could produce the apparently designed forms of the animal and plant kingdoms. What this shows is that Darwin, despite his reluctance to engage in debate over the theological implications of his new theory, was nevertheless keenly interested in the question of teleology, since he saw in this idea the key to disengaging the science of life from theological moorings. In other words, Darwin understood full well that the scientific guild, just as with the general population at large, was still wedded to the notion that biological organisms could only be explained as purpose-driven entities whose formal characteristics seemed carefully designed for the fulfilment of teleological orientations; he understood that the dragon of teleology had to be killed before a purely scientific view of biological origins could be proffered. Thus his own theological training influenced the development of his science; the nineteenth-century Anglican obsession with natural theology and the argument from design filled Darwin with the deep conviction that the biological sphere was indeed an arena of forms and apparent purposes. Influenced as he was by Paley, Darwin could not have missed the fact that Paley's arguments go well beyond the question of design and press relentlessly forward towards a connection between design, teleology and the demonstrable goodness of God. As Anne Clifford notes: 'Paley's argument from design detailed not only nature's order, but also nature's

purpose. In this regard, Paley broke with Bacon who argued against the intrusion of teleological reasoning into science because the handling of "final causes . . . intercepted . . . diligent inquiry of all real and physical causes."<sup>7</sup>

It should therefore come as little surprise that as Darwin began to forge a purely scientific theory of biological origins, this obsession with explaining the apparent teleology of nature as the product of purely natural and mechanistic laws remained front and center. Theology therefore gave to Darwin's theory a kind of architectonic formal structure, at least with regard to its primary focus and explanatory goals, even while Darwin resisted the final teleological view that theological approaches entail. As Michael Ruse concludes:

As a Christian young man, Darwin clearly viewed the world – especially the organic world – as impregnated with values that in some absolute sense are good, and very much to the benefit of our own species. We are the special creation, made in His image. My suspicion is that, within Darwin's inner mind, this world picture never darkened entirely. To the end of his days, Darwin saw evolution leading to humankind, which, for a good Victorian, is no bad thing. But as a professional scientist, he saw that the introduction of any kind of absolute value into science is inappropriate. One may hold values, but they are not a proper part of the scientific enterprise.<sup>8</sup>

What one sees here is the growing awareness in the mind of Darwin that science is an altogether different kind of discipline from either theology or philosophy; focusing as it does on the natural causes of natural entities, science, in order to be true to its own peculiar genius, must eschew the entire realm of qualities and limit itself to that which can be quantified and placed within the nexus of mechanical law. Darwin's passion, therefore, was to seek just such explanations for the biological sphere and to wrest the discussion of biological origins from the hands of the natural theologians (who still dominated even the scientific conversation) and to place it squarely within the ambit of the scientific method as he understood it. With the publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859 Darwin, as Francisco Ayala points out, 'completed the Copernican revolution by drawing out for biology the notion of nature as a lawful system of matter in motion. The adaptations and diversity of organisms . . . even the origin of humankind itself could now be explained by an orderly process of change governed by natural laws.'<sup>9</sup> And just as with Copernicus, Kepler, Newton and Galileo, the chief antagonism created by Darwinism for the dominant theological paradigm was not its challenge to a certain reading of the Bible, but its implications for how we are to view divine agency in the world. Indeed, for many thinkers of the day Darwinism was even more irritating than the celestial mechanists, since unlike the laws of Newton's mechanics which could be read more or less within the ambit of some version of the argument from design (with a nod toward the greater weight given to the Divine use of 'secondary causes' than in classical theology), Darwinism entailed a veritable

<sup>7</sup> Clifford, p. 287.

<sup>8</sup> Ruse, pp. 126–7.

<sup>9</sup> Francisco Ayala, 'Darwin's Devolution: Design Without Designer,' in *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology*, p. 102.



revolution in the very concept of law as this applied to biology, since within its parameters 'law' was now viewed as countenancing an orgy of randomness, chance and blind innovation. If God did indeed use the evolutionary process as His chief secondary cause in the creation of life, then it seemed to many that the Divine Designer was more of a madman than an architect. The dominant deistic conception of God had little trouble accommodating itself to Newton. However, Darwinism was another animal altogether and it shook the classical/rationalistic view of God to its core with the new chaotic image of nature and nature's laws that it proposes.

Thus the change that Darwin introduced into our understanding of the character of nature's laws, and not some challenge to biblical authority, was the key moment in his completing of the Copernican revolution. Early in his career Darwin was not only influenced by Paley, but also by several of his teachers and acquaintances at Cambridge University, most of whom were still avowed essentialists;<sup>10</sup> thus it came as a great shock to many of them when Darwin unleashed his earth-shaking bombshell in 1859: nature's laws, even in the biological sphere, did not operate according to the teleology of fixed forms. Rather, biological forms operated out of the same kind of mechanistic causes that Newton had shown governed the motions of the heavenly spheres – different laws, but of the same causative type. What Darwin proposed – that biological species were not fixed, had no occult forms, and therefore had no internal or external teleology (if we take teleology here to mean some kind of intentional purpose put there by the Creator) – challenged the essentialism of the biological sciences of the age and enraged many of his former teachers. For his theory involved no mere tweaking of scientific notions of law and causation but proposed, in a construction whose radicality can hardly be fathomed today, that both the classical forms of teleology, Aristotelian and Platonic, were in error. Aristotelian biologists held that the teleology of an organism was natural in the sense that it is internal to its own proper form and part of the worldly givenness of its structure. Platonic biologists, in a distinction with little practical difference, held that the teleology of an organism was more of an attraction via final causality toward its ideal archetype. Thus what most shocked his former teachers, and the broader scientific guild as well, was that in one fell swoop this entire intellectual edifice had been unceremoniously demolished.

Of course, even Darwin understood that biological organisms are structured entities that do act toward certain ends; but these ends, according to Darwin, were not governed by forms, either internal or external, and were carried forward by biological processes that were strictly materialistic. The genius of Darwin is in evidence here, as in so many other instances, in that, while being ignorant of scientific advances that were to come later (e.g. the study of genetics), he was able to guess correctly that there was some as yet undiscovered biological process that would account for the internal operations of organisms. The discovery that biological species are in fact mutable, and change according to environmental circumstances exerting pressure on living entities, paved the

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. David L. Hull, *Darwin and His Critics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, pp. 55–77.



way for his deeper understanding that even the seeming ends-oriented behaviour of animals and plants could be explained through materialistic laws. The success of his materialistic explanations for the mutability of species emboldened him to espouse a kind of promissory materialism that held out the hope that all other unanswered biological questions could be answered in due course in a similar fashion. Thus the laws of biology are reconfigured according to the new materialistic matrix, with all hint of formal and final causes removed, even at a time when Darwin could still not completely explain how such natural forces operated. What this shows us is that despite his commitment to the Newtonian ideal, Darwin is being driven here by an ideological vision as well, a vision that was decidedly anti-teleological.

But more than this, as we shall see in what follows, Darwin's proposed mechanism for evolution – natural selection – displayed a singular disregard for ordered purpose, a disregard that caught the attention of many of the natural theologians of the time. For if natural selection is the means chosen by God to create the world, then the question that immediately arises is theological in nature: what kind of God uses such random and chaotic laws as secondary agents in creation? Would not a rational Divine Architect devise more directed ways of doing things? What kind of God creates a universe devoid of the intelligibility of archetypal exemplars? Furthermore, if the laws that govern biology are so non-teleological and blind, then perhaps Newton's laws are equally blind. What has to be kept in mind here is that for the essentialists of Darwin's time, it was not just biological entities that displayed formal qualities, but also the non-living elements of the cosmos as well. Furthermore, the residual Platonism of the time saw in the geometry that governed the mechanics of the cosmos a definite idealism of form and number. To be sure, as was pointed out in the last chapter, the emphasis on a law-like cosmos greatly attenuated all teleological thinking among a growing number of influential thinkers. Nevertheless, tides turn only gradually, and many in the scientific establishment stuck doggedly to such essentialist forms of thought. What Darwin was proposing seemed to be the end of reason as such, since it created a situation where the laws that govern the world were irrational in the sense that they are not the product of any discernible intelligibility. As David Hull points out:

What must be kept in mind is that for essentialists *all* natural kinds were *equally* immutable. Some appreciation of how incredible Darwin's theory must have sounded to his contemporaries can be obtained by realizing that for them one species of living creature evolving into another was as impossible as a pentagon evolving into a hexagon or lead into gold. Not only did evolutionary theory seem to presuppose spontaneous generation, but also it smacked of alchemy.<sup>11</sup>

The great breakthrough for Darwin that led to this changed view of nature's laws began, as is well known, during his famous voyage on the *Beagle*, where he spent the long idle hours pouring over the multi-volume text by the geologist Charles Lyell (*Principles of Geology* 1830–33). Darwin was deeply influenced

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

by Lyell's arguments for the great age of the earth as well as his description of geological phenomena as the end-product of a long, uniform process of development. Lyell postulated that the geological strata and the fossil record of animals could all be explained through thoroughly natural means. Although Lyell continued to believe in some notion of a divine creation he did not believe in a 'young earth' or in the idea that all the life forms that have ever existed were the product of a special creation by God. Rather, he held that God had implanted in nature the capacity to bring new species into existence to replace those that had become extinct through natural processes. Furthermore, Lyell's uniformitarianism ran directly counter to the reigning catastrophism of the science of the period, a position that was more than a little influenced by biblical accounts of the flood. Darwin, influenced as he was by deism, was already more than a little ill disposed towards the willy-nilly recourse to miracles as an explanation for geological and biological phenomena. Lyell's 'old earth' chronology and his uniformitarianism seemed to liberate Darwin's mind from the last vestiges of belief in miracles, and also seemed to undermine his already weak commitment to the specific theological entailments of traditional Christianity. As Michael Ruse concludes: 'Darwin's ardent enthusiasm for uniformitarianism had two important consequences for his religious outlook. First, the Lyellian theory obviously minimizes miracles, which are a mainstay of Christian belief. In accepting uniformitarianism, Darwin rejected miracles. And as the miracles went out the window, so did Christianity, never to return.'<sup>12</sup>

What is interesting in all this is the extent to which Darwin's religious faith seems to have been based on the typical post-Enlightenment thirst for demonstrable evidence from nature when it came to proving the existence of God. In other words, he seems to have shared the typical view of many Enlightenment thinkers that since revelation-based religions are comprised of utterly unprovable sets of assertions, they therefore required corroborating evidence from the natural world in order to be held as true in any meaningful sense. Without this kind of evidence, revealed religion becomes a merely subjective, private affair fraught with all the social dangers associated with dogmatism.<sup>13</sup> It does not seem to have entered into Darwin's consciousness on any level that a different evidentiary approach to revealed religion might be possible, or that the deistic conception of God he had inherited might itself be a highly questionable, historically conditioned

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Ruse, *Darwin and Design*, p. 95

<sup>13</sup> It is an open historical question to what extent Darwin may have been directly influenced by some of the political philosophers of the Enlightenment. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau all took a jaundiced view of 'revealed religion' which, in their view, is based on fideistic and unprovable foundations. To a great extent, the natural theology of the nineteenth century seems to have developed with these criticisms in view, which explains its obsession with finding demonstrable, extra-revelatory evidence for God's existence through a rational scientific analysis of nature. Regardless of how directly Darwin may have been influenced by the political philosophers of the time, there is no doubt that an analysis of Darwin's writings shows that he drank deeply from the well of nineteenth-century natural theology, thus exposing him, however indirectly, to the idea that revealed religion was intellectually indefensible without some kind of corroboration from the natural world.

construction. In short, Darwin's own poor theological education, an education steeped in the arguments of nineteenth century natural theology, convinced him that if one could not find evidence of the miraculous or of a divinely implanted teleology in nature, then revealed religion is more than likely false and should be rejected. Thus the impact of Lyell on Darwin was more than scientific insofar as it convinced the young Darwin that most of the evidence for the Christian God in the natural world had now been eliminated.

This is not to say that Darwin now became an atheist. Lyell's theories did nothing to supplant the dominant deistic arguments of the day and only reinforced in Darwin's mind the superiority of the deistic conception of God over what he took to be the classical doctrine of Divine Providence found in traditional Christianity. However, reading Lyell does seem to have destroyed any remnant of faith in miracles or revealed religion in Darwin, as well as casting doubt on Christian conceptions of Divine Providence in the workings of nature, up to and including any idea of divine exemplars and forms operative within the structure of biological species. God might exist, but Darwin's deistic conception of God as the distant first mover just receded further into the mist of causative obscurity. It is perhaps even more fundamental that Darwin was astute enough to observe that if biological species are the product of the working out of blind natural forces, and if there is no real evidence for the Providence of God in how these forces operate in the biological sphere, then there is no reason to believe that the structure of biological organisms has any inner teleological orientation: since teleology implies purpose-driven behaviour, then no teleology in the classical sense is possible, since the entire nexus of blind cause and effect in the natural world is devoid of any such purposes.

However, there remained the knotty issue of biological origins, an issue that Lyell did not address in any great specificity other than to assert that all the species on earth arose through natural causes (even if those causes had been put there by God). Darwin knew that the apparent design of biological organisms continued to act as a powerful argument for special creation, and that any uniformitarian theory of evolution had to develop a scientific set of explanations to account for this stubborn fact. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that early in his career Darwin was still so influenced by the arguments of Paley that he exaggerated the perfection to be found in the structure of biological organisms – a mistake he would correct later in life as he realized more and more that adaptive change need only make an animal more suitable to its environment than its competitors, but not necessarily perfect. This emphasis on perfection in biological structure, as well as his interest in developing biological explanations for the apparent design of nature, shows up as late as 1859 in the opening pages of *Origin*:

In considering the Origin of Species, it is quite conceivable that a naturalist, reflecting on the mutual affinities of organic beings, on their embryological relations, their geographical distribution, geological succession, and other such facts, might come to the conclusion that each species had not been independently created, but had descended, like varieties, from other species. Nevertheless, such a conclusion, even if

well founded, would be unsatisfactory, until it could be shown how the innumerable species inhabiting this world have been modified, *so as to acquire that perfection of structure and coadaptation which most justly excites our admiration*.<sup>14</sup> (emphasis added)

Furthermore, the power of the design argument resides in its evident common sense, as is made clear in Paley's now famous argument about the natural inferences that a reasonable observer would make upon seeing a watch for the first time. The structure of the biological world in particular seems to cry out for similar inferences, and anyone who would argue with this had to counter the accusation that their position was plainly contrary to simple, quotidian reason. As Darwin himself states in the *Origin*: 'Nothing at first can appear more difficult to believe than that the more complex organs and instincts have been perfected not by means superior to, though analogous with human reason, but by the accumulation of innumerable slight variations, each good for the individual possessor.'<sup>15</sup>

The solution to this problem came to him gradually rather than as a sudden epiphany. While visiting the Galapagos Islands during his sojourn on the *Beagle*, Darwin noticed that there were animals (mainly birds) on the islands that bore striking resemblances to animals he had seen on the South American mainland, but which also displayed notable differences. Also the differences seemed to be always in the direction of making the birds in question more suitable for life on the island. Darwin did not immediately understand the full implications of these differences until he returned to England where he showed his samples to the renowned ornithologist John Gould. Gould's analysis concluded that the birds were indeed different species from those on the mainland. Armed with this new information, Darwin now had his momentous insight: animals adapt to their environment through a process whereby subtle modifications of the organism that arise during the reproductive process develop and accumulate over long periods of time. Why the modifications happen and how they create entirely new species out of older ones remained to be proven, but Darwin now had the beginnings of a theory: *descent with modification* (a phrase he preferred to the term 'evolution').<sup>16</sup>

Darwin's ornithological samples from the Galapagos had the added advantage of turning the tables somewhat on the natural theologians. Now it was they who seemed to be arguing against common sense, since in the light of the new science it would seem that one now had to view special creation as a singularly profligate affair, with God micro-designing millions of species to suit an almost endless myriad of specific environments, both large and small. Granted, there is nothing inherently illogical or irrational in such an approach – God could indeed micro-design animals if he so chose – but at the very least Darwin's empirical observations of species differentiation made the static notion of a fixity of species ever more suspect and placed the defenders of special creation on the defensive: in a world marked by flux and change, where environments fluctuate and whole geographic

<sup>14</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species, by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle of Life*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd. 1968, p. 66 (henceforth cited as *Origin*).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 435.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ruse, p. 97; Clifford, p. 290

regions can have their topography altered through one natural disaster, is it really reasonable to assume that all these highly specialized animals were put in their distinctive environments through a special creative act of God? The concept of the fixity of species was relatively easy to maintain so long as real knowledge of the vast array of different animal types was absent. But as this knowledge increased the biological taxonomy of the time came under increasing strain and rendered the notion of special creation ever more problematic.

The final blow of the hammer came when, after twenty years of honing his theory and delaying publication of his findings, Darwin received a manuscript in 1858 from Alfred Russell Wallace who had been doing work on the Malay peninsula, outlining a theory of biological origins that sounded remarkably like his own.<sup>17</sup> Darwin hastily cobbled together his findings and published *Origin* the following year. In it Darwin made truly public for the first time his argument that the mechanism that drove descent with modification was a purely natural process that he termed 'natural selection'. The basic outlines of this idea were shockingly simple: in the struggle for survival, animals compete with one another for limited resources, a struggle that results in the selection of those animals that possess traits that make them more adept at the struggle for survival than others, allowing them to pass on these advantageous traits to their offspring who then pass them on to theirs, and so on. Darwin had already noted that subtle changes and modifications in organisms often take place through some quirk of the reproductive process that had yet to be scientifically explained.<sup>18</sup> These changes are empirically verifiable and no thinking person could deny them. Now, along with the notion of descent with modification, natural selection provided the actual natural mechanism that made the evolution of one species into another possible over vast periods of time. The entire process is both random, yet law-like. It is random in that the changes in the organism that natural selection works on have no apparent association with anything intelligible and appear to be the product of pure chance. Furthermore, the environmental changes that drive the selection process in the struggle for survival also appear to have no intelligible directionality, in that they take place without regard for the organisms in question. But it is also law-like, since everything that happens in nature does so out of the necessity of natural laws that are blindly but inexorably working everywhere.

Obviously this is a plausible scenario on the face of it, but it would remain a simple just-so story if there was no corroborating evidence to support it. Many superficially plausible descriptions of the evolutionary process had already been proffered – Lamarck's in particular – but had failed to take root owing to their purely speculative nature. Therefore in order to buttress his theory, Darwin outlined in the *Origin* two lines of argument that people could easily understand. First, the selective breeding of animals by human beings in order to bring about

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Origin*, p. 72. Darwin does offer the suggestion that the modifications we see in organisms more than likely happen due to changes in the male and female reproductive systems before conception takes place. However, he later admits (p. 76) 'the laws governing inheritance are quite unknown.'

traits that are of utilitarian value is well known, and shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is a plasticity within biological organisms that allows changes to take place that can become a permanent feature in the selected species. Why then, Darwin argues, is it so hard to believe that nature itself could not have created similar selective changes through purely natural processes? Indeed, we should probably also assume that nature, given vast stretches of time, could do an even better job of selective adaptation than human beings. The importance of this argument for Darwin can be seen in the fact that it is the main subject of the opening chapter of *Origin*. Darwin notes:

When we look to individuals of the same variety or subvariety of our older cultivated plants and animals, one of the first points that strike us is that they generally differ much more from each other than do the individuals of any one species or variety in a state of nature. ... It seems pretty clear that organic beings must be exposed during several generations to the new conditions of life to cause any appreciable amount of variation; and that when the organization has once begun to vary, it generally continues to vary for many generations. No case is on record of a variable being ceasing to be variable under cultivation. Our oldest cultivated plants, such as wheat, still often yield new varieties: our oldest domesticated animals are still capable of rapid improvement or modification.<sup>19</sup>

The second line of Darwin's argument was influenced by something he read as far back as 1838. In that year Darwin read the now famous essay by the Reverend Thomas Malthus on the relationship between population growth and social economic policy (*An Essay on the Principle of Population*<sup>20</sup>). Malthus argued that human beings naturally over-reproduce and that the more industrious people in our midst tend to limit the number of their offspring so as to insure their own domestic prosperity. Poor people, by contrast, seem to lack this same level of restraint and tend to have more children than they can afford, stressing the social fabric of the nation both economically and morally. The government should therefore not embark on large social welfare programmes since they rob the poor of any incentive to restrain their reproductive proclivities. In fact, as Malthus argues rather darkly, famine, disease and war are God's appointed instruments for keeping the human population in check. As cruel as this sounds, it was simply the logical extension of Malthus' mechanistic view of nature's laws. Furthermore, it shows clearly that Malthus was one of the first people to recognize that the iron-fisted laws of nature apply to the biological realm as well as the non-biological. It was Malthus after all, long before Darwin, who first referred to the pressures created by the dual realities of over-reproduction and scarcity of resources as nature's great universal law that weighs down upon all in the animal kingdom without exception: 'Necessity, that imperious all pervading law of nature, restrains them within the prescribed bounds. The race of plants and the race of animals shrink under this great restrictive law.'<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Origin*, p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14

Darwin, though sympathetic to the broader social agenda of Malthus, nevertheless chose to focus on the strictly scientific issue of over-reproduction and its implications for biological organization. Darwin, like Malthus, saw that over-reproduction was true of the entire animal world (indeed, more so in animals than in humans, since the former lack moral restraint) and realized that this was further corroborating evidence for his theory of natural selection. It matters little that many modern scientists now view Malthus' theories as highly debatable. The point is that *An Essay on the Principle of Population* had the air of empirical science about it, and that is precisely what Darwin was looking for: Darwin needed just such empirical verification and Malthus seemed to provide it. Beyond such utilitarian calculation, however, there is no doubt that Darwin was genuinely impressed with Malthus' arguments; it may have taken him another twenty years to put his ideas finally into print, but it is clear that the germ of his later theory began to sprout after reading Malthus, a reading that seemed to unlock the mysteries created by his observations of the plants and animals he encountered during his voyage on the *Beagle*. Thus we read in a programmatic passage from the *Origin* a description of natural selection in which Darwin pointedly links his theory with that of Malthus:

A struggle for existence inevitably follows from the high rate at which all organic beings tend to increase. Every being, which during its lifetime produces several eggs or seeds, must suffer destruction during some period of its life ... otherwise, on the principle of geometrical increase, its numbers would quickly become so inordinately great that no country could support the product. Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence. ... It is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms; for in this case there can be no artificial increase of food, and no prudential restraint from marriage.<sup>22</sup>

Darwin's formulation of the theory of descent with modification through natural selection was not, of course, immediately accepted by everyone in the scientific establishment. As stated above, even some of his former teachers at Cambridge were shocked by his theory, and certainly there were voices within the religious sphere who opposed the new theory on theological grounds. But as Donald Hull points out, 'theological and metaphysical objections to evolutionary theory gradually subsided, not because their authors had been converted, but because no one whose opinion mattered was listening anymore.'<sup>23</sup> Thus over the course of the ensuing decades, what came to be known as Darwinism took hold of the intellectual landscape of modernity with a vice-like grip, rising to the level of a new scientific dogma, complete with mechanisms for putting dissenters in their place. It would therefore be pointless to go into great historical detail cataloguing who was for the new theory and who was against it. Teleology was dead. Formal and final causes within the biological sphere were discredited and set aside. Even though many thoughtful scientists disputed whether or not Darwinism constituted a true science in the Baconian sense of rigorous induction and experimental verification,

<sup>22</sup> *Origin*, pp. 116–17.

<sup>23</sup> Hull, p. 75.



there is no doubt that Darwin succeeded in convincing the modern world that the mechanistic science of Newton had now been successfully applied to the biological sphere as well; with the rise of modern genetics, the notion that life is governed mechanistically and reductively by DNA came to dominate the landscape. The triumph of modern mechanistic science over the classical world-view of antiquity was virtually complete by the beginning of the twentieth century.

## ***2. Darwin's Social Context and its Influence on his Theory***

No scientist formulates theories in a social vacuum and Darwin was no exception. The influence that prevalent cultural values and attitudes have on particular scientific theories is therefore a legitimate topic of conversation. Ever since Thomas Kuhn's landmark study on the role of paradigms in the formulation and maintenance of scientific theories, it has become commonplace in the philosophy of science to talk of all theories being 'value-laden'.<sup>24</sup> At times, Kuhn's legitimate insights have been turned by some into a wholesale assault on the very notion of scientific theories being anything more than culturally constructed narratives, without real reference to the world they purport to describe. Others, writing in a more populist vein (e.g. Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett et al.) act as if they have never heard of Kuhn, or even that there is such a thing as the philosophy of science, as they weave their positivist narrative of the triumph of scientific fact over the superstitions of religion.

However, whatever the merits of both these polarized positions, and notwithstanding the proper interpretation of Kuhn, it is my contention that all scientific theories, no matter how true they might be in an objective calculus of the available evidence, are influenced by their social context. Therefore their formulations are coloured or skewed in particular value-laden directions. In other words, a theory may be generally true in that it is the best explanation for the available evidence, but the theory may at the same time contain interpretative distortions, blind spots and an exaggerated emphasis on certain points, as a result of the conditioning effects of the social context on the theorizer. No claim will be made here that there is a necessary connection between Darwin's theory and his social context such that, had his social conditions been different, no theory of descent with modification would have been offered at all. Rather, my aims are more modest, since my primary goal is to set up the discussion in the next section where the question of alternative ways of viewing evolutionary theory will be explored.<sup>25</sup>

So in what follows, I will examine Darwin's social context, not to determine whether the theory is true or false, but to explore the manner in which Darwin

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

<sup>25</sup> For an interesting discussion of the broader issues involved in the sociology of scientific theories see: Gregory Radick, 'Is the Theory of Natural Selection Independent of its History?' in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, Jonathan Hodge and Gregory Radick (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2009, pp. 147–172.



framed his theory in order to determine if the social values and philosophical commonplaces of his time may have influenced its construction. The central question that interests us here is whether Darwin's central insights – descent with modification and natural selection – could have been formulated in ways that Darwin would not have considered due to the social biases which he undoubtedly shared with his contemporaries. I will begin with further analysis of the influence of Malthus on Darwin's mode of thought and also examine the important role played by the natural theology of the period and its influence on Darwin's approach to the question of suffering and pain in nature. Throughout my analysis, it shall be my contention that Darwin's theorizing was indeed skewed in certain directions by the powerful dichotomies that existed in his mind as a result of his theological education as well as the general religious sensibilities of the age.

### *Malthus, Natural Theology, and the Social Question*

Let us return then to Malthus. We have already mentioned that in his essay Malthus argued that seemingly evil realities like famine, disease and war were in fact God's providentially chosen instruments for keeping the human population in check and for keeping humanity on its toes, so to speak, when it comes to moral improvement, i.e. keeping us from becoming soft and complacent. This might seem at first glance to be a strange position for an Anglican clergyman to hold until one notices certain key features of nineteenth-century Anglican theology. First, the deistic tone of the natural theology of the time had one major problem: what to do about the presence of evil and suffering in the world? When one loses the tone and tenor of the classical Christian doctrines of the fall and redemption in the narrative of salvation history, one also loses any hope for the development of a Christian theodicy. The deistic emphasis upon the Divine Architect who creates the cosmos as a perfect machine and then steps back to allow it the space to unfold has no room for diabolical and/or human sabotage. Evil therefore must somehow be ontologized as the inevitable by-product of the laws of nature, and consequently seen as a part of God's wise plan. Obviously, this is an intellectually problematical and wholly unsatisfactory answer to the vexing existential questions posed to religion – any religion – by the presence of great evil and suffering in the world. Nevertheless, the point here is that such sentiments as expressed by Malthus, though not shared by all in the theological guild of the time, were more prevalent than one might initially surmise. Even the great Paley, given his emphasis on nature as perfectly designed, was forced to argue from the logic of such a position that seemingly evil things like the pain and suffering of animals were really not as severe as people generally surmised. In fact one can even hear echoes of the significance of this debate for nineteenth-century Englishmen in Charles Dickens' depiction of the execrable Scrooge who encourages the poor either to go to the workhouse or to die, 'thus reducing the surplus population'. Thus what one is seeing in all this is more than a mere debate about social policy: nineteenth-century Europe is locked in a much larger debate about the very nature of God and His relationship

to a natural world now conceived as operating under the rule of a closed nexus of laws.

One wonders, therefore, to what extent Darwin, while reading Malthus, was also struck by the coldness and draconian distance of any God who could allow His creation to be so permeated by the presence of great suffering. Perhaps, in reaction to Malthus, Darwin saw in the great suffering created by the pressure for survival a confirmation of the atheist presumption rather than an indication of any divine plan. We will probably never know but Darwin did on occasion make reference to his great difficulty in reconciling such evil with the existence of a Benevolent God, as in this excerpt from a letter of his in 1860: 'There seems to me to be too much misery in the world. 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, or that a cat should play with a mouse.'<sup>26</sup>

What this quote and others like it show us is that Darwin not only shared the typical deistic theological assumptions of the era (i.e. notions of creational perfection with no prelapsarian/postlapsarian distinctions), but also that he situated his own theory within the context of a natural world that is cruel and unreservedly brutal. Of course, there is much in the natural world that is cruel and brutal. But does Darwin not exaggerate somewhat here for effect? He cites two examples (wasp/caterpillar and cat/mouse) and generalizes from this to a conclusion: nature is gratuitously violent. Since these examples constitute a very simplistic two-case induction, and since the biological realm is very complex indeed, there is no question that the conclusions Darwin draws from these examples constitute nothing remotely resembling a true scientific position. It is, rather, a subjective impression Darwin has about how much suffering there is in the world, and as such, it is open to being questioned as a culturally conditioned insight. After all, how one characterizes nature in this context is often a function of antecedent metaphysical presumptions rather than scientific observation. For example, in the case of the wasp that lays its eggs in caterpillars, Darwinists since Darwin's time have repeated this example over and over again *ad nauseum* like some sort of minor creed. But could one not just as easily point to the innumerable examples of life's abundant joys, even for animals? I am not trying to belittle the suffering of the natural world as did Paley and others, nor am I implying that we develop some kind of tote board for tallying up the pluses and minuses of existence, but rather making a simple point about perception: one person's icky wasp is another person's pollinating wonder bug. Even the Darwinists themselves often vacillate between these two polarities, depending on the point they are trying to make: when arguing against the Christian view of God they like to emphasize how farcical the cosmic dance of pain and death all seems, but when they wish to avoid the charge of nihilism they suddenly wax poetic about the 'grand adventure of life' and other such assorted bromides. The following two quotes from Richard Dawkins are

<sup>26</sup> Francis Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, London: Murray, 1887, 2:105. Cited in Hull, p. 62.

symptomatic of the philosophical confusion in Darwin and his followers on the question of whether or not nature is gratuitously brutal or wonderfully magical:

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease. . . . The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.<sup>27</sup>

After sleeping through a hundred million centuries we have finally opened our eyes on a sumptuous planet, sparkling with colour, bountiful with life. . . . Isn't it a noble, an enlightened way of spending our brief time in the sun, to work at understanding the universe and how we have come to wake up in it? . . . Who, with such a thought, would not spring from bed, eager to resume discovering the world and rejoicing to be a part of it?<sup>28</sup>

It might seem silly to quote a modern populist vulgarian like Dawkins to raise questions about Darwin's theory. But the point is that there is an unbroken succession of such conflicted and confusing metaphysical/philosophical statements from Darwin on, down to the present. The mere fact that such evaluative judgments about the meaning of existence, drawn from supposedly Darwinian principles, have been present in the writings of Darwin and his followers for about 160 years, should give us pause and lead us to inquire to what extent Darwinism is a true science and to what extent it is a culturally constructed nineteenth-century ideology masquerading as science. Perhaps Darwinists keep making statements that confuse the distinction between science and philosophy because the theory itself, which purports to be purely scientific, is at least in part a veiled myth of origins. Perhaps the theory itself has deep structural fissures that alone can account for its seeming propensity for ideological infection. Thus, if we view Darwin's theory in its historical context as a counter-story to the one proposed by deistic natural theology, then it becomes readily apparent that there is a latent anti-theological protology, eschatology and soteriology at work within it – a kind of scientific simulacrum of the Church – that colours the manner in which Darwin frames the scientific aspects of the theory. Were this not the case, it is hard to explain why so many modern Darwinists – including one Nobel Prize winner (Steven Weinberg) – find in Darwinism a direct refutation of classical Christian theology, indeed of all theologies; Richard Dawkins, Peter Atkins, Daniel Dennett, Steven Weinberg and Sam Harris all view Darwinism as containing within itself the definitive destruction of religious faith. Since such a contention could only be true if one had in mind the natural theology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as representative of all theology, then it also becomes apparent that the ideological

<sup>27</sup> Richard Dawkins, 'God's Utility Function,' Quoted in *Scientific American* (November, 1995), p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, New York: Mariner Books, 2000, p. 6

aspects of Darwin's theory seem strangely incapable of transcending the social-theological matrix that framed them in the first place. In other words, the theory is so value-laden with nineteenth-century philosophical assumptions that not even the modern purveyors of Darwinian religion can get much beyond the simplistic theological/metaphysical dichotomies of that era.

Let us take as a case in point, in order to illustrate the question I am raising, the manner in which Darwin frames his theory of natural selection. Darwin emphasized that, generally speaking, natural selection operated on individuals rather than on groups and that the individual organism in question had to compete in a struggle for survival. This Hobbesian war of all against all in the animal world conjures up an image of atomized individuals in a strict adversarial relationship with all of the other atomized individuals of its own species. Now certainly there is some truth in this; but could we not also characterize natural selection in more cooperative and symbiotic categories, as some modern biologists are now suggesting?<sup>29</sup> Why the one-sided emphasis in Darwin's writings upon competition and struggle? Malthus, Darwin's great catalytic theorist, certainly had more than scientific motives in the formulation of his theory, concerned as he was to justify the rigid class structure of capitalist, Victorian England, as well as the draconian vileness of its social policy towards the 'lower' classes. Darwin seems to have shared many of these same views and most certainly was playing in the same sandbox as Malthus when it came to the preferability of a fiercely competitive society rather than one marked by lassitude and dissipation – the typical Anglo-Protestant concerns of the time. There is little question among historians that Darwin seems to have shared such views with Malthus even as he recoiled from the theological justifications that Malthus offered for their probity. It is very possible, therefore, that the hyper-emphasis in his theory of natural selection on the fiercely competitive and brutal nature of the struggle for survival may at least in part be accounted for as a reaction against the natural theology of his day, and as a deliberate endorsement of both racial and economic theories of class distinction within human cultures.

The point here is to understand the powerful formative influence that theological assumptions can have on a person's understanding of existence. This might sound trite, but in our secular age it is a truth that needs repeating constantly lest we confuse our proud secularity as the historically normal condition, or worse, that we actually believe there is a kind of objectivity that we possess and which religious cultures don't. Darwin's early theological training, no matter how much he may have rejected its basic assertions later in life, created in his mind a series of insoluble dichotomies concerning God's relationship with the world. The intellectual atmosphere of his youth emphasized deism, the fixity of species, the law-like construction of nature, the perfection of biological forms, the superiority of Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture and so on. What this jumble of ideas created in Darwin was a sense of either-or in his thinking regarding

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<sup>29</sup> This is an area of analysis that I will take up again in Part II. For now, suffice it to say that many modern biologists are developing approaches to natural selection that emphasize adaptive changes that occur as a result of mutually conditioning relationships among animals of the same species. This then opens up the importance of group dynamics in natural selection as well.

God and the world: either God made the world perfect and in a fixed order, or God did not make the world at all; either biological forms have a teleology put there by God, or they have no teleology at all and are the product of random forces; either God made nature to be benevolent and joyous or he did not make nature at all and it is a cold and brutish place filled with violence and death. Darwin's theological presumptions simply did not give him any alternative to these sharp dichotomies, and once he opted for agnosticism, the development of even his scientific theories tended naturally toward the darker side of each of these polarities. So when Darwin realized that the species are not fixed, and that nature is not perfect, and that biological forms evolved slowly over time owing to the randomness of variation, and that the whole process is laced with death and competition, he immediately drew the final conclusion that in his mind seemed a perfectly natural one to reach: there is no teleology in nature. Due to his own theological straightjacket, this seemed to be the only conclusion he could possibly reach.

If there is no teleology in nature, then it might also be that there is no teleology in human culture either. It is certainly germane to our discussion to point out that Malthus pointedly frames his theory of population within the context of a dichotomous rendering of the question of the perfectibility of human society, a question which is itself freighted with all kinds of theological and metaphysical presumptions which, it seems, nobody thought to make explicit. In the opening chapter of his essay Malthus discusses the then raging debate in England among social theorists over the perfectibility of human society. Some argued that with the rise of capitalist affluence, modern science and liberal democracy, society was on the cusp of a great leap forward in human social organization, with most of the pandemic ills of the human condition vanquished once and for all. Others argued that no matter what advantages modernity might bring, there should be no realistic expectation that human nature was about to change, and given that fact, all Pollyanna optimism about the future should be set aside in favour of social policies that recognize the fundamental flaws in the human condition that will always remain with us. For Malthus, either society is capable of progressive improvement in a clear and unmistakable linear path from ancient brutality to English 'High Tea', or society will remain in a state of perpetual moral entropy which can only be slowed if the educated and affluent learn strategies for keeping the poor and ignorant in their place. Malthus, in the light of his dichotomized analysis, opts for the more negative assessment, an assessment which he interpreted to mean, among other things, that the government should cast a jaundiced eye towards major social welfare programmes. He states:

This natural inequality of the two powers of population, and of production in the earth, and that great law of our nature which must constantly keep their effects equal, form the great difficulty that to me appears insurmountable in the way to the perfectibility of society. All other arguments are of slight and subordinate consideration in comparison of this. I see no way by which man can escape from the weight of this law which pervades all animated nature. No fancied equality, no agrarian regulations in their utmost extent, could remove the pressure of it even for a single century. And it appears, therefore, to be decisive against the possible existence of a society, all the

members of which should live in ease, happiness, and comparative leisure; and feel no anxiety about providing the means of subsistence for themselves and families.<sup>30</sup>

The significance of this for our analysis of Darwin is that it once again underscores that for those who shared the social views of Malthus, as it appears Darwin did, there was a palpable sense that human culture should mirror the biological world with its meta-structure of competitive indifference, since to do so would be scientific and enlightened. To be sure, there were those who wanted to take Darwinian ideas and use them for a progressive political agenda; even Darwin himself, as we see in his views on the issues of slavery and the eventual triumph of civilization over 'primitive' cultures, seemed to argue that natural selection could create progress in human culture. But once again, it only shows how philosophically confused and conflicted Darwin was about the full significance and meaning of his theory, for he continued to maintain that natural selection does not imply a teleology of any kind. With the ascendancy of the Whig party to power during this same time, there was a new impetus to deal with the problem of the lower classes once and for all. The primary fear for many in England at the time was typically Malthusian: the poor lack the moral restraint to limit the number of children in their families and if something is not done about it, England will be overwhelmed by poverty, disease and ignorance. The solution many sought to this problem was a kind of passive, 'soft eugenics', where the poor are deprived of the aid of social welfare programmes and consigned to the fires of the competitive economic furnace. Whatever the merits such political and economic views might possess, there is no doubt that they embody a deep pessimism about the perfectibility of society and run directly contrary to the teleological readings of history that were so popular among social progressives. This fact was not lost on Friedrich Engels, who saw in Darwin's theory nothing more than the biologizing of Whig policies toward the poor:

'The whole Darwinist teaching of the struggle for existence is simply a transference from society to living nature of Hobbes' doctrine of "*bellum omnium contra omnes*" and of the bourgeois-economic doctrine of competition together with Malthus' theory of population. When this conjuror's trick has been performed, ... the same theories are transferred back again from organic nature into history and it is now claimed that their validity as eternal laws of human society has been proved.'<sup>31</sup>

The trouble with such arguments, of course, is that they are merely suggestive and in no way constitute a proof that Darwin formulated his theories in order to legitimate Whig policies toward the poor or to undermine the various theodicies proposed by nineteenth-century natural theology. Furthermore, the use of such arguments is a sword that can cut both ways on the ideological spectrum. For example, in a recent study of Darwin's social milieu and how it affected his theory, the historians Adrian Desmond and James Moore point out that Darwin and his entire family were passionately opposed to slavery.<sup>32</sup> They argue that Darwin

<sup>30</sup> Malthus, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Engels in a letter to P. L. Lavrov, quoted in Radick, pp. 158–9.

<sup>32</sup> Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause*, Boston & New York: Houghton,

was so passionately anti-slavery that he formulated his theory of descent with modification in order to prove that all modern races were descended from the same ancient biological ancestor. In other words, in an ironic twist of history, when it came to the issue of slavery Darwin was in the same political wing as those who argued for the equality of the races on biblical grounds (all descended from Adam and Eve), while opposing the racial science of his day which argued that blacks are an entirely separate and inferior species of human being from whites, with their own distinctive biological genealogy. It is often overlooked today, with the near apotheosis of the scientific enterprise in contemporary culture, that bigotry and regressive politics have often found science to be their chief ally, with nineteenth-century racial science as exhibit A. Scientists of great renown, such as Louis Agassiz of Harvard University, were on record as champions of slavery and segregation all in the name of the science of racial purity. There were open scientific debates about the reproductive mixing of the races and whether rampant miscegenation would lead to the sterility of the human race, as when a horse and a donkey mate to produce the sterile mule. We might be tempted to dismiss all this with a condescending smile as the naïveté of an earlier and less sophisticated stage of scientific development. But in Darwin's day this was serious business, and Desmond and Moore argue powerfully for their thesis that Darwin was so deeply moved by the plight of the slave, and so angered by what he perceived to be the pseudo-science that supported it, that he felt compelled to publish his theory that all human beings of all races are descended from a common ancestor.

Might this then not imply that Darwin was not as Malthusian in his social views as has been commonly believed? Might he have harboured certain progressive social values that were at odds with the competitive world of Malthus? More to the point, does this mean that he may have held that human culture does indeed have a historical teleology? Unfortunately, the answer to all these questions seems to be 'no'. Upon closer inspection, Darwin's opposition to slavery appears to be somewhat anomalous in the overall picture of his social views. Rather than his biological theory being influenced by his opposition to slavery, he may have reached his position on slavery precisely because his biology was telling him that the racial science of his age was wrong and that all the races were really of the same species. Given *that* scientifically established fact, there could be no question that slavery was morally unjustified.

However, regardless of how he reached his principled stand on this issue, it did not change his fundamental approach to natural selection and how the general biological theory he had formulated applied to the evolution of human cultures and the status of the races within them. Furthermore, even though it is true that Darwin argued against slavery on the grounds that all races are descended from a common ancestor, what nevertheless often goes unnoticed is that the linchpin of his argument is that all human beings are essentially animals who are descended biologically from other animals. Even though it helped him in his fight against slavery, his theory therefore left little doubt that the same biological laws of natural selection that govern the animal world in general also govern human relations.



This leaves the door open for the idea that some races, though of similar origin, are superior in the struggle for survival over other races, and that some cultures, e.g. the British, are superior to others e.g. the 'savages'. As even Desmond and Moore point out, Darwin was in fact a racist who believed that even if whites and blacks had descended from a common ancestor, this did not negate the fact that whites are generally superior to blacks in almost all categories fundamental to our humanity. Furthermore, Darwin, despite having great respect for the peoples he had encountered on his travels aboard the *Beagle*, nevertheless held that such people were savages who were destined to be wiped out by white European culture in the great, competitive struggle for survival. As Desmond and Moore state:

He didn't see the incongruity as his science took on a Malthusian life of its own, shaped by the race-judging attitudes of his culture: the civilizational goal, the superior intellects, expansion as a means of progress. His science was becoming emotionally confused and ideologically messy. Malthus's 'grand crush of population' resulted in conflict and conquest, and Darwin began to naturalize the genocide in these terms. . . . Darwin was turning the contingencies of colonial history into a law of natural history. An implicit ranking – with the white man accorded the 'best' intellect – ensured the colonists won when cultures clashed. Already Darwin was accepting it as an evolutionary norm. Wedded so early to his evolutionary matrix, this supremacist image would itself be brought to justify later ethnic-cleansing policies, however abhorrent to Darwin's own humanitarian ideals.<sup>33</sup>

Thus it is an open historical and hermeneutical question concerning the extent to which Darwin's social milieu influenced the manner in which he nuanced his science. However, despite the lingering fog that blankets this issue, several conclusions can be reached. First, even if he sometimes made comments that sounded as if he endorsed some kind of teleology in nature and in human society, there is little doubt that the overwhelming trend in his thought was against any such teleological notions intruding into the scientific enterprise. Indeed, with the ascendancy of Darwin's theory, teleology comes to be associated more and more with the forces of obscurantism. Wherever it dares timorously to raise its head, it is treated like a leprous invader in need of immediate expulsion from the scientific village. The vehemence of the reaction against teleology, both by Darwin and his epigones, can only be explained in my view as an extra-scientific ideological reaction against the dominant natural theology of the time. Second, the Malthusian social politics that so heavily influenced Darwin clearly coloured the manner in which he described the process of natural selection. Specifically, the emphasis he places upon the individualistic and competitive nature of the evolutionary process, while certainly true in many of its aspects, is exaggerated to breaking point; a fact not lost on modern biologists as they strive to develop new evolutionary models that soften the competitive edges of Darwin's theory through a renewed appreciation of the role of symbiotic cooperation in the natural world. Finally, the Newtonian world of mechanistic laws gave Darwin an appreciation of the importance of science as an enterprise engaged in the search for the *vera causa* (true cause) of things. This

<sup>33</sup> Desmond and Moore, pp. 147–8.



led Darwin to be deeply suspicious of any account of nature that had recourse to occult forms of causation, up to and including all essentialist understandings of the role of form in natural processes. Armed with this prejudice in favour of mechanistic explanations as the only true ones, Darwin developed the idea of descent and natural selection along strictly uniformitarian lines as a process that involves the slow, step-by-step accumulation and preservation of very small changes stacked one on top of the other. He resolutely rejected the idea, popular at the time with people like Thomas Huxley, of 'saltations' or leaps in the evolutionary process. For Darwin, this latter view opened the door once again to the possibility that some occult force was secretly driving evolution forward towards a goal. Thus even in the very heart of his theory, we see that it was formulated, at least in part, as a reaction against notions of teleology and form, rather than being squarely based on observational data.<sup>34</sup> This then opens up the possibility that the very heart and center of the Darwinian theory could have been developed differently if Darwin had begun with a different set of intellectual assumptions.

### *Conclusion*

In the foregoing analysis of Darwin I have laboured to show that Darwinism represents the end-point of a centuries-long movement away from the classical world-view of forms and teleology, and towards a reductionist and mechanistic view of nature where teleology and essentialism are rejected. I have further argued that this movement is not properly characterized as a movement away from theology and towards purely naturalistic explanations. Rather, theological determinations have accompanied the process throughout and have, to a very great extent, coloured the manner in which naturalistic explanations are formulated. One need only look at the painstaking taxonomies of Aristotle to observe that classical culture was indeed concerned with describing and explaining the processes of the natural world. They may have placed greater emphasis upon formal and final causes, and viewed divine agency as an operative principle within nature, but this does not negate the essentially explanatory nature of their endeavours. The same

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<sup>34</sup> I make this claim due to the fact that there is no possible way, given the scientific knowledge of his time, that Darwin could have known, based on observational data, whether evolution moved forward via saltations or by gradualism. The fossil record was simply too incomplete to make an accurate scientific determination possible. Furthermore, as Darwin himself acknowledges, natural selection is not a creative agent in and of itself. Natural selection is restricted to operating on only those variations presented to it by the organisms. Darwin suspects that such variations are rooted in changes in the reproductive organs and that such changes are usually small, but he has no scientific way of knowing for sure whether either one of those assumptions is true. Darwin could just as easily have surmised, based on the evidence available at the time, that changes to organisms are abrupt and large, leaving the door open to the possibility that natural selection could produce saltations. It therefore would seem that extra-scientific ideological factors also played some role in pushing Darwin away from saltation and toward gradualism. It is my contention that Darwin preferred gradualism for two ideological reasons: 1) because saltation could leave the door open for essentialism; and 2) gradualism seemed more compatible with a mechanistic account of evolution.

could be said of the observations of medieval scientists who attempted to build on the Aristotelian cosmology by adding the insights of Christian Revelation. Furthermore, as we have seen, even as modern science emerged from this matrix, it did so in conjunction with, and not in spite of, changes in the theological temper of the age. We see these theological nuances at work in the Platonic pantheism of Kepler, the voluminous theological musings of Newton, and the natural theology of later deistic natural scientists. As I have attempted to show, even the great Darwin was influenced by the theology of his age and was always cognizant of its challenges as he developed his science.

The great historical movement I have attempted to describe, in however brief and cursory fashion, is still the dominant narrative of modernity, so our approach to the issues raised by modern science is not aided by simplistic assertions that ancient natural science was metaphysical and theological in nature whereas modern science is metaphysically and theologically neutral. Rather, this history of the rise of science is better characterized as a shift from one type of metaphysical/theological naturalism to another. To say otherwise is to foster hackneyed, Enlightenment-based stereotypes about the grand march of humanity from theological superstition to scientific rationalism. It is therefore also wrong to view the historical narrative surrounding these differing types of naturalism as representing a simple story of intellectual progress, where mechanistic rationalism is viewed as an evolutionary step forward from a more benighted theophanic concept of nature. Rather, the differing forms of naturalism represent a dialectical moment within the history of human thought, wherein the static essentialism of the classical world spawned its own negation in the form of a nominalist empiricism that led to modern mechanism. *To a great extent this process of dialectical negation was begun by theologians who changed some fundamental concepts concerning God, His power and His agency in the world.* Even though modern science is not as heavily theologically determined as classical naturalism, it is nevertheless historically false to claim that modern naturalism carries within itself no metaphysical or theological orientations whatsoever. The classical world appealed to theology directly as a source of causal explanations, and made ample room for primary forms of divine agency in the world. Modern science, though rejecting any recourse to God as a direct and primary cause, nevertheless retains theological and metaphysical orientations in the architectonic structure of its theories, usually without explicit articulation. This then raises the issue that will be the primary focus of section two: given this reality, can modern evolutionary cosmology be cast differently if we change the theological and metaphysical matrix that forms its interpretive grid?

I hasten here to add immediately that I am not saying that there was no real progress in the history of the rise of modern science; clearly great strides have been made in our understanding of nature and many elements of the classical view had to be superseded in order for this to happen. Nor am I claiming, as some radical philosophers of science maintain, that science is merely a cultural construct bearing no relation to the reality it purports to describe. Rather, the argument I am presenting here is that the very real progress that modern science has achieved was not, and is not, theologically neutral; once modern natural science began to emerge from the new metaphysical/theological milieu of the late medieval

world, it then had a rebound effect on theology and philosophy by seeming to confirm the movement towards a more nominalist understanding of God. This nominalist understanding of God, in its turn, influenced the manner in which scientists conceived of the laws that governed the natural world. In other words, both Christian theology and modern science view themselves as totalizing explanatory ventures, each from its own unique perspective, and they have therefore mutually conditioned each other for centuries.<sup>35</sup> Given the historical intellectual dialectic described above, this mutual conditioning has unfortunately led to grave metaphysical distortions in both science and theology that might be overcome if we can establish a better metaphysical and theological explanatory framework.

Before we proceed to our final observations, one further issue must be addressed. Some might argue at this juncture that my historical analysis has ended too soon. Science in our contemporary age, they might say, now proceeds along purely this-worldly lines of argumentation, methodologically eschewing all metaphysical and theological determinations; therefore even if my main thesis is correct, it ceases to apply to contemporary science since the early twentieth century, when science once and for all ended its flirtation with theology. There are two forms of this argument. First, there are those of a more vulgar cast of mind who would say that modern naturalism is best understood precisely as a form of science that has finally risen above the mumbo-jumbo world of metaphysics and theology. The second is more sophisticated and maintains simply that modern science is methodologically neutral with regard to metaphysics and theology. However, in reality both these types of arguments tend to overlap, with the more sophisticated version (science is neutral in such matters) tipping its hand now and then and showing that the cards it is holding are the same as those who make more pedestrian assertions.

In response to these two related forms of argument I would like to make two counter-claims. First, both arguments are naïve, since they both fail to notice that such claims are themselves already metaphysical in nature. The more vulgar version of this argument found expression for a time in logical positivism. However, this philosophical school failed for good reasons, chief among which was the monumental philosophical naïveté involved in claiming that there is any form of human knowledge that can prescind from metaphysical questions. It is a form

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, pp. 241–261. Weinberg, while acknowledging that he is an amateur in theological matters, nevertheless offers an interesting analysis of the relationship between science and religion. He notes that the attempt by Christian liberals to make peace with science through a careful delimiting of the spheres of study that each represents is flawed. It is flawed because it ignores the fact that both science and religion are making truth claims about the totality of reality, and will therefore sometimes make competing claims that often lead to conflict. Despite the fact that he disagrees with conservative Christians in their ultimate truth claims, he makes it clear that he thinks they understand the seriousness of the debate better than their more liberal fellow religionists. Thus Weinberg views the attempt by liberal Christians to limit the role of religion to the realm of human interiority (spirituality and morality) as an admission of defeat and as an ill-advised retreat from religious truth claims. Unfortunately, Weinberg's rather stereotyped views of religious people as either 'liberal' or 'conservative' ends up being rather simplistic and ignores the fact that the broader Christian theological tradition is far richer in intellectual resources than either one of these polarities possess.

of argumentation that works well with sophomoric minds that have been conditioned by the vapidness of our educational system and modern forms of media to live entirely within the epistemological realm of the obvious. But it is a conceptual non-starter within any truly sophisticated philosophy of science. The mere fact that putatively educated and intelligent people in our culture continue to assert some such notion does not make it any more respectable. Rather, it is merely one more indication of where the plausibility structures of modern secularity have taken us.

Second, the assertion that modern naturalism is purely atheological and ametaphysical needs to be proven rather than merely asserted. As I noted earlier, there are many contemporary scientists of note who make no bones about what they perceive to be the clear theological implications of modern evolutionary cosmology, even if those implications are negative in tone. Even though it is now fashionable to make neat distinctions between science as such and what has come to be known as 'scientism', the mere fact that such distinctions still need to be made indicates that the line between these two terms may not be as distinct as some would have us believe. Clearly, there is disagreement among scientists themselves as to what constitutes science, and the vast literature on the philosophy of science only reinforces the perception that there is no such thing as a single conception of what 'pure science' is. Science is carried out by scientists, i.e., human beings, and for many in the scientific guild science is viewed as more than a useful tool for describing the workings of physical laws. For a significant number of influential thinkers in the scientific world, science is viewed as a kind of totalizing wisdom, and represents an epistemological breakthrough into an altogether new way of describing the entirety of reality. Science in this approach is the great epistemological sanitizer that has allowed humanity to disinfect our intellectual world and finally rid ourselves of the harmful bacillus that is religion; the metaphysical principles that undergird such thinking, whether articulated or unarticulated, create an ordered logic that presses forward regardless of fine methodological distinctions. And the fact remains that modern science is still animated by a spirit of mechanistic, materialistic, reductionism. Central to my argument is thus the thesis that such metaphysical orientations are always already theological in nature since they are framed in an explicitly anti-theological vein. The great irony, of course, is that such anti-theological positions end up affirming the importance of the very question they seek to deny: the question of God. Lest one be tempted to think that my analysis here is just a little too clever – an interesting feat of semantic legerdemain – the persistence of the God question in the writings of so many modern purveyors of the myth of science as saviour is ample testimony to the continuing influence of theological concepts in modern science.

There is therefore in my view no clear sense in which it can be claimed that the metaphysical assumptions of modern science are radically different in kind from those of Darwin's age. Some might object to this and point out that there are many religious believers within the scientific world, which makes it simply wrong to say that all modern science is lined up against theological truths. But such was the case in Darwin's time as well, probably even more so, and yet mechanistic reductionism still won the day. Still others might object and point out that many scientists are

now openly questioning the simplistic types of mechanistic reductionism in favour of theories that champion emergentism, an approach that recognizes hierarchical levels of organization in nature that resist explanatory reduction to the forms of causation present at lower levels. We will discuss this idea more in Section two. However, for now two points will suffice.

First, once again there was something analogous to this debate in Darwin's time and it is precisely one of the issues that was latent within the controversy surrounding the idea of saltations. Just as today with emergentism, there were some respectable scientists who accepted the notion of evolution via saltations. However, the idea gained no traction precisely because it ran counter to the reductionist/metaphysical assumptions of the science of the time. Second, it should give us pause to notice that even most reductionists, e.g. Richard Dawkins and Steven Weinberg, accept some form of emergentism and it is not clear therefore that emergentism ultimately gets beyond some version of mechanistic, materialistic reductionism. Emergentism might be more congenial to a re-energized form of essentialism, and it might bring us to a level of theoretical sophistication that goes well beyond the billiard-ball physics of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, how one approaches the interpretation of emergentism is largely dependent upon one's antecedent metaphysical assumptions, which returns us once again to the point at hand: the dominant metaphysical motif that governs the central nervous system of modern science remains firmly within the ambit of the metaphysical materialists and the neo-reductionists, and no new theory has yet succeeded in changing this basic reality. This fact – that modern science remains reductionist and that new theories like emergentism can still be interpreted within this matrix – is neatly illustrated in the following lengthy quote from Richard Dawkins that is worthy of full citation:

For those that like 'ism' sorts of names, the aptest name for my approach to understanding how things work is probably 'hierarchical reductionism'. If you read trendy intellectual magazines, you many have noticed that 'reductionism' is one of those things, like sin, that is only mentioned by people who are against it. To call oneself a reductionist will sound, in some circles, a bit like admitting to eating babies. But just as nobody actually eats babies, so nobody really is a reductionist in any sense worth being against. The nonexistent reductionist ... tries to explain complicated things *directly* in terms of the *smallest* parts, even, in some extreme versions of the myth, as the *sum* of the parts! The hierarchical reductionist, on the other hand, explains a complex entity at any particular level in the hierarchy of organization in terms of entities only one level down the hierarchy; entities which themselves are likely to be complex enough to need further reducing to their own component parts; and so on. It goes without saying ... that the kinds of explanations which are suitable at high levels in the hierarchy are quite different from the kinds of explanations which are suitable at lower levels. But the hierarchical reductionist believes that carburettors are explained in terms of smaller units..., which are explained in terms of the smallest of fundamental particles. Reductionism, in this sense, is just another name for an honest desire to understand how things work.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996, p. 13.

And lest one think that quoting Dawkins proves nothing, since he is a well-known agitator and popularizer, there is this entirely similar sentiment from Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg:

Finally, there is the question of emergence: is it really true that there are new kinds of laws that govern complex systems? Yes, of course, in the sense that different levels of experience call for description and analysis in different terms. ... But *fundamental* new kinds of laws? Gleick's lynch mob provides a counterexample. We may formulate what we learn about mobs in the form of laws ... but if we ask for an explanation of why such laws hold, we would not be very happy to be told that the laws are fundamental, without explanation in terms of anything else. Rather, we would seek a reductionist explanation precisely in terms of the psychology of individual humans. ... I suspect that all working scientists (and perhaps most people in general) are in practice as reductionist as I am.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, as Weinberg and Dawkins make clear, despite a voice here and there that may dissent, the vast apparatus of modern science is still animated by a reductionist spirit and notions such as emergence seem to have had little influence on changing this basic reality. However, what has changed somewhat, as Weinberg notes, is the understanding of the laws of nature in terms of field theory rather than billiard-ball mechanism. Weinberg describes mechanism as a philosophical theory whose usefulness is now past as a tool for moving science beyond religious explanations of reality.<sup>38</sup> However, at one point he refers to the kind of mechanism he is describing as 'naïve mechanism', which is an interesting designation given his generalizing statement that mechanism is no longer useful. If there is a kind of naïve mechanism, does that not mean that there are still forms of mechanism that are not naïve and are still useful as scientific tools? It seems that what Weinberg is hinting at here is the fact that one can define mechanism either naïvely in terms of elementary particles only, or one can define mechanism more broadly to mean, simply, that all causes are merely efficient causes regardless of whether one is talking about elementary particles or electromagnetic and quantum fields. I have used the term 'mechanism' in describing the rise of modern science in this latter and broader sense of 'no causes other than efficient causes'. It makes little difference to my thesis, therefore, whether one is speaking of the naïve or more sophisticated version of mechanism in describing the modern scientific project. What is pertinent for my purposes here is that Weinberg would agree that modern science has no time for essentialism or teleology of any kind. Thus, despite advances in physics and biology that do leave the door open for more essentialist understandings of nature, Weinberg frankly acknowledges that modern science remains strictly reductive; a fact that raises the question once again of the role played by theological and metaphysical considerations in the development of such clearly ideologically motivated intransigence. That is not to say that the mere fact that modern science continues to be reductive means that it is rooted in ideological intransigence. Rather, the refusal to countenance even for a moment alternatives to this approach

<sup>37</sup> Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory*, p. 62.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. pp. 169–173.

hints at a broader ideological agenda at work, an ideology that I characterize as theological in the sense that it is framed, reactively, within the ambit of the God question, i.e. it is influenced and formed by that which it rejects.

There is one last question I would like to address before ending this section. Steven Weinberg also notes, and I think it is true, that philosophical and theological questions simply do not enter the mind of the vast majority of scientists when they are engaged in their research.<sup>39</sup> After all, what difference does your God concept make when, for example, you are setting up an experiment to detect mutations in a flu virus? Where is the influence of theology as the physicist tracks the geometry of the cosmos? I would therefore agree with Weinberg that world-view questions do not directly enter into the realm of concrete scientific research with any degree of frequency. Weinberg's conclusion in his analysis is that, given such an absence of explicit theological and philosophical thinking on the part of individual scientists, we can safely ignore such questions and dismiss them as irrelevant to both the scientist and the average person. Indeed, as Weinberg concludes: 'I am not alone in this; I know of *no one* who has participated actively in the advance of physics in the postwar period whose research has been significantly helped by the work of philosophers.'<sup>40</sup>

But that fact, it seems to me, completely misses the point. There are two counter-points to be made in response to this argument. First, notice how Weinberg characterizes the issue as one of the helpfulness or non-helpfulness of philosophy (and by extension theology) for doing science. However, my argument is not that modern science is preoccupied on a conscious level with theological and/or philosophical issues and that it has used these disciplines liberally in the development of its theories. My argument, rather, is twofold. First, the claim I am making for the role of theology in the development of modern science closely resembles the claim made by Thomas Kuhn: that science operates through the agency of theoretical paradigms that guide, consciously or unconsciously, the path that concrete research takes. Thus the mere fact that a particular scientist may not be aware of theological assumptions does not mean that he or she has not been influenced by such ideas. They are, after all, members of a cultural intellectual matrix that has been framed, in almost all cultures, by specific theological attitudes. For example, what the preceding historical analysis shows us is that the mechanistic and reductionist paradigm for understanding nature arose out of the theological and philosophical adjustments of the late medieval world. It matters little what the conscious attitude of individual scientists was towards these theological positions. What matters is that they were men and women of their time and were thus influenced by the theological tenor of the age.

Furthermore, the very wording of Weinberg's statement makes the point against which he is arguing. To say that philosophy and theology are non-utilitarian for science, and therefore irrelevant to it, is already to presume a certain philosophical understanding of the nature of knowing, i.e. in order for an idea to be taken seriously it must, in some sense, be directly useful. But this ignores the fact that

<sup>39</sup> Weinberg, pp. 166–9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. pp. 168–9.



some of the greatest ideas of any age are the shared sets of concepts and values that make up the deep assumptions of a culture, assumptions which, owing to their largely unthematic and implicit nature, are of no direct, practical use whatsoever. Weinberg, therefore, is guilty of a certain philosophical naïveté with regard to the role played by philosophical and theological concepts in the formation of the intellectual paradigms of a culture.

The second counter-point to Weinberg's argument is that he seems to have a rather univocal understanding of what constitutes science. His arguments clearly presume that the only kind of science worth talking about is the applied science of the laboratory. As important as experimental verification is to the very heart and soul of modern science, it is not the only aspect of science worth considering. In fact a good case could be made that the experimental and applied phases of the scientific enterprise are the end of the scientific process rather than its beginning. The beginnings of many great scientific breakthroughs are often in the imaginative subjectivity of the researcher, followed by the formulation of hypotheses and theories that are then tested. Furthermore, modern science has long since moved beyond the Baconian ideal of science as a pure exercise in inductive experimentation, and evolutionary science is one of the chief causes of this transition. There is a great deal of inductive evidence for evolution, of course, both cosmic and biological. But the fact remains that evolution is also a historical science that deals with the imaginative reconstruction of past events that are clearly not directly observable or verifiable in the laboratory. For example, just because one discovers a fossil that has both human and ape-like characteristics, it does not logically follow by strict necessity that this was, indeed, our ancestor. At best, one can make an educated guess and say only that the fossil is strong evidence that human evolution as described by Darwin is possible, but not that this particular fossil has now been proven to be the direct link. And do we even need to bring up the highly speculative and counterintuitive nature of modern physics with string theory, Schrödinger's cat (who may or may not be dead), multi-verses, Quantum indeterminacy, wormholes and so on? In short, science is both an applied art and a speculative wisdom, a form of human knowing that is both an explanatory, cause-seeking, solution-rendering enterprise, as well as a broadly descriptive and imaginative narrative of the totality of reality. If this were not so, then why does Weinberg devote two entire chapters of his book (*Dreams of a Final Theory*) to the question of philosophy and the question of God? Such speculative preoccupations are also laced throughout the works of Dawkins, Hawking, Atkins, Sagan *et al.* If both philosophy and theology are ultimately irrelevant to science, then why are the modern popularizers of science so unable to avoid talking about them? Weinberg and company cannot have it both ways: if theology and philosophy are truly irrelevant and passé forms of human knowledge, now surpassed by science, then they should shut up about it.

Where then does the historical analysis of the preceding four chapters lead us? To the question of God. It is the God question that haunted the rise of modernity and framed its idiosyncratic contours. It is the God question that is the single unifying thread that ties together all the various movements within the history I have just described. Contrary to the common narrative in popular culture, modernity is not



characterized by a flight away from God and towards 'reason' and secularity. Yes, our culture has grown increasingly secular in its public discourse, but this increase is largely the result of our societal squeamishness about using directly theological language in the public square. But this outward secularity is merely a mask that cloaks the deep theological assumptions that continue to operate in the implicit metaphysical logic of our discourse. The Liberal narrative views this theological reticence as a step forward in our grand march towards the truly inclusive society that will bring peace to the warring religious factions. However, given the intrinsically theological and metaphysical underpinnings of many of our public debates, can it really be a sign of progress if these assumptions are never allowed to be brought into the light of day and opened to the glare of societal critique? Latent within the modern Liberal project is the assumption that theological disputes are ultimately dangerous, and Liberalism in all its forms has harboured the utopian ideal of a truly religionless society. But such utopian aspirations are inherently theological themselves, regardless of their pretensions to the contrary, and open the door to dangerous crypto-fascist tendencies that are every bit as dogmatic as the religions they seek to replace – perhaps more so.

Thus the God question remains as the elephant in the room and its continuing relevance signals that our culture is at a watershed moment. The question that looms before us is not, therefore, how best to secure the peace through the elimination of theological issues. Rather, the question is the quality of the theology we will inevitably have, whether this theology is explicitly articulated or merely latent within the logic of our cultural structures. What is needed, therefore, is the very thing our Liberal culture fears the most: a renewed public conversation about the nature of God.

In Section two I will endeavor to develop the contours of a theology of God that will allow us to redeploy the teleological world-view of antiquity in a new form. This does not require, as many seem to think, a wholesale re-envisioning of God that ignores the collective wisdom of the rich theological resources of the Christian tradition. Rather, in what follows I seek a reinvigoration of classical Christian theology by bringing to the fore ideas that have remained underutilized in the tradition and which are only now being rediscovered by Christian theologians. Some may see this as an illegitimate revisionist enterprise that seeks to legitimize a moribund theological tradition through clever sleight of hand. However, that is a view that simply ignores the fact that this is the way living and vibrant intellectual traditions operate. Ideas that have remained latent for centuries are ignored due to the fact that their moment in time had not yet arrived, or their true relevance was overlooked because they did not address the issues and concerns of past cultural ages. But when new cultural realities and new intellectual questions emerge, ideas that were collecting dust on the theological shelf are suddenly thrown into the limelight and their retrieval allows us to revive the entirety of the tradition in a new light, all the while remaining within the organic zone of true development. It is to this constructive task that I now turn.

## SECTION II

### THE GOD OF COVENANT AND CREATION

“Take away the supernatural and what remains is the unnatural”

*G.K. Chesterton*

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## Chapter 5

### THE QUESTION OF GOD

#### *Introduction*

It has been the central thesis of this text that the modern world's conception of reality, formed in the matrix of the interface between Christian faith and the rise of science, is, at least in part, the result of changes in the theology of God that began in the medieval world. I say 'at least in part' because historical movements are rarely explained as the result of unilinear causes. Furthermore, there is also the thorny question of whether the changes we saw in theology were caused by historical events external to theology *per se* that were also influential in the rise of science. In other words, it is possible that both modern theology and modern science were influenced by a common set of causes that propelled them both down the path we have briefly sketched in the previous chapters. Furthermore, one never wants to give the impression that the present can be understood through a simple reduction to the categories of the past since each historical era contains an irreducible moment of uniqueness.<sup>1</sup> Therefore it is not my contention that changes in the theology of God eight hundred years ago were the direct and unique cause of the rise of modern science. However, it *is* my contention that whatever else the multifaceted narrative of the rise of modernity may imply, any narrative that leaves out the historical genealogy of the relationship between the theology of God and the rise of science is at the very least radically incomplete. Thus what I have outlined is not some grand metanarrative that seeks to explain historical movements in the register of a single controlling idea. Rather, what is offered here is a single strand in the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Cyril O'Regan, 'Balthasar and Gnostic Genealogy', *Modern Theology* 22:4 (October 2006), pp. 609-650. O'Regan states: 'Genealogy belongs to the regime of *naming through analogy* in which the conceptually underdetermined modern or contemporary discourses come to be known by means of the putatively better known pre-modern discourse, since the past is thought to provide a stability that makes knowing possible in a way not matched by the evanescent present and the unknown and even unthinkable future', p. 609. He goes on to state, citing Jacques Derrida, that genealogy thus operates '... palimpsestically. It brings up or sets in relief the writing covered over, almost but not quite erased, in bands of discourses that superficially at least have impeccably modern, even Enlightenment credentials', p. 610.

'thick description' required of any attempt to explain the origins of the modern world.<sup>2</sup>

Everything in the previous section could be categorized loosely under the rubric of 'diagnostics', i.e. under the banner of historical description with an eye to identifying a set of central issues critical to our understanding of the past. What now follows is the far more daunting task of delineating the outline of a constructive theological proposal that will attempt to remedy many of the theological defects that led to our current situation. To that end, the current chapter and the next seek to develop a modern Trinitarian theology of God that will attempt to show that: a. the traditional theology of God found in the Christian Church is both lacking in development in certain key areas, but also that it is characterized by a conceptually underdetermined fullness sufficient to the task of creating a cogent theology of God for the modern world; and b. modern evolutionary theory (and modern science in general) can be reconciled cogently, and not in an *ad hoc* fashion, with this view of God. The issue of theological cogency is critical to this project, since merely reconciling the Christian faith with modern science may imply a defensive posture that seeks an *apologia* for the continuing relevance of Christianity vis-à-vis a modern science whose categories of thought, as they have come down to us historically, are deemed normative for the dialogue.<sup>3</sup> Rather, what is sought here is a Trinitarian theology of God that will allow us to rethink the God-world relation in such a way that it will be possible to critique not only the theological end of the dialogue, but the scientific end as well. What is needed is not for one side of the

<sup>2</sup> For examples of genealogies of 'thick description' see: Louis Dupre, *Passage to Modernity*; Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008; Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989; Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> This, it seems to me, is precisely the problem with liberal forms of Christian theology that seek to accommodate the Christian faith to the categories of modern science while refusing to engage in any kind of substantive critique of the categories of science as such, or of the suitability of their provenance as a guiding set of principles for theology. The assumption is made that modern science is the way it is by some kind of necessity, while Christian theology is an altogether plastic reality capable of endless permutations. This in turn calls into question in a radical fashion the inner cogency of Christian Revelation precisely as a truth claim in any meaningful sense of the term 'truth'. Likewise, forms of Christian theology that argue from a strict biblical literalism and which therefore seem to imply a rejection of modern science are, in fact, merely the religious mirror image of modern science. They accept as a given that truth in science and religion is a purely univocal concept, wherein only that which can be empirically proven to be true counts as the reliably real. But since the empirical meaning of the biblical narrative contradicts the empirical meaning of modern science, it is the latter's empiricism that must be rejected. Ironically, therefore, most biblical literalists are thoroughly modern in their understanding of truth and embody a heretical form of Christian empiricism. I use the word 'heretical' here to mean not that they have fallen afoul of some magisterial authority that has deemed them thus, but that their views represent a fundamental deformation of the Christian evangel. Thus in my view both liberal and literalist forms of Christian theology are kissing theological cousins who accept without question the basic normativity of modern scientific conceptions of truth.

dialogue or the other to gain ascendancy within the categories of thought that have so far prevailed, but for a relatively new starting point to the discussion.

I say 'relatively' new merely in the sense that I am not calling for a wholesale scuttling of the theological paradigms of the past, but rather for looking at them afresh through a creative retrieval. What is sought here is the rehabilitation of the central categories of the classical Christian conception of God, updated precisely by being reanimated through their own fundamental principles. What this approach explicitly rejects therefore is the idea that the classical form of creedal Christianity has become a shopworn ideology that is simply no longer an intellectually viable option in the age of science.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously the category 'Trinitarian theology' is a vast one, and to attempt a wholesale retrieval of the entirety of this tradition is well beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is possible to limit the scope of the project by focusing on the central problematic issue identified in the previous section. Specifically, what the history just outlined shows us is that the source of the theological confusion of modernity resides within the ambit of what can be generically described as the God-world problem, i.e. how does the Infinite God interact with His finite creation? This central problematic issue leads in turn to a series of sub-questions, which will be explicated in what follows. In order to accomplish this task I will be making liberal use of the Trinitarian theology developed in the past century by the school of Catholic theology that has come to be known as '*ressourcement theology*'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For an example of a theological approach that views classical creedal Christianity as overly wedded to Hellenistic philosophy and therefore in no position to address modern science see: Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> The term *ressourcement* (return to the sources) is, in and of itself, rather unhelpful as a description for any Christian theological project insofar as all Christian theologies should, at least in theory, begin with the normative sources of Revelation. However, within the historical context of twentieth-century Catholic theology it came to be associated with a type of theology that was reacting against the alleged rationalism and theologically denatured neo-scholasticism of the so-called 'manual theology'. The latter was viewed by many as an overly apologetical form of theology that was reacting to the rationalistic scepticism of modernity and the fideism of Protestantism by providing a set of philosophical principles that could act as a propaedeutic for doing theology. This created a situation where Revelation was seen as providing no internal interpretative logic or warrant for itself, thus requiring some principle external to theology as the foundational starting point for doing theology in a modern sceptical world. This philosophical foundation was then used to ground the very idea of Revelation as well as the need for some kind of magisterial authority to interpret it. Following from this the dogmas of the Church became the first principles for doing theology from which all the various doctrines and practices of the Church could be deduced. The approach therefore tended to overemphasize the propositional nature of Revelation while undervaluing its covenantal nature as an encounter with an Infinite personal freedom in the temporality of salvation history. *Ressourcement* thinkers sought to remedy this situation through a proper retrieval of biblical and liturgical theology with an eye towards a greater role for mystery, historical developmentalism and analysis of Revelation's existential restructuring of human categories of thought. This obviously involved a much greater emphasis upon modern biblical scholarship and patristics, but it would be wrong to limit this movement to those disciplines. This renewed emphasis upon history, modern biblical scholarship and existential forms of theology and philosophy led, quite understandably, to the accusation that *ressourcement* theology was something new, even novel, and they were

Among the various representatives of this movement I will be focusing primarily on the theology of the late Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar in the current chapter, and in Chapter 6 on the thought of the contemporary theologian David L. Schindler, editor of the English edition of the influential journal *Communio: International Catholic Review*. I begin with von Balthasar because, in my view, his development of Trinitarian doctrine holds the most promise for the project at hand; and David Schindler has put forward one of the most creative developments in the contemporary theological scene of the metaphysical implications of Balthasar's Trinitarian ontology of love.

### *A. The Method of Approach*

The primary theological issue, as mentioned above, that framed the theology of God from the medieval period onwards is the exact relationship between God and the world. The question of God and his relation to the world is, of course, a very ancient problem as can be seen in the numerous disputes concerning the proper relation between the 'One and the many' in classical pagan philosophy. Even the often hostile relationship between the mythic Homeric and philosophical/Platonic forms of religion had this problem decidedly foregrounded as the neuralgic point of the dispute; no claim is being made here that the debate surrounding the proper relationship between the divine and the mundane is somehow unique to the modern period. Nevertheless, the question of God and his relation to the world becomes more acute from the medieval period onwards owing to the growing need to provide a theological account of God and his relation to the world that could

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often lumped together with the hated purveyors of modernist theology. Hence it was also called by its detractors the *nouvelle théologie* (the new theology). The irony of course is that it was precisely the practitioners of the neo-scholastic manual theology who were the true innovators if one views them against the backdrop of the entire history of Catholic theology.

In a second irony, after the Second Vatican Council *ressourcement* thinkers came to be identified with a more conservative vein of theology, since many of its practitioners became highly critical of the accommodationist tendencies of post-conciliar liberal theology. Theological liberalism was viewed by *ressourcement* critics as yet one more attempt to justify the claims of Revelation through appeal to some extra-theological principle, in this case an often vague and secularist rendering of the otherwise theologically legitimate category of experience. So instead of a deductive philosophical rationalism, liberals had recourse to an unreconstructed secularist reading of the various social sciences as the primary *loci* for analysing human experience, which then became its favoured propaedeutic. That is not to say that *ressourcement* thinkers eschewed the use of either philosophy or the social sciences in doing theology. Rather, it is a question of not allowing these disciplines to determine in advance what it is that Revelation is allowed to say, i.e. not allowing them to over-determine methodologically the interpretation of properly theological categories of thought, or alternatively not allowing theological categories to inform how one retrieves philosophy and/or science for theological use. Thus the charge by liberal theologians that *ressourcement* thinkers were fideistic or purely intra-ecclesial or neo-Barthian is entirely without merit. Cf. Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007; Adrian Walker, 'Love Alone: Hans Urs von Balthasar as a Master of Theological Renewal', *Communio: International Catholic Review*, XXXII: 3 (Fall, 2005), pp. 517–40.

do justice to the increased *theological* emphasis on worldliness that begins to push into the European consciousness. This new-found worldliness, as we outlined in Chapter 2, had several causes, among which were the rediscovery of Aristotle; the rise of the mercantile middle class; the movement of theology away from the monasteries and into the universities; a greater methodological distinction between faith and reason; the increased emphasis upon the humanity of Jesus among the Franciscans; the rupture between nature and grace introduced by the epigones of Aquinas; the rise of nominalism and its philosophical empiricism; and the Christian humanism of the Renaissance.

All these factors were important in their own way and paved the way for the revolution in human thought that was the seventeenth century, when science in its modern empiricist/inductive/mathematical modality exploded on the scene. In particular, the ascendancy of nominalist thought, especially in Protestant countries, created a theology of God where the divine is viewed as raw power or force whose inscrutability renders His intrinsic relation to the world opaque and lacking discernible intelligibility. Thus God came to be viewed as an alien and extrinsic force who acts upon the world as a transcendent rather than an immanent power. God came to be viewed as ever more distant and the cosmos was bleached of its theophanic/sacramental qualities. All this no doubt coloured the manner in which the first great scientific thinkers framed their theories concerning causation and motion. Once ensconced firmly in European consciousness, science exerted a rebound effect upon the very theology that helped to create it. The world-machine of Newton created a mechanistic world-view that seemingly had no room for God as a cause of anything – a fact that seems to have impressed itself upon the deeply religious Newton, prompting him to search for anomalies in his mathematics of motion allowing for God as a causative agent in the gaps of an otherwise closed system. But these gaps were quickly closed and the only God that remained plausible in such a scenario was the absentee landlord God of deism. But such a vestigial God cannot retain His importance for very long, and the modern world quickly abandoned such an attenuated deity as a pointless and romantic luxury.

The difference between the modern and classical situations is therefore that in antiquity the debate was truly over rival concepts of the divine, which in turn coloured their view of the natural. By contrast, modernity proposes a totally self-sufficient vision of the natural, which calls into question the very notion of the divine in a radical way. For the ancients, the deeper question was whether or not the material world was real in any substantive sense at all vis-à-vis a growing philosophical/spiritual monism of the divine. For the modern world the situation is exactly reversed: modernity questions the very existence of the realm of the divine vis-à-vis a growing materialistic monism.

The task of critiquing such monistic reductionism in our modern setting becomes even more difficult with the privileging of the Enlightenment's narrative of the rise of modernity in all the venues within our culture tasked with the duty to teach the grand narrative of our history. This story, simply put, is a developmental tale of progression from infancy to adulthood: history is portrayed as growth from the ancient world's privileging of the divine to the modern world's privileging of nature. The entire process is viewed as the natural progression of the human race



from the infancy of myth and religion, through the adolescence of philosophy and into the adulthood of reductionist science. When modern people do not have a story even as sophisticated as this one, they are still possessed of some vague notion that the modern world, with its airplanes, antibiotics and flush toilets, is somehow more mature in its understanding of the world than ancient cultures who were riddled with an ignorance born out of benighted religious superstition. In short, most modern people, whether they acknowledge it or not, believe, and believe strongly, in a historical teleology: history has a definite point, and *we* are it. In such a scenario, theological attempts to alter this condition will be viewed at best like civil war re-enactors who, God bless them, have a romantic longing for the past, or at worst as dangerous purveyors of a long-vanquished ideology who need to be dealt with harshly.

But the theological situation is made even more problematic by the fact that the best known theological alternatives to this Enlightenment narrative are: a. the anti-scientific ravings of the reductionist biblical empiricists (fundamentalists); and b. the theological liberalism born out of the post-Enlightenment era that breathlessly seeks the approbation of modern secularism through the creation of all manner of ersatz theological accommodations. Whereas biblical literalism and its attendant theological cousins are not respected even within the theological guild, thus offering no serious answer to modernity, liberalism by contrast became the dominant theological approach in the Christian academy well into the latter part of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, liberalism, despite its best intentions, has not truly bridged the gap between Christian faith and modern science, owing in great measure to its disdain for Christianity as a public truth claim. It opts instead to cede the realm of public truth to the social and natural sciences, while redefining the essence of Christianity as one symbol system among many, whose chief purposes are to instill in its practitioners an existential commitment to social justice and to foster a universalist spirituality of inclusion. Now the commitment to social justice and a spirituality of inclusion are in themselves certainly noble goals and not to be dismissed. However, it is doubtful that this attenuated form of the Christian faith is really up to the task of creating a truly fresh understanding of Christian Revelation for the modern world, since the very *modus operandi* of liberalism is the deconstruction of the tradition in order to liberate us from its putatively otiose strictures. This is a point made by Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) in his now classic text *Introduction to Christianity*. In that text Ratzinger equates the programme of post-Enlightenment theological liberalism with an ever-increasing attenuation of the historic claims of Christianity, all in the name of liberating ourselves from the strictures of the past in dealing with the present:

Anyone who has watched the theological movement of the last decade, and who is not one of those thoughtless people who always uncritically accept what is new as necessarily better, might well feel reminded of the old story of 'Lucky Jack'. The lump of gold which was too heavy and troublesome for him he exchanged successively, so as to be more comfortable, for a horse, a cow, a goose and a whetstone, which he finally threw into the water without losing much more; on the contrary, what he now gained in exchange, so he thought, was the precious gift of complete freedom. How long

his intoxication lasted, how sombre the moment of awakening from the illusion of his supposed liberation, is left by the story ... to the imagination of the reader. The worried Christian of today is often bothered by questions like these: has our theology in the last few years not taken in many ways a similar path? Has it not gradually watered down the demands of faith, which had been found all too demanding, always only so little that nothing important seemed to be lost, yet always so much that it was soon possible to venture on to the next step? And will poor Jack, the Christian who trustfully let himself be led from exchange to exchange, from interpretation to interpretation, not really soon hold in his hand, instead of the gold with which he began, only a whetstone which he can be confidently recommended to throw away?<sup>6</sup>

Thus the task before us is the creation of a theology of God that is up to the challenge of creating a theological dialogue partner with the modern world that is uniquely Christian, in the sense of privileging a robust rather than a minimalizing approach to the Church's creedal traditions. I think this approach is necessary for three reasons. First, because from the Christian perspective the task at hand is really nothing other than the desire to make specifically *Christian* faith more intelligible in a modern setting and that means, at the very least, taking the historical creeds of Christianity as a normative point of departure. How easy it is to say 'I want to reconcile the Christian faith with modern science', but then set about to do this by simply throwing overboard just about every central and defining Christian doctrine as these have been historically received.<sup>7</sup> What then exactly has one saved? Is it really a theological step forward to replace the normative historical contours of creedal Christianity with newer and far more idiosyncratic reconstructions of the Christian faith that look, for all the world, like the metanarrative of secular modernity in religious costume? It is therefore imperative that any theological outreach to modern science takes place within the *oikonomia* of the traditional faith, if for no other reason than the fact that people need to know that there is a theological alternative to the unhealthy dialectic between Christian fundamentalism and post-Enlightenment liberalism. This then leads to the second reason for theologizing based on a robust retrieval of the Christian tradition: those in the camp of the sciences who are truly interested in an intellectual dialogue with

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1970, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> I am reminded of a science and religion conference I attended at MIT in 2000. The noted British biologist and Anglican theologian Sir Arthur Peacocke gave a talk on how to reconcile the Christian doctrine of original sin with modern evolutionary theory. His talk then began with the fundamental thesis of the paper: the doctrine of original sin is no longer tenable and must simply be abandoned. I failed to see, then as well as now, how this was a 'reconciling' of anything at all and it points again to the very problematical nature of characterizing these dialogues as reconciling Christianity with science. The very language is defensive and implies an already existing conflict between two ideas presumed before the conversation to be in contradiction. Given the tone of the times, the Christian doctrinal end of that polarity is almost always the loser. The better approach, it seems to me, is one that begins with the presumption that since both the Christian faith and modern science are true, then when there are interpretative difficulties in the interface, the presumption is that one or the other of the polarities has been, at least in part, not fully understood and requires a deepening of thought and a broadening of perspective. This would be as true for our understanding of the full implications of a scientific theory as for a theological affirmation.

the Christian faith are usually interested in dialoguing with the Christian faith. Without getting too cheeky about it, a scientist who is interested in mere spirituality will have little difficulty in finding just the right one for his or her purposes from the many boutique shop offerings on display these days. But a scientist who wants to know how modern science and the Christian faith can speak to one another usually has some form of the traditional creedal faith in view. Thus a Christian theology that takes seriously the creedal truth claims of the Christian faith is rendering a tremendous service to this dialogue. Finally, I think this project is necessary because it is my contention that traditional creedal Christianity is in fact true; I am therefore interested in how the truth of the Christian faith, as this has been understood in the creedal formulations and theologies of the Great Tradition, interfaces at its interpretative horizon with the speculative elements of modern science.

This is not to say that I am advocating an approach that seeks to reduce Christian Revelation to a set of creedal propositions. The propositional model for Revelation, so dominant in neo-scholastic forms of Catholic thought in the early- to mid-twentieth century, has been rightly discredited as being, in its own ironic way, a form of theological modernism. If post-Enlightenment liberalism erred in taking the epistemic hubris and naïveté of the Enlightenment as normative for theological discourse, then neo-scholastic propositionalism is merely the conservative flip side of the modernist coin. Both positions are characterized by the rationalist quest to locate some point of Archimedean objectivity as the foundationalist cornerstone for grounding the universalist claims of Revelation. Thus both end up distorting Revelation each in its own way: liberalism through attenuating the distinctively Christian truth claim through locating its warrant in some kind of universal genus known as religion or religious experience, with Christianity being a mere species of that genus, and neo-scholasticism through locating the warrant for the faith in a deductive propositionalism that also, ironically, attenuates the Christian faith through reducing Revelation to a set of dogmas. In other words, both liberalism and neo-scholasticism are foundationalist and minimalist approaches to Revelation that are, for that reason, ill-equipped to bring a robust rendering of the Christian faith into dialogue with modern science.

The creedal approach to a theological rendering of Revelation that I am proposing seeks to avoid such reductive readings of the Tradition. I will leave it to the reader to determine whether or not I am successful. What I am proposing bears some resemblance to post-modernist understandings of how thinking within a particular intellectual tradition works itself out. First, in the Christian tradition of thinking about God there is an affirmation that God is the 'ever greater' and that the divine nature is therefore approached analogically and never univocally, so wide latitude must be given to a plurality of perspectives, since no single theological vision, or even an accumulation of a multiplicity of visions, can ever exhaust the infinite mystery that is God. Furthermore, this insight also applies to dogmatic formulations as well which are always provisional in their formulation and must never be equated with Revelation as such. As second order ecclesial realities they are always a form of the human witnessing to Revelation rather than Revelation as such; therefore a plurality of hermeneutical positions with regard to their proper

interpretation is inevitable, and indeed desirable, since only such a plurality of voices can even begin to give us some sense of the endless depths of God's being. Second, this plurality of voices is not unlimited, and the creedal expressions of Revelation, though not to be equated with Revelation as such, are nevertheless, normative *loci* within the Tradition for setting limits on what would otherwise be a runaway plurality – a situation that would render the very notion of Revelation questionable. A proper approach to the tradition will therefore seek to avoid both a univocal approach that seeks to reduce the faith to a set of timeless propositions, and an equivocal one where all forms of discourse are viewed as radically idiosyncratic and incommensurate with one another. The proper approach is, rather, analogical in that it recognizes a plurality of voices, all of which are ultimately oriented towards a guiding Christological centre, a centre that both relativizes each individual expression of the faith even while legitimating them as grounded in Revelation. In the language of Hans Urs von Balthasar, the approach is 'symphonic' in that the various voices within the Tradition are akin to differing musical instruments and movements within an overarching musical Gestalt.<sup>8</sup>

As stated above, the theological situation I am describing bears some resemblance to those postmodern approaches that emphasize that an intellectual tradition provides us with a kind of grammar that guides our discourse. However, I am quick to add that the approach I am advocating only bears a resemblance to such approaches to the extent that both share a commitment to a plurality of voices within a single overarching grammar. But postmodernism can mean many things and there are some potential misunderstandings I wish to address before proceeding. In some postmodernist approaches a retrieval of the past in the manner I am describing is impossible, owing to the differing horizons of the historical periods in question. Those of a more Nietzschean persuasion would fall into this camp. Obviously, that is not the approach I am advocating. On the other hand, followers of the critical theory put forward by Jürgen Habermas would note that if postmodernism represents the eclipsing of the modernist register, then, insofar as modernism was constructed as a response to premodern issues, then a partial retrieval of the premodern might, once again, be possible.<sup>9</sup> The advantage of this approach is that it acknowledges that a romantic return to the past is impossible, and therefore that any retrieval of the past can only happen in and through the thought forms of the present. Thus any retrieval of the Christian tradition will happen in such a way that what is created is not a naïve return to the past, but a genuine and authentic appropriation of ancient ideas by the present, creating a unique historical *eidos* of its own. Of course, this appropriation is always analogical in the sense that an idea that is translated from one historical era into another will never survive the journey uninfluenced by the transition. But the condition of possibility for such analogical transpositions is the fact that truly fecund ideas, like poems or great works of literature, are always polyvalent

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Cyril O'Regan, Balthasar: Between Tübingen and Modernity, *Modern Theology*, 14:3 (July 1998), pp. 325–353; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, Graham Harrison (trans.), San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> O'Regan, 'Balthasar: Between Tübingen and Postmodernity', pp. 349–350.

and bear within themselves a potential range of meanings that go beyond their originators. In a Christian theological context, what this means is that the more an idea is rooted in God's Revelation in Christ, i.e. the more participatory it is in the reality of Christ, then the more it becomes available analogically to all later generations of Christian thinkers for appropriations that are often stunningly novel.

But even here a further misunderstanding is possible. That which has come to be called postmodernism raises many valid issues and provides us with a trenchant critique of the modern. However, that was true of the modern era as well; modernity, in its heyday, was viewed as raising many valid issues and providing its contemporaries with a trenchant critique of the premodern. Likewise, there are already voices out there championing the idea of a post-postmodernism. I raise these points not to argue for a relativism of ideas, but to make the simple point that while Christian theology must always enter a dialogue with the thought forms of its era, it must nonetheless never become methodologically overdetermined by the same. Epistemic methodologies are also part of the finitude of human thinking and Revelation must never be reduced to any particular era's concept of epistemic warrant. Ideas come and go. For the Christian, it is but Christ who remains and therefore even if the kind of theologizing I am recommending leans heavily toward the legitimacy of thick description, perspectival plurality, the traditioning of all reason (Gadamer) and the ever-greater Transcendent horizon that is God, it would behoove us to remember that perspectivism applies to the perspectivalists as well.<sup>10</sup>

What follows is a detailed exposition of the trinitarian theology and metaphysics worked out by Hans Urs von Balthasar. For the most part, I will confine myself to a straightforward exposition of his thought on this topic, eschewing a detailed critique of his various positions. I choose this path for three main reasons. First, for

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,' *Communio: International Catholic Review*, XXIV: 2, Summer, 1997, pp. 347–396. Balthasar originally published this essay in 1939. In it he argues that the proper approach to interpreting the Christian tradition is to view it through the lens of the central controlling idea of Christian faith: the revelation of the trinitarian love of God in Christ. Armed with this controlling concept, he proceeds to analyse the theology of the fathers, the scholastics and modernity with an eye towards what is unique and helpful in their approaches and what falls short of the mark. I do not have time here to go into detail concerning his adjudications relative to each era. For our purposes, the salient point is that Balthasar argues that the tradition is constituted of a deep plurality of views which are all attempting, analogically, to plumb the depths of the central Christian idea. No era is privileged and each era makes its own unique contribution. Thus Balthasar privileges a kaleidoscopic approach to the tradition, eschewing the reduction of Revelation to dogma alone, while holding to the latter's necessity. But in all of this, the most important aspect of the Tradition for Balthasar might be its performative masters: the saints, who comprise a kind of living Revelation in each generation. However, for all this postmodern-sounding talk, Balthasar continues to assert the reality of a Transcendent truth that we can know in Christ, and therefore that the Tradition, insofar as it participates in Christ, is a real bearer of truth. Thus he shows us that ultimately Christian Revelation transcends all methodological and epistemic categorization, which thus legitimates the theological judgments that must also be brought to bear on what goes by the name 'postmodernism'.

the sake of clarity I wish to present a single, unified and internally cogent theology of God that can act as a working theological model for the science and religion interface. To digress into constant critique and sidebar conversations concerning alternative theologies would undercut the cohesive theology I wish to present. Second, the topic is so vast that a detailed account of all the various theological schools of thought and their attendant philosophical correlates goes beyond the scope of this text, which seeks to develop a constructive theological project rather than catalogue all the potential options at our disposal. Third, I judge Balthasar's theology of God to be constructively fecund which means, among other things, that a detailed study of the categories of his thought leads to a treasure trove of theological resources from the tradition that create new pathways for dialogue and discussion with alternative theologies. Thus the narrow focus on Balthasar's approach in what follows should not be construed as a claim to the last word on the topic, but rather as an invitation to further conversation.

### ***B. God and World: A Trinitarian Ontology of Love***

#### *1. The Ontological Distinction*

As we have seen in the previous section, both the classical world and Newtonian modernity were characterized by a chronic ambiguity in their concept of the divine. Specifically, there exists an ambiguity in their concept of the proper relationship between the realm of the divine and the realm of the world. In this chapter we will focus on the nature of this ambiguity in the classical world and the manner in which the Revelation of the Trinitarian God in Christ overcomes it. We will then deal in the next chapter with the same problematic issue in modern scientific culture.

In the ancient classical world the ambiguity rested in the inability of that world to formulate a metaphysic that could allow God to be Other – and therefore dialogical – while avoiding the mythological anthropomorphism of an objectified God or gods. Ancient mythic religion had preserved profound religious insights – insights that seemed to demand a world of divinity capable of dialogue with the human realm. Indeed, the entire religious edifice of pagan antiquity presumed that the gods, taken as a whole or separately, were entities to whom one could pray, offer sacrifice, from whom one could get real help in this world or, at the very least, sound advice on pressing matters through various oracles and auguries. In other words, like any good religion, the continuing need for people to believe that the divine realm was not utterly indifferent to their plight was of paramount importance. Indeed, the entire realm of dialogical prayer was as important in its own way to ancient pagans as it was later to Christians and Jews.

However, the difficulty is understanding how to maintain this dialogical quality in the divine without reifying God or the gods as human persons writ large. That was indeed the path of myth, which, despite its philosophical naïveté, preserved for the ancient world the important element of dialogue between the divine and the mundane in the religious sphere. However, the legitimate insights of myth

concerning the dialogical structure of humanity's relation to the gods eventually wilted under the sun of philosophical reason. Plato, of course, heaped scorn upon the mythic poets even as he himself eventually had recourse to his own myth-making in works such as the *Timaeus*. But even here Plato's construction of various myths seems to have served larger philosophical purposes rather than mythically religious ones. Nevertheless, the philosophical issue raised by Plato and others was directly on target: how could the divine realm act as a true ground for all that is, if it is itself merely one more finite object within the world of things. Thus the drift in ancient philosophy, especially in its later Neoplatonic forms (Plotinus, Proclus), is towards an ever greater identification of the divine with the all encompassing One. The only issue that was left to work out was how this One related to the fragmented realm of the many. The usual solution was the construction of philosophical forms of religiosity that tended, depending on whether one labelled them 'religion' or 'philosophy', towards either pantheism on the religious side, or some kind of theopanism on the philosophical side. What is specifically lost in this transition from myth to philosophical pantheism is the element of the dialogical in religion. One has purchased the coherence of the concept of the divine at the cost of its on-going religious relevance. As Balthasar puts it:

In the extra-biblical world, nations can only address their gods as 'thou' on the basis of a mythical assumption, namely, that these gods are limited, by one another or by the world. Where mythical religion passes over into philosophy, either the divinity is no longer addressed as 'thou' at all (Plato) or this manner of address becomes an essentially extrinsic form borrowed from mythical religion, e.g. Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, myth did not entirely go away in the ancient world as the common person had little time for such philosophical nitpicking. Indeed, mythic ways of viewing God seem rather natural to the human mind as we constantly seek to capture God in the categories of worldly and everyday imaginative thought. Indeed, even today we see mythic understandings in the minds of most Christians when it comes to how God deals with creation; so the material perdurance of myth in actual history merely points to the fact that the dialectic that Balthasar is referring to here – that between mythic and philosophical views of God – is a dialectic that constantly repeats itself in human history. However, one can still speak of the ascendancy of philosophical monism over the dialogical religious realm of myth in antiquity with reference to the occurrence of a very real shift in human religious consciousness among the intellectual classes and among the better educated in general. This shift in consciousness eventually takes on real structural form as it begins to percolate among the ruling classes.

The ancient world is therefore caught on the horns of a dilemma: either the dialogical world of myth, or the monistic world of philosophy. It would seem that one had to choose between mythical gods, with whom one could commune, or the cold God of philosophical monism. What the ancient world lacked, according

<sup>11</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume II: The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, Graham Harrison (trans), San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990, p. 287 (henceforth cited as TD II).



to Balthasar, was a clear-cut concept of creation based upon a sovereign, infinite, divine freedom. Without such a doctrine the ancient world could not sustain a clear distinction between God and world without falling back into mythology. In the new Christian framework, the old Platonic and Plotinian concept of the One that must emanate or radiate its essential nature within an overarching necessity 'becomes the absolutely free (and thus personal) God who is under no compulsion, not even from His own nature, and who freely sends forth from Himself the world of finite spirits, created to be free.'<sup>12</sup> Thus embedded within the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is the clear affirmation that there is a distinction to be made between the Being of God (Being as such in all its infinite purity) and the Being of creation; the being of the world is real only insofar as it participates analogously in the Being of God. This distinction between God and the world is grounded in biblical Revelation in an antecedent affirmation that there are two kinds of freedom at work in reality: God's infinite freedom and the freedom of creaturely finitude. As Balthasar puts it, 'Biblical Revelation rests on the basis of the primal God-world distinction.'<sup>13</sup> Biblical Revelation clearly affirms in a variety of different ways that there is in some sense an opposition between God's infinite freedom and human finite freedom. By this Balthasar does not mean that there is an inherent irreconcilable contradiction between the two types of freedom, which are then seen as in some way in competition with each other.<sup>14</sup> Rather, he means that the biblical record makes a sharp distinction between the two freedoms in order to highlight the fact that one is not reducible to the other and that they are, in some sense, radically different in kind. In the biblical Revelation a covenant is struck in which the nature of God as sovereign and One is maintained even while human freedom is definitely posited as other than God.<sup>15</sup>

What emerges in this notion of covenant is the essentially dramatic nature of biblical Revelation: the entirety of the economy of salvation is marked by the dramatic interplay between these two freedoms on the stage of history. Thus

<sup>12</sup> *TD II*, 191.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics: Volume V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, John Saward, Rowan Williams (trans), San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991 p. 628. (Henceforth cited as *GL V*)

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Robert Barron, 'A Reflection on Christ, Theological Method, and Freedom,' in *How Balthasar Changed my Mind*, Rodney Howsare and Larry Chapp (eds), New York: Herder & Herder, 2008, pp. 20–2. Barron makes precisely this same point concerning Balthasar's construal of the relationship between divine and human freedom. Barron refers to God's relation to the world as one of 'noncompetitive Transcendence' and roots this in the Chalcedonian understanding of the union of the divine and human natures in Christ: 'Balthasar sees the natures in Jesus as a play of two freedoms, infinite and finite. In the person of Jesus divine freedom and human freedom dovetail in an absolutely unique and non-competitive manner, so that nothing of the human has to give way in the presence of the divine, and nothing of the divine has to be compromised to make way for the human,' p. 20. I will comment more on these Christological points later in the chapter.

<sup>15</sup> *TD II*, 190–191. Balthasar states: 'It is one of the fundamental assertions of the Bible and of theology that such an opposition exists and that it works itself out dramatically in a variety of forms.'



does biblical Revelation confront the mythic-religious-philosophical synthesis of antiquity with two fundamental affirmations that drive home both the difference and opposition between these two freedoms, while maintaining their ultimate reconciliation within the divine initiative represented in the notion of covenant. Balthasar formulates these affirmations as follows:

First, that the Absolute is free (which the philosopher can concede in a limited sense); and second, that the Absolute has a sovereign ability, out of its own freedom, to create and send forth finite but genuinely free beings ... in such a way that, without vitiating the infinite nature of God's freedom, a genuine opposition of freedoms can come about.<sup>16</sup>

However, how do such affirmations avoid critical internal contradictions and an inevitable drift back into mythological views of God? Has one preserved the dialogical quality of Being at the expense of philosophical rigour? How can God be Wholly Other as Christian theology affirms and still have an ontological relationship with the world that presumes an analogy of Being on some basic level? What becomes of the reality of the finite 'other' that biblical covenant theology seems to demand? Would it not be easier simply to affirm the basic mythological quality of the biblical narratives and to search for the metahistorical philosophical truths contained therein, which is what the Enlightenment project was at least partially about?

It is clear that Christian theology, in order to appeal to thinking minds, cannot simply ignore all the philosophical problems that such a view of God presents.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, such questions help us to clarify our formulations and avoid pitfalls. For example, Balthasar points out that if we are to affirm that God is an Absolute Unity, then we cannot affirm ourselves as other than God in the sense of being outside of God or beside God or in any way an addition to the total amount of Being in God. Christian Philosophy helps us to seek the answer to the God-world opposition within God in a way that does justice to the affirmations of biblical Revelation (opposition) as well as the dictates of philosophical reason (unity).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 190. We cannot go into detail here and explore all the theological nuances in Balthasar's development of this concept of opposition in biblical Revelation. For our purposes it is sufficient to establish that Balthasar takes such a God-world opposition as his starting point in developing his Christian metaphysics. The general scope of the topic we are concerned with – Balthasar's theology of God and His Revelation – does not allow us time and space to go into detail, analysing every implication of the *contents* of his theology. It may be that Balthasar exaggerates this theme of opposition in biblical Revelation at the expense of a more immanent biblical strand. However, an examination of that question would require an entire study in its own right. Cf. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord VI: Theology: The Old Covenant*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991; *The Glory of the Lord VII: New Covenant*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 191. This is precisely why, according to Balthasar, we do theology a disservice when we arrogantly turn up our noses at the patristic and scholastic attempt to formulate Christian doctrine within the philosophical categories of antiquity. Such systems were not simply a distorting Hellenization of Revelation but, rather, powerful attempts to answer, assimilate and transcend the common understanding of ancient humanity within a Christian framework for thinking people. Since such attempts were an answer to the classical world-view, they remain as timely as the questions raised by such a world-view.

It is critical, in Balthasar's eyes, that these two tensions be bridged from within the structures of the divine life itself: a synthesis that avoids mythology, monistic philosophies of identity and pantheism. This means that the Christian solution points us to a conception of God so totally and infinitely Other that God can, by virtue of that fact, be the equally immanent non-other.<sup>18</sup> The task of Christian theology is therefore to ground the reality of finite freedom within infinite freedom in such a way that the integrity of both is preserved while affirming the absolute priority of the latter. Balthasar states:

The Christian task, in the face of the Stoic and Plotinian enterprise, is to heighten the formal model into a relationship between freedoms according to which finite freedom can only arise out of, and persist within, primal freedom (just as in Plotinus the 'other' – over against the 'one' – can only be 'other' because it itself is a 'one' and thus participates in oneness); it is precisely because it has its origin in freedom that it is really free.<sup>19</sup>

For Balthasar, the seminal figure in the Church's tradition for helping us to think about this issue is Thomas Aquinas. Thomas gave the doctrine of creation its most consistent systematic grounding with his formulation of the distinction between essence and existence. At the heart of this metaphysical distinction is the theological awareness of a fundamental distinction between God and the world. If God is not the world in a relationship of monistic identity, then the world's participation in the Divine act of Being must be mediated by finite creatures in some manner. The old Platonic-Plotinian concept of a direct participation in divinity by way of God's emanations is changed by Thomas into a mediated participation: God's imparting of the divine Being to creatures must not itself be hypostasized, must not be divinized, but must rather be viewed as a genuine creation of finite being out of the heart of the divine essence in such a manner that finite being remains just that – finite and non-divine in itself. 'Thomas,' according to Balthasar, 'is opposed to the hypostatization of the "emanations" (being-in-itself, life-in-itself etc.) and understands them as a single divine cause.'<sup>20</sup> If God's emanation of Being to the world was hypostasized, then we would be right back to a metaphysics of identity, and this is unacceptable to Christian philosophy and theology.

However, Thomas does speak of God emanating Being in a certain sense. The creature is not simply there in a kind of raw independence, utterly cut-off from any connection with the divine Being. All essences, insofar as they have progressed beyond a merely formal possibility as a concept or idea, must be truly real and therefore have the act of existence as a constitutive principle.<sup>21</sup> However, this participation in God's Being must not, as we have seen, be conceived of as a direct participation. This mediating level of Being which God emanates must be a level

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 193.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 230.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume IV: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, John Saward, Rowan Williams (trans), San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989, p. 401. Henceforth cited as GL IV.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 401–2.

of *non-subsisting* infinite Being which is the Being that each finite essence has as its own proper act of existence.<sup>22</sup> However, if the being of the world-totality is not subsistent Being as such but only its likeness, then how can we say that it is real? How does it achieve more than a purely formal actuality? It does so only in, through and with its concretization in finite essences. However, it is not reducible to these essences as such, for then we would have to assert that each finite essence was a sufficient explanation for its own existence. No single essence, or even for that matter all combined finite essences, can ever exhaust the infinite capacity of non-subsistent Being for expression. No finite essence can ever exhaust the infinite possibilities of Being. Therefore each finite thing possesses what it can never exhaust, and participates in what it cannot grasp, totally as its own. Infinite, non-subsisting Being is therefore 'that in which all communicate ... It is that which embraces all things, and cannot be exhausted by any number of natures but on the contrary can be participated in more and more in an infinite way.'<sup>23</sup> Thus infinite non-subsistent Being transcends the individual finite thing even though such Being, because it is non-subsisting, is suspended between the Being of God (upon which it is completely dependent for actuality) and the individual finite thing (without which it would never reach subsistence). There is therefore a real ontological distinction to be made between finite essences as such, and their act of existence, even though the latter only achieves actuality in the finite concretization. Balthasar uses traditional philosophical language here and refers to this Thomistic distinction as the 'Ontological difference'. He summarizes Thomas as follows:

Everything is put in a new light by the fact that the doctrine of the transcendentals is interpreted in the perspective of Thomas's major creative achievement – his definition of *esse* and its relation to essences. ... Thomas sees *esse* as the non-subsistent fullness and perfection of all reality and as the supreme 'likeness of divine goodness,' and so God can no longer in any way be regarded as the being of things, except in the sense that he is their efficient, exemplary and final cause. Thus in a new and much more radical way God is placed over and above all cosmic being, ...: he is indeed 'the Wholly Other'.<sup>24</sup>

Two related mistakes must be avoided. First, although essence and existence are distinct, existence is not added to essence like an extrinsic accident. Existence inheres in its essential determination as the most interior act of the finite thing. The second mistake is to picture non-subsisting infinite Being as a kind of ocean of potency which is then actualized by being fragmented into various parts by essences. Indeed, for Thomas, essence is a potency that awaits actualization in the act of existence. Moreover, as Balthasar points out, 'because *esse* does not subsist,

<sup>22</sup> We cannot go into more detail here concerning the manner in which Thomas holds creation as a kind of emanation of God that is not conceived of Platonically/pantheistically. The issues involved concern detailed dissections of trinitarian and Christological theology that would take us too far afield. For a more complete treatment of the topic see: Simon Oliver, 'Motion According to Aquinas and Newton', pp. 172ff.

<sup>23</sup> *GL IV*, p. 402.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 393–4.

it cannot even be said to release natures from itself as its possibilities; it is only in them that it comes to standing and subsistence.<sup>25</sup> For Balthasar, therefore, the God-world distinction, which initially de-essentializes and de-divinizes the cosmos, creates a space for the existence of finite creatures such that they possess an inner integrity, an individual subsistence vis-à-vis God that now allows us to affirm that such finite existents are made in the image and likeness of God in a much more radical way: they are now truly real in their own right and thus reflect something of the divine realness. Balthasar captures the sentiment of this concept in the following poetic meditation:

We are not God. ... We step back into distance. Love is found only in distance, unity only in difference. God himself is unity in Spirit only in the distinction of Father and Son. That we stand over against you and are receptive mirrors is in us the seal of your authorship. We are like you in not being you.<sup>26</sup>

What Balthasar means when he says that God is so totally the 'Wholly Other' that he is in fact the 'non-other' now comes into sharper focus. There is now an intimacy between God and creature that is based on an entirely different principle than that of a simple identity. Since the act of existing is the Divine act as such, the truly real existence of finite creatures is the greatest gift that Divinity can bestow; and this positing of finite existents is accomplished in a manner which neither diminishes the Divine unicity nor fragments Being into a variety of different modalities.<sup>27</sup>

This approach also preserves us from falling into what Balthasar considers the two most common metaphysical errors: the reductive analysis of being from either a rationalistic or an essentialist perspective. Both of these approaches end by destroying the integrity of finitude in one fashion or another. Rationalistic approaches, by turning Being into a purely formal concept, a limit concept or ground of possibility for the transcendence of knowledge, ironically end by destroying the essential orientation of finitude towards a real transcendence that is, at the same time, its most intimate possession. This destruction of real transcendence destroys any concept of Being as beautiful, as touched by glory, and leads inevitably to the positivism of modern science and the destruction of all real metaphysics. The end result is that finitude itself loses its integrity as a participation in transcendent Being and becomes a purely mechanistic reality, just one more faceless bit of matter in the great dance of reductionist randomness.

The second approach – the essentialist – almost always ends in a form of pantheism and/or philosophical idealism. However, idealistic pantheism destroys the integrity of finitude by reducing all finite existents to mere epiphenomenal

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 403.

<sup>26</sup> Balthasar, *The Heart of the World*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979 216–17.

<sup>27</sup> *GL IV*, p. 404. Balthasar states: '[it] is not to be understood as the disintegration or diminution (on the part of the creature) of God's being and unicity ... and the essences of things must not appear as simply the fragmentation of reality, in a negative sense, but must be seen positively as posited and determined by God's omnipotent freedom and therefore are grounded in the unique love of God.'

appearances of an overarching cosmic One. Such approaches also destroy the truly infinite nature of God by tying him too closely to the cosmos. Thus the divine personhood and glory, viewed as a dialogical/covenantal category, loses its theological purchase and human life degenerates into a mere mimesis of cosmic harmony.<sup>28</sup> It makes little difference whether such mimesis is conceived along theological, philosophical or artistic/aesthetic lines. The end result is the same: God and world conflate into a single cosmic harmony that destroys the Otherness of God and reduces the importance of the dialogical, and therefore, dramatic, quality in the God-world relationship. Thus only the Christian doctrine of creation preserves the integrity of finitude:

The de-essentializing of reality, as demanded by Heidegger and as achieved by Thomas, is an extension within philosophy of the illumination by biblical Revelation of the idea of God as creative principle. When God, in his knowing and omnipotent love, is seen as freely choosing to create, there can be no question of a restrictive fragmentation of being into finite essences. *Esse* can be suspended without confusion or limitation ... before the free God and only thus become the allusive likeness of the divine goodness. ... Thus and only thus is the creature liberated in the presence of God and in relation to God and can aspire with all its powers towards God and love him without having to comply with the perverse demand that it deny itself in its finite essence. ... The metaphysics of Thomas is thus the philosophical reflection of the free glory of the living God of the Bible, and in this way the interior completion of ancient (and thus human) philosophy. It is a celebration of the reality of the real.<sup>29</sup>

Thus the Christian awareness of the distinction between God and world and the further distinction between essence and existence opens up two mutually conditioning affirmations. The first affirmation is the full acceptance of the integrity of finite reality precisely as a true reality in its own right. The second affirmation is the act of wonder at the fact that anything exists at all as our primal experience of Being, and therefore as the philosophical attitude as such. Both of these affirmations are interrelated. Our affirmation of the integrity of finitude opens up the category of the world *as world* for legitimate philosophical and theological inquiry. The fundamental structures of finite being become the primary focus of our attention, since non-subsistent Being can only be apprehended through an antecedent awareness of the finite objects of our perception. Thus the fundamental question of existence is not 'why am I here?' or even, 'who am I?' but rather 'what kind of place is this?' i.e. 'where am I?'.<sup>30</sup> Our primal wonder at Being (the philosophical act as such) must be analysed in our relationship to that world, in our relationship to the realm of the finite. Our fundamental awe over the fact of existence as such is not an abstraction; it is concretised in our experience of an actual world in all of its existential integrity. Thus even though our primal wonder at existence as such has a kind of formal philosophical priority over our philosophical affirmation of the truly real nature of finite existents, the former is nevertheless only known and actualized

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp. 405–6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. pp. 406–7.

<sup>30</sup> *GL V*, p. 616.

in our experience through the latter. Our analysis of these dual philosophical affirmations must therefore begin in a study of how Balthasar unpacks our experience of existing as an individual in a world that exists antecedent to our own coming to be.

When we analyse our relationship to the world of finite being, we find what Balthasar refers to as a 'fourfold distinction' within our primal experience of Being.<sup>31</sup> The goal of this analysis of the fourfold distinction is twofold; first, to show that the source of our wonder at the act of existence is not a romanticizing subjectivity but an enrapturing created by Being itself; that Being as such causes wonder because it inherently evokes it,<sup>32</sup> second, to show that the only final explanation for our primal experience of Being as enrapturing is that we experience ourselves as being addressed by an infinite subjectivity which must transcend the boundaries of this world.<sup>33</sup> This brings us to the very limits of philosophy and points us towards a theological fulfilment in Revelation; a fulfillment which, in its trinitarian dimensions, will finally provide us with a theological grounding within God for the biblical affirmation of the distinction between God and the world. In short, Balthasar now offers us a phenomenology of human self-possession as a further explanation of the ontological difference. This phenomenological analysis deepens Thomas' original insight by grounding it in the dynamic relationship between human and divine freedom, which in turn opens the way for a Christological and trinitarian fulfilment. We must therefore begin with Balthasar's analysis of our awareness of existing as a being among beings, i.e. of existing as part of a world of beings, before we can proceed to an analysis of how his theology of God grounds the God-world relation.

## *2. The Fourfold Distinction*

The first distinction that Balthasar recognizes in our apprehension of Being, as we have seen, is the absolutely primal act of wonder or astonishment over the fact that 'I find myself within the realm of a world and in the boundless community of other existent beings.'<sup>34</sup> Nothing in this world of finite existents is a sufficient explanation for my self-awareness of being able to view the world as a totality. Biologically I am the product of a chance hit, but the world of chance does not seem capable of the intentionality required to bring forth my unique, personal subjectivity. I may know on a purely statistical level that my physiological existence is the product of a seemingly random coming together of one sperm and one egg out of the millions of other sperm and eggs. Nevertheless, I do not experience my personal existence as purely random; I have a sense of uniqueness and irreplaceability that does not

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 615.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. pp. 614–15. Balthasar states: 'It is not only astonishing that an existent being can wonder at Being in its own distinction from Being, but also that Being as such by itself to the very end "causes wonder", behaving as something to be wondered at, something striking and worthy of wonder.'

<sup>33</sup> *TD II*, p. 240.

<sup>34</sup> *GL V*, p. 615.

seem totally explained through a reduction of my existence to pure happenstance. However, despite this awareness of the non-random nature of my selfhood, I must nevertheless confront the fact that an infinite number of others could just as well have occupied this particular space in the universe that I occupy. I do not appear to be an indispensable part of some larger necessary web of events and existents. Thus there is an awareness of having been allowed in which begins in infancy; the child's entire subjective world is completely filled with the image of the other: the smile of the mother awakens in the child a sense of being welcomed in that forms the foundation for all later subjective development of the individual ego.<sup>35</sup> The priority of the other in the formation of one's self-consciousness is therefore established in the very infancy of life and this experience of being admitted arouses a sense of play at the love and grace of it all.

The loving nature of this admittance is of primary importance. Do I have a right to be here and am I therefore a welcome participant, or have I simply been allowed in and therefore stand before the world as a beggar seeking for my sense of self-worth through pleasing that which allows me to be here? Furthermore, says Balthasar, my right to be here must not be viewed along mechanistic lines. It is a metaphysical right. I can lay no claim to it as in a move to grab and to hold on to power. Being does not empower me in this worldly sense. My sense of belonging here by some kind of right is not a claim made vis-à-vis the world. For I am equally aware that the world did not intend me, i.e., the world is not what invites me in but, rather, simply the place in which I find myself. I seem to be invited in by a loving 'thou', a perception that begins with the parent-child relationship, so my right to participate in the world is tied to my right to give myself in the interpersonal participation between two people we call love. The self, therefore, in its relation to the ground of existence, experiences its existence as both grace and necessity. This definition of the self as essentially oriented to an encounter with the otherness of the world is central to Balthasar's thinking. The self, according to Balthasar, 'is, in so far as it is allowed to take part as an object of love. Existence is both glorious and a matter of course.'<sup>36</sup> We are thrown into existence and yet find it curiously non-fatalistic.

The second distinction flows out of the first. The self recognizes that it is simply one existent among others, and therefore it understands that all finite existents most likely share the same basic relationship to Being. Balthasar goes on to reach the following conclusion: 'It evidently follows from this that, although all existents partake in Being, yet – to whatever extent we were to multiply them – they never exhaust it nor even, as it were, "broach" it.'<sup>37</sup> Thus all finite existents take on the appearance of being both radically contingent ('I need not have existed') and yet mysteriously willed ('I am a subjective spirit who has been "invited in"). But invited in by whom? The world as a whole is also contingent. Therefore my primal experience is of participation in a world of radical contingency that seems to have its ontological origin somewhere outside its own totality. Thus my primal

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. pp. 615–6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 616.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 618.



metaphysical astonishment at Being is not of an ocean of Being in which finite existents are swimming. My apprehension of the Being of the world taken as a whole is precisely experienced in its indissoluble unity with the finite existent objects of that world. Therefore I do not perceive myself as being willed by the Being of the world as a whole, as if I can have some direct experience of Being as such. I can apprehend the Being of the world, but only in its indissoluble identity with beings. It thus appears to me as *non-subsisting* in itself. Balthasar states it as follows:

What this means, once again, is that I cannot appease my primal and overpowering wonder at the fact that 'something is' through gazing at Being, in which those things participate and thus exist. Rather, my wonder is directed at both sides of the Ontological Difference, ... for the fact that an existent can only become actual through participation in the act of Being points to the complementary antithesis that the fullness of Being attains actuality only in the existent; but the fact that (Heideggerian) Being can only be interpreted within existence (Spirit) points to the complementary antithesis that existence (Spirit) grasps the dependence of Being upon beings, and thus its non-substantiality.<sup>38</sup>

The third distinction is a simple inference from the second: if the Being of the world is non-subsisting apart from finite entities, then it follows that the essential forms which comprise the world cannot be generated by non-subsisting Being.<sup>39</sup> In other words, if the distinction between essence and existence ultimately rests on an affirmation of the reality of things precisely in their essential determinations, then they are not emanations of a univocal Being. The Being of the world is not responsible for the finite existents. To ascribe such causation to Being is to grant it subsistence – an affirmation which leads directly back to the pantheistic philosophies of identity which ultimately undercut my experience of having been addressed by a 'thou'. However, to see Being as non-subsistent also carries with it a certain danger, since the world is de-divinized and finite existents are then left to stand on their own subsistence. This demystification of worldly Being (and therefore of beings) leaves us with two basic existential options. The first option is to be tempted to see the nothingness of Being as non-being and therefore to lose our metaphysical powers of seeing altogether (as in much of post-modern philosophy). The nihilism that this spawns can darken entire epochs and lead to despising the world and its murkiness.<sup>40</sup> The second option is the one chosen by classical Western metaphysics: 'a homage to Being which lets Being in its totality be.'<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 619.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Balthasar states: 'Precisely by virtue of this dependence ... of Being upon its explication in the existent ... it is impossible to attribute to Being the responsibility for the essential forms of entities in the world.'

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. pp. 623–4. Balthasar states: 'Too much is demanded of the [world] in this case when its own essential light is supposed to suffice for Being as a whole and, since this excessive demand lies clear to view, the forced optimism of the forced worldliness turns perpetually into nihilistic tragedy. The injustice of the world is directly transferred to Being as a whole, which thus itself appears unjust.' (624).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 623.



This is as far as classical metaphysics can take us, for the ancients were not able to develop a concept of the cosmos that was more than a reduction to some concept of univocal Being. The next step was the development of the Christian doctrine of creation, which completes and transcends our primal astonishment at Being. This is the 'fourth distinction'. This final distinction inserts itself into the fissure created by the first three distinctions; the latter all point towards an Absolute freedom that neither the Being of the world can possess (since it is non-subsistent), nor the finite existent entity since 'it always finds itself as already constituted in its own essentiality'.<sup>42</sup> Thus the distinction between essence and existence shows us that neither of these mutually dependent poles is a sufficient ground for the freedom that undergirds the glory of Being and points beyond the ontological difference toward the distinction between God and the world. Furthermore, now we realize that only an Absolute Freedom which transcends the world can preserve the integrity of both non-subsistent Being and the finite existent. First, the glory of worldly Being is now preserved in a manner that does not attribute to it characteristics which it cannot sustain, e.g. intentionality and subsistence. Second, finite beings are preserved from being swallowed up in an all-encompassing act generated by worldly Being (an act that has the net effect of robbing finitude of its integrity). So the ontological difference ends by pointing us back towards a grounding unity. Balthasar states:

If the Ontological Difference must already, as bifurcation, be referred back to a *unicum* ... then it will be secured as the authentic 'site of glory in metaphysics' in its deepest affirmation of Being ... and thus of grace within its open-ended sway, in which each 'pole' has to seek and find its 'salvation' in the other pole: Being arrives at itself as subsistence only within the entity and the entity arrives at its actuality ... only within its participation in Being.<sup>43</sup>

But the Absolute Freedom that grounds the ontological difference must itself be an act characterized by the paradoxical coincidence of both fullness and poverty. It is fullness because it is, by definition, the complete antithesis of nothingness and pure Being as such. However, it is also poverty because, as Balthasar puts it, 'it does not need, holding on to itself, to enclose itself in the casing of an entity. ... Rather, fullness as such is pure power ... from whose potency ... all that is potential ... proceeds as rich abundance, which is thus pure freedom ... pure gift and love'.<sup>44</sup> We are now in the metaphysical anteroom to the Christian doctrine of creation and all that it entails. For just as we saw in the first distinction that human subjectivity is constituted through its relation to the other, to a world, we now see that Absolute Freedom is characterized by a fundamental *ek-stasis* that gives from its abundance in an *excessus* of Being. The finite subject does not first possess itself in a grasping manner and only then reach out to the other; the subject is constituted precisely in this turning towards the other; our primal experience as subjects is first that of being a participant in a world, and only second as constituting that world for myself through a deliberate act of self-conscious assertion of my own identity.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 625.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 626.

Likewise, God's nature is not characterized first and foremost as a kind of infinite divine monad that then, in a second movement of the divine nature, moves out from this essentially monological condition into an internal trinitarian dialogue and the *ek-stasis* of the act of creation.<sup>45</sup> God's nature is characterized through and through by the ecstasy of an *excessus* born out of an infinite freedom. Thus, according to Balhasar, in God an infinite *excessus* and an infinite self-possession coincide as the primal act of the divine existence. God's self-possession is precisely the same as God's self-dispossession.

We are now at the outer limits of metaphysical speculation and can go either in one of two directions: we can halt at the ontological difference and declare as mystery the exact nature of its ultimate ground (as Heidegger does, leaving worldly Being forever suspended in limbo), or we can remain open to the possibility that metaphysical speculation on the Absolute Freedom that grounds the ontological difference can be transcended and fulfilled in Divine Revelation.<sup>46</sup> The problem with the first option is that, once chosen, one does not simply freeze at a particular stage of metaphysical speculation; the refusal to go beyond the ontological difference into an analysis of Absolute Freedom leads in the end to the destruction of metaphysics. The tensions created and the questions left unresolved are decisive and cannot be ignored. One either goes forward, backward or abandons the project altogether. But once one does posit the reality of such an Absolute Freedom, then new questions emerge which seek resolution in a heuristic synthesis beyond the scope of metaphysics as such.

We have already touched upon some of these questions. For example, what do we mean when we say that Absolute Freedom is self-possession through an *ek-stasis* which overflows by way of such excess into self-dispossession? Both Plato and Plotinus touched upon this question in their discussion of the self-diffusion of the One or the Good, and yet they never reached a clear-cut distinction between God and world that would allow them to develop a consistent concept of the world as *creation* rather than as an extension or effusion of the divine essence as such. Balhasar summarizes this point as follows:

This mystery of the streaming self-illumination of Being, which was glimpsed by Plato and Plotinus and which alone explains the possibility of a world (that is, the paradoxical existence 'alongside' Infinite Being which fills all things and which stands in need of none), attains its transparency only when, from the sphere of the biblical Revelation, absolute freedom (as the spirituality and personality of God) shines in: but not in such a way that the personal God encounters man as one existent marked off from another existent, ... but rather in such a way that the personal and free depths of self-giving absolute Being first bring the mystery of creation ... into the light. God is the Wholly Other only as the ... Not-Other.<sup>47</sup>

Thus the question which was raised at the beginning of this section must be raised again: How is the God-world distinction grounded without falling into

<sup>45</sup> *TD II*, p. 255.

<sup>46</sup> *GL V*, pp. 625–8.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 626.

mythological dualism, and how is this distinction related to the description of God as an infinite *excessus*? As we can now begin to see, Balthasar attempts to recapture the glory of Being by showing how the metaphysical concept of God, developed in the preceding pages, is fulfilled and secured in the Revelation of Trinitarian love. Thus the Christian, through the related doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation, is heir to a metaphysics of love and becomes the real guardian of the glory of Being.<sup>48</sup> That is not to say that we can deduce the doctrine of the Trinity from all our foregoing discussions; nothing is more antithetical to Balthasar's theology than the idea that we can deduce Revelation from historical/philosophical antecedents. However, 'grace builds on nature,' and the entire history of metaphysical speculation creates a form or type which Revelation fulfils, superabundantly and supereminently, as the antitype. It is the very incompleteness and ambiguity of the metaphysical tradition that throws Revelation into sharper relief in its mode as fulfilment.

### *C. Trinitarian Metaphysics of Love*<sup>49</sup>

The ontological difference opened philosophy to the possibility of an Absolute Freedom that is underived and utterly sovereign. Furthermore, this freedom, precisely as sovereign freedom, must also be infinite self-possession. Thus God's nature can be characterized as the coincidence of infinite Being and infinite self-possession. This fact leads us away from the dual problems of necessity and contingency with regard to God's free act of self-possession and points us in the direction of a proper understanding of the trinitarian relations.<sup>50</sup> First, if God *is* infinite Being *as* infinite freedom and self-possession, then it is incorrect to assert that God somehow transforms an antecedent need to exist into his self-possession. God's self-possession belongs to his nature eternally, and as such is in no way the end result of some kind of underlying need that the self-possession fulfils. Here we must not confuse the idea that God is a necessary being with the idea that God's self-possession is itself the end result of some antecedent compulsion of some sort. Second, since this self-possession is infinite, it is complete and total and thus excludes that element of capriciousness which nominalistic interpretations of the divine freedom frequently fall into, e.g. the idea that God, as Balthasar puts it, 'could primarily affirm something other than himself or could

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> No attempt will be made in what follows to analyse thoroughly Balthasar's trinitarian theology in all its theological implications. The current discussion is simply concerned with how Balthasar uses his development of the trinity to complete his discussion of metaphysics. Thus the specific problem that we will be focusing on is how he uses his doctrine of God to solve the philosophical problem created by the Bible's positing of a distinction between God and world: how we can call God 'thou' without falling into mythological dualism. For a more detailed analysis regarding many of the specific problems with Balthasar's trinitarian theology, e.g. the immutability of God and the dangers of tri-theism in such a strongly relational approach, see: Gerard F. O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>50</sup> *TD II*, pp. 255–6.

affirm himself otherwise or only partially.<sup>51</sup> This view presupposes an anthropomorphic and ultimately mythological view of God as a static and discretely enclosed nature with certain attributes such as absolute freedom and intelligence. This view misunderstands God's self-possession as something that happens subsequent to his essential determination as a subsisting set of personal relations.

It is precisely at this point that Revelation can now clarify the philosophical issues raised by shedding light on the nature of this Absolute Freedom as the coincidence of Being and self-possession. God is now seen, through Revelation, as so radically sovereign that he can choose to 'give himself away' in a surrender that is no mere addition to his nature but is constitutive of that nature as such. Thus the possibility opens up for an intra-divine self-giving that becomes the foundation for the Father's gift of the Godhead to the Son and for their mutual sharing of the same with the Spirit. God is thereby defined as an infinite self-giving, a limitless self-donation. Balthasar puts it as follows:

The fact that the absolute freedom of self-possession can understand itself, according to its absolute nature, as limitless self-giving – this is not the result of anything external to itself; yet it *is* the result of its own nature, so much so that apart from this self-giving it would not be itself.<sup>52</sup>

The Father is not first a self who needs to lose Himself in the Son in order to regain Himself. The Father is from all eternity the act of generating the Son. And the Son *is* from all eternity the act of allowing himself to be generated while the Spirit is 'always himself by understanding his "I" as the "We" of Father and Son.'<sup>53</sup> What opens up in the Trinitarian Revelation is an image of God's Being which is One without being univocal. There is a differentiation or a texture in the Divine Being that allows us to posit (analogously) a 'where' and a 'when' between the trinitarian relations. For Balthasar, 'If there is to be absolute freedom, it follows that, in what takes place between the divine "hypostases", there must be *areas of infinite freedom* that are *already there* and do not allow everything to be compressed into an airless unity and identity.'<sup>54</sup> Balthasar means by this that if we are to take God's self-possession as infinite self-donation seriously, then we must acknowledge that the relationality that this opens up is a real relationality, i.e. the freedom that is involved in the various reciprocal self-donations is real: 'Therefore, something like infinite "duration" and infinite "space" must be attributed to the acts of reciprocal love so that the life of the *communio*, of fellowship, can develop.'<sup>55</sup> What we have here is the complete coincidence of being and having, of fullness and giving away, of wealth and poverty. The trinitarian *hypostases* bear within their reciprocity both an infinite distance and opposition and, precisely because of the distance and opposition, an infinite intimacy and presence to one another. They all share the same Divine nature, the same Divine freedom, but not in a hoarding manner,

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 256.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 257.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

where they all share it in common with absolutely no differentiation. The divine nature, states Balthasar, 'is defined through and through by the modes of divine being. This nature is always both what is possessed and what is given away.'<sup>56</sup> In short, God's subsistence lies precisely in the fundamental trinitarian act of letting the other be in an infinite reciprocity between opposition and intimacy.

What all this points to is that there can be what we can only refer to as an exteriorization within God that coincides with God's infinite self-possession, i.e. with God's interiority. For Balthasar, the concept of God's interiority is just as much an analogical predication as is the notion of exteriorization. It is therefore illegitimate to state that the concept of God's pure self-possession philosophically requires us to posit an image of God's interiority that is similar to human interiority in a univocal manner. Why is it, asks Balthasar, that we rarely see warnings about the analogical nature of all language about God when we speak of God's immutability or self-possession as an Absolute Subject? We tend to view these divine characteristics in an unproblematical manner as univocal and self-explanatory simply because the language that expresses them is more apophatic than kataphatic. However, when it comes to positing a real relationality within God between distinct divine persons, all the cautionary flags concerning the avoidance of such potentially anthropomorphic language are raised. Balthasar argues, instead, that the concepts 'interiority' and 'exteriorization' take on an entirely new relationship and meaning when applied to God and thus do not lose their quality as analogical descriptions of the divine nature. Both these analogical predicates must be seen in their ultimate grounding in the biblical affirmation that 'God is love.' What this does to our concept of God is to transform it so that our primary analogy for God is not absolute power (no history of anthropomorphism here!) but rather one of absolute poverty and love.

Here it could be said that Balthasar anticipates somewhat the critique by feminist and liberationist theologians of the traditional theology of God, where the emphasis has always been on the immutability and the 'Oneness' of God as foundational (*de deo uno*), with the dialogical relations of the trinitarian persons (*de deo trino*) tacked on as a secondary consideration. This overly monarchical conception of God had the tendency of viewing the divine omnipotence and self-enclosed aseity as the primary attributes of the divine nature. The consequence of this was a tendency to view the gratuity of creation as a raw act of divine power and as something that did not have a real relation with God in any way. However, the degeneration of this concept in nominalism leads to a notion of gratuity that is closer to the realm of the arbitrary and capricious rather than as an act of love. Balthasar's approach prefers to ground the gratuity of creation in a deeper theological gratuity within the trinitarian relations themselves. Thus, while it is true that God did not need to create the world out of some inner necessity – as some exaggerated kenotic theologies imply – we cannot nevertheless go to the opposite extreme of saying that the creation remains theologically without ground in anything other than a raw act of divine whim. As the Thomist Norris Clarke points out, when speaking of the gratuity of creation we must be aware that when

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 258.

we are speaking of a being who is infinite love, the finite relation between freedom and necessity breaks down – showing how, once again, the analogical nature of our language for God needs to be applied to the traditional divine predicates just as much as more modern ones such as ‘relationality’ and ‘dialogue’. For Clarke, it is not at all outside the realm of possibility to posit that even though God did not need to create the world out of some necessity – in that sense God remains free – given God’s nature as loving personal relationality as such, it is nevertheless entirely fitting and appropriate for God to create; so much so in fact that Clarke even hints at the inevitability of God creating a world of some kind (although it need not be this *particular* world). Clarke states:

Given an infinitely good and loving personal being, it seems to me one can say it is *inevitable* that it will pour over in *some* way to share its goodness outside itself, though one cannot predict just how. This inevitability, or necessity if you will, is not an external compulsion or blind metaphysical force, but the very logic, the special logic of a loving nature, that it will spontaneously pour over to share its goodness in some way, if it can, with a spontaneity that is at once lucidly and consciously free, uncompelled by anything but love, yet inevitable, out of character for it not to happen. Thus in the case of God ... in a certain sense freedom and necessity come together in a transcendent synthesis, proper only to the nature of love.<sup>57</sup>

Thus the sovereignty of God manifests itself in self-abandonment rather than a holding on to a static and univocal nature. The world’s oppositional conception of poverty and wealth is transcended in a divine interiority that *is* an exteriorization in the other.<sup>58</sup> This exteriorization within God forms the ontological ground of possibility for the analogous exteriorization of a finite world, as well as for the exteriorization of God that we refer to as the Incarnation. Balthasar puts it as follows:

The exteriorization of God (in the Incarnation) has its ontic condition of possibility in the eternal exteriorization of God – that is, in his tripersonal self-gift. With that departure point, the created person too should no longer be described as subsisting in itself, but more profoundly ... as a ‘returning ... from exteriority to oneself’ and an ‘emergence from oneself as an interiority that gives itself in self-expression’. The categories of ‘poverty’ and ‘wealth’ become dialectical.<sup>59</sup>

This concept of personhood, developed primarily to describe the relational hypostases within the Trinity and now applied analogously to spiritual creatures, allows us to overcome the autonomy/heteronomy impasse in our concept of freedom. It is a dialogical ‘letting be’ that fulfils our deepest interiority, our most intimate subjectivity. In the relationship between finite and infinite freedom there is no danger, therefore, of the creature being swallowed up in a divine freedom conceived of as existing over and against finite freedom, like a master to a slave.

<sup>57</sup> W. Norris Clarke, S.J. *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being – God – Person*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994, 224.

<sup>58</sup> Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark LTD, 1990 p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

If human freedom is made in the image and likeness of this relational, Trinitarian God, then it can only come to itself by going out of itself and drawing close to the divine freedom in a dialogical relationship of love. 'It can only be what it is,' states Balthasar, 'by getting in tune with the (Trinitarian) law of absolute freedom (of self-surrender): and this law is not foreign to it – for after all it is the law of absolute Being – but most authentically its own.'<sup>60</sup> And when this freedom opens itself to the creature, giving it a glimpse of its profound abysses, pouring itself out in the unfathomable paradox of Incarnation, Cross, and Resurrection, then the negative incomprehensibility of God in natural theology and metaphysics turns into the positive incomprehensibility of Revelation in the *excessus* of God's love in Christ. The former is primarily a negation of the ability of all instrumental concepts to contain God; the latter is the incomprehensibility that comes from being flooded and overwhelmed by a light so bright that it blinds. The former is dialectical, the latter is dialogical.<sup>61</sup>

It is within this blinding light of Revelation that we are able to understand how the world can be without adding to or existing alongside the infinite. It is central to Balthasar's development of the realness of the Trinitarian relations that we can say that there exists within God something for which our creaturely experience of spatiality and duration are analogies. The exteriorization of the interiority of the Trinitarian hypostases demands that we posit the event-like quality of these relations without, for all that, diluting the immutability or unicity of God. God does not become, nor is God many, even though the becoming of creatures in their relations with worldly others is an image and likeness of the event-like quality of the Trinitarian relations.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, given this assertion we can now posit the where and when of creation within God. The world finds its place and its time in the distance and duration within the trinitarian relations. There is an intra-trinitarian spaciousness that makes room for the world by incorporating it into the intra-divine relations in a manner which does not simply divinize the world in a univocal sense: i.e. the world does not simply blend into God and become moments within the Trinitarian relations. Neither, however, should this incorporating of the world into God be conceived of in terms of a contracting of God in order to create a space for the finite within God; that would be as anthropomorphic as the former view is overly monistic/philosophic. God does not need to create a void within the divine self in order to locate creation there. One cannot create a void since the void is by definition nothing, sheer non-being.<sup>63</sup> Since the trinitarian relations are

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<sup>60</sup> *TD II*, p. 259.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p. 260. For an excellent treatment of Balthasar's approach to apophatic theology, see: Raymond Gawronski, SJ, *Word and Silence: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter between East and West*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark: 1995.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p. 261.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 262 ff. It should be made clear that Balthasar is not simply replacing theo-ontological categories for personalistic categories. Infinite Being and infinite self-possession coincide and therefore Being *as* infinite self-possession is formally primary to a more traditional substance ontology. As we have seen, God as a subsistent unity was thus given a kind of formal priority over the concept of God's Being as infinite exteriorizing self-possession. Joseph Ratzinger makes the same point discussing the fact that Aquinas did not attend sufficiently to the full



characterized in their freedom by an infinite letting be of the other, the opposition within the Trinity is an opposition of infinite love and self-donation. Therefore there is no need for a retreat or a resignation within God in order to let the others 'be'. 'For that reason,' states Balthasar, 'God himself does not need to retreat either; he does not need to "close in on himself", he needs no "kenosis" when causing the world to exist within himself.'<sup>64</sup> The image of a God choosing to become less than he is in order to create an area of non-being where the world can now fit seems, superficially, to square nicely with Balthasar's own version of the kenotic view of God as the coincidence of wealth and poverty. Balthasar himself makes frequent use of kenotic concepts in his development of the infinite self-dispossession that characterizes the Trinitarian relations. However, Balthasar would view the notion that God created a void within himself in order to give up kenotically some of his own Being as an overly anthropomorphic development of the divine kenosis that ultimately destroys God's infinity and begs the essential question at the heart of the doctrine of the analogy of Being.<sup>65</sup> Balthasar summarizes this line of thought as follows:

The 'not' which characterizes the creature – it is 'not' God and cannot exist of itself – is by no means identical with the 'not' found within the Godhead. However, the latter constitutes the deepest reason why the creaturely 'not' does not cause the analogy of being between creature and God to break down. The infinite distance between the world and God is grounded in the other, prototypical distance between God and God.<sup>66</sup>

We are able to call God 'other' precisely because of the distance and relationality within God himself. Our otherness from God, however, must not be conceived mythologically as a dualistic opposition of two completely distinct realms, the human realm of mortality and contingency and the divine realm of immortality and glory. The otherness of creation is grounded within the spaciousness of the Trinitarian relations in such a way that the integrity of the world as existing in its own right is preserved. But it is grounded in such a way that it is taken up into the divine life itself and thereby constituted as within God (in the sense of participating in the divine life) without simply being

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implications of the Christian concept of person as this had been developed in the debates over Christology and Trinitarian theology: 'The undivided sway of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality.' *Introduction to Christianity*, 132.

<sup>64</sup> *TD II*, p. 262.

<sup>65</sup> *Mysterium Paschale*, pp. 28–9. Balthasar makes the following point with regard to his own kenotic view of trinitarian self-donation: 'This [kenosis] does not mean, however, that God's essence becomes itself (univocally) "kenotic", such that a single concept could include both the divine foundation of the possibility of Kenosis and the Kenosis itself. It is here that many of the mistakes of the modern kenoticists arise. What it does mean ... is that the divine "power" is so ordered that it can make room for a possible self-exteriorization, like that found in the Incarnation and the Cross, and can maintain this exteriorization even to the utmost point. As between the form of God and the form of a servant there reigns, in the identity of the Person involved, an analogy of natures.'

<sup>66</sup> *TD II*, p. 266.



reduced (mythologically) to a part of God or (philosophically) to a univocal emanation of the divine Being. We are only able to affirm this if we feel ourselves addressed by God as a 'thou' in such a way that this address comes from the inner nature of the Trinitarian divine life itself. We are thus taken up into God's oneness because this oneness of God has room for such otherness within itself. However, it must also be mentioned by way of concluding this section that the creaturely adoption into the divine life is an act of grace and not the product of any abstract law or principle of otherness that somehow makes it theologically necessary for God to seek out a relationship with finite others. As Balthasar puts it: 'God in himself is no one else's "other": he is the all-embracing One. ... The finite can only dare to call it "Thou" if in doing so it is answering to a "thou" that comes addressed to itself from the inner nature of the Absolute – from the divine Trinity.'<sup>67</sup>

#### *D. Christ: The Concrete Universal*

The world's place within God, then, has its ground of possibility in more than a generic and abstract concept of otherness within God. The world finds its place most appropriately, according to Balthasar, within the Son. Just as the Son is completely dependent on the Father for the communication of his Godhead, so too the world, in an analogical sense to this trinitarian dependence of the Son on the Father, is totally dependent upon the divine freedom for its reality. Thus both the Son and the world are characterized by an active passivity, by a dependence which is the ground for their most intimate independence. The Son is divinity in the mode of a passive receptivity who allows himself to draw his entire existence, his entire personhood, from the Father's act of self-donation. There is thus a double kenosis at work here. The Father is, from all eternity, nothing more than the act of generating the Son in self-donation, while the Son is nothing more than the act of letting oneself be generated.<sup>68</sup> Hence, the Son is the ground of possibility for all extra-divine 'allowing oneself to be.' The coming to be of the creaturely realm is therefore the finite analogue of the intratrinitarian act of begetting the Son. So creation does not find its place within the trinity in a univocal manner; there is a theologically legitimate sense in which we can say that creation finds its place most fittingly within the Son. However, it must be emphasized that the world, precisely because of its location within the Son, is for that very reason located within the totality of the Godhead. As Balthasar puts it: 'Being totally dependent on divine freedom, the world can receive its possibility and reality nowhere else but in the eternal Son, who eternally owes his divine being to the Father's generosity. ... We must add immediately that the world's location in the Son directly implies its location in the totality of the Godhead.'<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 287.

<sup>68</sup> We are not concerned here with developing the role of the Holy Spirit. The current emphasis is on the location of the world within the Godhead through the Son. That is not to imply that the role of the Spirit can be so easily bracketed from that of the Father and the Son. For now, it must simply be shown how Balthasar develops his idea of the Son as the paradigm for creation.

<sup>69</sup> *TD II*, pp. 261–2.

The locating of the world within the Son has the further implication, according to Balthasar, that it is through the Son that God creates. The Son, precisely as the infinite, intratrinitarian act of being the Father's perfectly begotten image, is therefore the ground of possibility for more than the abstract concept of 'allowing oneself to be.' The Son is also the ground of possibility for all possible creaturely images of the divine and is therefore the very paradigm for creation. The Son contains within his act of 'being the Father's perfectly begotten image' all possible images of the Father. Creation can therefore be seen as the Father's gift to the Son and it is the task of the Son, through the unifying agency of the Spirit, to take up the creation and present it back to the Father in that day when God will be All in All.<sup>70</sup>

The ultimate foundation for such a taking up of the world into God without becoming ontologically confused with God is the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ. Here we see the true significance of the Chalcedonian insistence upon the united but unconfused state of the two natures in Christ. Balthasar uses this Chalcedonian formula to develop his own unique approach to the analogy of Being. Through the incarnational union of the divine Son and the created world for which he is the paradigm, Christ becomes and *is* the 'concrete analogy of being.'<sup>71</sup> Balthasar is attempting here to overcome the confrontation between the analogy of being (with a neutral concept of being) and the analogy of faith (with its lack of a natural theology). The former runs the risk of positing a neutral concept of Being within which both God and the world share a space (thus domesticating and in a sense reifying God), while the latter creates a dichotomy between God and his creation that can lead to a variety of destructive dualisms. Balthasar puts it as follows:

We can speak of the *analogia entis* here, insofar as this relationship is distinguished from a pantheism or theopanism which dissolves God. ... On the other side, it must be distinguished from every form of pure dualism, which either isolates God's divinity from the world and closes it in on itself (deism) or isolates the world's secularity from God (resulting in sin being seen as a fall from the divine realm, secularism and the God-is-dead theology). The possibility of distinguishing between God – who 'is all' ... and thus needs nothing – and a world of finite beings who need God remains the fundamental mystery.<sup>72</sup>

However, if Christ is the concrete analogy of being, then two mutually conditioning principles can be held: 1) that creation does participate in some sense in

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Balthasar states: 'If the Son is the Father's eternal Word, the world in its totality is created by this Word (Jn 1:3), not only instrumentally but in the sense that the Word is the world's pattern and hence its goal. "Through him" also means "in him" and "for him" (Col. 1:16). ... The world can be thought of as the gift of the Father (who is both Begetter and Creator) to the Son; ... thus the Son takes this gift – just as he takes the gift of Godhead – as an opportunity to thank and glorify the Father. Having brought the world to its fulfilment, he will lay the entire kingdom at His feet, so that God (the Father) may be all in all; ... as for the Spirit, he is given the world by both: he is eternally the reciprocal glorification of Father and Son, but now he can implement it in and through the creation.'

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 267.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. pp. 118–19.

the act of Being and is therefore analogous to God's act of existence; and 2) that this analogy is based on a divine initiative where God Himself bridges the gap between creation and Himself through the Son's free obedience in the Incarnation. This latter point is central to Balthasar's entire approach. The initiative in bridging the gap is God's, and therefore any notion of the analogy of being that does not take into account the world's existence within the kenoses of the trinitarian God is doomed to fall back into one of the false polarities. Any approach to the analogy of being which takes as its methodological point of departure a world which is conceived of as pure nature is doomed eventually to see the God-world relationship in either monistic or dualistic terms. The tension created between God and world in such a scenario lends itself to an inevitable reorientation into a philosophy of identity or it will fall back into mythic or secularistic dualisms. A doctrine of creation that emphasizes the creating act of God as a kenotic descent (based on the intratrinitarian kenoses as its ground of possibility) will be able to affirm that there is an analogy between God and the world that has its foundation in the kenosis of the Incarnation. Christ, as the concrete analogy of Being, opens up within his person a new synthesis between the monistic and dualistic options. Contrary to Barth, it is not idolatry to see in the analogy of Being a point of contact between the divine and human realms because it is now clear, in the light of Revelation, that the world was made from the beginning for Christ and thus finds its true center in him.<sup>73</sup>

Thus what is being elevated in the analogy of Being is not some worldly form (viewed as 'alien' to God) that obscures God's Revelation, but a world that was made from the beginning with this very elevation in view. The analogy of being therefore has a radically christocentric orientation that satisfies the demands of the *analogia fidei* that the world, seen as the *major dissimilitudo*, should never be made to bear a burden which stretches it to the breaking point and beyond. Only God can reveal God. But it must never be forgotten that this creation is radically God's creation and that given its fundamental orientation in its concrete modality towards God, it can reveal something of that inexpressible light. But it does so, Balthasar is quick to point out, precisely as that which conceals even as it reveals. Just as God's freedom is a coincidence of fullness and poverty, so too created Being reveals something of the divine act of existence precisely insofar as it possesses Being but can never fully grasp it in its totality and so must let the other existent

<sup>73</sup> It is of course unfair to saddle Barth with a naïve and uncritical rejection of the analogy of being, since he did undergo a significant evolution in his thinking on this subject. It is unfair to take his early intolerance for this doctrine as paradigmatic for his entire career. Balthasar, for example, points out that much of Barth's early views on the Catholic concept of the analogy of being took the development of analogy in the work of Eric Przywara as exemplary for all of Catholicism. According to Balthasar, this is problematical on two fronts. First, it assumes that there is such a thing as a monolithic Catholic development of the philosophical doctrine of analogy. Second, even assuming that the first assumption is true, it does not necessarily follow that Przywara is exemplary of this tradition. Thus even Barth came to soften his view on the analogy of being as he grew more aware of the Catholic tradition. For a more detailed analysis of Barth's development of the analogy of being see: Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992.

be in all its mysteriousness. Here it must be kept in mind that, for Balthasar, the analogy of Being is largely an analogy between two freedoms, the one infinite and the other finite; and both freedoms converge in the one figure of the God-man who reveals to us in human form the divine coincidence of self-possession and self-donation. This trinitarian pattern for Being is the ultimate foundation for the analogy of Being and it points to Christ as the locus where all human freedom can reach fulfilment. The more finite freedom lets go and allows itself to be transformed from within by God, the more it will be itself. Balthasar states:

The Son's hypostatic distinctness, since it is divine and unique, is what distinguishes each person founded thereon. And the more the person, in response to the Son's call, walks toward his protégé in the Son, the more unique he becomes. Here we can speak of 'exemplary identity' (G. Siewerth), which is mediated, living and indestructible, by the analogy of Creator and creature. ... Freedom is communion. Communion is the opening up of ever new and unimaginable realms of freedom and dramatic plot; but they are all kept together in the unifying prototype, which is *universalissimum* because it is *concretissimum*.<sup>74</sup>

Christ as the concrete analogy of being reminds us that the inner orientation of finite existence is never, in the concrete, an orientation towards a self-enclosed subsistence: 'our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.' Just as the *analogia fidei* must acknowledge that creation itself can reflect God's image because it was made from the beginning with the Incarnation in view, so too the *analogia entis* must acknowledge that Being cannot be understood apart from this Revelation from God. The concept of 'pure nature' might be possible in the abstract, but concretely creation has existed from the beginning with Christ in view as its incarnational ground of possibility. The world has its own inner '*eidōs*,' its own immanent integrity (indeed, Balthasar's entire theology is geared towards preserving the integrity of finitude), but this inner self-possession and immanent teleology are, according to Balthasar, 'straining upward' towards an image which is not a part of the world's own inner self-possession but is its ultimate fulfilment.<sup>75</sup> The world's *telos* is curiously suspended in mid-air between a purely immanent fulfilment and an address from transcendence that seems paradoxically natural. The Incarnation is the key that unlocks this existential dilemma by revealing from above what humanity is most intimately from below. The theological open-endedness of the world and of humanity towards union with God is finally made clear in a Revelation that shines with the glory of a divine gratuity; and the gratuity of this Revelation guarantees that it will never seem merited as a right of our humanity as

<sup>74</sup> *TD II*, pp. 270–1.

<sup>75</sup> Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963, p. 140. Balthasar states: 'This struggle of the cosmos for God and of God for the cosmos ... would never have been so intense if it were not that, in the utmost intensity of immanent strain and tension, a form is struggling to be born which towers in stature above the whole cosmos. History does indeed have its own immanent *eidōs*, but in descending into hell and then ascending into heaven and sitting on the right hand of the Father, Christ has taken it aloft with him, and ultimately it is only there that history can seek and recover it.'

such, but will nevertheless appear as our most intimate fulfillment.<sup>76</sup> The Word is sent down by God to humanity and, according to Balthasar, it is that same Word that is the force which directs history toward an end at which the same Incarnate Word, who was always its guiding centre, awaits it.<sup>77</sup>

Theology, according to Balthasar and in words that remind one of Barth, is a dialectical encounter with a subjectivity (God's) and is therefore a dialectic characterized by a dialogical encounter with the pure actuality of Revelation. But 'event' and subjectivity presuppose 'nature' or integral substantiality as a condition of possibility (no matter how hard it is to differentiate graced nature from pure nature in the *de facto* created order). Therefore, 'event' presupposes the analogy of being. However, in Christian theology nature may not be viewed statically in isolation from its relationship to the category of history. In Christian theology, act and event take priority over substance in any theology of creation or theological anthropology. Nature must be seen, therefore, as a moment within the broader categories of event and actuality. So just as substantiality must be viewed as a presupposition within the more primary categories of subjectivity and actuality, so too is the analogy of being a moment within the analogy of faith. Furthermore, the emphasis on history within Christian theology means that the interpretation of the singularities of salvation history (i.e. Revelation) take priority over the abstractions of theological systemization and theory. Balthasar states:

History is itself the 'system' in Christianity. In Christianity there can be no abstraction, as in Hellenic civilization, but only an interpretation that may not shed itself of the positive fact. And, in contrast to mere 'theory,' interpretation is only possible from one's own commitment, from being drawn into the event, so that in Christianity our solidarity and social bond with the rest of the human race are ineluctably given with the historical. ... But where the absolute is deflected from the direction of the universal concept and from myth and is directed toward the historical, then this changes the very concept of act: God is no longer the pure act of Aristotle in contrast to the potentiality of the world or of its history; God is act as power, deed, love, as what appears in the world and its history as absolute event.<sup>78</sup>

Christian theology, therefore, must be characterized by an ever greater immersion in the objective singularity of the Christ-event within the horizon provided by

<sup>76</sup> Balthasar, *A Theological Anthropology*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967, p. 226. Balthasar states: 'This vertical-horizontal axis on which all history turns precludes any progressivism from matter to Spirit in the sense of escaping matter ... and evolving into a new Spirit-form freed from matter. This renders the Incarnation superfluous. ... We cannot escape the true historical present. This grounding in the horizontal present is based on our vertical relationship to Spirit. Thus we go forward horizontally only by remaining grounded vertically. Our form is shaped by this vertical-horizontal axis that stretches each to its limit and suspends man (dramatically and dynamically) in the middle. We progress only by living ever more deeply this profoundly mysterious suspension in the middle between the two poles of the axis. Thus is human life marked by a tension overcome only by the Incarnate Logos who bridges this tension on the cross. We progress by moving toward this depth.'

<sup>77</sup> *Theological Anthropology*, p. 227.

<sup>78</sup> *The Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 340.

faith.<sup>79</sup> The analogy of being reminds us that the categories of 'event' and 'Being' cannot be dialectically played off against one other in a theology that emphasizes the finitude of creation as a contradiction to the infinity of God. The nature of Revelation as pure event or pure actuality cannot be used to delegitimize the true inner integrity of the creature's act, or of the event that is creation. This is why Balthasar rejects Christian Platonism. The delicate balance between the pure actuality of grace and the inner integrity of nature is destroyed in any system that attempts to eliminate this tension by subsuming one of the polarities into the other.<sup>80</sup> Ultimately, the only reality capable of sustaining the unity of the two poles is the divine subjectivity as such. Creation and Incarnation both find their ultimate grounding within a decisive act of the divine subjectivity.<sup>81</sup> Along these lines it becomes clear why Balthasar emphasizes an approach to Chalcedonian Christology that begins from above with the divine personhood of the Logos. The Incarnation becomes the central focus of Christian theology because Christ is not simply an abstract paradigm for creation but is the very subjectivity within whose concrete act creation's act finds its proper fulfilment. The abstractions of philosophical theory and the dualisms of mythic projection are transcended within the personalistic categories of the divine subjectivity made historically concrete in the man Jesus. The singularity that is Christ, therefore, is the concrete analogy of being precisely because the universal elevation of creation that takes place as a result of the Incarnation is accomplished through the agency of the person of the divine Logos acting through, and in union with, the history of a single individual man. This, according to Balthasar, is what constitutes the scandal of Christianity to the human mind. That this concrete singularity could sum up within itself the world's 'act' seems inconceivable to human reason. However, it is inconceivable only until one penetrates the mystery of the divine act that *is* the effective cause of the hypostatic union. Balthasar states:

The natural order, for all its own laws and persisting condition, ultimately rests on the summit of this freest of all events, the Incarnation, and the history that flows from it: that between God and man. ... This history is, in its very centre as well as at every other point, the *concretissimum*, concreteness personified. To distance ourselves from this concreteness through abstraction is impossible, indeed sinful. However much there is room for legitimate abstraction and the formation of universal concepts, these remain merely relative to that most concrete reality of all, from which we cannot distance ourselves. ... On the other hand, this *concretissimum* is also the fullest and richest of realities, which is why it is so inexhaustibly rich in interpretative value. ... And within the various interpretations of this event ... we find room for the use of universal concepts, categories, properties and finally of Being itself.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. pp. 383–4.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p. 384.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 335. Balthasar states: 'Our focus will be to try to understand that if the historical *factum* of God's Incarnation in Christ is the meaning and goal not only of worldly history but also of nature and creation as a whole, then the necessity of intra-worldly history and nature rests on a decision that cannot be reduced to any sort of general norm.'

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. pp. 383–4.

***E. Conclusion: Gift-Reception-Fruitfulness***

In the preceding discussion I have endeavoured to explain those aspects of Balthasar's trinitarian theology that bear upon the central concern of this chapter, namely, how to develop a theology of God that can properly ground the God-world relation in a way that avoids the Scylla of the extrinsic God of the deistic Enlightenment and the Charybdis of a pantheistic/Hegelian/process concept of God. As we have seen, Balthasar attempts to avoid these extremes by rethinking the concept of the unity of the divine substance in the light of a development of the relational aspects of the divine hypostases. This approach was then used to ground both: a. the world's location within the Trinitarian relations; and b. the manner in which this location is not an abstraction but a truly historical/suprahistorical participation in Jesus the Christ, who is the concrete analogy of being.

Needless to say, the foregoing leaves many questions hanging in the air, but as I stated at the beginning, to examine all the sidebar issues that are related to this theme would require an entire book in its own right. For example, in a fuller treatment of the topic much more time would need to be devoted to Balthasar's dialogue with Hegel and his heirs (and with all German idealism in general). Nevertheless, there is enough here for the reader to get a sense of Balthasar's project for the central purposes of this text. However, even with regard to these purposes, there is yet one more issue that needs to be framed properly in order to set up the fuller development and application of the foregoing theological themes in the next chapter: the manner in which Balthasar's Trinitarian ontology of love moves beyond two of the more standard analogies for the trinity found in the Church's tradition i.e. the psychological analogy of Augustine and the social/dialogical analogy of Richard of St Victor (among others). These analogies are of course important and interesting in their own right. However, for our purposes we will be examining Balthasar's critique of these standard analogies in order to highlight what is truly original in his own approach and the manner in which his innovative insights open up new ways of rethinking the God-world relation. We will then pursue the full implications of these insights in the next chapter.

***Trinitarian analogies***

As we have seen, Balthasar's approach is rooted in the analogy of interpersonal love. This means, among other things, that the notion of human personhood becomes the prime analogy for Balthasar when discussing the Trinitarian relations. Thus Balthasar is explicitly rejecting the traditional analogy for the Trinity within the Catholic tradition, wherein the intramental faculties of the mind are privileged. Augustine and Aquinas in particular favoured this so-called 'psychological analogy' which is what gives the traditional discourse on this topic such weight in the tradition. Before we proceed, it is therefore important to analyse the reasons for Balthasar's rejection of this approach, since it has opened him to criticism from the more traditionalist Thomistic wing of theology. In what follows we will take up the psychological analogy as developed by Augustine. The approach of Aquinas is



much more nuanced and will be dealt with at length in the next chapter. There we will see that Balthasar still sees difficulties in the use of the psychological analogy, while acknowledging the manner in which Thomas' trinitarian theology as a whole advances the conversation in significant ways.

Beginning with Augustine, we see that the concern first and foremost was to preserve the divine unity precisely in order to counteract the residual subordinationist and Arian elements that still lingered in the late third and early fourth centuries. As Balthasar notes, Augustine's thinking here underwent an evolution. Augustine's first attempt at describing the analogy began with a triadic description of the human soul as '*mens, notitia, amor* (mind, awareness, love).'<sup>83</sup> The mind, in knowing itself (awareness), knows itself as an object of knowledge and affirms it in love (*amor*). However, such an approach immediately raises the problem that the divine mind in such an analogy is at risk of becoming an utterly self-enclosed form of self-love. This would seem to undercut the ability of such an analogy to ground the ecstatic and superabundant nature of the divine love as seen in the economy of salvation. As Balthasar notes:

But a love in which the spirit comprehends itself as thus known remains self-love. From a Christian point of view, then, it represents only a certain limited degree of love – provided that it is rightly ordered. ... Furthermore, does the mind (*mens*) as such not have a preponderance over its functions, *notitia* and *amor*, so that ... it plays the role of substance, they of accidents?<sup>84</sup>

Augustine, perhaps recognizing this difficulty, changed the triadic analogy to '*memoria* (the ground of the mind), *intellectus* (self-knowledge), *voluntas* (loving self-affirmation).'<sup>85</sup> This approach, says Balthasar, is marginally better than the previous one insofar as these three functions of the soul seem more equal in stature, and it preserves a more relational orientation. However, as Balthasar notes, Augustine had to recognize that the three faculties of the soul are not the soul itself, whereas in God the Persons are identical with the divine substance. Or, what amounts to the same thing: the three functions together constitute only one Person, never three hypostases.<sup>86</sup> Balthasar concludes from this that Augustine's version of the psychological analogy is only a faint echo of the true nature of the inner divine life and has no way of grounding the nature of the hypostases as truly other to one another, which alone can account for their truly relational nature. Furthermore, for our purposes here, it is difficult to see how such a trinitarian theology can properly ground the God-world relationship in a manner that does not succumb to a certain Platonizing tendency, wherein the self-enclosed soul's quest for God becomes a world-eschewing flight into interiority. In other words, in an analogy where the prime image for God becomes the soul's own internal

<sup>83</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory, Volume II: Truth of God*, Adrian Walker (trans), San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, p. 38. (Henceforth cited as *TL II*).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 39–40.



relations, there is an inbuilt tendency towards an over-spiritualizing of the mind at the expense of a now spiritually devalued world.

This is a point Balthasar makes elsewhere where he notes that the trinitarian theology of the Fathers did not always penetrate as deeply as it should have into the totality of their theological valuations of the world, owing in large measure to the influence of Neoplatonism on their thought. The Neoplatonic schema that viewed the world, pantheistically, as an '*exitus*' from the One, when transposed into a Christian vision, privileges a spirituality of the soul's ascent back to God that often overemphasized the internal life of the mind over the fragmentation of the world – a world which scarcely bears any trace of the Trinitarian God.<sup>87</sup> Specifically, the Platonizing tendency created an emphasis upon the distinction within worldly being between substance (that which is the permanent foundation of all else and does not change) and accident (that which is merely transitory). Obviously in such an approach philosophical ontology can never develop an appreciation for the event-like character at the very heart of worldly being. This makes it difficult to square metaphysics with the economic revelation in Christ that God is love, i.e. that God is not a static substance but a series of subsisting relations, and as such, pure event. If in God there is a perfect coincidence of infinite rest and motion, substance and relation, then in order for this to be reflected in worldly being there needs to be a concomitant development of the metaphysical standing of loving relation as the very substance of worldly Being as well. Balthasar turns to the metaphysical analysis of the philosopher of religion Klaus Hemmerle to make this point, in a programmatic quote worthy of full citation:

Hemmerle asserts that, while Christian theology's adoption and adaptation of secular (Greek) philosophy did make significant advances towards a new understanding of Being in its totality, nonetheless there remained a certain 'historical deficit of Christian ontology': 'What is distinctively Christian did not ... ultimately refashion the anticipatory understanding of the sense of being.' The foundation of this ontology was still the question, 'What remains?' (substance in its identity), and 'What changes?' (what is accidental and in motion). If, within the horizon of Christology and hence of God's self-revelation, the New Testament answer had been given: 'What abides is love', this would surely have resulted in the expansion of philosophy's world-bound ontology. For love abides only by giving itself, right from its very source ... So we see that what is primary is not the substantial *noun* (substantive) but the transitive *verb*; we begin 'with happening, action, consummation.'<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Balthasar, 'The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves', p. 374. He states: 'despite the formally orthodox post-Nicene view of the Trinity, no corresponding trinitarian piety and mysticism seemed inclined to develop. For example, in the mystical writings of Gregory of Nyssa one can almost touch the fact, so palpable is it, that the loveliest trinitarian and dogmatic passages in his work remain almost without influence on the actual mystical parties who were striving to ascend to God – not to the trinitarian God but to the absolutely simple essence of God that stands on the summit of the Platonic pyramid.' However, elsewhere in this article Balthasar is careful not to accuse the Fathers of allowing Hellenistic forms of thought to overcome completely their basic Christian sensibilities. His criticisms of an over-Platonizing in the Fathers is in no way meant to endorse the Hellenization thesis of early Christian origins and are offered as a corrective critique rather than a wholesale condemnation of their thought.

<sup>88</sup> *TD V*, pp. 73–74.

Balthasar is quick to point out that Augustine himself most certainly avoided most of these pitfalls as he freely acknowledged the weaknesses of his own analogy. Nevertheless, Balthasar does not see Augustine's use of the psychological analogy as a fruitful starting point for a trinitarian theology that takes full measure of the revelation of the Trinity in the economy of salvation. He therefore turns his attention to the second great attempt from the era of the fathers to create an analogy for the Trinity from within the realm of worldly being. This is the so-called 'social analogy' of Richard of St Victor who offers a countervailing analogy for the Trinity from within the realm of dialogical, interpersonal love. It would seem, on the surface at least, that Richard's approach is one that Balthasar's own trinitarian theology would find more agreeable than that of St Augustine; and indeed it is. But as we shall see, Balthasar concludes that this approach too suffers from some serious defects.

Richard of St Victor, quoting Gregory of Nyssa, notes that it is of the very essence of charity that it must take place between no fewer than two persons. Charity is the movement of the self towards an 'other' and since God is Infinite charity, this movement of the Father does not merely generate an image of Himself, but actually generates one who shares in the fullness of the divine essence, the hypostasis of the Son. But the essentially I-Thou nature of this relation remains closed in upon itself until it is seen that genuine love does not reach completion until the I-Thou relation is directed towards a common object of love, what Richard calls the *condilectio*, wherein the two persons involved in the I-Thou relation not only love each other but also love 'with' each other. The social nature of love is thus made clear and forms the primary analogy for the trinitarian relations.<sup>89</sup>

The essentially dialogical nature of this project makes this analogy closer to Balthasar's approach than the psychological analogy. Nevertheless, Balthasar makes it clear that even the dialogical models fall short of the mark. In essence, Balthasar finds this approach lacking, due to its tendency to focus so heavily on the dialogical aspect that what emerges is an overemphasis on the I-Thou aspect of the relation. In other words, even if the two poles of the I-Thou relation eventually open up to an object of common love (*condilectio*), there is no intrinsic connection between the inner life of the I-Thou and the common object of their love. The object of the *condilectio* remains somewhat external to the intrinsic logic of the I-Thou relation, even if it is the means by which this relation is completed or deepened. Lacking this intrinsic connection between the I-Thou and the object of the *condilectio*, it is difficult to see how this analogy can avoid engendering tritheistic images of the Trinity.

Thus Balthasar believes that both the psychological and the social/dialogical models for the Trinity are flawed – the former for its emphasis on the monadic unity of God and the latter for its tendency towards tritheism – and both are therefore complementary approaches from within similar Neoplatonic frameworks. Augustine chose to emphasize the Oneness of the Plotinian *nous*, whereas Richard chose to emphasize the Platonic notion of the self-diffusiveness of the Good. Although Balthasar is careful to point out that neither of these approaches

<sup>89</sup> *TL II*, p. 41

is to be rejected as a simple exercise in Hellenization, and that both Augustine and Richard were clear that their respective theologies were merely inadequate analogies for the *mysterium* at the heart of the Church's rule of faith, it is nevertheless clear that for Balthasar this Neoplatonic framework, however *ad hoc* it might have been, rendered these approaches incapable of using the analogy that he suggests as the best from within worldly being for the Trinitarian relations.<sup>90</sup>

Balthasar suggests that what is lacking in both the above approaches is the category of the fruitfulness or fecundity of love. Love is indeed dialogical but it is a dialogue that is inherently fruitful: from within the inner logic of love there emerges both the idea of the 'other' (as in the dialogicians), but also that it is of the very essence of the love that characterizes the I-Thou relation that it is fecund and that it generates, in a sense, a fruit from within the very logic of this love. Why this is so only becomes clear if we also see that it is of the very essence of love to take on the form of gift. Although Plato was on to something important when he emphasized the self-diffusive nature of the Good, there remains, however, the stubborn fact that there is a kind of necessity to this Platonic process that calls into question the very essence of the 'Goodness' under discussion. Only an infinite sovereignty can be this 'Good' if the Good is to be anything more than a mere description of an automatic emanation of some kind. But if the Good is the product of an infinite sovereignty, then goodness ceases to be the central category since it fails to capture the essence of the movement described here.

What becomes of central importance, then, is the category of gift-reception-fruitfulness. And for Balthasar, the primary analogy for this category within worldly being is that of the natural fruitfulness of marital sexuality. The mutual gift of the spouses, one to the other, is matched by a receptivity that is physically generative and constitutes, for Balthasar, the single best analogy for the Trinity from within the worldly sphere. This move of Balthasar from a purely I-Thou dialogical analogy to a dialogical-marital fruitfulness analogy is one of the most innovative and controversial aspects of his thought. The originality of this insight can be seen in the fact that the importance of human marital fruitfulness has always struggled to gain acceptance, both in the Church and in the broader society, as anything other than a purely biological process bearing no ontological significance within itself. We see, for example, that this analogy from sexual fruitfulness gains no traction in the early Church owing, once again, to the neo-Platonic colouration in the thinking of many of the Fathers, as well as the general air of a spiritualizing body-soul dualism that was pervasive in antiquity (even if the Fathers did not completely succumb to it). Indeed, as Balthasar notes, Augustine even went so far as to say that such marital analogies were absurd.<sup>91</sup>

Furthermore, this downplaying of the ontological importance of sexual fruitfulness does not get any better in post-Vatican II theology where, in the mad rush to find theological justification for the widespread dissent from the teaching against contraception, theologians began to invert the two traditional ends of marriage: procreation and the mutual love of the spouses. Central to the

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. pp. 42–3.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

teaching of *Humanae Vitae* is the idea that a moral openness to the possibility of procreation is an integral aspect of the sex act. This therefore necessitated that any dissent from the teaching needed to show that procreation was a secondary aspect of the sex act, and therefore could legitimately be repressed for reasons deemed appropriate by the conscience of the couples involved. And regardless of where one stands on that controverted issue, there is no doubt that the upshot of it all was an almost total eclipsing of the idea that marital fruitfulness has ontological significance.<sup>92</sup>

And it does not get better in contemporary secular thinking, despite the modern world's greater openness to the importance of the bodily aspects of our existence. Indeed, modernity and postmodernity both tend to treat human sexual fecundity as a purely worldly/naturalistic reality having no significance beyond the raw biology of the process. It is difficult to see how this differs in any radical way from the ancient world's view of sexual fruitfulness as a process wholly contained within the realm of worldly change and corruption. The only difference might be in the relative valuations given to the importance or goodness of purely bodily existence. Or is that even different? Balthasar notes that for modern men and women, the fruitfulness of sex is something to be avoided at all costs, calling into question just how normative we consider our embodiment to be, if at all. Rather, it would seem that modernity still suffers from a lingering Cartesian hangover wherein the body is portrayed as a kind of machine that we can manipulate at will, even as it affirms, atheistically, that it is precisely this body/machine that completely defines us. The irony, therefore, is that despite a certain body-soul dualism, the ancient world actually had a more positive valuation of the role of the body in determining the natural moral limits of our behavior, while modernity is characterized by the confluence of naturalism and nihilism.

But the bottom line is that neither antiquity nor modernity has granted to human sexual fecundity any ontological significance beyond that of its relationship with death. Indeed, many of the Fathers adopt an attitude towards human sexuality that is strikingly modern in some ways. They note the connection between death and the need for procreation and therefore locate human sexual fruitfulness entirely within the domain of our postlapsarian condition. Had we not sinned, a purely virginal fruitfulness would have been the norm. Balthasar, rather than rejecting this scheme outright, seems to say instead that this is a false either-or. Even if we concede that virginal fruitfulness (Mary) is superior to sexual fruitfulness, and that the latter is indeed a postlapsarian phenomenon, it does not follow that the latter is, therefore, itself tainted with sin *per se*. It means, simply, that in our postlapsarian condition, aspects of our nature that were formerly connaturally constituted as a supernatural/natural unity are now turned over to the rule of nature. To use an analogy, even if it may have been the case, as some of the Fathers have suggested, that in our prelapsarian state we would have had greater spiritual control over the processes of our body, e.g. digestion, it does not necessarily follow that in our postlapsarian condition there is now something inherently sinful about the digestive process. All it means is that one of the effects of sin was the loss of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 61.

that connatural unity of body and soul, nature and grace. Thus the fecundity of sexuality, though not as linked to the spirit in our postlapsarian condition as it could be, is nevertheless, a fundamentally good thing that still bears the imprint of a deep theological significance.

Balthasar turns to the thought of the Catholic theologian Matthias Scheeben (1835–88) for evidence of a modern thinker who was one of the first to take seriously the idea of marital fruitfulness as possessing some level of ontological meaning. Scheeben points out that even in such natural, non-sacramental marriages, ‘the bond of matrimony already has a *religious* character by reason of its natural end; it is, after all, nothing less than the production of new images of God.’<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, since it is Catholic teaching that God is immediately involved in the creation of new human life through His direct infusion of a unique soul into the newly conceived child, it follows that the marital act, even in non-sacramental marriages, is already involved in a covenanted bond with God, wherein the married couple actually shares in the sacred ministry of bringing new human life into the world. Thus Balthasar concludes this entire line of inquiry with a strong endorsement of the analogy of gift-reception-fruitfulness in the marital act as the best analogy for the Trinity from within worldly being:

The relationship described here, which is the simple but necessary complement to the dialogic we outlined above, remains, in spite of all of the obvious dissimilarities, the most eloquent *imago Trinitatis* that we find woven into the fabric of the creature. It not only transcends Augustine’s self-contained I, but also allows the *condilectus* [co-beloved] that Richard’s model imports from the outside to spring from the intimacy of love itself ... precisely as its fruitfulness ... while avoiding the dangerous tendency of the dialogicians to allow interpersonal encounter to slide into a mere two-way monologue. ... In light of the foregoing, we can say that fecundity is the law, not only of organisms, but ... as Scheeben has shown ... also of the life of the spirit.<sup>94</sup>

Where, then, does this leave us with regard to the primary question addressed by this chapter, namely, the God-world relation? What we have seen is that for Balthasar the only possible way to ground this relation properly is to locate the world’s becoming and historicity in the event-like nature of the Trinitarian relations as its ground of possibility. Obviously, this involves some version of a panentheistic approach to the question, since there can be no sense in which worldly being should be thought of as either: a) identified with God; or b) radically alien to God. Thus the path Balthasar pursues is to view the various transcendental perfections of worldly being as having some analogous reality in God as well, perfections that include the categories of relationality, receptivity and fruitfulness. Thus what becomes clear is that for Balthasar some notion of God’s being as substance can be maintained so long as this *substantia* is not defined as the ontological opposite of the transcendental perfections mentioned above. That is why it was necessary to include in this chapter certain Christological reflections that make it clear that even within the parameters of Chalcedonian substance categories, there is simply

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p. 62.

no room for the kind of thinking that would pit the historicity and particularity of Christ's human nature against the timeless eternity of his putatively static divine nature. Thus the Balthasarian vision is neither a hidebound retreat into a simple classicism (since he takes the categories of event, relation and receptive fruitfulness as ontologically determinative), nor a simplistic retreat into the metaphysical superficialities of so much of modern process thought (since he rejects the idea that God, in order to be relational, must be capable of change). What he has therefore attempted is a creative, yet faithful retrieval of creedal Christianity in the light of modern questions.

However, in order to complete this vision it is now necessary to extrapolate from the foundations expositied here and to develop the themes that have been raised as they apply to the modern science and religion dialogue. In particular, and in light of the history outlined in the previous section, we must reexamine the reductionist mechanism of modern physics and biology with an eye to how these disciplines could be approached differently in the light of the Trinitarian ontology so briefly outlined here. Specifically, we need to examine further the theme of gift-receptivity-fruitfulness, both in the theological sphere as a development within the Trinitarian theology of God, as well as in the scientific/worldly sphere as a potential new paradigm for a theology and ontology of nature. In order to accomplish this, I will lean heavily on the innovative development of Balthasar's theology put forward by David L. Schindler as well as some representative thinkers who are associated with his school of thought. It is to this task we now turn.

## Chapter 6

### CREATURELY BEING IN A TRINITARIAN CONTEXT

#### *Introduction*

In the previous chapter we examined the Trinitarian ontology of Hans Urs von Balthasar in order to develop a theology of God that could properly ground the God-world relation in a manner that avoids pitting the world against God, as if immanence and transcendence were somehow in competition with one another. In the historical section of this text in part one, we saw how this immanence-transcendence dialectic so coloured the debates surrounding Newton and Darwin in particular that it became almost impossible to create a credible theological response to the challenge of modern science. We further saw how much of this was the result of the various intellectual ruptures that had taken place in the medieval world, e.g. nature and grace; monastic contemplative theology and rationalistic, scholastic theology; Thomistic universals and nominalist particulars, and so on. What this historical analysis makes painfully clear is that what is needed is a renewed sense of the created world precisely *as creation*, i.e. as the sacramental, theophanic manifestation of the covenant God of the Bible, who, precisely as a God of covenant, is *therefore* also a God who creates, a God who speaks, a God who interacts. In other words, what is needed is precisely a theology of God that can recover a true Christian cosmology in the full sense of that term as a theological theory of everything. The retrieval of such a cosmology could then act both as a new integrative principle for all theology, and also as a metaphysical grounding for a non-mechanistic form of science. And I emphasize here the word ‘cosmology’ rather than the more currently fashionable ‘theology of nature’ in order to underscore the need for a renewed Christian world-view that is truly expansive in its scope and not limited by the canons of academic theological methodology. After all, many of the purveyors of the modern scientific myth – Dawkins, Sagan, Dennett, Atkins, Harris *et al.* – understand quite well that narrative cosmologies, in order to be effective, must go beyond the boundaries of strict, academic scientific methodology. However, what I am arguing for here is not the creation of a new form of Christian propaganda to counteract the cultural effects of naturalist propaganda. Rather, what I am calling for is the creation of a new Christian cosmology that is the fruit of an integrative and speculative wisdom that goes beyond the narrow confines of academic theology as such – legitimate though this

is in its sphere – in order to recover something that has been lost: a rich, sacramentalized view of the cosmos where the world of matter is seen as containing within its own inner essence, precisely as matter, the potential for transposition into a higher register of spiritual existence, while retaining its own integrity as matter. In other words, what is needed is a Christian wisdom, a Christian cosmology, that understands that in order for nature to be truly and properly natural, it needs a constitutive relation to the supernatural.

This task is made all the more urgent by the fact that for too long now theology has simply ceded to the sciences the task of formulating our culture's cosmology, naively assuming that it matters little who controls the defining narrative of reality for our times. And once the task of forming cosmological narratives is ceded to the mechanistic naturalists, it should come as no surprise that the Christian theological narrative of covenant and redemption in Christ seems to be, at best, a mythic fairy tale left over from our more infantile past as a species, or, at worst, an alien narrative of a bloodthirsty deity whose theological concretization in the Church has created, so the narrative goes, some of the worst forms of oppression in our culture's history. And to make matters worse, it is the very marginalization of the Christian narrative that creates a downward vortex of cynicism, since the violence perpetrated by the churches in the past seems even more heinous to modern eyes precisely because the 'truths' the churches were seeking to impose through such violence now seem to be trivial to the point of irrelevancy. Therefore, the only proper place for 'religion' is in the private sphere of the inner conscience. Religion contains no public relevance because it contains no public truth. Or put another way, the ethos of modern scientific naturalism has created an integrative cosmological wisdom that goes beyond the strict confines of science as such and is totalizing in its explanatory appeal. By contrast, the Christian narrative has lost precisely any claim to totalizing narrative appeal. And this brings us to a very salient truth for our purposes in the remainder of this book: there cannot be two culturally cohabitating and totalizing wisdoms that exist in contradiction to one another. That is why fulminating over Dawkins or Dennett as simplistic purveyors of 'scientism' entirely misses the point. They are not purveyors of 'scientism' but rather of a kind of integrative wisdom, born out of a naturalistic ethos, that has broad appeal to modern minds. Thus, when we bracket such approaches as mere 'scientism' in order to dismiss them and proceed immediately to dealing with true academic science, we make a most serious error. For what we call 'scientism' is the thoroughly legitimate working out of a kind of philosophical 'wisdom' generated from within the metaphysical logic created by the modern scientific method as such. This simplistic distinction between science as such and scientism ignores the manner in which science as such is always already oriented to a set of distinctive values and truths that carry within themselves the seeds of an entirely new cosmological sense of what matter is, and therefore *of what God is as well*. In other words, just as I have laboured to show that changes in the theology of God have affected changes in our view of the world, the reverse is also true – changes in our view of immanence can have radical affects on our view of transcendence as well.

Thus the task of creating a renewed sacramental Christian cosmology is more than an exercise in poetic 'spirituality' – the kind of sentimentalism, for example,



one finds on greeting cards or on posters of whales in high spirits – but exists rather as the most pressing Christian intellectual/cultural task of our era. The aim of the next two chapters, therefore, is to examine some possible avenues of theological development that can aid in this process. In chapter six we will examine further some of the ramifications of Balthasar's trinitarian ontology. In particular, we will look at how his thought is developed by David L. Schindler, who is in the *Ressourcement* school of Catholic thought. We will then conclude with an analysis of the sacramental theology of the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann. Specifically, using these authors, I will explore the full ramifications for the cosmological task at hand in Balthasar's use of the gift-reception-fruitfulness theme in his trinitarian ontology. We have already examined how it is that Balthasar's trinitarian ontology allows us to locate the world within God. Now we need to nuance this further by examining how this location within trinitarian existence alters our fundamental view of nature as such. What this requires then is a closer examination of the trinitarian life as a circumincession or *perichoresis* of gift-reception-fruitfulness in order to see how the world's inclusion in this process alters our cosmological understanding of nature.

#### ***A. Eternity and Temporality: Gift-Reception-Fruitfulness in God and World***

Working within the parameters of Greek substantialist thinking, Christian theology helped to create the modern polarization between God and the world insofar as its doctrine of God remained insufficiently trinitarian, i.e. insofar as its doctrine of God continued to privilege an essentially Aristotelian approach to God as infinite thought eternally reflecting on itself, with little to no relation to the world. And even though it has become a somewhat tired cliché to point out that such thinking also gives us a static view of God, there is no denying that traditional concepts of God's immutability emphasized to the point of exclusion that there can be no concept of 'becoming' within God, since this would imply a potency that is in need of fulfillment. Thus, in response to modern science – first with regard to Newton's static view of absolute space and time, and then with regard to a more evolutionary and dynamic view of nature – Christian theology developed in two contradictory directions. First, in response to Newton's relatively static cosmos, and under the influence of a Cartesian dualism, God became an infinite and absolute power, aloof from the cosmos, and acting on the world extrinsically as either a deistically conceived first cause and/or as an ongoing Providence, akin to a factory foreman who hangs around in the office waiting for something to troubleshoot. However, it did not take long for the metaphysical naïveté of such a Tinker-Toy view of God's agency to call this approach into question. For it could not answer a very simple question: of what concern is such a world to such a God? In other words, the God of the Newtonian settlement, and indeed, the God of much of classical Christian thinking on the topic of God's immutability and his relation to the world, fails to account for the 'why' of creation beyond a raw assertion of God as a voluntarist mystery. God and the world are merely juxtaposed to one another in an external

relation of power, creating a largely objectified God similar in many ways to the gods of the ancient cosmogenic myths of origin.

The second approach taken by theology was that of Hegel and all the process thinkers who came in his wake. Such approaches became more popular post Darwin and Einstein with our increased sense of the historicity and dynamism of all worldly being. Hegel, to his credit, saw clearly that the extrinsic God of power could never be the creator God of Christian revelation. The God of the Bible is a kenotic God who engages his creation directly – indeed, for Hegel and all process thinkers, the God of the Bible is, in fact, essentially constituted in and through his relation to the world. However, the God of process thought merely replaces the mythic, objectified God of Deism with the monistic God of philosophical pantheism. And in such approaches, if God is to engage the world in a true relation, then it follows that God is somehow limited or even circumscribed by the world, thus absolutizing the world and destroying the biblical notion of God's transcendence. Furthermore, the idea of God as an infinite kenosis who loses himself in creation fails to take seriously the fact that for a true relation to exist between God and the world, the poles of both sides of the relation must retain their own integrity as an identity-within-relation. Hegel seems to equate the gift of self to an 'other' as the sheer negation of the giver in the gift, betraying, perhaps, a lingering notion of relationality as the relation of two centres of power that exist in an extrinsic relation to one another, rather than as the communion of intrinsically related spiritual interiorities. Finally, and most problematic, most process thinkers in the Hegelian register lack a proper sense of analogy where God remains the ever greater in the midst of the worldly relation. For example, for Hegel, the death of Christ on the cross does not show us the true nature of God's love in an analogical sense, where the mystery of the intratrinitarian love remains ever greater than even Christ's manifestation of this love, but rather, it shows us that even worldly death is simply a part of who God is in a univocal sense. In such theological approaches God's concern for the world thus becomes not so much a concern but, rather, a collapse into speculative identity.<sup>1</sup>

The historical result of these two approaches to God is that the God of the Newtonian settlement is eventually discarded as a mythic redundancy or superfluity, and the God of the process thinkers degenerates into a rather ambiguous, and therefore dangerous, apotheosis of worldly *eros*. And neither seems to do justice to the basic data of Christian revelation. Furthermore, neither is a significant aid to a proper metaphysical understanding of the God-world relation within the broader context of the relationship between modern science and Christian theology.

The question that is before us, then, is how the trinitarian theology of Balthasar, briefly sketched in chapter five, can be further developed to show us not just how it

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously, it is impossible to deal adequately with all of the nuances of process thought in such an abbreviated manner. However, it is critical to lay out the essential Hegelian problematic in order to set up the discussion that follows. For a broader treatment of the topic within the limited parameters pertinent to the current discussion see: Antonio Lopez, 'God the Father: A Beginning Without Beginning,' *Communio: International Catholic Review*, xxxvi, #2 (Summer, 2009), pp. 219–258. See especially pp. 239–243.

is that the world can be located within God (which was the main point of the last chapter), but the full implications of what this might mean for our understanding of nature precisely as nature. And as has been already indicated, the direction of our enquiry now picks up where the last chapter ended: the development of the full implications of the idea that God is a loving perichoresis of Gift-Reception-Fruitfulness. Specifically, the question before us is the question of the dialectic just described. Can nature be construed theologically so as to avoid, on the one hand, viewing it as an autonomous set of powers which mirror the extrinsic, voluntarist divine power that posited its existence (thus leading to the modern instrumentalizing of nature as a metaphysically and theologically neutral or inert reality), or, on the other hand, as a pantheistic realm where nature is viewed as an absolute mother and/or monster?

The key to answering this problem resides in the fundamental Christian assertion that God is love and that the world is created for this love. Indeed, as we saw in the last chapter, the world resides within the intratrinitarian spaciousness of God's love. Love, therefore, and not some subpersonal category, is the key to understanding the very ontology of worldly being. Indeed, a properly Christian metaphysic must proceed under the assumption that the most ontologically significant reality is that of person, since only persons can love. Therefore care must be taken not to privilege approaches to nature that emphasize personhood as some kind of secondary or even tertiary reality, a mere epiphenomenon of the more primary categories of matter or process. Furthermore, in any Christian ontology, an analogical link between the love that is God and human love must be maintained. Concretely, this means that a properly Christian metaphysic of Being must take seriously the ontological significance of subjectivity in its analysis.

Thus the key to a properly Christian view of nature is the affirmation that the world is, indeed, creation and as such is the product of a free sovereign act of God. However, this sovereignty is not to be understood in a voluntarist/nominalist sense as raw, inscrutable power. Rather, God's freedom is never to be divorced from his nature as goodness and love. Of course, this opens up metaphysical questions, e.g. what is the relation between freedom and necessity in God? Or put as a positive proposition, one must rethink the nature of even worldly freedom as pure autonomy if one is to understand the nature of God's freedom as the freedom to do only what is consonant with his nature as trinitarian love. For even in worldly freedom, the ontologically neutral 'blank slate' approach to freedom, that views willing as a choice between co-equal possibilities, is philosophically naïve. From a Christian anthropological perspective we are never more free than when we bind ourselves to the good. Freedom, in this view, is anteriorly constituted by the Good for the Good, and thus is, paradoxically, never more free than when it is circumscribed by its choice for the good. This is a difficult concept for modern minds to accept, given our almost Promethean understanding of the proper uses of human freedom, but it is an absolutely critical concept for any true understanding of the divine freedom. Balthasar, reflecting on this question, points out that in God there is an infinite coincidence of Being and self-possession in freedom, i.e. God's freedom is not a secondary movement consequent upon a more primary essence, but rather, his essence is characterized precisely as the very act of trinitarian

self-possession in love.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this needs much deeper elaboration, but for our purposes here it is sufficient to point out that the primary reality that needs to be affirmed is that in a Christian view of God there can be no question of either voluntarist or necessitarian views of the God-world relation: God's nature as the dynamic event of trinitarian love is beyond the dialectic of freedom and necessity owing to the coincidence in God of Being and love. As Balthasar puts it: 'Here ... we are already placed beyond necessity and chance. The fact that the absolute freedom of self-possession can understand itself, according to its absolute nature, as limitless self-giving – this is not the result of anything external to itself; yet it is the result of its own nature, so much so that, apart from this self-giving, it would not be itself.'<sup>3</sup>

Returning, then, to our original point, a proper Christian view of nature as the creation of a sovereignly free God means that creation is the product of a God who creates out of his goodness and for no other reason. There was no prior constraint upon God's creative activity other than his own goodness (and even here constraint would not be the best term). Therefore, given the theological affirmation that the world is the creative product of this infinite goodness, finitude must not be viewed as some kind of a declension from the absolute One, a pure limit or restriction upon being that fragments it and calls forth a spirituality of worldly negation in order to transcend such fragmented limits and return to the undifferentiated Source. Finitude, in a Christian view, should be viewed rather as the positive expression of the divine image in a worldly modality, i.e. as an analogy for various positive perfections within God. In particular, the historical and temporal nature of creation, with its dynamic of becoming, development and change, points positively to something analogous within the divine life, and not to the realm of *vanitas* that will pass away once the world returns to its divine source. For as we saw in the last chapter, the difference between God and the world is a non-alienating difference, owing to the fact that it is located within the ever-greater infinite difference-in-unity that is the Trinitarian life of God. But here we now need to press further and point out that this very same theological reality not only grounds the world's difference from God, but also grounds the positive nature of the differentiation of individual beings within the created realm. Thus the distinction of finite entities from one another is not an alienating and negative limit on being, but is rather the very ground of possibility for a union that is the fruit of communion, a union that is far deeper and richer than the unity of monistic homogeneity.<sup>4</sup>

The salient question, then, is: How can we maintain the traditional doctrines of God's immutability and His eternity in the face of the affirmation that the temporality and developmental becoming of the finite created world are analogies for positive perfections within God? But since the question of becoming is also related to the question of temporality, the real issue is how properly to image the relationship between time and eternity. So before we examine in more detail

<sup>2</sup> For Balthasar's complete treatment of this topic see: *TD II*, pp. 243–284.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 256

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 258

the gift-reception-fruitfulness analogy, we must first turn to this fundamental consideration.

David L. Schindler has developed this theme in a programmatic essay that helps to clarify the central issues at stake.<sup>5</sup> Schindler begins by pointing out that the Trinity is eternal, but not in the sense of being indifferent to or opposed to time. Rather, it is supratemporal and includes the reality of time, analogously, within itself. Thus, the Trinity is not merely timeless or atemporal. If it were, then eternity would be opposed to temporality as its transcendent negation. It goes without saying that such a view is radically at odds with the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation, and redemption whose internal theological logic demands a more positive relation of time to eternity. Schindler, commenting on this fact, states: '... from within such a time-less state, what has gone on *in* time could hardly be redeemed; it could only be shed or otherwise rejected' (HWCC, p. 225). In other words, in such a view God's eternity would constitute a reality that would be (at best) indifferent to the world of time, or (at worst) hostile towards it in the form of a negative judgment. From a worldly perspective it would also mean that our existence as temporal beings consigns us to a realm where God can only be absent, or, if present, profoundly alienating. In other words, the atheistic critique of Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche *et al.* would be entirely correct: in order to affirm the fundamental structures of human existence one needs first to reject such an alienating God. Therefore Christian theology must approach this topic without the Hellenizing philosophical blinkers that have all too frequently infiltrated our speech patterns and forms of thought on this issue. The fundamental thrust of the entire Christian economy of creation and redemption bespeaks God's positive judgment on the constitutive nature of temporality for our existence, and as such must be viewed analogously rather than as a mere dialectic of negation.

But temporality is still a bit too abstract as a category, since a deeper question needs to be asked: What, concretely, does the fact of the temporality of our existence mean, beyond the fact that our lives unfold in a linear chronological sequence? What it means most essentially is that time is the place or space where creatures can develop and become. In other words, it is the place of the creaturely act, it is a sphere marked by the dramatic structure of event and disclosure and encounter with the other. The image in popular Christian imagination is that we are in this world as a kind of stranger, placed here rather extrinsically by an atemporal and eternal God as a kind of moral testing ground, a place where, if we do well, we can escape to something more nonworldly and heavenly. The not so subtle pseudo-platonizing here is palpable. But what such a popular image misses is precisely the deep anthropological and ontological importance of the fact that we were not lowered into this world by God on the end of a crane as some sort of angelic visitor to a foreign land, but rather, we were created along with this world to exist in this world precisely as temporal beings whose existence is characterized by the dynamic of event and sequential becoming. In other words, what it misses is

<sup>5</sup> David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1996, esp. pp. 221–236. Henceforth internally cited as 'HWCC'.

that because we were created as *incarnated* spirits, our very spiritual side is that of a worldly spirit oriented through and through to the temporal sphere of change and development. Therefore, just as we saw with the notion of temporality as such, the fact of our constitutive orientation to change, development and becoming-in-time must be viewed as a positive perfection of our being, and not as a mere limit in the sense of negation. We are beings who exist in the constant interplay between potency and act and thus require the element of becoming in time as the very ground of our existence as creatures.

What then can this mean for our understanding of God? Schindler, once again, turns to the trinitarian theology of Balthasar for insight: 'First of all, Balthasar ... insists that the trinitarian life of God contains the "original idea" (*Urídee*) of time. ... The present is not a mere "*nunc stans*" which would eliminate all sense of expectation and fulfillment – and hence all the tension proper to movement – in God. On the contrary, these are infinitely intensified in God' (HWCC, p. 225). Thus according to Schindler, it is also wrong to characterize God's being as outside of, indifferent to and/or alien to any notion of becoming. Given God's nature as tripersonal love, it is altogether misleading to characterize the inner divine life as a kind of static and impersonal stillness. The traditional scholastic metaphysics of motion has contributed to this misunderstanding, since it equates motion with the movement from potency to act. Therefore, despite some of Aquinas' more nuanced discussions of this topic, the tendency was to view the inner divine life as utterly devoid of any concept of motion leading to an attenuated sense of what it means for God to be living in a tripersonal sense. Therefore in Schindler's Balthasarian analysis it is better to characterize the inner divine life as the stillness of an infinite motion, and thus as a kind of superbecoming where the pure act of being that is God must include the category of gift-reception in order for the love between the trinitarian persons to be real. Receptivity here does not imply potency or lack, but the positive and infinite intensification within God of the temporal idea of gift-reception that is central to love (HWCC, p. 226). The Son and spirit receive the Father's Gift of being and the Father, in turn, receives back from the Son and Spirit their gift of reception. Nor is receptivity merely passive or gift simply active. There is an active passivity in the reception and there is a note of passive reception in the activity of giving. The Being of God is therefore characterized as the Infinite perichoresis of love where there is a simultaneity of gift-reception, unity and distance, rest and motion, action and contemplation. And without such simultaneity all of these paradoxes break down into contradiction and lead to Hegelian notions of God being sublated by temporal history in the absolute kenosis of the Father. All process thought is thus rooted in the mistake of not taking seriously enough the traditional doctrine of the Trinity as a perichoresis of love, i.e. not taking seriously enough how radical a claim it is to say that God *is* love. All process thought, ironically, adopts what are essentially Hellenistic notions of substance and immutability and therefore falls prey to false either-or thinking. Schindler puts it as follows:

Simply put: on Balthasar's trinitarian view, expectation, fulfillment, newness, surprise – and the movement implied by these – and passivity, all of which characterize time,

are not mere negatives to be eliminated in eternity. Rather, they are 'positives' which receive an infinite *deepening and intensification* in eternity. Balthasar thus sums up: 'God placed change (*Wechsel*) and surprise [and becoming and motion and "passivity" and so on] in finite time (*endliche Zeit*) in order that these might thereby provide an image of his infinite time (*unendliche Zeit*).' What exists in God is not the absence of time, and all its concomitant attributes, but the original image (*Urbild*) of time (HWCC, p. 227).

It is important to note here that Balthasar is not attacking the idea of God's immutability in the fashion of process thinkers. He accepts this doctrine. However, he is attempting to deepen the ontology that undergirds this assertion by moving away from static substantialist accounts of God's being and toward personalist-dramatic accounts. Thus, the Christian cannot simply accept Aristotle's isolated God as absolute Thought thinking about itself, but must temper this with the category of Trinitarian love. He thus distinguishes the dynamism of the God of love from the changing God of myth, and he distinguishes the immutability of God from the static God of philosophy (HWCC, p. 227, n.12). His are truly dramatic categories that deepen the ontology of immutability and becoming, respectively from within the categories of what a person is and what love is and all that this implies. However, it is also important to note that Balthasar is not merely replacing traditional metaphysical concepts of God with modern personalistic philosophy. Rather, he is transforming the traditional ontology from within. As Schindler puts it: 'it is precisely the *personal – love* – which reveals the primary meaning of ontology' (HWCC, p. 227, n. 12). Thus the traditional concept of God as '*actus purus*' can be enriched: by expanding it, from within a trinitarian perspective to include "passivity" (HWCC, p. 226). The Father, as the unoriginate source, is active giving as such, but in such a manner that it is always already in relation to, and inclusive of, the active receptivity of the Son and the Spirit. The dual movement of giving and receiving in God, therefore, is mutually conditioning and constitutive: 'The Father's "*active action*" is conditioned by the "*passive action*" of the Son and the Spirit, and vice versa. . . . [thus] activity is not merely active, nor is passivity merely passive. On the contrary, mere activity now takes on an inherently generous character, and mere passivity an inherently receptive character' (HWCC, p. 226).

What this means is that receptivity in God does not imply a movement from potency to act, but is a perfection of the *actus purus* of God's Being as such. Thus, by way of analogy, we can say that receptivity in creaturely being is a necessary corollary of our relational nature and is a positive perfection of our being as well. Granted, in creatures, receptivity does imply a movement from potency to act, but this temporal dynamic, far from implying an imperfection in our status as the *imago dei*, can now be conceived as one of the primary ways the *imago dei* is perfected within us. It follows from this that our status as creatures is fundamentally constituted precisely in the fact that worldly being is first and foremost a receptive reality in two mutually conditioning ways. First, worldly being, as nonsubsistent, has the status of pure gift in the sheer gratuity of God's loving act of creation. Our posture before God, therefore, is that of grateful, contemplative reception of the unmerited gift of existence. This is one of the primary truths Balthasar was attempting to



elucidate in his meditation upon the real distinction between essence and existence ('the fourfold distinction') that we saw in the last chapter. Our first experience as human subjects is the experience of being allowed in that is first communicated to us in the loving smile of our mother. But the second point of Balthasar's analysis of the real distinction brings us to the second point of the significance of relational receptivity as well. For the child gradually learns that the mother, and indeed all those who are other, are in the same position as ourselves vis-à-vis being: we are all in the same fundamental position of being receivers of the gift of existence. Furthermore, we become aware of this reality not through an immediate contact with absolute Being, but through the mediation of all worldly others (including the entire nonhuman realm of nature) through whom I come to my own identity in the entire nexus of relational encounters that constitute my temporal existence.

The ontological significance of this for worldly being is that we can now affirm that all finite realities are not only fundamentally receptive as creatures before God, but that we are also fundamentally receptive in all of our constitutive relations with finite others.<sup>6</sup> The paradox of worldly existence is thus analogical to the paradox of the intra-Trinitarian life: just as God is not first a nature which then must somehow constitute itself through a secondary movement outward toward the other, but *is* essentially constituted precisely by the *ekstasis* of love, so too human existence is not first an autonomous centre of subjective freedom which then seeks to constitute itself through a secondary movement outward toward others, but is precisely constituted in its *esse* through the active reception of the gift of the other. Thus just as in God there is an eternal and infinite simultaneity and coincidence of Being-in-itself and Being-for-the other, so too in human existence there is the temporal movement from potency to act, wherein we become more interiorly who we are in self-possession only in and through our receptive opening to the irreducible gift of all those who are other. The concept of irreducibility is important here because it underscores the fact that it is a distortion of our nature to view the other merely as a means to our own self-possession. Being receptively open to the irreducible gift of the other means that we can only come to ourselves, so to speak, when our receptivity is based upon the active *ekstasis* of our nature to reach out towards the good. Here the paradox is bridged and we can move beyond the mere negation of a self-sacrificing Hegelian kenosis/dialectic: our constitution as a self-possessing interiority can only reach its true fulfilment in an ecstatic affirmation of the goodness of existence and in the irreducible goodness and gift of all finite existents, including ourselves. Thus part of my being open to the gift of the other is to allow the other to receive the gift of my own interior goodness as well, i.e. the fundamentally receptive posture of letting the other be is also characterized by the active donation of my own self to the other and allowing this donation to be received by the other. The significance of this latter point is easily overlooked without the realization that the dynamic of gift-reception would degenerate into a simple negation without the concomitant affirmation that such a relation, as in God, is also fruitful. Put another way, we can say that the gift-reception motif remains purely within the realm of dialectic unless our relation to others is seen as

<sup>6</sup> For what follows see: *TD V*, pp. 61–109.



the fructifying source of the very superabundance of worldly existence; the *ekstasis* of gift-reception issues forth in the *excessus* of worldly forms that far surpasses the simple sum and logic of the I-Thou relation, and creates the *condilectus* wherein the love between two is turned outward in the joy of a common object of love.<sup>7</sup> Thus does the act of philosophical wonder move beyond a simple awe over the fact that something exists rather than nothing and culminates in a more concrete joy over the enrapturing forms of the world, forms that seem to go well beyond the mechanistic logic of necessity and instead express in themselves the principle of superabundant fruitfulness.

Thus creaturely being finds in this movement from potency to act, which happens only within the temporal sphere with its manifold and ontologically constitutive relations, a positive perfection of our being. And all of this is simply a metaphysical meditation on the meaning of God as love and must constantly be placed within its proper analogical context. There is no sense in which God's active receptivity within the divine life, or his suprabecoming fruitfulness, is to be equated with worldly notions of the same in a univocal sense. To repeat: Balthasar accepts the traditional doctrine of God's immutability. But even our concepts of immutability must be submitted to analogical critique so that we do not fall into a false univocal sense of what it means when we predicate 'eternity' or 'unchanging' to God. Thus what Balthasar is asking us to consider is that the Christian affirmation that God is a loving series of interpersonal relations implies a dynamic view of God, where difference and distinction are not the opposite of unity but its necessary correlate within the reality of the communion of love, and that eternity and immutability are not the opposite of relational gift-reception, but expressions of the infinite nature of these constitutive relations as always already existing in perfect self-possession. Balthasar states that we cannot say that there is becoming in God in a worldly sense, since for us such becoming implies a potency that is a kind of poverty. Nevertheless, he states, 'We cannot avoid using the word "process", "procession" in the context of the life of the Trinity to denote its constant vitality; this concept is the link between creature and Creator, between being and becoming.'<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps at this juncture a brief *excursus* is in order since there is an important metaphysical issue that I have glossed over in what has preceded. The position I have just summarized asserts that receptivity is a constitutive perfection of our creaturely *esse*. Of course, this position is rejected by certain modern Thomists (e.g. Steven A. Long) since in the classical Thomistic view, receptivity is a potency that awaits actuation and is therefore merely an accident of our being and not a

<sup>7</sup> In the previous chapter we saw that Balthasar criticized the use of the idea of the I-Thou relation being completed by the *condilectus* of a common object of love, as this idea was worked out in the trinitarian analogy of Richard of St. Victor. But he did not do so in order to critique the notion as such, but to point out that even the idea of a common object of love is incomplete without tying it through an interior metaphysical logic to the deeper reality of fruitfulness. In other words, a common object of love can remain somewhat extrinsic, and arbitrarily related, to the I-Thou relation unless the *condilectus* is somehow also the intrinsic fruit of the I-Thou relation itself.

<sup>8</sup> TD V, p. 77.

constitutive element of our act of being as such.<sup>9</sup> The key to understanding this objection is the realization that receptivity in this view represents a pure potency in need of some type of later actuation. In other words, receptivity is not in any way active but is, in its essence, pure passivity. Our *esse*, in this more classical view, is indeed ordered to a certain communicativity, but insofar as communicativity implies a mutuality that contains a receptive element (potency), one can only speak of such receptivity as a purely passive potency, and therefore not one of the transcendental properties of being as such. There might indeed be acts associated with the mutuality of existence as well, but such acts would then be the actuation of our receptive potency, and not receptivity as such.

Furthermore, as Steven Long has argued, the analogy between receptivity in the Trinity and creaturely receptivity breaks down when one realizes that the Son's reception of full substantial divinity from the Father is in no way circumscribed by any kind of potency, since – as divine – the Son's receptivity is a participation in the *actus purus* that is God. God's essence is his existence and the Son's receptivity is a uniquely divine form of reception admitting of no limiting potency and that is, strictly speaking, a supernatural mystery which is beyond our powers to elaborate upon analogically since there is nothing in Revelation that would guide us beyond these basic parameters, and the nature of reception in the creaturely realm is so associated with potency that it simply cannot provide us with a proper analogical starting point. It is true that creatures receive their being from God and exist in a state of receptive dependency vis-à-vis God. However, in creatures the concept of reception is tied to the reality of our essence, which exists in a state of pure potentiality awaiting actuation from the act of being (creation). As such, for the creature, reception is a purely passive reality that exists solely in the realm of potency. Therefore, according to Long, the use of the term receptivity, as it applies, respectively, to God and the world, is strictly equivocal.<sup>10</sup> There is simply no middle term between the two types of receptivity (divine and creaturely) for grounding the analogy. Divine receptivity in the Trinitarian relations is merely terminative rather than relational in the creaturely sense. He seems to mean by this that when the Son receives his divinity from the Father he does so not as a receptive potency but as a pure act; thus the relation between Father and Son is terminative in the sense that the essence of the relation is one of pure actuation that terminates in the pure act of the Son. There is no potency here whatsoever, and therefore receptivity as applied to God and the world is an equivocal predication.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the entire approach adopted by Schindler and others (e.g. Norris Clarke), according to Long, is marred by a kind of Gnostic bootstrapping of the argument

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent articulation of this view see: Steven A. Long, 'Divine and Creaturely 'Receptivity': The Search for a Middle Term,' *Communio* XXI (Spring, 1994), pp. 151–161.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Long states: 'Yet insofar as the term "receptivity" pertains to the creaturely participation of being through creation, it simultaneously denotes both a limit and a perfection. For in this sense receptivity is defined by creaturely essence – the mode in which being is received – which is a transcendental perfection that is an intrinsic mode of being and principle limiting esse. In this sense the term "receptivity" is dissimilar to its use of the Second Person of the Trinity, whose essence (and also substance) is one and the same with that of the Father.' pp. 152–4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 156.

from the outset. One begins with an assertion of what the divine receptivity must be like – even though this is a strictly supernatural mystery that we cannot know – and then one proceeds from this dubious starting point to an assertion that creaturely receptivity is like this as well and thus a perfection of creaturely being. One then uses this putative creaturely perfection as the basis for the establishment of an analogy between God and creature that simply cannot be sustained.

In response, Schindler argues both theologically and philosophically. Philosophically, he notes that our *esse* is characterized by a triune structure: it is from another (*esse ab*), truly exists as a unique interiority (*esse in*), but does so precisely as a being constitutively oriented to exteriorization in the world (*esse ad*). What this means is that the nature of creaturely being as existing in itself is precisely so because it is also simultaneously being that is from and toward, i.e. is always already constituted as a receptive relationality. Thus receptivity is not merely a passive reality linked to potency, but is an essential element of the very act of being.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, there is an imperfection and a potency relating to human receptivity that is not shared by God. That is why it is analogical and not univocal. But, Schindler insists, the analogy can be sustained since imperfection in creaturely reception does not mean that receptivity is *first and foremost* an imperfection or a potency. As he puts it:

It nonetheless suffices here merely to recall the burden of my argument, which is not that relation in the creature is not also defective, or again, is not also intrinsically tied to potency. The argument simply insists that defectiveness and thus potency do not signify the *first* meaning of other-relatedness, *even in the creature*. To assume otherwise – to assume, that is, that a relation which is always (also) defective must thereby be *primarily or exhaustively* defective – is to beg what is precisely what is at issue. (HWCC, p. 290).

Furthermore, Schindler notes that Long's argument begins its analysis of creaturely *esse* by appealing to something that is essentially subpersonal as its starting point: the limiting nature of essence in its relation to *esse*. Why not begin instead with what Christian philosophy must recognize as the highest realization of worldly being: personhood and its essential act of loving, relational mutuality. Why assume the modern prejudice that personhood and love are merely anthropological realities chiefly explainable through psychology and sociology but bearing within themselves no ontological significance whatsoever? However, if one begins one's analysis of *esse* from within personalist categories, then the full implications of the meaning of relational mutuality must be admitted into the discussion of being on a constitutive *ontological* level. The kind of reciprocal mutuality that love demands contains within itself an active receptivity that is more than a mere potency waiting to be activated. Mutuality in love demands a receptiveness that is an intrinsic part of the essential act of love, and not a mere passivity. As Schindler keenly notes, if the receptivity of love is merely a passive potency awaiting the perfection of being actively fulfilled, then it follows that the love we find between two spouses would actually become less relational and less mutual the more their receptivity moved

<sup>12</sup> See: David L. Schindler, 'The Person: Philosophy, Theology, and Receptivity,' *Communio* XXI, (Spring 1994), pp. 175–6.

from potency to act. In other words, if the respective lovers are first conceived of us as beings-in-themselves who then need to become receptive to others in order for this being-in-itself to be completely fulfilled, then it follows that the other is a mere means to the ends of my being and once my receptive potency for relationship is activated and thereby fulfilled, then my mutuality with others will decrease in direct proportion to the fulfillment of the potency. This seems to be a very strange model for love and marriage indeed. Therefore, any proper analysis of love would need to include receptivity of the good of the other, and my own gift of self to the other, as active principles rather than merely passive ones. And the ontological significance of this shift in focus is enormous for our understanding of the receptive quality of creaturely *esse*.

Finally, with regard to the theological analysis of receptivity within the Trinity, Schindler points out that Long is guilty of a kind of gnosis himself. For in point of fact it is Long who imposes his own philosophical *a priori* upon the divine nature when he insists that the only possible meaning for receptivity in God must be one that is utterly discontinuous with worldly receptivity. But how does he know this? He begins with an assumption rooted in philosophical analysis and then proceeds to use this philosophical analysis to limit what is and is not allowable within God regardless of what Revelation might imply. As Schindler notes:

[H]aving already assumed that receptivity is essentially tied to potency and thus to what is essentially imperfect, and having done so on the basis of a philosophical analysis of receptivity as found in essence (that is, in the limit that makes finite beings finite), Long can then, *as a matter of principle*, find no genuine receptivity within God: there *cannot* be such, since we know from our philosophical analysis of finite being that receptivity always involves imperfection. What appears to be receptivity *must* be something else. . . . the irony is that it is Long himself who rather slips into a kind of gnosis: on the basis of his philosophical analysis, which he consciously develops apart from and thus prior . . . to consideration of revelation, Long *knows in advance* what can and cannot be properly found in God. He *knows in advance* what sort of receptivity God is to be permitted to have within himself.<sup>13</sup>

By implication then, Schindler clearly wants to assert that Long is being somewhat inattentive to the full witness of Scripture on this issue and is being overly constrained by a philosophical *a priori* that is excessively and unnecessarily constrictive. It is important to note here that Schindler is not attacking the legitimate autonomy of philosophy, nor disputing its important role in theology. No fideism is implied in this criticism at all. What is at stake is the proper notion of the relationship between philosophy and theology. There is no time here to elaborate fully on this important topic. However, suffice it to say that what Schindler is arguing against is the notion of a separate philosophy that closes itself off from the insight and fulfillment of revelation. Schindler accepts the reality of a specifically Christian philosophy, in the sense that a truly Christian philosopher will allow his philosophical thinking to be opened to new vistas of rational inquiry, new paths of discourse, new potential insights, by opening his thought to the gentle guiding

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 177

influence of Revelation. Revelation would not dictate to philosophy what it can or cannot conclude, but it could open the philosopher to new possibilities and allow him to burst open rational categories that have grown moribund. So by implication it would seem that Schindler is saying that Long's approach to the question of receptivity in God and in creaturely being is not being sufficiently open to a more expansive understanding of receptivity provided by Revelation. Philosophy has a role to play in the interpretation of Scripture, but only after it is understood that Christian philosophy must always exist with an anterior relation to Scripture's own self-interpretation as well as the authoritative tradition of the Church in creed, sacrament and teaching.<sup>14</sup>

What then is this broader view of receptivity provided by Scripture? Schindler turns to the Gospel of John as one of the clearest expositions of the idea that the Son really is from the Father, and not merely in a terminative sense. Everything in the Scriptural Revelation points toward Christ's essential mission as being constituted by his stance of filial receptivity before the Father. Over and over again it is emphasized that Christ is from the Father and receives everything that he is from the Father. Are we to understand these scriptural assertions as mere metaphors having no ontological and/or theological significance for the immanent Trinitarian life? Christ's status as one who expositis the Father ('He who sees me sees the Father') is not primarily an action characterized by a positive generative agency (i.e. as one who possesses divinity in his own right and who now seeks to exposit it on his own, so to speak), but rather first and foremost as an active receptivity, i.e. Christ images the Father and does His will precisely as the Son, as 'child'. He states:

To be sure there is only one hypostatic union: only Christ is *from the Father* in a way that is coincident with absolute equality with the Father. The point is simply that Christ's proper reality nonetheless lies *always* in being *from the Father*, and thus *always* in being a *child*: Christ is perfect (divine) precisely *in* his childlikeness (sic). (HWCC, pp. 283–284).

Obviously, Schindler is aware that this is a complicated theological issue open to a variety of interpretive approaches. Nevertheless, what he seeks to establish is not the hegemony of his own view of things, but simply the acknowledgement from more traditional Thomists that his approach to the question of receptivity is at least theologically warranted, plausible and potentially true. Furthermore, any attempt to refute his theological assertions cannot take place on the level of a philosophical *a priori*, but must be carried forward precisely as a theological argument based on an exhaustive alternative reading of the same scriptural evidence.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, from all of this Schindler presses forward with his analysis of creaturely being and, based on his theological analysis of the Scriptural evidence for

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 178.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 179. Once again it is important to note that Schindler is not saying that his theological analysis simply trumps philosophical reason. What he is asserting is that given the scriptural evidence, a properly Christian philosophy should, at the very least, be open to the idea of receptivity as a positive perfection both of divine and creaturely being and that its properly rational investigations should proceed with this view as a serious and open possibility. (Cf. *ibid.* p. 182.)

receptivity in God, concludes that active receptivity is a constitutive perfection of creaturely being and stands in an analogical relation to the intratrinitarian life of God. In a succinct statement he drives this point home, which I will quote in full and let stand as the conclusion to this *excursus*:

In light of this, the most basic thing to be said about creatures is that they are children in the Child. ... Creatures image God not first as Father (who goes out of Himself, who pours Himself forth, who communicates Himself), but as Son (He who receives from another, who is communicated). They image the perfection of God not first as agent but as patient: they are empowered to represent the agency of the Father only in and through the patience of the Son. In a word, they image first the God who, in Jesus Christ, is revealed to be receptive and thus childlike; only then (that is, always in and by virtue of the receptivity proper to childlikeness) do they image the self-communicative activity proper to father-likeness. (HWCC, p. 284).

Returning then to our discussion of the relation between time and eternity we can say that what all of this means for the creaturely order of temporality is that every moment of time finds its true inner meaning in its orientation to God's time, i.e. to the eternal event that is an infinite series of reciprocal relations, in the mystery of gift-reception-fruitfulness. If we do not see any analogical linkages between the receptive mutuality that characterizes the relational nexus of our temporal existence, then we must discard the idea that the temporal realm is grounded, precisely as temporal, in the eternal. And if we do reject the idea that the eternal life of God grounds the temporal, then temporality itself seems to vanish into the mist of epiphenomenality, i.e. what we call time becomes merely the phenomenal appearance of being to our minds, but not a true inner measure of reality. Reality becomes merely the reductive interplay of atoms where time is a mere physical relation between space and gravity and quantum events. In such a view, time, in its full human significance as that place or space wherein our becoming happens, becomes little more than a fiction of our imagination, a gross anthropomorphism forced upon reality and thus devoid of any ontological depth. Thus does the modern world fall prey to a notion of time that is either a naïve chronological sequence or an esoteric thought experiment in theoretical physics. By contrast, therefore, it is only the Christian affirmation of time's rootedness in the divine life that can ground a retrieval of a truly personal notion of time as the place where divine and human freedoms interact and intersect. In other words, only Christian revelation can thus ground the full ontological importance of time as more than one damn thing following another.

This theological/anthropological conception of time as the place of our becoming means as well that the deepest appreciation of the full ontological meaning of time comes not from the physicists but rather from the poets and the saints. As Schindler points out, only the saint can truly grasp the true meaning of temporality as the intersection or encounter between God's suprabecoming and our becoming. The saint can contemplatively rest in the eternal moment of every temporal event without, for all that, ever losing sight of the temporality of the temporal, or prescinding from its concreteness in some flight away from time. 'But,' Schindler states, 'this can happen only through a stillness that is still-moving, through an

ever-deepening intensity of communion. The meaning of life is found, not by moving outside of the moment, but by “burning into” the moment’ (HWCC, p. 231). Precisely by burning himself into the moment (Schindler borrows this phrase from a poem by T. S. Eliot) does the saint contemplatively see the true significance of that moment in the light of eternity. But this requires that the saint view all moments as gifts of an ‘other’ that we are first to receive receptively and contemplatively. *For it is only in the order of gift and receptive contemplation that the true generative fruitfulness of the encounter with the ‘other’ can happen.* The very structure of our existence as temporal beings means that our passive-contemplative disposition to receive the gift of the other is the constitutive element of our becoming, i.e. we can only come to ourselves through an openness to the gift of others, and this can only take place in time.

Thus we can approach our temporality as a random and meaningless succession of pointless moments which are all ephemeral and gone in a flash (where the self becomes an empty shell awaiting some kind of artificial construction of our choosing), or we can approach time as our encounter with Being in beings, an encounter with the concreteness of worldly being which is now also a sacramental encounter with eternity. As Schindler concludes:

Curious men attend closely to the passing of events all about them. But such men merely drift along on these currents of past and future, remaining on their surfaces. It is the saint who truly penetrates the events of history. And the sense of the saint’s doing so is paradoxical: by apprehending time’s intersection with the timeless. That is, only through awareness of the eternal dimension *in* time does the moment *of* time become truly attended. And how is this awareness achieved? Only by ‘a lifetime’s death in love, ardour and selflessness and self-surrender’ (HWCC, p. 228. The internal quote is once again from a poem by T.S. Eliot).

Balthasar’s Christology also sheds light on this. As we saw in chapter five, for Balthasar, Christ is the ‘concrete universal’ or the concrete analogy of Being. That is because He is the very presence of eternity in time, in the very modality of time. Following Aquinas, Balthasar holds that the Incarnational mission of the Son is the economic manifestation of his immanent procession from the Father. Thus he does not leave eternity behind when he becomes flesh, but is the very presence of eternity in time in an Absolute and definitive sense. ‘Thus the Son,’ states Schindler, ‘in taking on flesh and temporality, does not leave eternity behind. On the contrary, Jesus’ every moment, precisely *in* time, reveals eternity. The deepest meaning of temporality is found in relation to eternity, in the relation of love which is from and for the Father: because *that is what Jesus is*’ (HWCC, p. 232). And in light of the fact that the entire mission of Jesus is oriented toward his hour, the paschal mystery, where we find the coincidence of love and being in the self-sacrificing death of the cross, we can conclude that receptivity is oriented to the deepest kind of activity: ‘it leads to a death within which – and within which alone – arises the fullness of time, so that time might transcend itself into eternity, and might thereby be redeemed. In sum, it is in Jesus’ passion that we find the stillest point that is the fullest dance, and the darkest point that is the greatest light’ (HWCC, p. 233). In other words, it is precisely the receptive *fiat* of Jesus before the Father that



leads to the deepest kind of action. If all things were created in the Logos, then all things bear the same *form* of his existence, the same inner orientation to an intelligibility of gift-reception-fruitfulness.

What this shows us is that the events of time become truly pointless, and in a sense nontemporal, if they are not oriented, constitutively, to the passion of self-sacrificial giving. Contemplation or theory will become an empty boredom if not invested with the transcendent meaning of eternity, i.e. theory will become evacuated of the only possible meaning that gives cogency to theory in the first place – it will become a sterile and lifeless pure thinking that means nothing, thus undercutting the very purpose of thinking at all. Only in the light of Christ does time take on its full significance as a relation of love that gives itself unto death in order to transcend itself and thus find itself. Likewise, action devoid of an inner orientation to self-sacrificial giving, and to the contemplation of the moment of eternity in all temporality, will become an action based on raw power, i.e. will become harsh because it is essentially ontologically extrinsic to its object.

The dualism implied, therefore, in the modern project's neglect of contemplative receptivity to the gift of being, and its privileging of action as the imposition of our will upon an essentially impersonal and ontologically flat nature, can only be alienating and destructive. The divorce between our interiority and the exteriority of the world inevitably leads to a reductionist account of reality that does violence to its ontological depth and richness. Lacking ontological significance, the temporal order of mere matter also lacks moral orientation and significance, giving rise to the modern technological imperative where everything within the purview of our power is reduced to a mere technical problem to be conquered, rather than a gift to be contemplatively treasured. As Schindler points out, modernity is thus chiefly characterized by an instrumentalist understanding of nature: 'The result may be summed up in the term instrumentalism: the other (human or nonhuman) – who is now merely an outsider – thereby becomes an instrument for control and manipulation in the interests of the (empty) self' (HWCC, p. 236). And the difficulty is that Christianity has very little it can say to such a vulgar view of existence: any possible ontological point of contact has been cut off at the knees by the acid of the modern reductive spirit, leaving those who still seek a spiritual way out of this jungle vulnerable to the most abject and *ersatz* religious constructions imaginable. Balthasar puts it bluntly: 'But where is the famous point of contact with the *anima technica vacua*? I for one certainly do not know. Some table-rapping, a *séance* or two, some dabbling in Zen meditation, a smattering of liberation theology: enough.'<sup>16</sup> And Balthasar's use of the phrase *anima technica vacua* is, according to Schindler, most apt since 'it suggests that a soul empty of the contemplative is one whose action will take on the form of the machine. The action of such a soul, precisely by virtue of its lack of a *contemplative sense of the other*, will assume the characteristics of externality and extraversion' (HWCC, p. 235). The end result of this process is a modern world captured in a dehumanizing ethos of power-relations, leading Balthasar to conclude:

<sup>16</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilog*, tr. Edward T. Oakes, SJ San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, p. 11.



But whenever the relationship between nature and grace is severed ... then the whole of worldly being falls under the dominion of knowledge, and the springs and forces of love immanent in the world are overpowered and finally suffocated by science, technology and cybernetics. The result is a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation – a world in which power and the profit margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless, the purposeless is despised, persecuted and in the end exterminated; a world in which art itself is forced to wear the mask and features of technique.<sup>17</sup>

What the foregoing makes clear is that everything we have been discussing is more than a foray into the *esoterica* of pointless metaphysical speculation. The historical section of this text in section one had as one of its main goals the attempt to establish historical linkages between our concepts of transcendence and our concepts of immanence. Furthermore, I am also trying to establish that changes in our view of immanence rarely stay sequestered in the realm of the purely conceptual: ideas have consequences, and one of the chief consequences of the loss of a proper 'gift' concept of nature and of our own contemplative-receptive response to this gift, is the concomitant loss of a sense of the world's ontological weight, with all its destructive consequences.

Thus what is clear is that what is at stake is more than the ethical uses of a science that is viewed as otherwise ontologically benign. Rather, what is at stake is the ontology implied by the entire modern scientific enterprise. That is not to say that science is to be rejected in its totality and that we need to return to some premodern condition of prescientific, preindustrial culture. The issue is more complex than that, since it is possible to question whether or not the manner in which modern science has developed is the only possible way it could have done so. Science, as currently understood and practised, implies the ontology bequeathed to it by people like Francis Bacon, René Descartes and Galileo *et al.* Bacon's insistence that scientific knowledge represents the imposition of human power on nature reflects a fundamentally coercive understanding of knowledge and a rather inert view of nature. Likewise, Descartes' dualism and mechanistic view of matter contributes to the same kind of causal extrinsicality and sense of domination over inert matter. Finally, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities in nature by people like Galileo only reinforces the view that only the quantifiable is truly real, consigning the whole realm of the *qualia* to epiphenomenal irrelevance. And while there is an element of truth in all of these assertions, the question becomes one of relative priority: are we to privilege abstracting parts from wholes, quantification, extrinsicality, dualism, mechanism as the basic ontology of science, or can other ways of viewing the scientific enterprise be conceived?

### *B. Nature as Erotic and Oblative*

In order to reconceive the nature of science we need to inquire further into the full implications of the metaphysical position outlined in the last two chapters. One

<sup>17</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), pp. 114–5.

way of doing this is to view the relational-receptive aspect of being as an aspect of the *eros* inherent within worldly being. By this I mean that the receptivity of being is not a mere passivity, as we have seen, but an active openness that is, in fact, a movement toward the good that is the other. Hence, as we have also seen, receptivity is a corollary of the relational nature of love and the movement of our will towards the good. Thus the entire approach we have just outlined bespeaks a fundamental *eros* within nature that eschews monadic concepts of being in favour of dynamic ones. However, as we also saw, this movement of worldly being, grounded in Christ, culminates in an oblation element wherein all worldly forms display the simultaneity of self-possession and self-dispossession. Or put another way, the oblation dimension of existence speaks of self-possession *in* dispossession. Thus, in what follows, I would like to explore the erotic and oblation dimensions of nature in more detail with an eye towards how the ontology inherited by modern science could be developed differently.

### ***1. Interiority, Exteriority and Eros*<sup>18</sup>**

‘There is no being,’ states Balthasar, ‘that does not enjoy an interiority, however liminal and rudimentary it may be.’<sup>19</sup> The modern world has lost sight of the deep mystery that is the existence of each individual object. Under the sway of a mechanistic view of nature the individual objects of our world are reduced to metaphysically flat realities whose full depth of meaning as concrete individuals is swallowed up by the world of cold abstraction. Ironically, it is the radical empiricism of the modern world-view that has spawned a new essentializing of nature where the mystery and beauty of concrete entities is bleached white by the typological imperative of scientific classification, e.g. this particular daisy is merely an example of ‘type A daisies’ and this type of dog is merely an example of its species and so forth. The goal of modern science is the prediction and control of nature thereby privileging what all members of a species share in common rather than accentuating the idiosyncratic incommunicability of their individuality. In other words, the basic ontology of modern science involves the abstracting of parts from wholes. And even though there is a certain validity in this approach for the analysis of nature, there are also grave dangers that often go unmentioned when the truly real is seen only in this process of abstraction. Balthasar states:

If each and every thing were nothing more than an ‘instance of ...’ or a kind of algebraic *x* that could be exchanged for other entities without loss, then things would possess absolutely no intrinsic value of their own as individuals. ... Any knower who grasped the essence of the species of which they are exemplars would immediately comprehend at the same time every individual entity that fell under it: no individual could present him with any further mystery. ... In a world such as this, existence

<sup>18</sup> In this section I am presenting material, in a slightly revised form, that I have published elsewhere. See: Larry Chapp, ‘*Deus Caritas Est* and the Retrieval of a Christian Cosmology,’ *Communio*, XXXIII (Fall 2006), pp. 454–467.

<sup>19</sup> Balthasar, *TL I*, p. 84

would no longer have any meaning, for being would have lost the property that alone gives the possession of being its desirability: unrepeatability, and therefore interiority. In a world such as this, there might still be unsolved problems that knowledge had not yet mastered. But the essential mystery surrounding everything that exists for itself would be nonexistent.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly, Balthasar is not questioning here the legitimacy of scientific classification and description. However, absent a countervailing corrective, there is a steep spiritual and cultural price to be paid for the hegemony of this way of thinking. In Balthasar's approach there is a need to reaffirm that even the simplest inanimate material object possess an existence for itself that resists final reduction into abstraction, and retains a certain spontaneity in the expression of its concrete individuality. He states: 'Even [inanimate things] are not merely a passive prey for knowledge. At work even in them are energies that display themselves externally and thus move from the inside to the outside.'<sup>21</sup> What is at stake here is the full metaphysical weight that is to be given to the concrete entity, a weight that is absolutely essential if we are to maintain our awe and wonder at the sheer facticity of existence. No Christian cosmology is possible in a world that has lost this awe towards the deep mystery of being:

This kind of radical cynicism becomes possible whenever man no longer has a flair for the central mystery of being, whenever he has unlearned reverence, wonder and adoration, whenever, having denied God, whose essence is always characterized by the wonderful, man also overlooks the wondrousness of every single created entity.<sup>22</sup>

This deep mystery of being should not, however, lead us to a radical agnosticism about the possibility of knowing and understanding existence.<sup>23</sup> For in every existent being the deep incommunicability of its inward interiority is further characterized by an *eros* toward exteriorization and communication. To exist is to shine into the world of appearance, into the total sensorium of existence where the interrelated web of materiality opens up a space for the communicating appearance.<sup>24</sup> And what is communicated is nothing short of the reality of the existent being itself. Thus, for Balthasar, there is a deep interconnection between the interior essence of a thing and its outward appearance, between its interiority and its exteriorization. To be sure, the appearance is not merely identical with the essence, but what appears does divulge the interiority which is an act of divestiture on the object's part. This unity of the essence and its appearance allows Balthasar to reach two important conclusions. First, that what appears is a reliable guide to knowing the inner essence of an object, and second, that the unity of the essence and the appearance means that the appearing is an integral and constitutive part of the essence as such, i.e. that the appearance is not an epiphenomenon of no

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 84

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 82

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 85

<sup>24</sup> *TL II*, pp. 228–232

importance to our knowledge of the object and that the habit of modern science since Newton and Galileo to divide reality into primary and secondary qualities is a violation of being. The dualism between what I perceive with my senses and apprehend with my intellect and the way reality truly is in itself leads directly to the modern reductionist world-view where nothing is truly real unless it is quantifiable. But the privileging of the quantifiable aspects of nature over the so-called subjective qualities such as colour and shape ignores the *eros* of nature to communicate itself outwardly just so into the realm of sensible intelligibility. This, of course, constitutes no apologetic in the sense of proof that the reductionist world-view is in fact incorrect. Indeed, the senses of sentient animals developed in an *ad hoc* fashion in direct response to the physical properties of nature, and thus it should come as no shock that there is a fit between the senses and reality. Nevertheless, the issue is deeper than what a foray into evolutionary epistemology can tell us. For the deeper issue is whether the appearance of a thing, i.e. its exteriorization into the world, is epiphenomenal or ontological. For Balthasar, the answer is clear: the ubiquitous presence of the dynamic movement of being, in its temporal becoming and growth in self-possession, is strong evidence for an ontological rather than an epiphenomenal rendering of its importance. Thus, the appearance is never to be dismissed in our total understanding of the object. Balthasar states:

Truth is the unveiling of being insofar as it is, and the living being unveils itself by living its life: it unfolds this meaning stage by stage with an almost exaggerated obviousness. It displays nothing other than itself. No one who has witnessed the unfolding of a plant's life ought to say that he has seen *only* the appearance of life, not its essence.<sup>25</sup>

One can detect here the unmistakable echo of Goethe who rebelled against the scientific distinction between primary and secondary qualities, and who argued strongly for the overall organismic Gestalt in the appearing of an object, especially living objects. This idea, roundly dismissed during his time as a rank romanticizing of nature, is now enjoying a bit of a renaissance, primarily among philosophers of science, but also to a lesser extent among some scientists as well. Leon Kass, for example, reaches startlingly similar conclusions to those of Balthasar in his analysis of the teleology of evolution.<sup>26</sup> Kass would agree with standard neo-Darwinism that evolutionary theory has destroyed both a simplistic Biblicism as well as the Aristotelian universe of eternal, static forms. He further stipulates that differential reproduction, biological variation, and natural selection do not seem to be directly guided by some heteronomous external hand. Rather, the forms of nature have evolved out of the inner energy latent within the material of the cosmos with chance playing an important role in this development. However, Kass would argue that the standard reductionist take on the narrative of life simply begs two important questions. First, Kass points out that the question that goes unanswered in all of these accounts is why survival itself is one of the goals of biological life?

<sup>25</sup> *TL I*, p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> Leon Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs*, New York: The Free Press, 1985, esp. pp. 249–275

Why is survival such a constitutive element of the biological imperative in the first place? Does this fact alone not imply that nature is characterized by a kind of straining out beyond itself into the unspecified field of the future? The very historical nature of evolution only underscores the dynamism and restlessness of the evolutionary story. It also explains why Darwin, and almost all Darwinists since then, are simply incapable of describing evolution without recourse to hierarchical and teleological forms of discourse, no matter how metaphorical the use of such words may be deemed. When new forms appear they unfailingly give the impression of directionality, pointing, once again, in the direction of an *eros* within nature that is striving towards an as yet unspoken completion in some future form. In short, Darwinism leaves unanswered the question of how mere matter, so apparently blind and chaotic, could contain within itself the latent potentiality for all this organization and upward directionality as it unfolds its interiority into the appearance of manifold forms:

Matter must not be thought of simply as inert and passive, as resistance to acceleration, as little billiard balls, as waves or particles, as understandable only externally and through laws of relation. Matter has character; matter has possibility; matter is prefiguratively alive. For all his errors on this subject, Aristotle was perhaps closer to the truth even about matter than are the modern physicists.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, Kass is aware of those who would argue that there is no real increase in nature's complexification over time. All the basic forms of the living world, so the argument goes, had already evolved by around 300 million years ago. All that has happened since then is directionless change, and therefore there has been no upward movement towards greater and greater complexification or even diversification. In response to this argument, all one needs to do is point to the fact that this assertion is demonstrably and empirically false. It scarcely rises to the level of nonsense. For there most certainly was an ontologically significant upward movement when mere chemistry advanced to become life. And there was an upward movement when life became sensate, followed by life that was not only sensate but also had higher level emotions and a rudimentary form of cognition. Finally, the movement within nature from sensate, affective, quasi-cognitive animals to human intelligence is an ontological step forward of enormous significance. To deny that such a breakthrough into self-aware, moral and intellectual cognition is of great evolutionary significance is merely to assume the reductionist world-view in advance. Were there no religious thinkers to contend with, and hence no polemic to be considered, then Dawkins *et al.* would be screaming from the rafters how evolution had managed this great march *upward* from the amoeba to Beethoven. Indeed, in their more unguarded moments, when they forget that people actually do remember what they have said before, they admit as much, as we saw in chapter four.

This leads us to the second question that Kass says most Darwinists simply leave unanswered. Namely, what does the emergence of biological forms tell us about the environment that spawned these forms? Put another way, could it not be said that

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 275.

the reason why first life itself, then vegetative life, then sentient life, then affective life, and finally self-aware spiritual life emerged at all is that there is something about the natural world that evoked them in the first place? Could it be that the reason why life that was sensibly aware of its surroundings evolved is because the world is, after all, sensible? And what about the emergence of intelligence?<sup>28</sup> The mathematical physicist Paul Davies marvels at the fact that not only is the universe scripted in the language of mathematics, but human intelligence also seems uniquely suited to understanding this language – a reality that is indeed serendipitous given the fact that there is nothing in evolutionary theory that says that it had to be so.<sup>29</sup> Along these same lines, the paleobiologist Simon Conway Morris argues forcefully that the all-pervasive presence of the convergence of similar forms among isolated biological populations shows us that the emergence of the basic structures of life, up to and including intelligent life, was a biological inevitability given the constraints imposed upon genetic variation and natural selection by the basic laws of nature.<sup>30</sup> Granted, Morris' viewpoint is controversial, nor does it help that he is a believing Christian in the eyes of his critics. Nevertheless, the evidence he marshals for the idea that the potential for life is built right into the fabric of the cosmos is impressive and cannot be lightly dismissed.

What is being driven at here is the idea that the *qualia* of existence, far from being the poor stepchild of the quantifiable, seem to have arisen as a result of being somehow compatible with something essential in the fabric of nature itself. The outward appearing of the forms of nature, far from being the mere epiphenomena of billiard ball interactions operating out of blind, chaotic chance, emerge instead as integral components of the process. Intelligence evolves because nature is, in fact, intelligible, and flowers bloom because nature is, in fact, sensible. The organismic Gestalt of the appearances in nature arises, as chaos theory teaches us, out of a deep inner drive from within nature itself towards intelligible self-complexification. Seen from this perspective, then, evolutionary theory, far from destroying a metaphysical view of the cosmos, only deepens the mystery; nature, apparently blind and driven by chance, nevertheless is marked by the metaphysical dynamic of the unfolding of interiority into a myriad of exteriorized appearances, all of which are continuing to strain into an as yet unspecified future. Put another way, we could say that nature, even in its simplest structures, seems to have an *eros* for explication, exteriorization, communication and indeed for life itself. As the biologist Arthur Peacocke puts it: 'Somehow biology has produced a being of infinite restlessness, and this certainly raises the question of whether human beings have properly conceived of what their true "environment" is.'<sup>31</sup>

Once again, none of this is offered as an apologetic or as some kind of scientific proof that reductionism is false. What I am offering is an internally coherent and

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp. 273–4.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Davies, *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World*, New York: Touchstone, 1992, esp. pp. 93–116.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Conway Morris, *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Arthur Peacocke, chapter in *Darwinism and divinity: Essays on evolution and religious belief*, edited by J. Durant, Oxford: Blackwell, 1985, p. 123. Quoted in Morris, p. 314.

scientifically plausible counter-narrative to the standard reductionist narrative of modernity. All that I am attempting to prove is that the data of the natural sciences are open to differing metaphysical renderings. The question of the final validity of this metaphysical narrative, as opposed to the reductionist account, will hinge on its broad explanatory appeal, i.e. will hinge on which metaphysical account is the most expansive in the sense of having the greater integrative power in the face of all of the data. For now, however, we must turn to the second aspect of the natural world: its oblation or agapaic dimension.

## *2. Nature as Agape*

Returning to Balthasar's analysis we see that *co-extensive* with the erotic drive of nature to move from interiority to an exteriorization of appearance in a variety of forms, there is also what can only be characterized as a kenotic, agapaic, oblation side of nature. Each existent thing may exist for itself but this should not be read in a monadic, self-enclosed manner. Lower forms of existence are taken up and integrated into higher levels, and all of nature's forms, including human beings, pass away into the dissolution of death, making way for new forms to arise.<sup>32</sup> Balthasar states in a lengthy passage worthy of full quotation:

Perhaps we could see in the whole of this progressive fashioning, which reveals a 'disposition' of simpler forms to be incorporated into, and engulfed by, more highly organized ones – from matter, variously transformed, on and up through the plant and animal forms – a sort of self-effacing readiness to be disposed of, a self-oblation for the sake of the end that was intended from the beginning (É. Dacqué) and that emerges ever more distinctly through the whole 'sacrificial process' of nature (H. André): the pre-formation of the central being, man. For its part, this being, as an 'unfolded and infolded figure', has 'the character of a chalice that opens to receive its actual fulfillment'. If so, it is only in this sacrificial shape that man would be both the embodiment of the universe as well as its dispositive opening to the 'loving sacrificial death' that occurs once and for all when the Word of God becomes incarnate – the death that eucharistically fills up the cosmos with triune life.<sup>33</sup>

Much has been made of the problems for theodicy created by the fact that the evolutionary process is violent – 'red in tooth and claw' as Lord Tennyson put it – and that such violence and suffering militates against any view of a benevolent creator.<sup>34</sup> We do not

<sup>32</sup> *TL II*, p. 229. Balthasar states that this oblation side to existence is seen especially 'in death, through which the finite being, returning to its ground, holds itself in further readiness for something other than itself.'

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 228–229.

<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note here that even in modern evolutionary biology there has been a shift of focus away from the violence of competition as the primary means whereby biological organisms seek to survive, and towards a more relational view that emphasizes the integral role played by social cooperation and symbiotic relationships in survival. Here, as in so many other places in the evolutionary narrative developed by science, the role of culture is critical: it is little wonder that Darwin, living in the era of expansionist colonialism and robber-baron capitalism,



have the time here to plumb the full depths of this critique of theism nor should the full weight of such arguments be minimized. Nevertheless, there is no denying the oblation and sacrificial aspect of the natural world. Everything that exists does so only insofar as it is rooted in a broader world of entities who all communicate with one another in a great interconnected web where every existent thing is in some way, no matter how small and distant, dependent for its existence upon all the others. If evolutionary theory has taught us anything, it most certainly teaches us that the sheer plasticity of the forms of nature speaks of an oblation character to existence, where everything that exists must submit itself and open itself to the shaping forces of the whole. That is why existence for itself can never be viewed in an isolated and monadic fashion; in order to be itself an existent thing must sacrificially pour itself out into the world and allow itself to be taken up by that world and placed in the broader narrative of life. In short, the paradox of *eros* and *agape* in the human realm finds an analogous echo in the physical forms of the cosmos; the *eros* of nature to move out of itself into the exteriority of appearance, must, if it wishes to participate in the world of existent things, give itself up in an *agapaic* sacrifice that is no mere add-on to the essence of the thing but constitutive of its very being. Thus, even in the physical forms of the natural world we see an analogy for the unity of *eros* and *agape* in the single movement of love that is the triune God.

There are only two possible responses to the oblation character of nature's *eros*. Either we now view existence as essentially transitory, ephemeral, cruel and pointless, as all things pass into oblivion, or we view the unity of the erotic and sacrificial aspects of reality as indicative of a deep metaphysical truth about the nature of the cosmos and its ground. Therefore, if the oblation character of existence is not to be viewed as ultimately cruel and tragic, then there must be a point to such sacrifice. Thus the *agapaic* dimension of existence cries out for inclusion in a hierarchical view of being, where the entire sweep of cosmic and biological evolution is seen in a teleological light. Teleology is a dirty word among most evolutionary biologists and cosmologists. It smacks of vitalism and crypto-creationism, leading most biologists to reject it out of hand as incompatible with a naturalistic account of reality. And yet the forms of nature cannot help but evoke from us a clear sense of directionality from the simple, to the complex, to the sentient, to the self-aware, to the moral/spiritual. Even Richard Dawkins begins his book, *The Blind Watchmaker*, by defining biology as the study of those organisms that give the appearance of having been designed.<sup>35</sup> But we must not confuse here the notion of design with complexity of structure or irreducibility of structure. Rather, what marks something off for us as giving evidence of having been designed or, at the very least, giving us the illusory appearance of having been designed, is the element of purposiveness, i.e. does the given form in question have a structure that is uniquely suited for the completion of some task?

Here, Leon Kass again throws some light. Kass notes that it makes no difference whether the purposiveness of an organism is caused by purely natural forces or by

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focused on competition and violent struggle as the primary engines of natural selection. For an excellent recent addition to the literature on theodicy in general see: David Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996, p. 1.



some hidden divine hand. If an organism displays organizational structure that is suited to the unfolding of a purposive function, then it can be said to have, in a certain sense, a teleology:

When considering the functioning of an animal, we ask not only whether it functions in a characteristic way, but whether it functions well or normally as such and such an animal. ... These notions of 'good' and 'well' are, in a way, implied by the notion of 'complete,' 'whole,' and 'functioning'; on the other hand, it may be useful to distinguish 'having a function' and 'performing it well.' This holds for machines, no less than organisms, indeed for anything that works towards an end. *The end is a standard as well as a goal.* Teleological analysis will be concerned both to identify the end and to evaluate how well or badly it is achieved.<sup>36</sup>

Kass goes on to note that as organisms become more complex there emerges a clear sense that the inward principle of organization becomes more integrative and sophisticated, leading to notions of higher and lower forms of existence. Not even Darwin, as we have seen, could avoid the use of such language, and the fact that modern Darwinists persist in the use of such metaphors shows that this habit is more than a hangover from nineteenth century notions of progress – indeed, it is the natural consequence of our observation of the forms of nature. Kass further speculates that this upward directionality shows us a natural world that defies reductionist explanation and is better described as a series of organizational hierarchies that involve qualitative distinctions between levels, with each higher level incorporating lower levels of organization into a new synthesis and integration. Finally, Kass states that there is no way we can avoid the conclusion that the emergence of Man – an organism endowed with the intelligence and freedom required to count as the apex of the hierarchy – is in some way, the goal of this whole movement.<sup>37</sup> Kass therefore comes down on the side of those who would claim that a more traditional metaphysical outlook has more integrative and explanatory power than the reductionist metaphysic.

In an important article, William Stoeger SJ develops further this idea of a teleological orientation in nature by showing in meticulous detail how the course of both cosmic and biological evolution displays a definite directionality.<sup>38</sup> The key for Stoeger is to show how theological and philosophical notions of teleology are, at the very least, compatible with the findings of the physical sciences.<sup>39</sup> Absent this correlation with real science, Stoeger fears that metaphysical speculation will remain just that – speculation. What he sees no evidence for is the idea that there is some kind of scientifically discernible, deterministic blueprint

<sup>36</sup> Kass, p. 257.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. pp. 270–272.

<sup>38</sup> William R. Stoeger SJ, 'The Immanent Directionality of the Evolutionary Process, and its Relationship to Teleology,' in *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology*, pp. 163–190. It should be noted that Stoeger is a scientist who works for the Vatican observatory.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.189. Stoeger states: 'it is not possible to specify from the natural sciences and philosophy alone the ultimate end or goal of the universe, and to elaborate that end or goal at the level of the entities which compose it. This is possible, however, at the level of revelation and our reflection upon it – theology.'

that has been in nature from the beginning as a kind of script for all that follows. Rather, he argues that what modern evolutionary theory shows us is that nature is governed by what he calls a 'flexible determinism', by which he means that nature, in its more proximate operations, is not deterministic and has a variety of statistically relevant directions in which it can move, but in its more remote (future) orientation there is a definite directionality to the path it will take, once the conditions are set by the more proximate operations. Put in more pedestrian language you could say that when you are viewing nature up close and observing its day-to-day operations there appears to be no guiding hand or deterministic script playing itself out. But when you step back and look at the big picture, one sees that nature is not just a chaotic jumble of random events but an ordered whole which operates within the constraints of the laws of nature, constraints which do give to the whole a definite trajectory. He thinks that many in the scientific establishment move too quickly to conclude, based on observations of nature up close so to speak, that there is no directionality to the evolutionary process whatsoever. He begs to differ:

It seems that many writers in this area are quick to conclude that because no specific form is uniquely determined by a given process, the process itself is oriented towards no general class of end products. This is patently incorrect. Given that the regularities and interrelationships of nature are operative, we can always identify a class of ends towards which the process under consideration is directed, within which the specific outcome of a process will inevitably fall.<sup>40</sup>

Similar to Kass, Stoeger views this directionality as hierarchically structured, i.e. nature displays a hierarchical nesting where there is great variability in local operations, but once certain paths are determined by those operations, then the trajectory is established and the entity in question is now taken up into a higher synthesis, where the process begins anew. Furthermore, nature is relational since no entity and its operations is isolated or monadic, and is deeply configured by its constitutive relations with the web of other entities in both its immediate and remote environments. Thus Stoeger adds further weight to the idea that there is an erotic (directional) as well as an oblation (openness to be taking up into a higher synthesis) element to the processes of nature.

Granted, much of this is highly speculative and is the subject of much debate among biologists and physicists. Nor is the concept of the emergence of levels or hierarchies in nature a position that is unique to Kass or Stoeger. Nevertheless, for theological purposes it is enough to note that it is certainly a scientifically respectable position, albeit a minority one. But scientific history is littered with examples of just such minority positions, ridiculed in their inception, gaining acceptance over time. Certainly, theology cannot pretend to dictate a preferred scientific outcome and must wait for the scientific community to reach its own independent conclusions. However, science is not an abstraction and real science always takes place within a culturally influenced medium. Therefore it is not illegitimate for theologians to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 188

suggest scientific research projects that show promise for a more humanistically integrated approach to our intellectual construction of reality.<sup>41</sup>

In concluding this section let us now return to the theological development of this notion in the thought of Balthasar. As has already been noted, Balthasar develops the idea that there is an oblation side to nature where lower forms are engulfed by, and taken up into, the higher forms of existence. But what constitutes lower and higher in this philosophical/theological context? For Balthasar, these terms denote increasing levels of integration between the interior and exterior aspects of being. In this scheme a being is considered higher in the hierarchy of existence when lower forms can be taken up into the higher without their own inner integrity being destroyed. Indeed, the very oblation character of lower forms shines through in the fact that their own inner essence seems to be fulfilled precisely by being taken up and used in this manner. What gives nature its aspect of beauty or grandeur for most observers is this apprehension that the being taken up of lower forms by the higher constitutes no act of violence but seems to be built right into the very *telos* of things. C. S. Lewis makes a similar point in his development of the notion of transposition, where it seems to be the very mark of existence for lower forms to be transposed into higher levels of existence without losing their own inner integrity. Indeed, for Lewis the transposition of the lower into the higher, and the natural into the spiritual, appears to us as both seamless and, at the same time, as discontinuous – a reality that can only be explained if we approach being, in a sense, from the top down:

The Developmentalist explains the continuity between things that claim to be spiritual and things that are certainly natural by saying that the one slowly turned into the other. . . . I am not saying that the natural act of eating after millions of years somehow blossoms into the Christian sacrament. I am saying that the Spiritual Reality, which existed before there were any creatures who ate, gives this natural act a new meaning, and more than a new meaning; makes it in a certain context a different thing. In a word, I think that real landscapes enter into pictures, not that pictures will one day sprout into real trees and grass.<sup>42</sup>

### *C. Nature, Receptivity and the Sacramental-Liturgical Cosmos.*

It would be wrong, in the sense of incomplete, if the foregoing were left where it is. Further theological linkages need to be developed between the erotic-oblation

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, London: SCM Press, 1990. Barbour develops his now classic typology for the relationship between science and religion and identifies four basic models for this relationship: conflict, independence, dialogue and integration. Space prohibits a full discussion of these models. However, Barbour notes that in the dialogue model one of the chief ways that theology can contribute to the scientific enterprise is precisely by suggesting scientific research projects that fit well with the Christian world-view. Theology, of course, would not dictate the outcome and would have to live with whatever conclusions were reached scientifically. Nevertheless, given the fact that science does not exist in a vacuum but moves forward intuitively as well as inductively, it only makes sense that Christian theology should be a player in the formulation of the intellectual matrix in which science is enculturated.

<sup>42</sup> C.S. Lewis, 'Transposition,' in *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 27.

dimension of nature and its true ontological status as a gift that must be contemplatively received. Of special importance is the idea that the directional or erotic side of nature finds completion in an ascending hierarchy of being that is characterized by its final culmination in humanity, i.e. in spiritually aware beings whose entire existence is circumscribed by the Christological form of the Paschal Mystery. In other words, in what follows I wish to develop a Christological/sacramental view of nature itself, but also of humanity's role in nature as its liturgical voice. Furthermore, the oblation side of nature also finds its fulfilment in the sacramental nature of existence insofar as this same Paschal Mystery is, in its essence, the revelation of the receptive/sacrificial fruitfulness of love.

Nature's ascent through various levels or hierarchies is fulfilled in man due to his spiritual capacity not only to physically embody such a transposition of forms – a reality he shares with the lower animals – but also to complete nature intellectually by taking all of existence up into an act of spiritual cognition that not only lifts nature higher by incorporating it into a concept, but also by wedding this awareness to his spiritual capacity to look higher towards God as the ultimate source of existence. Man's capacity for openness to the infinite elevates all of nature into God, as man, microcosm and voice of the whole, liturgically offers the entirety of being, in an act of loving service, to the Creator. Absent this liturgical element to his being, man's conceptualizing of nature can easily degenerate into a grasping and titanic effort to dominate and control. Thus we see that the ecological crisis of modernity was spawned not by the Christian liturgical/sacramental view of the cosmos, but by the Enlightenment's functionalizing and mechanizing of nature for the sake of its exploitation in the capitalist commodification of all of existence. As Balthasar puts it: 'In succumbing to this temptation, man not only forgets that he is not God, to whom he owes his existence both directly and indirectly through nature; he also forgets that, if he is to exist at all, there can never be a moment when he is not already taken out of himself into the world. His body belongs in equal degree to the world and to him.'<sup>43</sup> He then concludes:

We see first that, insofar as man is a product of the sacrificial process of nature, he must at the same time be dispositively open to the descent of the divine difference – concretely, of the self-surrender of the Son in the will of the Father through the Holy Spirit ... Needless to say, what man sees nature living out unconsciously is something that he himself must freely and knowingly understand and appropriate.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Theo-Logic II*, p. 231.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 230. It is critical at this juncture that it be made clear that the Christological teleology of human history and the role of man as the liturgical apex of creation are radically different from any Teilhardian progressivism. The difficulties and controversies surrounding Teilhard's thought are too numerous to go into in any depth here. However, suffice it to say that Balthasar was highly critical of what he considered to be Teilhard's overemphasis upon the confluence of evolutionary history and the coming kingdom of God. Teilhard's system underplays the dramatic element in our relationship with God because it utterly neglects the destructive force of human sinfulness. Thus too, in Teilhard's system, is the cross subsumed under an overarching evolutionary world-view. Thus the entirety of the Paschal mystery becomes, simply, a necessary step in the onward march of anthropogenesis into christogenesis. Teilhard spoke of the march of evolution toward the Christic 'Omega Point' as the gradual 'amorization' of the

As we see in this passage, for Balthasar, man's liturgical openness to the infinite is not only a means for avoiding a false consciousness toward existence, but also an affirmation of the essentially eschatological quality of nature's ultimate *telos*. Man is the apex of creation not as a self-glorifying end-point that remains closed in upon itself, but as the opening of the cosmos to an agapaic/erotic divine descent from above. Man's openness to the infinite points towards the fact that nature's entire *eros* would remain frustrated if man himself were, in fact, the end of the process. The agapaic and erotic dimension of nature finds its completion, therefore, in the triune love of God revealed in Christ. Eros without agape degenerates into a demonic nihilism, while agape without eros sinks into the realm of mere duty.

The essentially eschatological nature of man's openness to the infinite also points to the absolutely pivotal role played by Christian revelation in the West's development of the centrality of the notion of person. For if human personhood is not made in the image and likeness of a divine person, then personhood becomes a mere conceptual construct for the sake of political ends at best, and a mere epiphenomenon of nature to be treated in a cavalier fashion at worst. We cannot have it both ways: if man's personhood is not reflective of a deep metaphysical reality built right into the fabric of existence, then his ultimate dignity stands on shaky ground. If, however, man's personhood is reflective of deeper theological groundings, then we must own up to the fact that nature itself has a personological/eschatological goal. 'The point at issue here,' states Joseph Ratzinger, 'is whether man in his relations to God is only dealing with the reflection of his own consciousness or whether it is given to him to reach out beyond himself and to encounter God himself.'<sup>45</sup> What is at stake is not some esoteric theological speculation about man's role in the cosmos, but an absolutely central aspect of the Christian revelation of who man is, and by extension, what the cosmos is. For if the Christian faith is true, then, 'worship and prayer are not only possible; they are enjoined, that is, they are a postulate of the being 'man' who is open to God.'<sup>46</sup>

In terms of cosmology, then, what opens up in the light of these personological reflections is the true teleology of nature. Commenting on the essentially

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cosmos. However, within the context of our purposes here, one could say that for Teilhard, the agapaic element of love is subsumed by the erotic, just as God's transcendence in His system is subsumed by His immanence. For Teilhard, the immanent/erotic element of nature as a striving for the future is clearly the central determining concept in his theology of evolution. The agapaic or oblativ side of nature is simply viewed as the inevitable pain associated with growth and is, therefore, merely an inner moment within the *eros* of nature, which is primary. For Balthasar the erotic and the agapaic elements of love are utterly co-extensive and coincident with one another. Thus, the need for *agape* to chasten *eros* through a series of renunciations – made especially necessary due to the sinfulness of the human condition and the disordered nature of many of our immanent desires – makes impossible any facile progressivism of human culture. Cf. Balthasar, 'The Spirituality of Teilhard de Chardin: Remarks on the German Edition of *The Divine Milieu*' (an as yet unpublished translation by Edward Oakes, SJ). The original article appeared as, 'Die Spiritualität Teilhards de Chardin,' *Wort und Wahrheit*, 18/5 (1963), pp. 339–350.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1970, p. 116.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

eschatological/Christological nature of the cosmos, Ratzinger speaks of the importance of the personological/Christological dimension in any genuinely Christian cosmology:

Going on from there, one might be tempted to say that the biblical message about the end of the world and the return of the Lord is not simply anthropology in cosmic imagery; that it does not even merely present a cosmological aspect alongside an anthropological one, but depicts ... the coincidence of anthropology and cosmology in definitive Christology, and precisely *therein* portrays the end of the world, which in its two-in-one construction out of cosmos and man has always pointed to this unity as its final goal. Cosmos and man, which already belong to each other ... will become one through their complexification in the larger entity of love that ... steps beyond and encompasses *bios*. Thus it becomes evident here once again how very much end-eschatology and the breakthrough represented by Jesus' resurrection are in reality one and the same thing.<sup>47</sup>

The point I am driving at here is that there is a deep connection between the essence of human personhood as the *imago dei*, and the affirmation that such spiritual interiority is the very goal of nature in its true essence as a sacramental epiphany of the Trinity. Nature is indeed first and foremost gift, and thus the proper posture of all creaturely being before God is receptive adoration of this gift. But only man is capable of giving a true voice to nature's essentially sacramental structure. Everything we have discussed up to this point – nature as gift-reception and its corollary, nature as erotic-oblation – finds its ultimate fulfilment in man as a worshipping being. The biblical witness could not be more clear: man is not first and foremost *homo sapiens*, or even *homo faber*, but rather, he is essentially *homo adorans*. The Second Vatican Council affirmed (*Gaudium et Spes* 22) that it is only in the light of Christ that man is truly revealed to himself. But what, exactly, did Christ reveal as the true measure of man? For it is not as if Christ left us with some kind of discursive theological dissertation on this topic where all questions can be answered in a didactic fashion. No, it is the entirety of the form of the life of Christ as the man who offers to God a perfect sacrifice of love that defines who man is. But this sacrifice on Christ's part is not an act of raw duty, where he enters the world as a kind of Gnostic emissary who, having achieved his goals, returns to God with lost treasure in hand. Rather, his sacrifice of love is meant to restore man to his rightful nature, the nature intended by God from the beginning, and to do so precisely by acting in our place as the new Adam. Thus, the restoration he initiates is precisely that of man as a worshipper of God in spirit and in truth, which was Adam's primary vocation before the Fall.

This latter point needs further elaboration in order for its full significance to be understood. The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann offers in my view one of the most cogent developments of this theme in modern theology.<sup>48</sup> Schmemmann argues that the contemporary religious response to modernity takes one of two forms. First, there is the path of retreat from the world into spirituality.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. pp. 244–5.

<sup>48</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002.

This views the secular world as having no spiritual significance and abandons it as profane. The second is moral activism where the world is taken too seriously as an end in itself and, more importantly, is viewed as a self-enclosed realm of natural causes requiring no reference to God. Thus in the second approach, the contemplative life of liturgical praise of God is deemed a distraction and even as a transcendentalizing enemy of the real goal of religious life: social justice in a purely worldly sense. Both of these approaches end up not truly understanding what the real life of the world is since they both trade in the currency of dichotomous thinking: nature versus grace, God versus world, nature vs. supernature, religion vs. the secular world, the sacred vs. the profane. Neither one takes seriously the idea that, for the Christian, the true meaning of the world, indeed the very essence of the world's life, is to be found in the form of the life of the God-man, who precisely reveals that the original plan for creation knows of no such dichotomy. 'Unless we know,' Schmemmann states, 'the same dichotomy between religion and life, which we have observed in the spiritual solution, remains. Whether we spiritualize our life or secularize our religion, whether we invite men to a spiritual banquet or simply join them at the secular one, the real life of the world, . . . remains hopelessly beyond our religious grasp.'<sup>49</sup>

In contrast, for Schmemmann, the world is first and foremost creation, and as such is the epiphanic and sacramental representation of God. Man is created as a part of this world precisely as a being whose very communion with God is constituted in and through the matter of nature and her forms. Indeed, in the Genesis narrative, God communes with Adam and Eve precisely through the very material life he has given them in the garden of paradise. They are to eat of the fruit of the garden and in so doing take into themselves the world that God has given them. And in so doing, they commune with God in and through this world. But man is also hungry for God and thus he alone among the animals is to bless God for the food he has received. He was created, as Genesis states, to name, and thereby to bless, the creatures of this world out of gratitude to God. Thus man's original vocation is that of a receptive adorer of God, whose sole task is communion with God through honouring and praising him in and through the world. In a wonderful passage Shmemann captures the essence of this idea:

To name a thing, in other words, is to bless God for it and in it. And in the Bible to bless God is not a religious or a cultic act, but the very *way of life*. God blessed the world, blessed man, blessed the seventh day (that is, time), and this means that he filled all that exists with His love and goodness, made all this very good. So the only *natural* (and not supernatural) reaction of man, to whom God gave this blessed and sanctified world, is to bless God in return, to thank Him, to *see* the world as God sees it and – in this act of gratitude and adoration – to know, name and possess the world. . . . The first, the basic definition of man is that he is *the priest*. He stands in the centre of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God. . . . The world was created as the matter, the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 15.



In this beautiful passage we see that for Schmemmann the world cannot be viewed as theologically neutral or profane. It is a fundamentally unchristian approach to ignore 'the primordial intuition that everything in this world and the world itself not only have *elsewhere* the cause and principle of their existence, but are *themselves* the manifestation and presence of the *elsewhere*, and that this is indeed the life of their life, so that disconnected from that epiphany all is only darkness, absurdity and death.'<sup>51</sup> In other words, as with Balthasar, Schmemmann is emphasizing here the constitutive nature for our humanity of our belonging to a world, i.e. he is emphasizing that it is a fundamental violation of our being to seek to find our true home and life elsewhere than in the very structures of finitude, temporality and creatureliness. Our role as the priest, or the liturgical mouthpiece of creation, precludes any view of nature as somehow alien to the spirit of God, as operating according to a set of purely immanent laws that have no epiphanic or sacramental value. It also precludes any view of man that would pit him against nature as something that needs to be conquered or overcome in either a spiritualizing or secularizing direction. Therefore the Christian vision of nature cannot be that of either spiritualizing negation or that of naturalistic absolutizing. The Incarnation does not allow us either one of those paths. The Christian vision of nature is, rather, one of sacramental transfiguration where nature, precisely as nature, becomes more itself, more natural, the more it sacramentally manifests its divine origin. And by extension, man becomes who he is, i.e. becomes more rather than less human, the more he is the very priestly fulfilment of both the erotic and oblation aspects of nature. Man thus becomes more worldly even as he reaches upward to God, and he becomes more God-like even as he grounds himself firmly in the world. Such is the in-betweenness of our existence, not in an alienating or dichotomizing manner, but precisely as the very priest of creation. Thus for the world and for man, the absence of God does not mean we are now free to be more natural or more human, but rather that when the world and man lose God they also lose themselves. As Schmemmann puts it: 'Things treated merely as things in themselves destroy themselves because only in God have they any life. The world of nature, cut off from the source of life, is a dying world. For one who thinks food in itself is the source of life, eating is communion with the dying world, it is communion with death.'<sup>52</sup>

The essence of original sin is our turning away from God and thus turning the world into an end in itself. When the world is treated as an end in itself, without a constitutive orientation to the God who is its source, it becomes a theologically neutral arena where the sheer power of the human will becomes the determining factor. Furthermore, since man is a part of nature he too becomes an object of his own possession, without a fundamental orientation of his will to the Good. Indeed, the Good becomes a completely constructive project itself, a mere anthropological creation of a completely unfettered will. The door is then open for human life as a whole to be viewed as a project of activist mastery over the forces of nature, including man himself. And as the Genesis narrative makes clear, God allows his creatures to pursue this path, the path of ruin, death and destruction.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p. 17.



In classical Christian theology, therefore, the life that was lost by Adam was the life of contemplative adoration of God in and through a natural world thought of as sacramentally charged with the presence of God. In its place arises the very concept of secularity, which Schmemann defines precisely as the rejection of the sacramental view of nature and of man's role in nature as a worshipping being. Schmemann is at pains to point out that the secularity that characterizes the non-sacramental view of nature is not necessarily atheistic and most often is not. Witness the sad phenomenon of modern America where 85 per cent of the population claims to believe in some kind of God, all the while living lives of utter secularity. Thus the sin of Adam is not the sin of atheism, but rather the sin of asserting a false autonomy from God, the sin of asserting all the very dichotomous ways of viewing the God-world relation. The bulk of the historical section of this text was an attempt to discern the path the modern world took down this same path: the path of naturalism and secularism rather than the path of atheism. It was a path forged in the fire of a false view of Transcendence and immanence where God and world are viewed as competitive aliens. The mere fact that secularity and atheism are so often equated is ample testimony to the *de facto* atheism that is at the heart of the secularist denial of nature's sacramentality, i.e. in a world where God is viewed as outside nature, a figure vaguely viewed as the great rewarder of good deeds in the next life, is hardly a God worth engaging. Witness too the number of putative Christians who think that so long as they are good persons, there is really no need to worship God in Church. What is affirmed in such secularized forms of Christianity is nothing other than the essence of original sin as such: the denial of the importance of receptive, contemplative worship as the true meaning of existence. That is why the fact that so many people still claim to believe in God and who still go to Church does not impress Schmemann:

A modern secularist quite often accepts the idea of God. What, however, he emphatically negates is precisely the sacramentality of man and world. ... He may deduce meaning from God and ascribe to God the origin of the world and the laws that govern it. He may even admit without difficulty the possibility of God's intervention in the world's existence. He may believe in survival after death and the immortality of the soul. He may relate to God his ultimate aspirations, such as a just society and the freedom and equality of all men. In other words, he may refer his secularism to God and make it religious ... All this changes nothing in the fundamental secularity of his vision of man and world, in the world being understood, experienced and acted upon in its own immanent terms and for its own immanent sake.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, for Schmemann, it is accurate to say that modern secularism is in fact a Christian heresy, rather than a directly anti-Christian polemic. It is a heresy created by Christians themselves as they dichotomized God and the world and thereby denatured nature as the sacramental presence of God. Neither is this a mere esoteric squabble among theologians, for what is at stake is the very nature of life itself. Secularized Christianity is in fact a reversion to Gnosticism where, ironically, the very affirmation of the world's theological neutrality leads by an

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

inexorable logic to its denigration as a positive obstacle to our communion with God. God is now to be sought in a whole range of alternative spiritualities, all of which have one common theme: the flight from the world of things into the realm of pure spiritual interiority viewed as a flight from the world. The goal is some kind of immediate experience of God in the depth of the soul that bypasses the Covenant God's clear intent to sojourn with man in and through the historical structures of the world. And this flight from materiality, from the world, is also a flight from man himself, as the body comes to be viewed as a tool for the soul to be manipulated at will, and bearing no constitutive sacramental meaning in and of itself.

The sacraments of the Church are also casualties in this abandonment of the world and the movement of the soul inward. Now cut off from their true nature as the intensification and focalization of the world's sacramentality, they become magical cultic rituals whose significance as sacred must be strictly delineated from the realm of the profane. Rather than being viewed as the focalized presence of the cosmic Christ – where the Christological life of the world is made manifest and known – they degenerate into just one more cultic religious act similar in all ways to the cultic rituals of other religions. Thus are the Christian sacraments denatured and domesticated, and now fall prey to the voluntarist and relativist understanding of religion as a therapeutic tool to help us become better participants in an essentially secular world. And once we discover that there are actually therapeutic paths that are, in reality, more helpful to us in this secular sense – be they religious paths (like Zen meditation) or secular paths like exercise, holistic medicine, and psychological counselling – then the Christian sacraments can be casually discarded as superstitious remnants of our benighted past.

Thus Schmemmann agrees with Schindler and Balthasar: the world, in order to be truly world, must first be viewed in truth for what it is: a pure gift from God which must be received in humble adoration in order for it to be true active communion. Gift-reception is the motif of all Christian sacramental life and it reminds us of the true life of the world. Thus the form of this world, its intelligibility, is the very life of the Paschal Mystery. Absent this, the world is abandoned and becomes an unredeemable domain of death. Matter becomes merely material rather than being the domain of Spirit's transformation. We were to be the agents of this transformation, but we chose to live non-eucharistically in a non-eucharistic world, a world of mere matter. Cult or religion is the way in which man has attempted to seek after the God for which he still hungers but cannot find in such a secularized world. Thus religion often contributes to our alienation because the form it has taken is often in the direction of dividing the sacred and the profane. Jesus does not come to found a new religion but to inaugurate a new way of life.<sup>54</sup> But the classical forms of religion, by abandoning the sacramental meaning of the world, contribute to our alienation by normalizing worldly death and making it the true mark of material reality, while focusing our eyes on an other, worldly form of life that is truly alien to our real life in this world. In other words, without Christ, without a sacramental Christological

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. pp. 19–20

view of the world, without an engagement with the world that finds it to be the place of our communion with God, the place of our redemption, our true home, we are left only with the religious option of viewing the decay and death of this world as the last word on the cosmos rendering it non-eucharistic and immune to transfigurative transformation. As Schmemmann puts it, powerfully:

To accept God's world as a cosmic cemetery which is to be abolished and replaced by an other world which looks like a cemetery ('eternal rest') and to call this religion, to live in a cosmic cemetery and to dispose every day of thousands of corpses and to get excited about a just society and to be happy! – this is the fall of man. It is not the immorality or the crimes of man that reveal him as a fallen being; it is his positive ideal – religious or secular – and his satisfaction with this ideal. This fall, however, can be truly revealed only by Christ, because only in Christ is the *fullness of life* revealed to us, and death therefore becomes awful, the very fall from life, the enemy. It is *this world* (and not any other world), it is *this life* (and not some other life) that were given to man to be a sacrament of the divine presence, given as communion with God, and it is only through this world, this life, by transforming them into communion with God that man *was to be*.<sup>55</sup>

But here it is terribly important for our understanding of worldly form to understand what Schmemmann means by the sacramentality of the world. As mentioned above, for Schmemmann, the sacramentality of the world means that it is a eucharistic world, i.e. a world characterized by its inner sacramental orientation to give thanks to God in the form of Christ. But what is the form of Christ? Christ, who is the very life of the world, was rejected and killed by the world. And his crucifixion is not in the past as some distant event now to be replaced by activism for the world in terms of the moral message he left us. Christ is still and will always be present to the world as the crucified and risen one. And it is this presence of the cosmic/crucified Christ (the Lamb who was slain) that marks the very identity of the form and life of the world as well. In other words, the modern world seeks to define reality within the categories of the strictly quantifiable, but in so doing it sets its sights too low, and in this narrow focusing of our intellectual eyes, we lose sight of the true form of the world. Thus when the world rejected Christ, it rejected itself and doomed itself to death. Furthermore, our modern predicament is more dire than we think since there is no going back after the advent of the death of Christ to some kind of neo-paganism. The genie is out of the bottle and Christ has forever killed the gods. So the alternative we face is either the acceptance of Christ or nihilism: having killed Christ, the world has also killed its only possible spiritual path forward. In the words of the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart: it is Christ or Nothing. In contrast to the world's despair, the Christian Eucharist is the gift of Christ's life as the crucified and risen one. It is not merely a new cult or liturgy, a new way of demarcating sacred from profane. It is, rather, the focalization of the sacramental-eucharistic form and life of the natural cosmos as well. When Christ rose he ceased to be a strictly historical part of this fallen natural world. But in ascending he can now give us his eucharistic form of life. Thus the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 100.

Christian Eucharist does require us to remove ourselves from this world, not as a spiritualizing flight from the profane world and into the realm of the sacred, but rather in order to ascend to the Father as Christ did and to partake of this new life. Only then can we return to the world, for the sake of the world, for the life of the world: a world whose very form is marked by the intelligibility of the Lamb who was slain.

#### *D. The Form of the World*

At this juncture, and before we can draw this chapter to a close, we must now return to the question addressed in the historical section of this text where we raised the issue of form and its loss in the modern world. In order to address this question anew, in the light of the past two chapters, it is important to ask two deeper questions: 1) Has the modern world really rejected the concept of form, or has it merely replaced the classical conception of form with a modern one?; and 2) In response, is it not more pertinent to develop a Christian *theological* concept of worldly form rather than attempt a purely philosophical retrieval, precisely in order to protect a properly philosophical metaphysic from an endless dialectic between static essentialism and reductive materialism?<sup>56</sup>

With regard to the first question it becomes clear that modern science is the dominant voice in our attitude toward the question of form. In this view, it seems to be the case that all classical concepts of form are dead and gone forever; the static and essentialist world-view of the medievals has been decisively rejected in favor of the mechanistic and reductionist materialism of modernity. However, if we change our focus from the concept of 'form' to the concept of 'intelligibility', our perspective changes. For it is simply not the case that modern science gives us a vision of a purely random and chaotic cosmos where everything that happens does so in a jumble of conflicting interactions lacking any coherence whatsoever. There is indeed randomness and chance in the process of evolution, but this randomness is not a pure chaos since the various chance interactions that take place in the natural order do so within the overarching constraint of the laws of nature and the limitations placed on chance by the parameters of the various structural features of

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<sup>56</sup> Of course, this raises all kinds of methodological questions with regard to the proper relationship between theology and philosophy; too many, in fact, to go into at length here. In what follows I am proceeding under the assumption that there is such a thing as Christian metaphysics which means, among other things, that philosophy has a legitimate autonomy from theology, but that it recognizes its own incompleteness without an eventual fulfillment in theology. Thus the Christian philosopher will pursue philosophical research with the same methodological rigor and integrity as non-Christian philosophy, but that he will do so with an openness to theological determinations. What this means is that Christian philosophy will not be averse to picking up avenues of research that theology suggests to it. Indeed, the Christian philosopher will understand that, since Revelation is true, theology is a natural ally in the quest for truth wherever it is found. Hans Urs von Balthasar goes so far as to say that it is Christian Revelation alone that will, in the future, be the only guarantor and protector of a genuine metaphysics of being in the face of the modern world's relentless anti-metaphysical empiricism.

entities and organisms that have come into existence as the result of previous interactions. Furthermore, since all entities and organisms exist in a dynamic, relational interplay with their environment, the various factors structured into this exchange also constrain the role of chance. William Stoeger concludes from this that it is incorrect to describe the evolutionary process as the product of pure chance, and notes with regard to both cosmic and biological evolution that: 'though its actual course is indeterminate, its general course towards complexity, ... given the hierarchies of global and local conditions which are given, can be interpreted as inevitable in the universe in which we live.'<sup>57</sup>

Thus there is an intelligibility that emerges in the natural order that gives to the natural world its precise characterization as a unified cosmos. All modern science is predicated upon just such an intelligibility in nature, as well as upon the deep conviction that the universe is an ordered whole, a genuine cosmos. Therefore it is not at all a stretch to claim that modern science does affirm some concept of form. However, instead of the static forms of Aristotelian science, we see the affirmation of the form of reason and intelligibility in science's quest for the efficient causes that govern natural interactions. This may be an impoverished sense of causation, but it is not, for all that, a simple denial of the intelligible coherence of structured existence. Therefore all modern science is predicated upon the metaphysical assumption that the universe is indeed intelligible, and that human reason has a connatural ability to plumb the depths of this cosmic rationality. The physicist Paul Davies has been making this point for years as he points out that the language of the universe is mathematics and that it is indeed serendipitous that the human mind just happens to possess the ability to interpret this language, a situation that is in no way necessitated by the laws of nature.<sup>58</sup>

These insights are given further weight by the studies of Ilya Prigogine and others with regard to the self-complexifying nature of the cosmos. Prigogine won the Nobel Prize for his studies in nonequilibrium thermodynamics where he shows how disorder and chance on one level of being can give rise to new levels of organization and coherence. The science involved in his analysis is too technical to go into detail here, but suffice it to say that the upshot of such studies is to point out, once again, that nature does indeed tend towards order which arises precisely out of the interplay between chance and the laws of physics. It would seem, in other words, that what modern physics is discovering (rediscovering?) is that nature does evince a strong predilection toward ordered directionality, even if such directionality cannot be predicted in advance. Thus what modern science itself seems to be indicating is that we do indeed live in a genuine cosmos, i.e. within an ordered and intelligible whole, where the sum of the chance interactions of nature is greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>59</sup> The modern scientific concept of form is therefore to be found in this emphasis upon mathematical intelligibility, the rationality of efficient causes, and the structured/ordered nature of the whole cosmos.

<sup>57</sup> William Stoeger, *Immanent Directionality*, p. 180.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Paul Davies, *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.

<sup>59</sup> Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos*, New York: Bantam Books, 1984.

This emphasis upon the cosmos as an ordered whole leads us to the second question. Namely, is it not perhaps best to develop a theological concept of form rather than a strictly philosophical one? To begin our answer let us return to Schmemmann. For how is Schmemmann's sacramental/epiphanic cosmology, or any similar theological cosmology, any different from the older medieval cosmologies of form? Is Schmemmann's view nothing more than a kind of Platonic revival sharing in all the problems of that approach? The crucial difference, it seems to me, is precisely in Schmemmann's Christological reduction of the question as we just outlined it. It is true that for Schmemmann the cosmos is an epiphanic and sacramental manifestation of God. However, where he differs from medieval approaches is in his development of the full implications of the fact that creation resides within the Logos, i.e. rather than focusing on the question of divine exemplars and the manner in which creation reflects those exemplars in a rather static fashion, he chooses instead to emphasize the connection between the immanent Logos and the Incarnation. In other words, if one locates creation within Christ, then one must view this location within the context of the full economy of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. And when one does this, the entire nature of the form of the cosmos as the sacramental presence of this economy changes.

How does it change? Specifically, it changes because what opens up is a new twofold awareness: 1) there emerges a deeper theological understanding of what constitutes the true form of the world; and 2) there emerges an awareness that humanity now takes on a constitutive role in the very construction of what we mean when we say that nature is a cosmos. With regard to the first point, we have already noted throughout this chapter the many ways in which the 'receptive-gift' quality of nature finds its true home in Christ. Furthermore, we have underscored how this receptive-gift quality of nature is also characterized by an erotic-oblative, interior-exterior dynamic that finds its deepest analogue in the death and resurrection of Christ. So there is no need to labour these points here. However, it should be noted, with regard to the specific question of form, that this deeper understanding of the world as analogously related to the form of Christ carries within itself an insight into how the concept of form can be retrieved in a modern setting. For if the chief obstacle to the concept of form is its static quality and in its introducing into nature forms of causality that go beyond efficient causation, then the theological relating of the form of the world to the form of Christ can point our way out of this thicket of issues. In short, what we now seek is a Christological intelligibility in our approach to nature, rather than an exclusive emphasis upon worldly forms as based upon static, divine exemplars.

Jose Granados points out that there are two stages to God's creative action.<sup>60</sup> First, there is the classical understanding of creation as the imparting of being and of a certain form and structure for that being. However, even in the early Church Fathers we find that this creative act is not complete unless we also view it in its linkage to the redemption wrought in Christ. Here we see the dynamic entry of

<sup>60</sup> Jose Granados, 'Love and the Organism: A Theological Contribution to the Study of Life,' *Communio*, XXXII (Fall, 2005), pp. 435–471.

God into time and history where, among other things, we find the affirmation of the positivity of creaturely difference in the hypostatic union, i.e. the union of the divinity and humanity in Christ does not efface or obliterate or absorb the humanity into the divinity. Rather, the specific reality of humanity, and indeed of all material creation, is assumed into God without losing its integrity as creaturely. This is all made possible, as we have seen, by the fact that God is always already a trinitarian unity-in-distinction through the relations of the divine persons. Thus the positivity of the world's being, precisely as world, finds its ground in God who is nothing other than an infinite positivity of distinction. But just as in God, where the positive distinctions are a function of the divine love and not a mere mechanics of divine motion, so too in the world the goal of all creaturely being is freely chosen communion, first with the entire nexus of creaturely being, but also with God himself.

Thus for Granados and the early Fathers, the second stage of creation is the full explication of what the original forms imply: the gradual, dynamic movement towards greater and greater self-possession through transcending the self in that which is other. Granados draws upon the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg who develops a biblically grounded theology of the divine Spirit as a kind of divine field (analogous to the causative role played by fields in modern quantum physics) that is immanent to creation and moves it through a dramatic interplay of freedoms. This is no pantheistic *élan vital* but the dynamic presence of a God who is so wholly other that he can be the non-other, i.e. that which is most intimate within a creature without destroying the creature's worldly integrity. Thus, as Robert Barron puts it, God's transcendence is a non-competitive transcendence that is able to act upon the world in a non-interventionist manner because the world is always already open to such movement due to the fact that its inner being is already marked through and through by the gift-reception modality of love.<sup>61</sup>

The Spirit of God is therefore given gradually to creaturely being in direct proportion to its metaphysical level of existence. And as the world unfolds in its dynamic evolution, the Spirit of God accompanies creation on its upward journey towards spiritual self-possession in humanity. The various forms of the world are therefore neither static nor mere epiphenomenal descriptors which the human mind attaches to them. The dynamic fluidity of natural forms resists any static essentializing, but they most certainly exist in the manner of a metaphysical intelligibility. What I mean by this is that worldly forms are real in the sense that organizational self-identity and relational *ekstasis* impart to creaturely beings a real participation in the intelligibility of self-sacrificing love. All creaturely forms thus find their substantial intelligibility precisely in and through the very historical fluidity of their relational interactions. This is a deep paradox since we are accustomed to thinking of substantial reality and dynamic fluidity as metaphysically bi-polar realities. But this worldly paradox finds its ground in the paradox of the intratrinitarian divine relations, where God is infinite self-possession precisely in

<sup>61</sup> Robert Barron, 'A Reflection on Christ, Theological Method and Freedom,' in *How Balthasar Changed My Mind*, Rodney Howsare and Larry Chapp (eds), New York: Crossroad, 2008, pp. 9–25.



and through an infinite self-dispossession. In other words, as we have seen, there is no static divine substance that stands behind the trinitarian relations. Rather, God's substance is nothing more than the series of personal relations where there is a coincidence between wealth and poverty. Thus worldly form stands in this same paradox and gains its metaphysical intelligibility as form precisely through the fluid and dynamic movement of being in time. And the Spirit of God is also present in this formal movement through time, as the redemptive fire of love beckoning creation to ever-higher levels of participation in this trinitarian paradox.

Note well what I am not saying here. I am not claiming that it is now impossible to retrieve the classical Thomistic concept of form and that this needs to be replaced with the theological model I am proposing. Indeed, I think it is possible to develop the Thomistic philosophical model for form in some interesting and creative directions. But I will leave that to the philosophers. What I am saying however, precisely as a theologian, is that any such philosophical development of the Thomistic view must, within the ambit of a Christian cosmology, take due note of the insights of Revelation. For as I stated at the outset, our task as Christian thinkers in the modern world is the development of a counter-wisdom or counter-narrative to the reductive wisdom provided by modern science. Our task will thus remain woefully incomplete – and therefore unsuccessful – unless it is a fully integrative endeavor, which means, among other things, that the truth of Revelation cannot remain bracketed for long. Thus, any Christian metaphysics of form must seek out the various ways in which worldly form bears the imprint of the Trinitarian life of God poured forth in the full economy of Christ's redemptive action.

A further caveat is in order here and one that will lead us into our final topic. It is important to understand that the upward movement of worldly forms toward fulfilment in human spiritual self-possession is by no means a straight and steady path. For the Christian narrative of redemption is also the narrative of sin. And if what we have been saying about the sacramental nature of worldly being is true, then the most significant aspect of finite existence is its orientation towards the creation of free moral/spiritual beings, capable of communion with God. Thus in general it can be said that human sinfulness harms this natural capacity of nature by thwarting this orientation in a most fundamental way. In other words, the mentality of our modern scientific culture is that the most significant aspect of nature is the realm of the strictly quantifiable, with human moral awareness relegated to a purely subjective epiphenomenal quality, a mere human construct and projection. The contention here, however, is that this is exactly wrong and the reverse is in fact true: the realm of the quantifiable is an important but ultimately lower level reality, with the human domain of moral and spiritual qualities ranking at the top of the metaphysical food chain. So any discussion of the form of the world would be incomplete without at least a cursory glance at the reality of sin.

The reality of human sinfulness affects worldly being in three significant ways.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> For the following analysis of original sin I will be following loosely the analysis of the theologian Michael Schulz in: "Fallen" Nature: How Sin Affects the Creation,' *Communio*, XXIX (Fall 2002), pp. 490–505.



First, and perhaps most obviously, human sinfulness affects individual persons and their own ability to engage in the fullness of their vocation as receptive and worshipping beings. Second, in a more general sense, the doctrine of original sin points to the universality of a spiritual/moral defect in the entirety of the human race, which diminishes our corporate vocation to be the liturgical voice of the cosmos. Third, and allied with the second reason, human sinfulness actually makes the world less distinct from God even as it increases our alienation from God, i.e. human sinfulness harms the world's form precisely as a true reality in its own right distinct from God's being. The first effect of sin is rather straightforward so we will not deal with it further. However, effects two and three require further elaboration.

The second effect – original sin and its consequences – requires a brief defence of the doctrine itself, since it has come under increasing fire in recent years. I will prescind from the exegetical questions concerning the proper interpretation of Genesis on this matter, and focus instead on the logic of the doctrine itself. The chief theological warrant for some version of original sin, it seems to me, is that its denial involves one in an unavoidable ontologizing of evil. This ontologizing can take many forms, but four approaches stand out. First, there are those who would simply equate finitude itself as necessarily involved, by definition, in limitation. The limitedness of finitude necessarily implies a limitation on our intellectual and moral abilities as well, leading to the conclusion that the evils we see around us are the inevitable by-product of the very idea of creation. Thus what God creates is inherently oriented towards evil in a constitutive fashion, since it is metaphysically embedded in the very idea of finitude. Unfortunately, this ontologizes evil, since the evil of the world must be part of God's direct intention in creating, if the very idea of finitude is inextricably bound up with evil. Furthermore, redemption in this scheme can only mean an overcoming of finitude and final absorption into the infinite life of God. This view, then, ultimately dissolves the metaphysical significance of worldly forms precisely as finite and renders the very notion of finite creatureliness otiose. It is hard to see how this could be reconciled with a proper Christian view of existence.

The second way that evil is ontologized is subtler than the first. In this view, what God creates is initially good and the finite forms of the world are good precisely as finite and worldly. However, from our current historical vantage point we can engage in a little theological hindsight and affirm that it was inevitable that every single human being would commit some kind of sin. This view could be called therefore the 'de facto awareness of the inevitability of sin' approach. And over time, the cumulative effect of these personal sins snowballs, and creates deformed human social structures that institutionalize sin and make it virtually impossible for any single human being to resist.

This approach sounds plausible but it masks some serious theological defects. First, there is the very notion of freedom that it seems to imply, for it would seem to require a rather neutralist understanding of the human will as equally oriented to the dual possibilities of good and evil. But why, in a Christian view, would this be so? Surely, as almost the entirety of the Christian tradition makes clear, God created human freedom with an anterior orientation to the good. If he didn't, then the choice of individual humans for evil would hardly seem blameworthy if God

directly created human nature with an anterior *neutrality* towards the very concept of the good. But once again, this seems to ontologize evil, since at the very least it would seem that God has created a world with a constitutive *indifference* towards the preference of good over evil. Thus this approach seems in significant ways simply to beg the question, for it would seem that it fails to give us an adequate Christian theological justification for why human beings incline towards sin in the first place, without involving God in the direct willing of an evil condition. But that is precisely what the doctrine of original sin is meant to do, so this theory seems inadvertently to give us a backdoor entryway into the very doctrine it presumes to dislodge.

Furthermore, despite the snowball effect of personal sin, it does not seem reasonable to assume that all human beings would necessarily succumb to its influence. Would not someone arise who would find the inner resources to overcome cultural influences, no matter how ingrained? For one of the consequences of denying original sin is precisely the denial that our root freedom has been metaphysically compromised. Therefore this denial requires an affirmative corollary: outside of our culturally ingrained evil habits, our freedom remains as metaphysically neutral toward the choice between good and evil as it did in the beginning. Thus, once again, this approach seems to beg the question of exactly why it is impossible for anyone to swim against the tide. Michael Schulz summarizes this point nicely:

Such a claim is difficult to reconcile with the original emphasis upon man's freedom. In any case, it remains always thinkable that certain individuals will decide to swim against the tide of sin. Hence the question arises: Why can there not be a similar snowball effect of goodness and friendship with God? The Pelagian resonance of the above idea – namely, that the subjective consent to the destructive power of sin first grounds one's being as a sinner – is avoided to the extent that we make clear that man's fallen condition *a priori* and *interiorly* determines the actualization of freedom. It is also important that one does not think of this interior formation through evil as merely the passing on of bad habits. The essence of original sin consists in a deficient condition; namely, not being able to live in the original power of divine love towards God, his creation and one's neighbour and therein to bring about the good in an unqualified sense. Furthermore, this fallen situation must be referred back to man's origin if we are to make its universality plausible.<sup>63</sup>

The third way in which the denial of original sin ontologizes evil is the attempt to describe creation as an act whereby God imposes order upon an already existing chaos. Such approaches usually deny that Scripture affirms a creation *ex nihilo* and view the latter as a later philosophical imposition upon the more original biblical witness. The world is co-eternal with God in some form and has a natural inertial tendency towards disorder and chaos. Thus God must struggle to impose order, and every single human sin is merely our participation in the natural tendency of the world towards chaos. This view would apparently not ontologize evil since it does not usually affirm creation *ex nihilo*. However, this is beside the point. In

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. pp. 492–93.

any properly Christian view of the world, the cosmos must be viewed as created; whether *ex nihilo* or from all eternity matters little. For to affirm the eternity of a world vis-à-vis a non-creator God, who struggles against the forces of chaos latent within such a world, is to create a mythological view of God who is juxtaposed to a world that exists in its own right, independent of God's agency. Furthermore, to say that this view is more scriptural is to fall prey to a naïve biblical fundamentalism that does not take into account form critical analysis of the Genesis creation narrative, nor of the latter's ongoing appropriation and development in later sections of Scripture. If one were to engage in a more sophisticated exegesis, one would then see the Genesis narrative as preserving certain mythic modes of speaking, even while pointing towards a deeper fulfilment in the full theological register of high Jewish Monotheism. And given the context in which this narrative was written (sometime around the Babylonian exile), the mythic elements can be viewed as a kind of anti-mythic Jewish theological rejoinder to Babylonian creation myths.

Finally, the fourth way that the denial of original sin ontologizes evil is in a decidedly modern, evolutionary narrative. In this view sin is completely naturalized as part of the very processes of evolution, where a certain egoistic selfishness is genetically hard-wired into us owing to the nature of evolution as a dog-eat-dog struggle for survival. Elements of altruism can also emerge, genetically, but this is a bit of a ruse since the orientation to sacrifice one's self for the group is still nothing more than a genetic strategy to guarantee the survival of one's progeny. There is no genetic, evolutionary impulse to live altruistically for humanity in general or for the stranger. This accounts for the widespread incidence in human history of war and genocide. Thus the basic orientation of human nature remains selfish, and this is what we mean by sin. Redemption in this view is also completely naturalized. Salvation consists in the moral betterment of the human race through a general overcoming of our basic Darwinian inclinations. Thus in theory one does not even need God for salvation since it could just as easily be achieved, if not more so, through genetic engineering and better living through chemicals. However, among its sincere Christian proponents, this view tends toward a kind of Teilhardian mysticism where the entire process of evolution is viewed as a dynamic of gradual humanization culminating in the perfect man, Christ.

Unfortunately, such approaches imply a certain antagonistic dualism between our biological nature, which is viewed as inherently selfish, and our spiritual nature, which becomes the agency whereby we gradually trump our biological heritage. Furthermore, it ontologizes evil since it makes God's chosen path of creation – evolution – constitutively oriented towards evil. This approach is often also linked to the first approach – the notion that finitude implies limitation – when it affirms that it is simply impossible for God to create a world that is self-developing that does not involve these kinds of evils. That is why I sometimes characterize this approach as 'in order to make an omelette you have to crack a few eggs', i.e. the creation of a self-developing world will necessarily involve these little speed bumps and mishaps and tendencies because the end – salvation in Christ (the omelette) – certainly justifies these means.

Thus the doctrine of original sin emerges as the only viable theological option for

affirming the fundamental goodness and integrity of creation, the anterior orientation of our wills in our original state towards the good, the complete goodness of God *and*, therefore, the *tragedy* and *unnaturalness* of sin. The doctrine of original sin is therefore in its essence the Church's definitive rejection of the naturalizing of sin. We have already stated in our analysis of Schmemmann that original sin is best defined as the loss of our *natural* orientation to live towards God, in and through the world, and of our need to fulfill our *nature* through the contemplative adoration/worship of God. Original sin entails the loss of these *natural* orientations and thus further diminishes our ability to act as the liturgical mouthpiece of creation. However, it also needs to be emphasized that the effect of sin is so pervasive within us that it becomes difficult to discern even the full meaning of sinfulness itself. Thus even our thoughts about what constitutes the truly natural within us needs to be redeemed, since in our postlapsarian condition it is difficult to differentiate between that which is truly a part of our nature and that which is a distortion of our nature. Philosophy is of some help in this endeavor, but absent a definitive revelation from God, it is difficult to see how the human mind would ever have conceived of the idea that evil is completely unnatural for the human being.

'Accordingly,' states Michael Schulz, 'thinking itself requires a historical redemption from sin.'<sup>64</sup> Thus it is only in the light of the universal cosmic horizon provided in the Revelation of God in Christ that the forms of this world can be properly conceived. Human thought about finite entities, especially in the nominalist mentality provided by modern science, will remain hopelessly fragmentary and unable to appreciate the deep formal intelligibility within the objects of the world because it lacks this universal metaphysical orientation towards the God of Jesus Christ. And classical Aristotelian/Thomistic metaphysics, despite its orientation towards a Transcendent goal, cannot fully counter this nominalist impulse, owing in great measure to the Hellenizing, static essentializing in its method. Thomists will object to this broad generalization and point to Thomas' sophisticated account of the act of being as being dynamic rather than static. But even granting this point, the fact remains that Thomas' epigones created a scholastic intellectual tradition that was ill equipped to deal with the historical fluidity and dynamism of modern evolutionary thought. Thus many modern Thomists are aware that his approach must be updated in order to tease out of his method the relational and personological orientations of worldly forms.<sup>65</sup> What is emerging, therefore, even within modern Thomistic metaphysics, is an awareness that nature, in order for the formal intelligibility of finite entities to be preserved, requires a universal, Christological-eschatological horizon where the forms of the world acquire substantial reality precisely as receptive beings whose being is from another and towards another. Thus the universal horizon provided by Christ is no mere theological idealism where all particular objects are absorbed into a grand conceptual scheme of some kind. Rather, what opens up is the relational and

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 496.

<sup>65</sup> For an excellent example of a development of Thomistic thought along these lines see: Norris Clarke, *Person and Being*, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993.

personological dimension where static substance is redefined as substance that exists always already through a series of relational complementarities, both in the world and, ultimately in God. The forms of this world are thus only intelligible within this personological and eschatological horizon. Joseph Ratzinger, puts it as follows:

In this idea of relativity in word and love, independent of the concept of substance and not to be classified among the accidents, Christian thought discovered the kernel of the concept of person, which describes something other and infinitely more than the mere idea of the individual. Let us listen once again to St. Augustine: 'In God there are no accidents, only substance and relation.' Therein lies concealed a revolution in man's view of the world: the undivided sway of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality. It becomes possible to surmount what we call today 'objectifying thought'; a new plane of being comes into view. It is probably true to say that the task imposed on philosophy as a result of these facts is far from being completed.<sup>66</sup>

This personological horizon therefore necessitates the positive reality of worldly forms. In a pantheistic or Hegelian dialectic the realm of the personal, and thus the realm of the individual as well, is swallowed by the abstracting concept. Only Christianity, with its emphasis upon the ultimacy of personal existence, can also raise the positive existence of individual forms into a higher synthesis of Spirit and matter that does not negate the latter, but rather, affirms its true inner meaning. Finite forms, despite existing substantially as receptive relationalities, thus retain a true independent existence, justifying a realist metaphysics and an epistemology that begins in the senses. Ratzinger again summarizes this beautifully in a passage worthy of full citation:

This confirms once again the infinite precedence of the individual over the universal. ... The world is in motion towards unity in the person. The whole draws its meaning from the individual, not the other way about. Perception of this also justifies once again Christology's apparent positivism, the conviction ... that makes one individual the centre of history and of the whole. The intrinsic necessity of this positivism here becomes apparent afresh: if it is true that at the end stands the triumph of spirit, that is, the triumph of truth, freedom and love, then it is not just some force or other that finally ends up victorious; what stands at the end is a countenance. The omega of the world is a 'you', a person, an individual. The all-encompassing complexification, the unification infinitely embracing all, is at the same time the final denial of all collectivism, the denial of the fanaticism of the mere idea, even the so-called 'idea of Christianity'. Man, person, always takes precedence over the mere idea.<sup>67</sup>

However, as Ratzinger goes on to note, this movement of all worldly forms toward the eschatological horizon of the person who is Christ is no mere automatic process. As we have already seen, if the inward teleology of all worldly forms is

<sup>66</sup> *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 132.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p. 247.

toward fulfilment in the spiritual self-possession of man, then this process is characterized first and foremost by man's free relation to God. Thus, it is the dynamic and dramatic interplay of freedoms – human and divine – that determines the fate of the cosmos. There is no cosmos at all without man's free, conscious decision to orient himself, as a part of the world and as its liturgical voice, towards his priestly role within creation. Unless man retains a fundamentally theocentric posture then he will lose the cosmos as well. Thus it is no flight of metaphorical imagination to say that God's universal relation to the world is constituted by man's free decision, and that the world loses its status precisely as cosmos when, under the sway of original and personal sin, man turns away from God. Returning then to the analysis of Michael Schulz:

In terms of the perspective of natural science and the philosophy of nature it is therefore not simple nonsense or mere fantasy to consider the cosmos in the light of human relation to the ground of all being. If the cosmos receives its ultimate determination only in man and in man's relation to the creator, we cannot help but conclude that the cosmos is affected by salvation history or the concrete form of the relation between God and man. Thus man's sin also has implications for the world. There is such a thing as a fallen world, a world that falls away from itself, only within the context of a human freedom that rejects and obstructs the relating of finitude back to God.<sup>68</sup>

Finally, we return to our discussion of original sin and note that the last consequence of sin for the forms of worldly being is that, in the light of the positivity of our existence as individual creatures, sin does not make us more distinct from God, but less. If one of the primary ways in which worldly form images God is precisely in its reality, in its sheer distinct existence as true, then sin is that which alienates us from God by, in a sense, making us less real. The irony, therefore, is that the modern secular ideal of total human autonomy from God in the name of affirming our full existence is, in reality, a prescription for unreality. It may seem to be a trivial example, but I find in my undergraduate students the peculiar reality that the more they assert their autonomous independence from all conventions rooted in religion, the more they become exactly like one another. Those students who are most existentially authentic, the ones who are true moral agents in the full sense of that word, are precisely the students who understand and affirm that their existence stands in utter dependence upon the entire stream of the world's relational nexus, and of the world's reality being ultimately rooted in God. Indeed, the most idiosyncratically interesting students are almost invariably those who are either devoutly religious in an authentic way, or secular students who, for all their secularity, are still honest seekers of God. Anecdotal as this example surely is, I find it to be paradigmatic of modernity as a whole: the more our scientifically minded culture abstracts parts from wholes, and then reductively explains away love as veiled lust, justice as veiled revenge, charity as veiled manipulation, beauty as epiphenomenal subjectivity, and form as a mere composite of bits, the more the world loses its individuality, its idiosyncratic distinctiveness, and evaporates into

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<sup>68</sup> 'Fallen Nature,' p. 499.

a nihilistic and cynical mist. All that remains then is not a distinctive world of irreducible individual forms all in relation to one another and to God, but mere matter which is good for nothing but conquest and exploitation. We are now truly, as a result of our sins and the abandonment of our sacramental/liturgical role as adorers of God, the *anima technica vacua*.

Human sinfulness, therefore, is the reality that does not allow us simply to view the relationship between God and evolution as one of constant rectilinear advancement at the behest of the immanent divine Spirit. As Balthasar notes, even in the Scriptures there is a slight tension between the spirit of God as the creator who imparts his wisdom and order to the cosmos, and the spirit of God as sanctifier who enters into specifically human history as the God of ethical covenant.<sup>69</sup> That is because in biblical revelation the relationship between the general history of the world (and of man) and the specific particularities of salvation history, is one of continuity and discontinuity. And that is because the Bible wishes to emphasize the sheer loving gratuity of God's redemptive covenant with man. Therefore Balthasar is adamant that we should not view Christ's work of redemption as merely a conceptual omega point that is the capstone of a naturalistic process of gradual movement toward self-transcendence, i.e. Christ is not merely the highest instance of the world's gradual ascent toward self-transcendence. Rather, Christ is both in continuity with natural and human history *and* in discontinuity, as he ushers in a decisively new form of existence that could not have been anticipated or guessed at. Christ is in continuity with natural history insofar as the pattern of his life – the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies for the sake of others – is also, as we have seen in all that we have outlined in this chapter, the gift-reception/erotic-oblative paradigm for all of worldly being. Balthasar is thus not denying here that there is an analogous continuity between the form of Christ's life and the form of worldly beings. However, in an age of evolutionary spiritualities and cosmic Zen Christs and so on, Balthasar wishes to remind us that the act of creation is ultimately an act geared towards ethical covenant, where the dramatic interplay of human and finite freedoms precludes any easy and simplistic pneumatologies, where the Spirit of God is equated with the immanent natural drive of evolution. In this regard, the Holy Spirit is not simply the soul of the world as our souls animate our bodies. As with all of created reality, the process of evolution is the product of a generous gift of real being from the Creator, possessing within itself an independent worldly *eidōs* (independent in being from God but still dependent on God for that very independence!) that strains upward for completion in man's spiritual self-awareness, but does so as an inherently receptive reality that awaits, in humility, for a movement from above that is in no way necessitated by this natural evolutionary dynamic, but is rather strictly gratuitous. In short, created nature awaits the free covenant decision of man in his relation to God.

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<sup>69</sup> For what follows see: Balthasar, *TL III*, pp. 425–9.



### ***Conclusion***

Before we end this chapter there are still a few loose ends that need to be tied. First, we have been discussing the possibility of a retrieval of the concept of form along the lines of a theologically grounded trinitarian/sacramental ontology of love and of the eternal, divine presence in time. It has been argued further that only by viewing creaturely forms in their proper orientation towards the form of the life of Christ will we truly be able to retrieve the inner intelligibility of finite forms in a historically dynamic and non-static manner. Finally, the central priestly role of man and his freedom for the liturgical constitution of the cosmos precisely as cosmos has been highlighted, with due weight given to the role of human sinfulness in the interplay between divine and human freedom in God's various covenants with humanity. But what does all this imply with regard to the relationship between finite form and the material substrate of our existence? I have already noted that I do not wish to go into a full philosophical analysis of the concept of form since that would take us too far from the central theme of this text, namely to develop the outlines of a new *theological* understanding of the God-world relation. Of course, theology in a Catholic register must attend to philosophy on some level and we have done so when the theological topic at hand demanded such a treatment. In what follows, and by way of conclusion, I would like to elaborate a bit further on the relationship between God's agency in the world and the realm of matter and its processes.

First, in light of the above treatment of the relationship between salvation history and general natural history, it is clear that all nature's forms bear the imprint of a certain eschatological tension and ambiguity. For if it is true that we must not conceive of Christ's redemptive entry into time as the seamless and, therefore, thoroughly predictable goal of evolution, then it is true that the analogous form of nature as image of this Logos speaks to the ever greater dissimilarity in the analogy as much as to the similarity. And it is precisely this dissimilarity that creates the tension and ambiguity spoken of above. Just as in the eschatological horizon of human history, nature too shares in the already-but-not-yet quality of the redemptive process. This is what accounts for the tension in our view of the finite forms of the world. Specifically, nature, when viewed from one angle, displays a deep intelligibility and order, a clear structural logos that tends towards self-complexification and a gradual ascent towards spiritual self-possession in man. The forms of the world present themselves to us often as an irreducible Gestalt that resists reduction to mere parts and give every indication of organismic stability over time. However, viewed from another angle, nature's forms present themselves to us as marked off by death and decay, an inertial tendency toward disorder, and a constant fluidity so extreme that it would make Heraclitus blush. So which is it: Parmenides or Heraclitus? This dialectic of stability/fluidity remains etched in our perception of worldly being and speaks to the fact that the very concept of form stands under the sign of expectation. In other words, there is an inchoate order and trajectory in nature's forms that is hard to miss, but this very order and trajectory is threatened with instability on all sides – an instability in the midst of order, an aimlessness in the midst of the teleonomy of nature's laws – that can only be



overcome if nature and her forms are viewed as open to an integral fulfilment and resolution from the realm of the Transcendent.

Thus to return to Schindler's analysis at the beginning of this chapter, finite being, viewed precisely as constituted in its very self-possessing interiority as that which is 'from another' and on its way 'to another', will remain permanently suspended between these two poles of its existence until the realm of mere matter is viewed as constitutively oriented to a fulfilment from above. But in order for this to happen, man, the liturgical priest of worldly being, must adopt a fundamentally receptive/contemplative stance before the source of all finite being. Thus the forgetfulness of God which so characterizes the modern world is, in its essence, a forgetfulness of worldly being as well. It is not automatic, for anyone with simple intelligence, to view the world as ordered by formal and final considerations. Indeed, as we have seen, it is possible to view finite being as a realm of instability and death, lacking in any orientation to ultimacy. Contemplative/receptive faith in the God of Christian revelation, therefore, presents itself as a possibility in the modern world, precisely as that which alone can preserve the 'formalness' of form and the 'reasonableness' of reason. As Balthasar thus concludes: 'The Christian is called to be the guardian of metaphysics in our time.'<sup>70</sup>

Finally, and building on what was just discussed, one of the enduring mistakes of Christian thought is the attempt to find in worldly forms a clear and indisputable indication of the movement and agency of God in the natural world. The quest for the exact philosophical causal mechanism in God's dealings with the world can only lead to a mythological view of God wherein he is merely juxtaposed to worldly causes. This, it seems to me, is the fatal flaw in most intelligent design arguments.

Furthermore, if we look at the fundamental ethos and dynamic of salvation history we are confronted with the startling fact that when God reveals himself, it always remains possible to deny this revelation, since the events of salvation history remain open to purely worldly interpretations. God moves quietly, slowly, almost incognito, and never overwhelms the perceiver with his presence. This dynamic finds its primary example in the fullness of God's revelation in Christ. In Christ we have the definitive entry into time and history of God himself. But He does so in the form of a slave, in the quiet anonymity of Nazareth, an anonymity that continues on in His public ministry where he moves primarily in the back roads of Galilee rather than the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem, enjoining those who follow Him to remain silent about His true identity. And when He rises from the dead, His now transformed earthly reality does not take on the form of an overwhelming display of divine power, but rather, is barely even recognizable by those who knew Him best.

This theological dynamic, it seems to me, gives us clear reasons for approaching nature's forms as the sacramental presence of God in the modality of a disclosure that remains suggestive rather than definitive, i.e. in the modality of a presence that gently beckons the mind to probe deeper, to wonder, to marvel, and thereby to see the same materiality that others see, but now with new eyes. That is why Balthasar is insistent that the primary philosophical act is the act of wonder before the great

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<sup>70</sup> *GL V*, p. 656.

mystery of being. But even such wonder cannot remain content to remain where it is. It must either ascend to the eyes of faith, to an affirmation that this wonder is the entryway to the glorious revelation of the beauty of God's revelation as love, or it will lose its momentum and degenerate into mere admiration for nature's order.<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, when it comes to analyzing God's agency in the finite forms of this world, we must resist the temptation to locate the causal joint of God's activity. The German philosopher Robert Spaemann, in an essay dealing with the relationship between evolution and theology, makes a similar point.<sup>72</sup> Spaemann begins by noting that there really is a kind of epistemological dualism between a strictly scientific (i.e. naturalistic) understanding of the world and a humanistic understanding. Science, at first glance, does seem to explain a great deal of reality through recourse to strictly naturalistic arguments. But when these arguments are carried through to their reductionist conclusions, they do not seem to satisfy totally the perception of our rational human experience that there are aspects to existence that seem to resist this kind of reduction, e.g. our experience of the moral law, of kindness, justice, love, beauty and so on. Spaemann therefore argues that this dualistic impression is created by the fact that the material aspects of our existence form the necessary prerequisite for the entrance of life, consciousness and self-consciousness into our world, but they do not, for all that, constitute totally sufficient causal explanations: 'There are prerequisite conditions for the development of life, of instinct, of consciousness and of self-consciousness. But prerequisite conditions are not sufficient causes. They do not explain for us who we are.'<sup>73</sup>

The difficulty, however, is that the exact cause of the higher metaphysical aspects of existence is not clear, and thus there is the constant tension to reduce the problem to either materialistic or idealistic sources. The Christian revelation of the Creator God who grants to finite entities a true worldly form and being, and who then wishes to engage these creatures in a covenant that respects their freedom, is the only way to avoid the materialist/idealist dialectic. The doctrine of creation further affirms that the mystery of finite existence is best explained by the fact that, since the Living God is transcendent to and prior to creation, that life precedes matter, and is the best possible solution for why mere matter seems capable of unfolding, teleologically, towards the emergence of life and consciousness. In other words, how does the subrational produce beings capable of reason, how does the subpersonal and subconscious produce personality and consciousness? How does the amoral produce the moral? These are not scientific questions alone, since their resolution eludes a strictly reductive analysis and always will, since the very nature of these realities is inherently non-reductive. Thus, Spaemann concludes:

Every attempt to overcome the dualism idealistically or materialistically, that is, through reduction of the one side to the other, will leave the subsumed side unsatisfied. Someone who wants to affirm the unity of reality without surrendering one of

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *GL V*, pp. 646–7.

<sup>72</sup> For what follows see: Robert Spaemann, 'Common Descent and Intelligent Design', in *Creation and Evolution: A Conference with Pope Benedict XVI in Castel Gondolfo*, Stephan Otto Horn, SDS, and Siegfried Wiedenhofer (eds.), San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008, pp. 61–9.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67.

the two sides can do this only if he brings the idea of creation into play; according to this idea, the process of the natural development of life and of the species of living things, including man, is founded upon the same will of a Divine Wisdom that also wills the result of this process, namely, a natural being that discovers its natural origin and thanks the Creator for his life, that is, for his existence. The same Bible that speaks about the fellowship of all that is living, with which God enters into a covenant, says that God himself lives and that this life precedes the matter that it animates.<sup>74</sup>

The non-sufficient nature of purely natural causes to explain, reductively, all of reality opens the door to the legitimacy of viewing every finite existent as embodying a kind of coded double meaning. What Spaemann means by this is that realities that are perfectly integral and complete in a purely straightforward manner, might, at the same time, also contain a certain superabundance of information that speaks to more hidden, and possibly higher, levels of existence. The higher levels would not in any way absorb or destroy the lower levels, but would actually build upon them and point towards the ultimate source of everything. Furthermore, these higher levels of existence would only be perceivable by beings capable of conscious understanding. In other words, what Spaemann is affirming is that a purely quantifiable scientific analysis of reality is indeed possible, and even necessary, in order to get at the positive, physical facticity of a thing. After all, we are material beings who live in a material world, and therefore an understanding of our nature requires, by way of a baseline beginning, a thorough understanding of the material prerequisites of our existence. Nevertheless, if we focus solely on these quantifiable aspects, we run the risk of missing *qualitative* aspects of reality that are truly there, which resist reduction to mere matter as an explanation, and seem to be discernable only by a higher act of understanding. Thus the full meaning of existence would only open itself, as Schindler noted, to those who are receptive in their fundamental existential stance toward being and who are characterized by a contemplative, rather than a dominating, technocratic spirit. By way of analogy, Spaemann has recourse to a piece of music by Bach:

Some years ago a double code was discovered in the G-minor Violin Sonata by Bach. If we follow a particular cabalistic system that during the Baroque period was called *geomantia*, in which musical notes, letters and time values are arranged in a definite order, then we find encoded in this sonata the following text: 'Ex Deo nascimur, in Christo morimur, per Spiritum Sanctum, reviviscimus' (We are born of God, in Christ we die, through the Holy Spirit we come to life again). The sonata is a marvellous piece of music. The musicality of its configurations of notes is certainly reason enough for us to understand why Bach composed it. However, if someone following a rumour, suspects that something else could still be hidden here and makes the attempt to search for a further message, and that person has mastered Latin, then suddenly a further, unexpected dimension of this music appears before his eyes. Fortunately, a scholar investigated the case, and she did not allow herself to be intimidated by Occam's razor.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. pp. 68–9.

Spaemann concludes by applying this analogous insight to the question of God and the world. So long as we remain locked in a reductive, mechanistic view of reality, we will never have the proper eyes to see the *qualia* of existence as anything other than epiphenomenal projections of human consciousness. The concept of form will remain completely unintelligible and incoherent in a world dominated by such a mentality. The hiddenness of the Covenant God of creation makes such a reductive world-view tantalizingly possible, especially in light of the vast technocratic successes of science in conquering and dominating our world. But as I write this, fears of environmental catastrophe abound in the world: global warming, rising acidity in the ocean, toxic heavy metals accumulating everywhere, massive extinctions of biological life forms, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the lingering possibility of another Chernobyl or of nuclear war in the Middle East, the potentially apocalyptic accidental unleashing of genetically engineered or artificially created life forms, and so on. Such catastrophes point towards the deeply ambiguous nature of these putative scientific conquests, and call into question the very spirit of domination that modern technocratic culture requires. At some point we will come to realize that these various catastrophes are not merely accidents that we need to learn how to avoid in the future, but the inevitable by-product of a functionalist view of life that does not have the wisdom to see that there is indeed, like in the Bach sonata, a different message coded into existence that is there to see for those who are willing to do so. Those who will continue to be haunted by the revelation of God in Christ will be the ones who will see reality for what it truly is, in all its teleological and formal aspects, and who will know more about existence than the reductionist next door, and who will not, therefore, be intimidated by the barbaric scientific vulgarity of our culture:

Once someone has the dimensions of the unconditional at his disposal, and the old rumour about a Creator God keeps haunting him, he will not be intimidated if natural science hopes to find in functionality for survival the sufficient cause for the development of the natural species, including man, and to some extent has already found it. Wherever he encounters the good, the beautiful and the holy, or wherever he encounters the truth claim of a scientific theory, he will discover a message that has been encoded in a completely different way, which by no means can be traced back to the first, although even the first one has its own beauty. But where the beautiful comes from and what it means that something is beautiful: this he will understand only with the help of the second message.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

## Chapter 7

### THE ABOLITION OF MAN

#### *Introduction*

The argument that has been put forward throughout this text is that theology matters. Theology matters because ideas matter, and ideas about the nature of ultimate reality are among the most determinative for any culture's intellectual form and concrete structure. Furthermore, it has been my contention that modernity took the form it did in large measure because Christian theology could not respond adequately to the intellectual challenges posed by the rise of modern naturalistic science. The first half of the text detailed in brief some of the history of this change in world-views and noted that modernity came about due to various ruptures between nature and grace that began to emerge in late medieval theology. The second half of the text was a more constructive attempt to demonstrate one possible theological path forward for healing these ruptures, and to begin to address the challenge posed by modern science through recourse to a renewed Trinitarian theology.

In what follows I would like to demonstrate why it is that I think Balthasar's approach to the question at hand is not only one possible approach to these questions, but is, in fact, one of the best possible approaches among the various possibilities. Therefore by way of conclusion I would like to situate Balthasar's theology within the broader context of modern culture in order to highlight why I think his approach is even more important today than it was even during his lifetime. I think this because Balthasar, in my view, understood the metaphysical pulse of modernity and therefore accurately diagnosed where it was going. Specifically, there are two apparently contradictory, but in reality deeply related, aspects of the modern world that are of relevance to our discussion of the role of theology and science in the future; namely, the mutually conditioning realities of postmodern pluralism in the religious sphere and the rise of technocratic scientific capitalism as the Esperanto of our increasingly interdependent socio-economic life.<sup>1</sup> It shall be my contention that the deep pluralism we see championed by

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using the terms 'scientific capitalism' or 'technocratic Liberalism' in what follows to denote the confluence of economic interests and scientific research in a world governed by the metaphysical cultural logic of technology. In other words, just as in capitalist theory the market is amoral and proceeds by an invisible hand regardless of broader ethical and human concerns,

postmodern religious thinkers in the academic West is, in reality, a veiled form of religious agnosticism that actually favors one form of religiosity over all the others, and does so precisely in order to further the aims of Liberal, technocratic, scientific capitalism.<sup>2</sup> In other words, I see a deep connection between modern science, technology, capitalism, and Liberal/secular democracy, where the goal of the modern nation state is an increasingly global and cooperative venture to bring all human life under managerial control by the political classes, under the rubric of doing so scientifically. And the last great obstacle to any such unification through globalization are the great religious traditions of the world, Christianity in particular, and Roman Catholicism most of all. The conclusion I hope to draw is that the modern world is at an intellectual crossroad where the choices we make will lead either to a new springtime of Christian humanistic thought or to the technocratic abolition of man.<sup>3</sup>

At this juncture a disclaimer is in order. In what I have just outlined I do not mean to imply that there is some kind of grand conspiracy by an unknown cabal of élites to control the world by pulling its strings like a puppeteer behind the scenes. I will leave such political fantasy to the extremist blogosphere and to the television and radio pundits who want to sell books to a public that feels increasingly vulnerable to the forces shaping the modern world. Nor do I think that there is some kind of a global conspiracy to do away with religion in general or to stick it to the Catholic Church in particular. So rest assured, gentle reader, that your author is not a raving conspiracy theorist. However, the bad news is that, in my view, the reality of the situation is in fact much worse than an overt conspiracy. For in a conspiracy, an action hero can emerge who can, with great courage and intelligence, expose the élitist cabal and return the world to its rightful order. Furthermore, conspiracies, even if they are large and involve a wide cross-section of élites, nevertheless remain isolated tumors by definition, since any conspiracy worth its salt requires secrecy, which requires control of information, which requires a small, tight-knit group of conspirators. So once again, in such a scenario the world as a whole remains relatively healthy and it can remain so if we can just locate and bring down the conspirators. Thus, conspiracy theorists are, in reality, social optimists who think that, by and large, modern society, especially in its Liberal democratic form, is healthy and requires nothing more than vigilance against the enemies of democracy to keep it so.

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so too does technology move forward by a kind of imperative where the power to do something appears as its own internal warrant. Thus, the metaphysical logic of modern voluntarist conceptions of freedom creates a situation where amoral market forces decide which technological advances to fund and promote, regardless of ethical objections by the few, whose dissent from the ongoing march forward will be dismissed as their choice but not binding on the rest of us. Once ensconced, however, in the cultural landscape, such technological capitalist innovations will become the norm, and in a sense inevitable for all.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted here for the phrase 'deep pluralism' to my friend Glen Olsen, a historian at the University of Utah. See: Glenn Olsen, 'Separating Church and State', *Faith and Reason*, 20 (Winter, 1994), pp. 403–425. Olsen means by the use of this term a type of pluralism that appears irreducible since the differences in world-view begin at the level of first principles.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

However, my contention is that the problem we face is much deeper, and much more socially rooted, than a rather pedestrian conspiracy of élites. The problem we face is a deeply structural one woven into the very fabric of the metaphysical soul of the modern world. And it is a fabric that has been under construction for the past thousand years and is only now coming into view as a radically new way of envisioning the human project. So when I say that the deep pluralism at the heart of postmodernism's approach to religion has been developed to further the aims of modern scientific capitalism, I do not mean to imply that its purveyors are cynical manipulators of the body politic for the sake of some kind of international scheme. Rather, what I mean is that there is a deep metaphysical connection between the religious agnosticism of postmodern religious pluralism and the technocratic redefining of humanity. And since it is further one of the primary points of this text to point out that the logic inherent within metaphysical positions is inexorable, what I mean to claim is that the modern world is gripped by a vulgar metaphysical nightmare whose internal logic links together both postmodern pluralism and globalizing technocratic capitalism.

I will begin, therefore, with a very broad analysis of postmodern theology and where, I think, Balthasar's theology corrects some of its deficiencies. No attempt will be made to be exhaustive or even precise by way of numerous footnote citations and sidebar scholarly conversations. Postmodernism can obviously mean many different things and the very idea that such a thing even exists has been called into question.<sup>4</sup> However, to me that is all utterly beside the point for our current purposes. I am most interested in the question of religious and metaphysical pluralism as a putatively irreducible reality that calls into question any religious tradition that would dare to make universalizing truth claims. It is in this sense of 'deep pluralism' that I am employing the term 'postmodernism' as this applies to modern theological and metaphysical discourse. Furthermore, in what follows I am presenting more of a concluding programmatic essay that attempts to paint a big picture rather than an exhaustive dissertation. I think this is warranted by the topic, since at this juncture I think it is far more important to draw the reader's attention to the fundamental theological, metaphysical and social issues that are stake in the modern world's debate about the future than it is to parse, endlessly, the many differing and contradictory meanings of postmodernism.

I will then proceed to a discussion of how all this relates to scientific, technocratic capitalism and the dangers it poses to our understanding of what it means to be human. The analysis put forward will be apocalyptic – not in the 'doomsday-end-of-the-world' sense of that word, but in its deeper theological meaning as marking a time of decisive existential significance. In that sense, every age is an apocalyptic one since in every era the fundamental choice for or against the Good, the True and the Beautiful, i.e. for God, is made anew and in a variety of differing cultural venues. That is probably why in every era you will find Christians who are convinced that they are living in the days of the Lord's return. I harbour no such notions of prophetic prescience and hope for a world of continuing dynamism and

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kenneth L. Schmitz, 'Postmodernism or Modern-Plus', *Communio* XXVII, 2 (Summer, 1990), pp. 152–166.

vigour long into the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, there are some key differences between the modern world and every previous Christian era that came before. First, with the rise of modern secularity and science you see a world that has now become truly post-Christian in significant ways. And there is a vast metaphysical difference between the crisis presented by a corruption of the faith (as in the past) and a dying or dead Christianity, culturally speaking. Second, we also now see for the first time in history that human beings will have the technological capacity to reshape completely their own biology, and to merge this genetically reshaped humanity with increasingly sophisticated cybernetics. Furthermore, this will be in conjunction with the exponentially increasing potential of modern science, in league with socio-economic-political interests, to bring all of humanity within the grid of information. Thus even if all ages have serious existential choices to make, ours is confronted with choices the likes of which the world has never seen before.

### *A. Balthasar and Post-modernism*

William Cavanaugh, at the beginning of his programmatic essay 'The City: Beyond secular parodies', employs a strategy of rhetorical subversion.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to the opening lines of Rousseau's *Social Contract* 'Man is born free but everywhere is in bondage', Cavanaugh begins with a more biblical understanding of our 'state of nature': 'Humankind is made for communion, but everywhere is divided'.<sup>6</sup> Central to this inversion is Cavanaugh's insistence that the often violent divisions that plague the human condition constitute a serious rupture with our truest, deepest nature as beings made in the image and likeness of a God defined as a loving Trinitarian communion of persons. Thus, for Cavanaugh, 'communion' is the central, determinative anthropological category. This in turn allows us to view the egoistic qualities of human existence as alien to our truest nature. Therefore, as we have seen, at the heart of any true Christian vision of humanity is the recognition of a rupture that has opened up in history between our origin in God and our current condition of sin. It goes without saying that in such a narrative the theological category of redemption plays a normative role, and that the Christian Church is therefore fundamentally a soteriological and eschatological society committed to the moral and spiritual transformation of the deep structures of historical human existence.

On the other hand, the so-called modern period, typified here in the quote from Rousseau, posits a vision of human nature as constituted by a deep and autonomous rational freedom; a vision that begins, sociologically and psychologically, as an intensification of the Protestant ethos of freedom from ecclesiastical bondage requiring a new 'social contract', wherein free individuals seek their true centre of gravity in a Cartesian self that must contend with other Cartesian selves.

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<sup>5</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, 'The City: Beyond secular parodies,' in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (eds), London and New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 182–200.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 182



This is followed by a more conflictual construal of freedom wherein the Hobbesian war of 'all against all' requires the soteriology of the emerging nation state. Thus, as Cavanaugh sees it, the modern period is marked off, not as the ascendancy of reason over superstition, but rather as the emergence of a rival soteriology to that of the Church, wherein the liberation of our autonomous freedom from bondage to external authority is the true salvation.<sup>7</sup>

However, as is the case with almost all the dialectical movements within history, the pole that is rejected continues to exercise a gravitational tug on its polar opposite. Thus despite the potentially nihilist implications of its rejection of classical metaphysics – implications that a later generation of thinkers will draw out – modernity retained a fundamentally positive disposition towards the power of reason, the dignity and worth of human life and the need for humanity to adopt a common and enlightened view of the meaning of existence. The vestigial religiosity of such central figures as Rousseau, Hobbes and Locke, however nominal and ill-defined it may have been, is nevertheless a testimony to the continuing influence of theology on their thought, despite their protestations to the contrary. However, this theology was heavily tainted with the voluntarism and semi-deism of the nominalist theology of the period, resulting in a vision of the God-world relationship that was extrinsicist at best and heteronomous at worst. Gone was the classical theology of a Trinitarian metaphysics of participation, replaced now with a vision of humanity as an undifferentiated aggregate of individuals existing over and against an inscrutable, raw and ahistorical divine will. The extent to which such a theology allowed for participation in God centred on the affirmation that we are closest to God when we imitate the raw autonomy of his reason and moral will.<sup>8</sup> Thus even though the egoistic qualities of human existence continued to be viewed as something of a rupture from our truest selves, this rupture was now nevertheless to be overcome, not in the soteriology of a sacramental participation in the very life of God, but in the secular and radically individualist soteriology of reason, education, science and the benevolent *Pax* of the liberal state.

The Achilles heel of the Enlightenment's humanism, however, was the self-induced metaphysical amnesia that it required; born in the crucible of Christendom's post-Reformational self-immolation it was necessary for the new class of philosophers to create the fiction that reason was a secular reality in the sense that, even if it is ultimately a gift from God, it required no grounding in a sectarian theology of any kind. In order for reason to be truly universal it needed to be liberated from all that had particularized it in the past. Gotthold Lessing's famous dictum that the contingent truths of history could not act as the proper vessel for the universal truths of reason stands as the ruling principle of the Enlightenment's approach to theology. We should not, however, allow the naiveté of this account of reason to blind us to the truly positive ethos that this movement away from historicity represented: the desire to define with a great deal of critical specificity the exact contours

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 'The modern state is best understood ... as a source of an alternative soteriology to that of the Church. Both soteriologies pursue peace and an end to division by the enactment of a social body.' p. 182.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 186

of what we mean by 'the real'. The irony here is that it is precisely the Christian tradition's long-standing, and self-contradicting flirtation with Hellenistic conceptions of the relationship between the finite and the infinite, as well as the historical and the eternal, that made it almost inevitable that modernity's quest for the truly real would spin off in a decidedly logocentric and speculative direction that had little use for the idea that finitude and contingency might have metaphysical standing. Thus for many thinkers of the period, the traditional metaphysics of participation that had viewed reason as grounded in the bathing light of the creator spirit, seemed overly wedded to the theological specifics of the historically contingent Christian Revelation. Thus was it deemed a particularizing force and avoided as the grounding for reason.

However, what all this points to, as David Hart makes clear, is that there truly is a 'ditch', as Lessing put it, between the historical rationality of Christian Revelation and the foundationalist rationality of the Enlightenment. Hart emphasizes that even if Lessing's motivations were based on a false fact-value/contingent-universal distinction, he was nevertheless correct to assert that the Christian faith has very little in common with the kind of foundationalist rationality represented by the Enlightenment. The Christian faith is not founded upon an evidentiary form of reason, but rather upon a more expansive form of reason that includes the validity of testimonial witness and the power of aesthetic beauty as a criterion for truth. Hart, in a very Balthasarian statement, asserts:

Christian theology has no stake in the myth of disinterested rationality: the church has no arguments for its faith more convincing than the form of Christ; enjoined by Christ to preach the gospel, Christians must proclaim, exhort, bear witness, persuade ... before other forms of reason can be marshalled. Lessing was undoubtedly correct ... to place Christ on the far side of that wide ditch that separates contingent historical facts from universal 'truths' of reason; and no less than enlightened scepticism, theology has need of Lessing's ditch.<sup>9</sup>

However, regardless of the interplay between the positive and negative elements of this historical shift, the fact of the matter is that this metaphysical/theological amnesia guaranteed that the rationalist optimism of the period could not be sustained; reason, now divorced from its metaphysical grounding in theological transcendence, was forced back in upon itself. At first, the Kantian 'turn to the subject' seemed to be only a further vindication of the power of reason to police its own precincts, but it was only a matter of time before Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud *et al.* would lay waste to these precincts and expose them as shadowy pretensions masking more sinister urges. Thus if there really is anything truly different from modernism in post-modernism, no matter how variegated the meaning of that term has become, it is the latter's working out of the full implications of Kant's revolution. Thus whereas modernity could be characterized by its rejection of sectarian theology and the metaphysics associated with it, post-modernity could be characterized as the final rejection of all metaphysics and the working out of

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003, p. 3

the full implications of this rejection. This leads us then to three key questions that arise in the light of this distinction. First, to what extent is the final rejection of metaphysics a logical consequence of modernity's rejection of Christian theology? Second, how truly free from metaphysics and theology is postmodernism? Finally, to what extent can we attribute to the contingent, historical structures of human existence, precisely as historical and contingent, a truly universal rational meaning that is not tied to the ahistorical abstractions of speculative reason?

For our purposes now we need first to examine the question of how this final rejection of metaphysics in postmodernism relates to Balthasar's theological project. To return once again to David Hart, he points out, in a manner strikingly similar to Balthasar, that most of the intellectuals who have come to be closely identified with whatever we mean by postmodernism, e.g. Nietzsche, Deleuze, Lyotard, Derrida, Heidegger, Foucault and Levinas, are all working out in their own distinctive manner the implications of Kant's notion of the sublime and its relationship with our imaginative experiences of beauty.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the postmodern problematic is, at its root, an issue in aesthetics, i.e. what is the relationship between what appears and the ground (if any) of its appearing?

In Hart's analysis, post-modernity views the appearing of beings as the fragmenting of Being in a declension from that which is primal into that which is epiphenomenal. There is no way to breach this rupture through the power of reason or imagination. Everything that appears, therefore, presents itself to human consciousness as an opaque positivity resisting all attempts at final resolution into the grounding source, a source that can never be known and thus looms in our consciousness as either a vague awareness of the sublime or as a source of deep existential resentment. What emerges in post-modernity, then, is the reassertion in new garb of the ancient insight that all reality is a kind of dance of illusions – Heraclitus on steroids if you will – and that all attempts to put time in a bottle through expansive speculative metanarratives that purport to explain everything in neat rational formulas is futile at best and a thinly veiled grasping after power at worst. In much post-modern thought Original Sin is the unbridgeable rupture that opens up between primal being and beings in the creative act as such, and all reality bears the stamp of the chaos and violence that this rupture opens up. As David Hart puts it:

It ... marks the triumph of Heracleitos over Parmenides, of the narrative of being as dynamic flow and aimless differentiation over the narrative of being as immobile totality. If indeed metaphysics, in its every manifestation, is really the attempt to erect a hierarchy within totality that will still the turbulence of difference, dam up the alluvial force of becoming and scaffold Dionysian energy in a framework of Apollinian reserve, the collapse of metaphysics must be (for thought) the setting free of chaos and its prodigal play of creation and destruction. But a mirror preserves the image it inverts.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the ancient metaphysics of participation is not simply repudiated but rather

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 43–93

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pp. 37–8

stood on its head; insofar as we are, we exist in a state of opposition to all the other fragmented bits of our experience. Nietzsche grasped this well and viewed history as the playground of the Titans. Sartre turned it into a philosophy of existential resentment over the inessentiality of human existence – the ‘nauseating’ fact that the God who does not exist remains nevertheless as the truest goal of all my striving.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the end result is the same: there is nothing in my experience that lays a moral claim upon me beyond that which I assert in an arbitrary act of the will (Levinas).<sup>13</sup> And further, this lack of a moral claim emanating from the ‘other’ is a direct result of the death of metaphysics: that which appears does so in a manner that reveals no inner depth of being, no excess of meaning pointing beyond itself, nothing that would lead me out of myself and into an abyss of being that has been revealed, in however preliminary a manner, in the very finitude of existence as such. Put another way, the death of metaphysics is the death of aesthetics and the death of aesthetics robs the good of its normative moral force. As Balthasar puts it:

Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. ... nothing else remains, and yet *something* must be embraced, twentieth-century man is urged to enter this impossible marriage with matter, a union which finally spoils all man’s taste for love. But man cannot bear to live with the object of his impotence, that which remains permanently unmastered. He must either deny it or conceal it in the silence of death. ... in such a world the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. ... In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency. In other words, syllogisms may still dutifully clatter away like rotary presses or computers which infallibly spew out an exact number of answers by the minute. But the logic of these answers is itself a mechanism which no longer captivates anyone.<sup>14</sup>

For Balthasar, then, the key element in the contemporary world that militates against the reception of the Christian Gospel is this rupture in the aesthetic fabric of our perception of being: materialism, reductionism, technologism, idealism,

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Olivier Clément, *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology*, New York: New City Press, 2000, p. 12. Clément quotes Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*: ‘The essential nature of human beings is none other than the yearning to be God. So their essential nature is inessential to them.’

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 82. Hart has harsh words for Levinas: ‘What makes the spectacle afforded by Levinas’s thought – the utter ruin of the whole rationality of love – so disheartening is that it offers not even the consolation of rational coherence. The ethical “relation without relation” that Levinas describes is nonsense: there is no encounter, nor even a trace within an encounter, that is not thematized, conforming to intentions largely determined by cultural tradition. But even if there were, there would still be no such thing as unthematized responsibility: the claim that obligation erupts from the singularity of an irrecuperable event, indifferent to every context, and from the affront of an alterity whose only appearance is interruption and accusation, is sheer assertion. In truth, given the nature of the abstract event Levinas describes, it might just as well (and just as blamelessly) be taken as a provocation to kill the Other.’

<sup>14</sup> *GL I*, pp. 18–19.

empiricism, positivism, nihilism – all of the ‘isms’ of the modern period – can be characterized, despite their manifest differences, by their common rejection of the metaphysical affirmation that the finite entities of the world constitute an ‘appearing’ of the very depths of being. For some of these movements such depths truly exist – whether materially or formally makes no difference here – but cannot be known. For others, such depths do not exist and are best ignored as fictitious illusions or tricks of the mind. However, the end result is the same: the rejection of the notion that finitude can act as an iconic or sacramental appearing of the primal ground leads inevitably to the prosaic flattening out of existence into mere appearance, with the meaning of things read off their surface with no further significance. This in turn leads to a pointless and exaggerated phenomenology where philosophy degenerates into an absurd cataloguing of difference in order to highlight, even more pointlessly, how radically disconnected all the bits of existence truly are. Finally, it is precisely this fragmented and non-teleological existence that gives rise to the tortured moral posturing of so much modern thought: the very meaninglessness of existence allows me the great opportunity to exhibit my existential courage by positing meaning where none exists, and then accepting all the accolades for being the kind of sophisticated person who continues to ratiocinate even after truth has been debunked, who continues to have causes even though all such movements have been exposed as egoistic power grabs and who continues to love even though it is impossible in a world of irreducible difference.

For Balthasar, on the other hand, the realm of the finite is not to be equated with some kind of aboriginal declension from a primal unity where the act of creation as such is the point of rupture and the source of all alienation. The Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation and the resurrection of the flesh render such a scheme impossible and point to Christianity as the aesthetic religion *par excellence*, the vindication of the poets and the most world-affirming religion in history. For Balthasar, therefore, a properly Christian theology must have at its core a proper theology of revelation that gives an account of the appearing of God in the structures of creaturely finitude. And since those structures are inherently historical, this theological aesthetic must of necessity issue forth in a theological dramatic that takes account of the fact that the entrance of the Living God into history is no mere slideshow for our pedagogical amusement, but an active engagement between divine freedom and human freedom. Thus even though Balthasar rarely speaks of either postmodernism as an intellectual movement or mentions any particular postmodern thinker of note, nevertheless his entire theology of revelation, as explicated in his grand trilogy, can be viewed on one level as an answer to the three great Kantian critiques with the order reversed. The rupture between finite beings and the primal font of Being opened up by Kant, between that which appears and the ground of its appearing, is answered in Balthasar’s theological development of Christian revelation under the controlling motif of the God who appears, and in thus appearing grounds all appearing.

Nor does Balthasar think that there is anything particularly new in this agonistic struggle between the aesthetical/dramatic elements of Christian revelation and the anti-worldly philosophies of the modern age (anti-worldly here understood as the denial of any real metaphysical significance for the world’s fragmented and

epiphenomenal forms). Postmodernism might raise the rejection of traditional metaphysics to an art form and wallow in a kind of epistemological agnosticism never before seen, but as John Milbank has noted, there is an implied metaphysics of estrangement in much of postmodern thought that resonates with an echo of ancient Platonism's concept of the declension of the many from the One. Ed Oakes notes that for Balthasar the constant temptation of all human theorizing about the Absolute is to veer in the direction of this Platonic/Plotinian schema, referred to by Plato in his Republic as 'The Divided Line' between the realms of spirit and matter.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as we have seen, Balthasar views this tendency as the very fruit of original sin, wherein humanity attempts to bypass its creaturely status as a being in a world and seeks instead to reach God's spiritual mode of existence through an ascent of the spirit that reaches divinity in spite of the world rather than through it:

The religious ideal of man after his expulsion from paradise – to become spirit, sage, mystic, perfected, ... always means *at the same time* that this genuinely religious impulse will contain a revolt against the Creator, a disowning of the nature in which man was placed and created: the earthly, physical = psychic, communal, spatial-temporal existence. Man does not want to be man but something else (as he imagines, something higher); as a religious person, he gives, as it were, his resignation notice to God, saying that he will no longer do God's service. For this service consists in the simple recognition and exercise of his nature. Instead of accepting the primary fact of his creatureliness as the basis and starting point of all his religious movements and aspirations, he tries, as it were, to leap over this basis and seek for a magical way to reach, on his own, the Creator's way of being, almost as if he were trying to eat some kind of a philosophical or spiritual apple, endowed with the same charm that ensnared Adam and Eve.<sup>16</sup>

So strong is this Balthasarian critique of all spiritualizing attempts to denigrate the finite structures of creation as the primary *loci* for our encounter with God that it has led Kevin Mongrain to structure his entire analysis of Balthasar's theology along the lines of an Irenaean retrieval, i.e. Balthasar's entire theology is viewed as an agonistic struggle against the recurring ghost of Gnosticism in all its variegated historical forms.<sup>17</sup> And despite the fact that he finds a certain terminological looseness in Balthasar's use of the term 'Gnostic', Mongrain nevertheless notes that for Balthasar Gnosticism is to be found wherever a theologian 'prioritize(s) a priori knowledge over a posteriori concrete, particular historical existence.'<sup>18</sup>

W. T. Dickens approaches his analysis of Balthasar from a slightly different angle but makes the same essential point: in Balthasar's theological aesthetic, what gives finite existence its particular *gravitas* is the conjunction in every existent thing

<sup>15</sup> Edward Oakes, SJ *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, New York: Continuum, 1994, p. 112

<sup>16</sup> Balthasar, 'Patristik, Scholastik, und wir,' *Theologie der Zeit* 3 (1939), p. 69–70. Quoted in Oakes, p. 111. This article by Balthasar has since been published in English in *Communio: International Catholic Review*, XXIV, No. 2 (Summer, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Mongrain, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

of form (species) and splendour (lumen).<sup>19</sup> Human thought goes awry and the aesthetic dimension of existence is lost wherever the attempt is made to divorce an object's form from the light of being that shines forth from within the form. When this happens, then one of two erroneous approaches usually holds sway: either the light of being is denied and the form is read as a spiritless object of human calculation, where distinctions must be made between primary and secondary qualities (or quantities and qualities with the latter always being relegated to the realm of human subjectivity), or the importance of form is denied and attempts are made to access the light of being by bypassing the creaturely forms that mediate it, as in all spiritualizing/Gnostic forms of religion.

Thus, whether one speaks of Plato's divided line, or of Gnosticism, or of the divorce between form and splendour, or of postmodernism's rupture between that which appears and its primal ground, the end result is the same: the central concern of Balthasar's theology of revelation is the vindication of the finite, historical structures of worldly existence as mediations of the divine *precisely in and through* their finitude.

What is at stake in this debate is nothing short of the entire concept of a historical revelation from God that is universally normative and is mediated to all generations through a non-distorting and essentially trustworthy series of historical mediations (Scripture, Church). Many modern theologies, such as many types of liberationist and feminist theology, have their roots in a hermeneutic of suspicion and, as such, find the whole notion of a single, normative revelation to be naïve and dangerous. Indeed, such critiques often extend far beyond an abstract philosophical rejection of the notion of normativity as such and engage in a wholesale deconstruction of the concrete historical mediations of Revelation in the Scriptures and the Church. These theologies of suspicion have wielded, and continue to wield, enormous influence in most of the major centres of theological research.

There is a sense in which there is an irreducible and irreconcilable difference between Balthasar's theology of revelation and that of the theologies of suspicion. Certainly, one wants to avoid stereotypes and overly neat simplifications for the sake of equally superficial theological typologies. However, over-obfuscation through endless caveats and needlessly thick descriptions of tangential issues is also to be avoided. Balthasar's theology of revelation is most definitely an approach that emphasizes a hermeneutic of trust towards the foundational mediations of revelation. Furthermore, through the development of his theological aesthetic and dramatic, he asserts without reservation the universally normative character of the Christ-event. There is no way this approach can be reconciled with the postmodern rejection of a normative historical revelation or with those who assert that the mediations of that revelation are inherently deformative and leave us far distant from the originating Jesus-event. Dare I say, therefore, that there is a ditch between these two rival approaches? And dare I say further, that if one wants to be serious in one's theology, avoiding all false irenicism and the model of a false dialogue that

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. W.T. Dickens, *Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics: A Model for Post-Critical Biblical Interpretation*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, pp. 25–72.



seeks common ground for the sake of common ground even where none exists, that one must inevitably choose between one of these rival paths? This book, therefore, has sought to offer a sympathetic reading of Balthasar's Trinitarian theology of Revelation and ontology of love as an antidote to the suffocating staleness which the theologies of suspicion have introduced into the theological fold.

Finally, it becomes quickly apparent that the nature of this theological divide over the theology of revelation centres upon differing notions of universality and rationality and how these differences translate into differences in theology, most especially in Christology. For example, in those theologies still influenced by the constructions of universality and rationality that flow from the Enlightenment, we see that the definition of universality is sought in a kind of genus and species distinction, i.e. Jesus becomes a single, noteworthy species of a more universal genus called the religious or spiritual genius. The alleged fruits of this approach are many. First, it allows the theologian to relativize the figure of Jesus, thereby opening up new vistas for inter-religious dialogue while at the same time maintaining that Jesus is still, in some sense, meaningful. Second, the peculiar contours of this thing called religious consciousness can be studied, sociologically, psychologically, historically and even physiologically. This gives it an air of scientific, and hence universal, validity since it is objectively verified as one of the scientifically established aspects of the structure of our human nature.

In the more postmodern theologies of suspicion there is a deep distrust of all attempts at universalizing the significance of Jesus. The approach to reason and universality in the Enlightenment is viewed by many postmodern theologians as naïve, since it neglects to account for the social construction of all knowledge and the fact that reason itself will take on a multiplicity of forms depending upon the moral and metaphysical plausibility structures of any given culture. Furthermore, since there is no such thing as the universal structure of rationality, and rational objectivity is an illusion, postmodern thinkers have tended to view such language as benign and naïve at best, with many pointing towards an even darker construction of rational language as a form of veiled egoism. In other words, when we assert something as true based on what we believe to be rational warrants, we are really asserting our own will and seeking to dominate and control the social environment. And it doesn't matter that we may not be consciously aware of this. In fact postmodernists would argue that most people are not aware of this reality, and that the true force of the manipulation of the social environment lies precisely in its nature as a veiled grasping after power. All truly postmodern philosophy therefore takes on one of two forms: either it seeks to unmask the veiling of the manipulation in the name of some politicized moral ideal, or it acknowledges that all rationality and language is a grasping after power and therefore opts for a more cynical philosophy of self-interest that embraces the Liberal project of maximized personal liberty within the loving embrace of Leviathan. When all this gets translated into theology, we see that the first type of postmodernism utilizes the historical critical method and its quest for the historical Jesus in order to undercut any notion of a normative ecclesial orthodoxy, freeing up the figure of Jesus to be placed in ever new hermeneutical and political categories. Or put another way, it is the contextualized praxis of one's own culture that provides the ethical and spiritual



horizon for one's approach to Christology.<sup>20</sup> The second type of postmodern philosophy translates into a highly vulgarized pop Christology that reduces the significance of Jesus to a rather vague message of inclusivity, now redefined as an endless tolerance for all the whims of the egoistic self, most especially the sexual ones.

Of course there is still the thorny philosophical question of how postmodern all this really is, since in order to avoid a silly solipsistic reductionism of all thought into the soup of a Freudian nightmare, even postmodernists must acknowledge that some speech rises above the level of a pure power grab. Otherwise their fulminations concerning the nature of truth would fall under their own indictment of the rhetorical nature of all speech. For example, many modern feminist theologies take it as a given that a univocal parity between men and women in all spheres of social activity is a desirable goal, and that any notion of a complementarity of the sexes in social roles is a code-word for 'separate but equal' forms of sexist oppression. They thus engage in a radical critique of the praxis of the Church vis-à-vis women throughout the Church's history. The problem is that from within the categories of postmodern thought, such a critique of the Church's praxis betrays an attempt at a form of Archimedean objectivity with regard to the previous horizons of the Church. Furthermore, it presumes that the particular ethical horizon known as modern feminist theory is to be taken as normative in academic discourse in the university (if one doubts this, just try to counter this new orthodoxy in any modern major American university). But whence comes the normativity of one form of praxis and the consciousness that arises out of it over another? Certainly, feminists are saying more than 'I like this form of praxis' in the same way that they may say 'I like vanilla ice cream'. There is an implied ethical claim in modern feminist theory that presumes the existential superiority of one horizon over another. This then points to the manner in which postmodernism, far from being a simple denial of the Enlightenment's attempt at a metanarrative based upon universalizing reason, is itself a metanarrative that completes the Enlightenment's critical project. In essence, postmodernism is the metanarrative about all other metanarratives. The difference that postmodernism adds in its metanarrative is that it knows that its own metanarrative, like all others, is founded upon the illusion of truth. Thus it has the air of the ruse about it, a sophisticated act of academic legerdemain, and,

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Allan Torrance, 'Jesus in Christian Doctrine,' *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. In an interesting discussion of the liberationist and feminist criticisms of Christian doctrine as the false metaphysical Hellenization of the historical man, Jesus, Torrance argues convincingly that the postmodern notion that the only real Jesus is the Jesus of hermeneutically controlled historical reconstruction is, in fact, the real Hellenization. By hermeneutically controlled I mean that the various historical reconstructions of Jesus are not to be engaged in naively, ala the Enlightenment, in a quest for the truly objective historical Jesus. Rather, postmodernists are sophisticated enough to understand that the Jesus of the reconstructions is, for the most part, a projection of the existential horizon of the reconstructors. Rather than viewing this as a flaw, they view it as the necessary prerequisite for a Jesus who conforms to our own liberating praxis in the fight for various forms of social justice. But as Torrance points out, this Jesus is then the product of philosophical construction that in its truly demonic form allows for the apotheosis of personal and political ideology on a grand and apocalyptic scale.

in its own way, just as bourgeois as all other metanarratives; a fact anticipated and exposed, but not avoided, by Nietzsche. However, all the foregoing notwithstanding, the essential trajectory of postmodern theological constructions is in the direction of a critique of the concept of ecclesial and scriptural normativity, i.e. that the ecclesiastical attempt to create a universally valid revelation is an illegitimate power grab that seeks to impose one historical horizon upon all others. Thus all universalisms are rejected in this approach in favor of a radical relativism of theological horizons.

Balthasar's approach shares the postmodern concern with the false universalizing of the Enlightenment's notion of reason. If the only form of reason available to us is that of the Enlightenment, then Lessing's ditch remains intact and the Christian faith truly is an irrational attempt to impose a single contingent life on the rest of human history. However, Balthasar does not share postmodernism's radical scepticism towards all forms of universal truth. Insofar as postmodernism rejects the reason of the Enlightenment in favor of a notion of truth as pure power-as-rhetoric, then it actually still deals in the polarizing either-or rationality of the Enlightenment, i.e. if Archimedean objectivity is impossible, then its polar opposite must be true (objectivity as an illusion), and all we are left with is the internal structure of human consciousness as it impresses itself upon its environment. The thought never seems to occur to many postmodernists that these may not be our only options. Thus postmodernism remains part of the dialectic of modernity and cannot exist without it.<sup>21</sup>

Balthasar transcends this dialectic through the development of truly theological criteria for truth, wherein it is God who provides us with an aesthetic-dramatic fulcrum for history; the Incarnation means in this regard that the transhistorical (universal) is not to be found in the ahistorical abstraction of reason, but precisely within the particularities of a new historical dynamic established by God himself. The fact that the truly universal is now to be found in a radicalized particularity also undercuts the other half of the modern dialectic: no Archimedean point can be found in abstract reason, but neither are we cast adrift in an ocean of disconnected and completely idiosyncratic historical moments. All history and all its various horizons (*logoi*), precisely as history, are now freighted with the significance of a vertical descent into history by God. This might seem rather vague, but what opens up before us is a new form of engrafted reason that has beauty and drama as two of its chief criteria for truth. And what this does for our concept of truth is to tie the truly universal to a more testimonial rather than evidentiary notion of reason.

The Balthasarian project, therefore, appears before us as a grand justification of

<sup>21</sup> Once again, David Hart makes the point nicely: 'Where the discourse of fashionable postmodernism should become distasteful to theological reflection, in fact, is not in its alleged "relativism" or "scepticism," but in its failure sufficiently to free itself from the myths of modernity. Jean-Francois Lyotard has described the postmodern condition succinctly as "incredulity toward metanarratives": an attitude commendable in itself, no doubt, but also one that can easily be translated into a dogmatic metanarrative of its own. ... The "postmodern" condition, however, is an awareness that all metanarrative structures stand upon a shifting surface of dead and living metaphors, while all "truths" are endlessly fluid.' *The Beauty of the Infinite*, pp. 6-7.

the metaphysical and theological integrity of the realm of the finite as an adequate sacramental mediation of the divine. The aesthetical, dramatic and logical aspects of worldly being constitute the analogical ground for divine Revelation – with all proper nods to the *major dissimilitude* at the heart of every analogy – and must not be viewed as a realm of fragmentation and declension so extreme in its opacity as to render the finite into a positive obstacle to our understanding of the divine. The biblical God is a ‘God who speaks’, i.e. a God who appears in a creaturely realm of his own making and who, therefore, can make himself known through the very structures of finite existence. Thus the Balthasarian project is nothing less than a total reorienting of modern theology away from its fixation on the distorting effects of the various finite media of Revelation, and towards a fresh view of the sources of Revelation as the beautiful, dramatic and logical manifestations of the very Glory of God. And even if the postmodern problematic does not play a role as an explicit foil in his theology, his entire project is nevertheless an attempt to answer the charge that all finite existence is marked with the sign of Cain, and therefore can never act as the mediation of the divine.

That is not to say that Balthasar is unaware of the fallen condition of existence or of the apophatic moment in all theological discourse. However, he is at pains to point out that sin does not so corrupt nature as to negate the ‘it is good’ of creation, nor does the apophatic and iconoclastic element in theology trump the more positive aspects of Revelation. If this were so then the Incarnation is pointless and the entire biblical economy of salvation is an exercise in futility. The inner logic and trajectory of all biblical theology is in the direction of grace and the making known of the mighty deeds of God *pro nobis*. This inner logic and trajectory gives witness to the irreducibly aesthetic and dramatic nature of all biblical truth and is, in the final analysis, the justification for Balthasar’s grand trilogy.

### ***B. Apophaticism and the ‘Pluralism of Religious Truth’: A Liberal Trojan Horse***

What Balthasar’s theology of Revelation makes clear is therefore that nothing is more foreign to the spirit of Christian faith than an exaggerated apophasis that relativizes the positive aspects of God’s self-revelation in Christ. Such exaggerated apophasis rather easily lends itself to acting as a pious mask for what is in reality a deep religious cynicism and agnosticism. For once the unique revelatory claims for Christ are set aside in favor of a ‘history of religions’ approach, the door is wide open to a relativizing of *all religious truth claims* in the name of a false irenicism between religions that feigns respect for alternative paths to the divine when in reality what is involved is the calling into question of the positive truth claims of such paths in the first place. This is the point made by Wolfhart Pannenberg when he notes that the issue of religious pluralism is certainly nothing new in the history of Christianity, and therefore the current attempt by Christian theologians to redefine the Christian faith in non-incarnational and therefore nonnormative terms is in reality indicative of a crisis of truth among Christian theologians in the West, and not, as is claimed, the product of some radically new historical situation

faced by the Church for the first time. What is being called into question is precisely the positive truth content of the traditional Christian doctrines concerning Christ in the name of a pluralism of religions, where all paths to God are relativized and therefore made equal.<sup>22</sup> But this equality, according to Pannenberg, is a strange one, predicated as it is on a potentially disastrous denial of the importance of specific truth claims within religious traditions:

It is the encounter of specific truth claims that challenges each religious tradition to reaffirm itself in facing those challenges. That means to incorporate whatever one has to recognize as elements of truth in other traditions into one's own faith. But it can never mean to give up on the specific truth claims of one's own tradition. If that happens, it would precipitate the end of that religious tradition. Therefore the advice of some promoters of a theology of religious pluralism to relativize and play down the Christian truth claims could prove disastrous.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, it has now become commonplace in certain Christian theological circles to criticize traditional Christology on the grounds that it illegitimately claims universal revelatory normativity for Christ and thus opens the door to religious intolerance.<sup>24</sup> What this criticism implies is that it is not theologically proper to conceive of a God who might choose to enter into time and history in an absolute and definitive manner since in doing so one might be tempted to claim that there is in fact a single religious tradition that most clearly embodies the truth about God. But why should this be decided *a priori* unless there is an antecedent metaphysical claim being made here that the particular historical structures of a single man's life cannot be theologically universalized into a normative revelation for all times and places? William Cavanaugh places this question within the context of the classical philosophical problem of the one and the many, and views modern pluralistic approaches to religion as a thinly veiled attack on the importance of the many. Drawing upon Balthasar's theology of revelation, Cavanaugh asserts that the modern pluralist's project is as hostile toward particularity in the religious domain as globalizing capitalism is in the economic, and Liberalism in the political. He thus identifies the path of religious pluralism as part of the same distorting and alienating dynamic that characterizes modernity in general. 'The pluralist's appreciation for the particular,' he states, 'is based on an *a priori* assumption that Lessing was right: there is an ugly and uncrossable ditch between the absolute on the one hand, and the relativities of history on the other.'<sup>25</sup> He further points out that such disdain for religious particulars is not a neutral approach to the question of

<sup>22</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims,' in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Gavin D'Costa (ed.), Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990, pp. 97–106.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 1985; Terrence Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000; Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000; John Hick, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> William Cavanaugh, 'Balthasar, Globalization, and the Problem of the One and the Many,' *Communio*, XXVIII, 2 (Summer, 2001), p. 335

truth in religion, but is actually the affirmation of a very particular religious truth claim, that of the Vedas: 'The pluralists thus adopt the solution of the Vedas to the problem of the One and the Many: truth (Sat) is One, but has many names.'<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the animus against situating this normative revelation within a particular historical, linguistic and institutional mediation betrays a fundamental cultural bias against the very idea of a historically embodied normative religious truth. John Hick, for example, claims that all particular religious truth claims are second order realities that are of relative unimportance when compared with the foundational religious experience at the heart of all religions. But on what basis is such a claim made unless it is that of a dualistic metaphysic that pits time against eternity, the particular against the universal, and the concrete against the abstract? The privileging of a vague religious sense as some kind of univocal and universal phenomenon over the particulars of any given religion already betrays a fundamental metaphysical posture that is all too typically modern in its provenance. Specifically, the Liberal reduction of religion to subjective experiences owes more to the Enlightenment's critique of religious revelation as a source of public truth than it does to the real historical and empirical reality of religion as actually practised. As such, it constitutes a fundamental distortion of the reality of religion in the name of a new metaphysical posture towards the relation between the particular and the universal in religious truth claims. Thus if this is the implied metaphysical logic of such positions, what becomes of their putative metaphysical neutrality towards all definitive religious/metaphysical claims? Do they themselves then not become simply a rival religious metaphysical doctrine of their own, a new and idiosyncratically modern form of religious truth?

Cavanaugh, therefore, points out that the religious pluralist is assuming the élitist posture of one who has stepped back from participation in any particular religion in order to gain a bird's eye view of the whole and to pronounce judgment upon it. This represents an altogether new kind of religious subjectivity, that of the modern critical thinker who has seen through the particularities of all religions and who can now confidently assert what it is really all about. What this does, says Cavanaugh is to encourage the religious seeker to become a kind of theological tourist who skips from one venue to another in rapid succession simply to catalogue what is there without ever entering into the reality in question. Furthermore, this detached observer approach to religion is the perfect religious template for modern consumerist culture, since it affirms the essentially trivial nature of particular religious doctrines, which in turn opens the door to a syncretic mixing of religious elements that is guided by a privatized ideology of consumerist choice. Thus, the religion of the modern pluralist is the ultimate enemy of serious existential engagement with religion and fosters a globalizing homogeneity similar in its effects to such globalizing capitalist ventures as the McDonalds hamburger. In other words, the pluralist seeks to turn religion into a kind of global spiritual junk food: homogenized, safe, and so lacking in nutritional value and flavour that it actually destroys the true religious palate.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. pp. 336–7.

The élitist quality of such consumerist and syncretic approaches renders the pluralist's project suspect from the outset, since one of its clear goals is the creation of an entirely new religious dogmatism that stands above all other religious constructions. Thus what is most telling about such approaches, and which often goes unexpressed, is the hidden theological particularism and dogmatism that such a globalizing view implies. For if the practitioners of the pluralism of religious paths approach are to be consistent, then they must acknowledge that all religious truth claims, and not just Christian ones, are relative, provisional and subject to an extreme apophatic critique. But is this not a highly particular and rather dogmatic theological claim in its own right? By what Gnostic revelation do the purveyors of such views know this to be theologically true? Are their views about apophasis not also to be critiqued by their very own apophatic method, or is this the lone dogmatic position concerning the truth of God that is to be accepted at face value? As Pannenberg notes by way of example, how do we come to know that all religions are relative approximations of the truth of the One God?<sup>28</sup> The very assumption that religion seeks God, if the reality designated by the word 'God' is not to be a meaningless and empty term, must have some already defined sense of what that God is like. And is not the assertion that all religions seek God an already prescriptive theological affirmation of some form of Monotheism? Does this then not imply, at the very least, that all monotheistic religions are superior in their truth claims to non-monotheistic religions?

Thus, as Pannenberg points out, the pluralistic approach to the question of religious truth often has recourse to some version of philosophical natural theology as one of its mainstays, but such approaches are not really all that new (e.g. the Greek philosophical tradition and its critique of the gods). Certainly, philosophical reason can go a long way towards establishing certain truths about God independent of revelation. But how does that save the pluralist's argument from hopeless self-contradiction? For if philosophy can ascertain that monotheism is superior to all alternatives, then do we not have a philosophical warrant for trusting the revelatory truth claims of monotheistic religions over non-monotheistic ones? Therefore, once again, what seems to be driving the pluralist's theological agenda is not a concern for religious truth as such – for if it were it would adopt the view of the superiority of monotheism as a truth claim – so much as a concern for modernity's canons of Liberal rationality, wherein it is simply an axiomatic religious dogma that all religions are equal.

However, Hick and others claim to be arguing as theologians from within the ambience of a redefined version of the Christian faith where the divinity of Christ is denied and Christianity takes its place as merely one path to God among many. But if this is so, then how exactly is the positive truth content of Christianity arrived at, and how is this truth content used as a barometer for judging the truth claims of other religions? And if there are such identifiable theological criteria, by what authority are they established as authentic first principles beyond the mere opinions of Hick and his collaborators? For Hick and others like him spend a great deal of time rejecting the theological normativity of the Christian faith precisely as

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<sup>28</sup> Pannenberg, p. 97.

just such a theological barometer for truth. What then does it mean when he claims that he is arguing as a specifically Christian theologian? Are we not right back then to some notion of philosophical natural theology as the ultimate arbiter of religious truth? In point of fact, when one peels back the layers of vague rhetoric in such approaches, what one discovers, yet again, is that the operative theological criteria are the truth canons of modern, Western, naturalistic Liberalism. Such celebrated religious virtues as tolerance, diversity, dialogue, openness etc. turn out on closer examination to be the old bromides of the Enlightenment's polemic against the particularities of Christian revelation, now dressed up in the inclusive language of postmodern pluralism. Thus, under the seemingly benign guise of promoting religious tolerance and diversity (who could be against tolerance?), and using the Enlightenment's biased and exaggerated historiography of the dangers of religious particularism (wars, genocide, inquisitions etc.), these apophatic approaches to religious pluralism actually promote a radical distrust of all religions; while professing to love religion in general, they actually sow the seeds of distrust for all particular religions as these religions have been practised and understood by their practitioners. Authentic apophysis can be found in all religions, more emphasized in the East, but present in the mystical theology of the West as well. Indeed, the acknowledgment that the ultimate reality is infinite absolutely requires a strong apophatic element in even the most positive elements of Theistic revelation. The apophysis of modern pluralistic approaches, by contrast, is characterized by a deep distrust of the very idea of 'truth' in religion and are therefore different in kind from even the most extreme forms of traditional religious apophysis.

Joseph Ratzinger goes even further and concludes that the modern desire to dissolve the positive truth content of theistic revelation in the acid of a generic mysticism is, in reality, a recipe for the complete irrelevance of religion in the modern world. For part of the rejection of theistic revelation is the very idea of creation as a revelatory manifestation of the one God, and thus as a place where we can encounter this God. The entire realm of the material, the sensual, the historical, all become empty of God and devoid of any theological meaning. Gone too is the integrative and communion building power of religion where everything is reduced to the therapeutic quest of the individual soul to find mystical union with the ground of being, but not with its appearing in anything concrete. 'Salvation,' Ratzinger states, 'is outside the world, and we get no guidance for our action in it beyond whatever strength we may acquire from regularly withdrawing into the spiritual dimension. But this dimension as such has no definable message for us. We are therefore left to our own devices when we engage in worldly activity.'<sup>29</sup>

Thus for Ratzinger the question of religious truth is the decisive one and any attempt to marginalize its importance for the sake of a false notion of tolerance runs the risk of creating the very intolerable situation it seeks to avoid. The attempt to unite religions by asking them to submit their most fundamental truth claims to sceptical doubt will prove fruitless, since religion, stripped of its traditional function as a bearer of positive, normative truths, will simply wither and fade,

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, 'Interreligious Dialogue and Jewish-Christian Relations,' *Communio*, XXV, 1 (Spring, 1998), p. 35.



as we see in the secularized West. Furthermore, the effort to transcend particular religious doctrines by emphasizing a common ethical practice as the core of religion will prove equally fruitless and even destructive. For the common problems that confront the human race and that demand ethical response do not of themselves mandate a particular prudential solution. Nor do religions have ready-made ethical answers to all of the great pandemic problems that confront the world. Rather, the role of reason is critical here in the process of moral action where respect for dialogue and a diversity of views are critical. 'Whenever,' Ratzinger states, 'a religiously motivated moralism sidesteps this often irreducible pluralism, declaring *one* way to be the only right one, then religion is perverted into an ideological dictatorship whose totalitarian passion does not build peace, but destroys it. Man makes God the servant of his own aims, thereby degrading God and himself.'<sup>30</sup> Thus for Ratzinger the denial of the importance of religious truth, and the reduction of religion to either a vague mysticism or a moralizing religious activism, simply opens religion to the distorting forces of ideology, and opens society to the very real threat of the apotheosis of whatever currently fashionable political movement can put on the revolutionary mantle of orthopraxis. Only when religions are committed to the Transcendent God of Truth will they respect the quest for this Truth in one another, and avoid the temptation of divinizing more terrestrial ambitions.

This latter point is extremely important. For part and parcel of this move to pluralize and relativize all religious truth claims under the banner of a tolerant apophysis, is a deeper project actually to redefine all particular religions in a manner that now comports with the new Liberal political model. So we see the modern spectacle of characterizing religious practitioners as falling into one of two camps: 1) sophisticated religious people who understand that the particularities of their religious tradition are not to be taken seriously as truth claims, and who are on board with the modern Liberal project; or 2) vulgar fundamentalists who resist the project of Liberalization, continue to believe in their religions as historically received and understood, and who are all potential fomenters of hatred and division. Thus one cannot help but reach the conclusion that the goal of such gross characterizations, despite voluminous empirical evidence to the contrary, is the dissolving of religious particularism in the acid of postmodern Liberalism for the sake of extra-theological political motivations. What this further tells us is that the apophatic path of a radical pluralism of religious truth is, in reality, nothing more than a new religion in its own right: the religion of modern technocratic Liberalism, complete with its own unassailable dogmatism, its magisterial apparatus, and its methods of coercive compliance. Thus, given the dominant role played by the canons of secular, Liberal rationality in such approaches, their true inner ideological orientation is now apparent: they are a politics in search of a theological position. And once the requisite theological position has been worked out, it is secular Liberal politics that once again assumes control. The upshot of all this is the tendency to view all religious truth claims through the lens of the political, relegating traditional theological discourse to the margins of the academy and, surprisingly, to the fringes of the Church as well.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 36.



With this marginalization of theology and the downplaying of the positive truth content of the various religions, we see the emergence of spirituality as a substitute for religion in the modern Western world in particular. What the term 'spirituality' means, of course, is open to a wide variety of interpretations; thus it is best to define it based on the role it seems to play rather than in any particular denotative meaning, and that role is the validation of the highly individualistic and syncretistic religious constructions of the modern atomized self. As anyone who teaches modern undergraduates can tell you, what people seem to mean today when they say they are spiritual is that they believe in some kind of a God whose contours seem largely shaped by their own subjective opinions about the divine and not by any kind of religious authority outside the self. Despite the fact that such subjective opinions are largely shaped by the ambient culture and residual ideas gleaned from the dominant religion of the region, the notion that ideas about God are relative to the subjective dispositions of the individual self is the central determinative principle. Religious hierarchies and authority structures are deemed to be antiquated legacies from a less democratic past, now replaced by the freedom of the self to choose among religious options. Of course, there is in a sense great truth in the idea that faith is not to be coerced and that it must be the product of a choice of the individual believer in the depth of his or her conscience. However, what is different here is the very notion of religious conscience. In traditional views the conscience is indeed free to choose its own path, but that this path must be considered carefully in the light of objective truth. In other words, the function of the conscience was to discover the truth and to pursue it. Today, however, the opposite is true: conscience is viewed as my own distinct *nomos* beholden to no truth outside the self. Conscience creates its own truth and is thus a testament to the radical egalitarianism of religious truth. Thus, by 'spirituality' most people today mean 'the truth of my own religious views simply by virtue of the fact that they are *my* views'. Put another way, we can venture the further insight, mentioned in the foregoing analysis of pluralism, that what is at work here is the radical agnosticism of Liberalism coupled with its corollary: the total egalitarianism of religious sentiments.

In all of this there is an ironic, and dangerous, return to a kind of tribalizing of the religious impulse as individuals turn away from the expansive, universal traditions of the world's great religions and towards the idiosyncratic needs of the self and its immediate context. Furthermore, this tribalizing effect is really a return to the ontological role traditionally played by polytheism in the history of the world's religions.<sup>31</sup> It is often assumed, wrongly, that the only difference between polytheism and monotheism is one of mathematics, i.e. polytheism holds for a multiplicity of gods while monotheism simply engages in a mathematical reduction to one God. However, this ignores a fundamental ontological difference between the two approaches. In polytheism the fragmented world of the gods and their often contentious relations with one another and with humankind is merely a projection of the world's fundamental ontological fragmentation into a vast

<sup>31</sup> For what follows I am indebted to the analysis of Giorgio Buccellati, 'On Christic Polytheism and Christian Monotheism,' *Communio*, XXII, 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 113–138.

array of natural objects and forces. The concept of infinity is not really in play and the world system as a whole is viewed as a mere aggregate of finite moments and parts. Furthermore, even though the gods are portrayed as personal they are not, for all that, approached as loving beings who providentially guide human affairs to generally good outcomes. In point of fact, the gods are looked upon as agents representative of forces that humanity seeks to bend to its need. And behind it all there lurks the impersonal law of fate that governs the gods as well as human affairs. Thus, in a polytheistic mentality, religion takes on the form of a kind of power of acquisition where the fundamental forces that govern the cosmos are viewed as a field of possible human exploitation for the expansion of human power. There is, therefore, in the polytheistic ontological scheme a constitutive human posture characterized by possessing rather than contemplative gratitude and adoration before a gracious God.

In contrast, monotheism is a fundamental affirmation of the Infinite Transcendence of God who exists beyond the realm of finite fragmentation and is the ground of possibility for all finite existents. As such, monotheism views the cosmos as a unity of finite entities which are in deep relation to one another because they are first participators in the divine being. Furthermore, God is personal and a creator who seeks to enter into communion with creatures whose very existence is characterized as 'gift'. Thus, the fundamental ontological posture of monotheism is one of receptive gratitude and adoration before the mystery of the Infinite. Monotheism therefore resists the instrumentalizing of nature and the ontology of grasping, and seeks instead to locate the *logoi* of creation in the Infinite embrace of the divine Logos. Unfortunately, monotheists often approach their God in a polytheistic fashion, in the sense that they treat the Infinite as if it were simply a single mythic god whose will we need to bend to our own. However, that does not change the fundamentally new attitude towards the world engendered by the monotheistic revolution in human thought.

Returning then to our main theme – the relativizing of religious truth in the name of a tolerant pluralism and the subsequent reduction of religion in the social sphere to private spirituality – we see that these modern spiritualities approach the world as a largely fragmented zone of forces and parts, where the individual spiritual seeker attempts to find some wellspring of deep power within themselves for coping with the world's vagaries. The difference, however, is that unlike in ancient polytheism where the world was still viewed epiphanically even as it was approached instrumentally, the modern person tends to approach nature within an empirical and scientific mindset that only reinforces the fundamentally instrumental view of the world already inherent within the fragmented zone that his or her spirituality metaphysically posits. It is certainly true that many of these modern spiritualities do often speak of the oneness of all things and of a deep spiritual connection that permeates the natural world. But in actual practice the metaphoric nature of such utterances becomes clear when a basic instrumentalist posture of acquisition and control over the world dominates our day-to-day living as well as our basic moral attitude towards such things as abortion, embryonic stem cell research and human cloning. Regardless of what you might think of each one of these moral issues, the point at hand is the inherently instrumentalist view

of nature that such practices imply: nothing in nature is viewed as an irreducible whole imbued with an inviolable and normative goodness. Rather, everything, including human life itself and the form of the human body, is viewed as an inert field of mere matter open to human exploitation for largely utilitarian purposes.<sup>32</sup> Thus we see that despite the vague rhetoric of our spiritual oneness with nature, the natural world is, in reality, viewed as a mere instrument for our manipulation. The boutique shop quality of these vague spiritualities betrays what is in fact a consumerist approach to religion where the atomized Cartesian self is the absolute arbiter over how best to use the realm of the sacred in order to advance its own therapeutic well being.

These are admittedly harsh words and broad generalizations. But I hold them to be true. The point I am trying to make is not that of a moralizing judgmentalism where anyone who holds differing moral views on the basic gender and life issues from the official teaching magisterium of the Catholic Church is to be characterized as a dangerous spiritual dilettante. Indeed, even the Catholic Church bases its moral teaching in these matters on the kind of reasoning involved in natural law theory, and not on raw fideistic assertions. Thus there is room for rational discussion on all these controversial issues, and my point is not to foreclose legitimate moral conversation among people of good will and reason. Rather, the point of the harsh tone is to drive home how metaphysically serious the issues we confront truly are. My assertion here is that what we are witnessing in the modern world's flight from historical religious truth claims is a reassertion of a fundamentally and radically different ontology: the ontology of a tribal polytheism now intertwined with the power of modern science and the capitalist market. My further assertion is that this ontology is best characterized as a metaphysic of acquisition, of power, and of 'having' that denies humanity's fundamental constitution as *homo adorans* and replaces it with *homo faber*. The caustic harshness of words is often the only instrument at a theologian's disposal to dispel the modern metaphysical fog that would have us believe that nothing metaphysically fundamental has really changed, that an instrumentalizing metaphysic of power is consonant with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that theology and all metaphysics is, therefore, irrelevant intellectualizing, and that the technological imperative that allows us to do anything we have the power to achieve is the dominant moral norm that brooks no interference from religious moralizers. The final result, therefore, of the relativizing of religious truth in the acid of a pluralistic, apophatic agnosticism is the elimination of God's sacramental glory and beauty from the world, a glory that is our only hope of saving the world from the hegemony of technocratic, capitalist control.

<sup>32</sup> A case in point would be the spirituality often associated with 'eco-feminists' who wax eloquent about the oneness of the female body's cycles with the harmonious cadences of nature and its seasons, all the while running to the pharmacy to buy the latest chemical estrogenic sterilants to pump into their bodies and to flush down the toilet into the world's water systems. Ironically, it should be noted, the Catholic Church's approach to birth regulation, where respect for nature's cycles and the affirmation of the sacredness of the life-giving power of the woman is front and centre, is castigated for being misogynistic since it does not grant to women total technological control over their bodies.

My claim, therefore, is not that all technology is bad – quite the opposite, I am not advocating a neo-luddite position – but that the technological imperative is dangerous when it is morally framed within the religion that is Liberalism, framed within a metaphysic of mechanistic reductionism and voluntarist individualism. In what follows, I would like to develop this thought further and to explore the deep connection between science, technology and Liberal culture with an eye towards how Christian Revelation remains our last best hope at thinking through these issues differently. Specifically, it will be argued that in our postmodern condition of fragmented and irreducible difference, only the Revelation of God in Christ, as the Appearance that grounds all appearances, can give us the holistic vision required to provide humanity with an alternative view of science and human culture.

### *C. Liberalism and the Ethos of Technological Science*

The question of technology as a uniquely modern phenomenon has been dealt with extensively by a host of thinkers. The fundamental question that arises is the extent to which the alliance between modern science and its technological application represents a qualitatively different phenomenon from the use of technique by human cultures down through history. After all, the invention of the wheel and of crude stone tools is as much an attempt by human beings to foster a mastery over nature as is the modern computer. The difference, however, seems to reside in the elimination of the classical distinction between art and technique.<sup>33</sup> In classical cultures a distinction was always made between the realm of human moral and spiritual wisdom – a realm loosely categorized here as that of ‘art’ or the human capacity for symbol creating context – and ‘technique’, which was viewed as the prudent application of human ingenuity to the pursuit of the good life (‘good’ here being defined morally and spiritually rather than as merely referring to the material conditions of life). The latter was always viewed within the broader context of the former, even if it frequently resisted such contextualization as a result of human moral fallibility. In contrast, modernity represents a decisive break with this tradition insofar as, beginning with the advent of experimental science and then continuing on into technological advancement, science and technology came to be viewed as totalizing metaphysical explanations of existence. This revolution in human thought created the uniquely modern fact/value distinction that led directly to the marginalizing and privatizing of religious wisdom as non-public in its truth claims. Christianity, of course, was greatly to blame for this state of affairs, given its fragmented self-immolation in the Reformation and the subsequent social conflicts that arose in its wake. It was simply inevitable that European culture would turn elsewhere for the intellectual glue that holds society together, and the Esperanto of science and technology, with their wild successes in taming some of humanity’s pandemic problems, seemed the perfect substitute. The result of this social upheaval was the slow but inexorable drift of European cultures

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<sup>33</sup> George Parkin Grant, ‘Thinking about Technology’, *Communio*, XXVIII, 3 (Fall, 2001), pp. 610–612.

towards science and technology as the sole form of public truth discourse. Thus what is different in the modern context with regard to science and technology is the metaphysical shaping of society into an entirely different cultural reality, where technology became a reality-creating and truth-creating social phenomenon that colours our entire existential posture towards the world.

The difficulty posed by technology, therefore, is that all discussion concerning its proper uses is always already framed by a set of metaphysical assumptions created by technology itself. In other words, technology is more than a set of metaphysically neutral tools to be used by human beings at our discretion, but actually also frames the very intellectual matrix in which discussion of those uses takes place. For example, modern technology has brought in its wake a range of new environmental crises never before encountered by human culture. But rather than call technological society itself into question, modern human beings proceed instead to seek even more technological solutions to the very problems created by technology. The idea that such new technologies might also bring unforeseen problems is contemplated, but accepted as a necessary risk, since technology as such is viewed as an unalloyed good whose promise for human betterment provokes an almost eschatological faith in its eventual triumph and efficacy. Now, this faith in technology is perhaps justified on some level and I am not advocating, as I said previously, the abandonment of technology in favour of some nostalgic agrarian utopia. The point, however, is that moral and theological considerations are rarely taken seriously as necessary components of our public discourse on this issue, since modern society universally adopts the attitude that technology carries within itself its own warrant requiring no further contextualization or justification. The only possible moral consideration allowed into the conversation is merely the application of more quantifiable technique in the form of complicated risk-reward calculations along strictly utilitarian lines. In this situation, morality itself, rather than being viewed as our fundamental commitment to some conception of the Good, objectively considered, is instead sublimated by the technological mindset as such as a mere extension of our ability to calculate practical, empirical consequences. Obviously, there are implied moral valuations of the good in every calculation of consequences, since even here some antecedent sense of what differentiates good from bad consequences must be operative. Nevertheless, since such implied moral valuations must never be admitted explicitly for the metanarrative of Liberal procedural democracy to work, the tendency in our public discourse is towards a kind of lowest common denominator calculation of material effects.

A case in point is the current debate in the United States over federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. The essentially moral question of the embryo's metaphysical status is considered to be too subjective and arcane for our technocratic culture to answer. As President Obama famously said during an interview in response to a question about the moral status of the foetus, 'the answer to that question is above my pay grade'. Translation: such questions are moral and metaphysical and are therefore irrelevant to the political decisions that need to be made concerning the status of unborn or embryonic human life. Instead, science is invoked as the primary arbiter of the ethical uses of embryonic human life and the entire focus is on the practical benefits of such research in the form of medical cures

for terrible diseases. Thus technology as such, and what it can achieve, frames the entire discussion from start to finish. Any attempt by organized religious bodies, e.g. the American Catholic bishops, is viewed suspiciously as an attempt to impose private dogmas on public policy, as if religious insights into the meaning of human life are extrinsic and alien intruders into the normative kingdom of technology. Obviously, this is but one example of our current attempts at public moral discourse, but it strikes me as utterly paradigmatic of our contemporary attitudes towards the role of technology.

This point is driven home forcefully by the philosopher George Parkin Grant, who observes that the internal metaphysical/cultural logic created by technology does, in fact, impose a certain destiny on the development of modern society. Technology is no neutral tool to be used within the context of antecedent moral notions of the good. Rather, technology creates and imposes a radically new mindset, since the development of technology requires a certain set of industrial, economic and political conditions for its development, conditions which in turn frame the very nature of the society that must then decide how to use the technology in question. Thus technology creates social structures and expectations that become completely and indelibly etched into the cultural metaphysical landscape. In other words, technology as an abstraction, as a mere theoretical idea, does not exist. The social conditions required for its development are themselves the product of the confluence of modern science, political Liberalism and corporate capitalism, conditions which in turn dictate an almost inevitable decision in favour of whatever new technological innovation emerges as the latest saviour for the dominant social problem *du jour*. Along these lines Grant, speaking of the proper uses of computer technology as a paradigmatic example, notes:

When we try to think the sentence 'the computer does not impose on us the way it should be used,' it becomes clear that we are not allowing computers to appear before us for what they are. Indeed the statement (like many similar) obscures for us what computers are. To begin at the surface: the words 'the computer does not impose' are concerned with the capacities of these machines, and these capacities are brought before us as if they existed in abstraction from the events which have made possible their existence. Obviously the machines have been made from a vast variety of materials, consummately fashioned by a vast apparatus of fashioners. Their existence has required generation of sustained effort by chemists, metallurgists and workers in mines and factories. Beyond these obvious facts, computers have been made within the new science and its mathematics. That science is a particular paradigm of knowledge and, as any paradigm of knowledge, is to be understood as the relation between an aspiration of human thought and the effective conditions for its realization.<sup>34</sup>

And what, exactly, does technology impose upon us, according to Grant? Obviously, that is a complex question, but Grant identifies two fundamental aspects of modernity, and, ironically, postmodernity that technology has helped to shape. First, it breeds a certain technocratic mindset that views nature as a metaphysically inert field of potential tools for human use and exploitation. Gone,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 617.

of course, is the classical metaphysics of participation and in its place we find the modern materialist flattening out of reality into simple matter in motion. Thus reality does not impose upon us any antecedent moral commitment, born out of its metaphysical depth as an expression of some Transcendent goodness, but rather presents itself as a pliant set of open possibilities for the human will to exploit at its discretion.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the technological mindset creates a voluntarist understanding of the relationship between the human will and nature, closing the door on any hope of discovering a contemplative dimension in our posture towards existence and opening the door to the creeping nihilism of modernity.

Second, and deeply related to the first, technology imposes on culture a homogeneity that is destructive of all genuine difference in the world. That is the deep paradox at the heart of the postmodern project. For all of its talk about irreducible difference and pluralism, what postmodernism creates in its denial of universal Transcendent truth in the structures of finite existence is a situation where meaning is a projection of the subjective ego robbing it of any public warrant. This in turn creates the very moral and spiritual social vacuum that is filled by some other universalizing impulse, e.g. science and technology. For the great flaw at the heart of postmodernism is its silly insouciance in the face of the most obvious fact of human existence: the human desire, and hence the inexorable human quest, for universal meaning and context. Thus the postmodern critique of hegemonic moral and spiritual metanarratives, rather than fostering a revolutionary new approach to human life as a dance of pluralistic differences, resurrects instead an old-fashioned relic: anomic despair and its desperate need for amelioration in some kind of quest for eschatological ultimacy. So the question before us is not a choice between metanarratives on the one hand and pluralistic difference on the other, but rather a choice between competing metanarratives, one religious and classical and the other technological and scientific. But most certainly pluralistic difference is a good thing, and so the further question arises as to which metanarrative is best suited for the promotion of a kind of universal meaning that does not, for all of its universalizing, create a bland homogeneity, and which in turn fosters and protects legitimate difference. And despite stereotypes to the contrary, one of the enduring strengths of Christianity, and of Catholicism in particular, is its ability to assimilate new cultural modalities into its universal theological horizon, without destroying them. Indeed, it often enlivens them through a fresh invigoration of spiritual content. In contrast, the inbuilt tendency of the technocratic project to impose a stifling homogeneity is precisely one of its most pernicious aspects. Once again, using the computer as a paradigmatic example, Grant observes:

Nevertheless, it is clear that the ways that computers can be used for storing and transmitting information can only be ways that increase the tempo of the homogenizing process. Abstracting facts so that they can be used as information is achieved by classification, and it is the very nature of any classifying to homogenize. Where classification rules, identities and differences can appear only in its terms. Indeed, the word 'information' is itself perfectly attuned to the account of knowledge which

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 615.



is homogenizing in its very nature. 'Information' is about objects, and comes forth as part of that science which summons objects to give us their reasons.<sup>36</sup>

The same could be said of a whole range of technological marvels that have become more than tools to aid human existence in our day-to-day affairs. To cite one more example, who would be so foolish as to assert that the automobile has done nothing to alter permanently the social landscape? At first cars were curious oddities, and then they became sought after luxuries, only to develop into absolute social necessities that impose their own logic on the structure of the societies they inform, a structure that also tends towards a homogeneity of form and content wherever the automobile reigns supreme. As Grant wryly observes: 'Any society with such vehicles tends to become like any other society with the same. Seventy-five years ago somebody might have said: "The automobile does not impose on us the ways it should be used," and who would have quarrelled with that? Yet this would have been a *deluded representation of the automobile*.'<sup>37</sup> (emphasis added)

What this last fact points to is that our choice is not between a technological understanding of reality on the one hand, versus a Christian one on the other, as if the two options were coequal metaphysical possibilities between which we must simply choose in voluntaristic fashion. Even to frame the question in such a way already privileges Liberal technocratic voluntarism as the answer. What is really at stake here is *reality as such* since, ironically, the technocratic mentality of modernity does not give us a deeper insight into the nature of things, but actually destroys our ability to see things in their proper light – *including the artifacts of technology themselves*. Abstracted from some notion of the Good, of the whole, of God, reality degenerates into a nominalist nightmare of disintegrated parts where the world is not even the world any more, but a play of shadows that defy true understanding. So the contradiction at the heart of the modern Liberal project is that its instrumentalist understanding of nature isn't even instrumentally useful in the long run. This might seem an outrageous claim in the face of technological science's manifest successes. Nevertheless, the verdict is still out on the final outcome of technological, Liberal society as the modern world seems beset by a series of intractable social, environmental, economic and political crises that threaten to veer into the realm of the unsustainable at any moment. My claim is that this situation has been caused precisely by Liberalism's instrumentalist understanding of nature, which routinely mischaracterizes the truth of reality even as it successfully exploits it on a mechanistic level, and thus robs the modern world of the very wisdom it needs to see things properly. In short, contrary to Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Samuel Harris, it is modern technocratic Liberalism that breeds alienation and illusion, a fantasy world of false eschatological promises rooted in the myth of a technological utopia.

Finally, it is not technology alone that imposes its own metaphysical logic upon our social reality. For as we noted above, technology does not exist in the abstract and is itself the product of certain political and economic decisions made over the

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 619.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



past several centuries, and in the West this political/economic structure is Liberal capitalism.<sup>38</sup> The metaphysical bifurcation implied by the Enlightenment's fact/value distinction gave rise to both modern science's technocratic account of nature as a metaphysically inert field of pliant possibilities, as well as the political theories of Liberalism that eventuated in the modern religiously neutral state, where the public sphere of civil rights is defined in procedural, positive law rather than grounded in some conception of the Good as Transcendent. Certain forms of government were more in tune with traditional notions of the good than others, e.g. the American experiment in natural rights, but by the twentieth century, a completely secular notion of rights and justice came to dominate the landscape and to define the political sphere through and through. Thus, seen in this light, Liberalism is merely the political expression of the same technocratic mentality as modern science, with capitalism the economic face of secular indifference to the Transcendent good. What they all have in common is the denial of the world's metaphysical participation in God in a manner that actually makes a difference. It matters little if a majority of people still claim to believe in God, since the entire edifice of Liberal modernity is predicated upon a procedural forgetfulness of God that is a kind of *de facto* atheism. Thus, regardless of one's religious affiliation, insofar as one's life is animated by this ethos of Liberal secularity, then it is thoroughly legitimate to refer to such people as atheists. This was Nietzsche's great insight, as well as Dostoevsky's, where the social decision to treat nature, political society and economics as if God did not exist is tantamount to the death of God.

No greater evidence for the idea of society as devoid of Transcendent orientations can be found than in Liberal society's love affair with the social sciences as tools for the control of mass culture. The modern state is a complex interactive set of managerial bureaucracies populated by economists, sociologists and various other social engineers drawn from the secularized multiversities of our great cosmopolitan cities. The goal of such bureaucracies is always the same: prediction and control of vast swaths of culture at the service of a political class that requires the maximization of economic largesse and technological prowess in order to convince the public of their competence as social managers. Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor understood well that in the great dialectic of freedom vs. bread, bread will win every time – a truth not lost on modern Liberal democracy where political freedom is always merely a means to the overarching end of material, economic and technological well being. Political freedom, or democracy as it is commonly called today, is therefore a bit of a ruse and has an air of unreality about it, since any classical sense of the moral meaning of the common good has been replaced by the politics of personal fulfilment. In short, we no longer live in the political world of Locke, but in the corporate cubicle, technology's totalizing embrace and on Oprah's couch. And this we call democracy.

This confluence of secularizing forces, as I have stated, has in common the fact/value distinction that bleaches the world of any metaphysical orientation to Transcendence. Thus the fact that Liberalism's great rhetorical devotion to freedom is now a hollow mantra is indicative of the predicament we are in. We continue

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. pp. 620–1.

to use words with moral connotations in our public discourse, but they are now empty of their traditional meaning and bespeak instead a kind of vague nostalgia for a moral system we seem to remember but don't dare to invoke with any degree of seriousness. But this cultural paralysis comes at a very dangerous time in human history, where the very spiritual wisdom we need to create the moral context for our notions of political justice and the proper uses of technology is the very wisdom that these same structures have worked so diligently to discredit. As Grant notes: 'We are called to understand technological civilization just when its very realization has radically put into question the possibility that there could be any such understanding.'<sup>39</sup> He then concludes with an observation that this wisdom escapes us even as we continue to make moral sounding claims about how things like computers should be used. What is the moral force of the use of the word 'should' in a technocratic regime that thinks questions of moral valuation are merely subjective tastes? Grant summarizes this line of thought in the following trenchant summary:

The resolute mastery to which we are summoned in 'does not impose' is the very source of difficulty in apprehending goodness as 'should'. Therefore, the 'should' in the statement has only a masquerading resonance in the actions we are summoned to concerning computers. It is a word carried over from the past to be used in a present which is ours only because the assumptions of the past were criticized out of public existence. The statement therefore cushions us from the full impact of the novelties it asks us to consider. It pads us against wondering about the disappearance of 'should' in its ancient resonance, and what this disappearance may portend for the future.<sup>40</sup>

#### *D. The Abolition of Man*

The loss of the moral and spiritual finality of the world in modern technocratic Liberalism is therefore both the eclipse of God and, for that reason, the abolition of man. With the loss of a Transcendent reference point, there is no longer any reason to view humanity as in any way privileged in the sense of having an inviolable dignity unlike that of any other life form. Humanity becomes just one more piece of the overall material puzzle to be deciphered through experimental science like all the other data of existence. But more importantly, since one of the primary goals of modern technocratic science is the ability to manipulate and control, there is the growing realization that human nature as such is soon to be under the same kind of technocratic control as all other aspects of our environment. But this raises the further question of just who will be in charge of this process of manipulation and control? As the theologian Livio Melina notes: 'Who is doing the experimenting, and what is being experimented upon? Impersonal experimentation is done on things that can be manipulated: both the subject and object of experimentation are lost in the imposition of a law that appears to overtake them both with its

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 626.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 624.

implacable urgency.<sup>41</sup> This is precisely the situation C.S. Lewis referred to as *The Abolition of Man*, where our ability to control nature is eventually turned on itself, leading to the paradoxical situation where our domination of nature becomes nature's domination of us. This happens almost automatically once the rule of the Transcendent moral law is denied and those invested with the power of technocratic control exist in a realm beyond all spiritual/moral influence. As Lewis states: 'When all that says "it is good" has been debunked, what says "I want" remains. It cannot be exploded or "seen through" because it never had any pretensions. . . . My point is that those who stand outside of all judgements of value cannot have any ground for preferring one of their own impulses to another except on the emotional strength of that impulse.'<sup>42</sup>

Thus nature gets its revenge on the pretensions of human beings through the arbitrary rule of those Lewis refers to as 'the Conditioners', i.e. the technocratic élites invested with the power of control in the modern state's structure of managerial bureaucracy. It is therefore one of the great ironies of history that the Enlightenment's elevation of human reason above divine revelation led, by an inexorable logic, to the subjugation of human reason to the forces of nature, since it is now nature, reductively conceived, that is the ultimate home of humanity, and not God. What nature teaches us about human reason is that it is nothing special – the blind product of evolutionary forces that created this thing called reason for purely utilitarian purposes, and which science now exposes as a pretentious mask for a host of more unseemly subconscious urges. Nietzsche, Freud, Marx and Darwin, along with a host of lesser epigones, have unmasked reason and freedom as ephemeral and vain constructions of religion and religious philosophy – which are themselves expressions of the androcentric fallacy – and who all advocated in their own way, ironically, that the more reasonable path (what could that even mean now?) was that of brute scientific honesty (why is honesty so prized?) in the face of reality (whatever that word means). The emptiness of such words as 'reasonable' or 'honest' or 'real' in such schemes becomes immediately apparent, and it is not long before knowledge for the sake of knowledge gives way to the spirit or will simply to dominate: the *libido dominandi*. Furthermore, such a will is now unfettered from any constraint beyond the category of desire, which in turn is a category both adolescent in its neutral posture towards the good, and demonic in its open-ended insatiability. The Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas has captured this dynamic beautifully:

Under its gaze [i.e., that of science], the nature of things, reduced to atoms and causes with no purpose, was left without a trace of dignity. However, that which does not arouse respect can be subdued, and, set loose from its own cosmic inviolability, every thing becomes an object of limitless use. If there is nothing definitive in nature, no structure in its products that serves a purpose, then it is permissible to do what one wants with it without thereby violating its integrity, because there is no integrity to violate in a nature conceived exclusively in terms of the natural sciences, a nature that

<sup>41</sup> Livio Melina, 'The Eclipse of the Sense of God and Man,' *Communio*, XXXIV, 1 (Spring, 2007), p. 101.

<sup>42</sup> *Abolition of Man*, pp. 65–66.

is neither created nor creative. If nature is merely an object and in no sense a subject, if it expresses no creative will, then man remains the only subject and the only will. Therefore, the world, formerly an object of man's knowledge, now becomes more an object of his will, which obviously is the will to dominate. *Such a will, once its increased power has surpassed its need, becomes desire, purely and simply, a desire with no limits.*<sup>43</sup> (emphasis added)

Given this unmasking of human reason in the name of a science in the service of a raw *libido dominandi*, one is hard-pressed to locate a coherent vision of the human that can guide our moral deliberations over the proper applications of our growing biotechnology. For whatever else moral reasoning might require and contain, some vision of what it means to be human, and thus some normative sense of those aspects of our nature that are essential to human flourishing and which cannot, therefore, be violated, is a necessity. But there is simply no way that science as such can provide us with a humanistic orientation for our moral vision. Worse still, modern Liberalism mandates that it is only science that can provide us with such vision and that all other metaphysical truth claims must be checked at the door. Thus, as Melina points out: 'The question of a knowledge of human nature that is capable of informing man's increasingly powerful interventions on himself would appear to be both *imperative* and *impossible*, at least from a scientific point of view.'<sup>44</sup> Nor can one make appeal to some notion of the common good, as is often done in modern Liberal cultures, as the product of some kind of consensus between the self-interested wills that comprise society: a concordat of peace among balkanized rivals for reasons of pure self-interest cannot provide society with anything even remotely approaching a coherent vision of the moral good. That is why in classical conceptions of the common good the emphasis was upon the discovery of a true transcendent goodness that, once discovered, imparts to one and all an equal participation in this good, guaranteeing an extra-social warrant for society's noble aspirations and an extra-social censor for its morally negative impulses.

All of this is, of course, simply a roundabout way of saying that without an awareness and affirmation of God, there can be no human project that does not, in the end, destroy itself with its own technological prowess. However, what does an affirmation of God mean in this context? This is where the previous discussion of Balthasar and postmodernism, as well as our discussion of the agnostic underpinnings of the apophatic approach to religious pluralism, sheds light on our contemporary predicament. For the simple fact of the matter is that what is needed is an affirmation of God as the bearer of a definitive revelation that is carried forward in human history through the agency of a discernible religious tradition. Philosophical religion or natural theology can be helpful as adjuncts to a discernible tradition, or as preparations for discerning God's revelation, but approached in hermeneutical isolation they tend to evaporate into the mist of private speculation. In other words, both faith and reason are required to develop the full meaning of

<sup>43</sup> Hans Jonas, *Dalla fede antica all'uomo tecnologico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991), 262. Quote in 'The Eclipse of God and Man,' p. 105.

<sup>44</sup> 'The Eclipse of the Sense of God and of Man,' p. 102.

a possible divine revelation, but the process of discernment cannot move forward under Enlightenment based assumptions about Archimedean reason. Thus I take it as a basic principle of the hermeneutics of religion that *secular reason cannot form an adequate foundation for the adjudication of nonsecular claims*, and it is precisely the bias of the Enlightenment and modern technocratic Liberalism to make such a claim. This then is the fundament of our predicament: we need to affirm the truth of God but cannot do so since the only kind of reason allowed to our public discourse is always already freighted with anti-religious negations.

The irony, of course, is that Liberalism *is a metaphysical system* that functions as a kind of hidden religion within our culture. Therefore what is before us is a choice between two competing, and mutually exclusive, religious visions: technocratic Liberalism and Christianity. One of the great myths of modern culture is that we have to have a strictly secular form of government in order to keep the peace among differing religions. However, the fact of the matter is that we do have a state established religion in the West and that is the religion of technocratic Liberalism, and while it is probably true that Liberalism has kept the peace among different religions, it has done so only by marginalizing all religions other than itself. Its great success in achieving this marginalization was arrived at through stealth, where Liberalism speaks in the language of religious rights and allows religion a broad, free space in which to operate, but which nevertheless does so only by first gutting the specific content of all religions other than itself. The great untold story of modern Western Christianity is that of how it allowed its theological language, doctrinal truth claims and ritual symbols to be co-opted by Liberalism, and thus domesticated. What we have witnessed is a massive sublimation of the central truths of Christianity into the Leviathan of the modern social contract, a sublimation of Christianity to the political sphere so complete that it would make Constantine blush. In other words, it is my contention that in this great struggle between two competing religions, technocratic Liberalism and Christianity, it is plain to see that Liberalism has won the day. Indeed, so complete has been its victory that all our political debates between so-called conservatives, liberals and radical progressives take place within the ambit and under the sway of Liberal categories of thought. This point was forcefully made by Alasdair MacIntyre over two decades ago: 'So-called conservatism and so-called radicalism in these contemporary guises are in general mere stalking-horses for liberalism: the contemporary debates within modern political systems are almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals and radical liberals.'<sup>45</sup>

The greatest casualty of this Liberal victory is the Church. In many ways it is not an exaggeration to say that the Church has, in reality, disappeared from the modern world in any meaningful sense. To be sure, the Church still exists even on a sociological level as a discernible reality filled with millions of members. But that begs the question as I have framed it here, for it is my contention that the genius of Liberalism as a religious construction is precisely its ability to convince people that it is not a religion, and that it is merely making space for real religions like

<sup>45</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, p. 392.

Christianity; it can then point to the millions of people who still attend Christian churches as evidence for this claim. But it is a ruse and a sham, since for most Christians the Church no longer operates as the sacramental presence of God on earth, i.e. the very body of Christ that makes Christ truly present here and now precisely through the finite particular structures of the Church and her sacraments. Rather, as per the Liberal vision of religion, the Church is now viewed, even by Catholics, as a mere voluntary association, an aggregate of like-minded individuals who choose among various denominations for the one that best suits their tastes. Thus the Church loses its ontological status as well as its mystical pedagogy and is usually reduced to a utilitarian vessel for instilling moral values. In keeping with this social utilitarian function, the Church herself begins to de-emphasize the Eucharist as the central act of the Church and to fill the empty space with various committees and other bureaucratic structures in emulation of the managerial style of capitalism. The end result is a Church populated with unbelievers, i.e. with closet Liberals and *de facto* atheists who rebel against the traditional teachings and structure of the Church in order, constantly, to make it seem more Liberal. Thus the Church remains as an outward structure, and the Eucharist remains as a historic symbol, but neither the Church nor the Eucharist of her Lord carries any meaning for most believers beyond those given to it by Liberal society. Francisco Martinez, the Catholic archbishop of Granada, concurs with this view and offers this trenchant summary:

The Church loses both ontology and mysticism. Whatever does remain of these two aspects of reality (and what remains are mainly dislocated, isolated fragments) is a mere function of the empty banality of liberal 'ethics'. Strictly correlative to this metamorphosis is the replacement of the sacramental logic whereby the Christian *logos* has characteristically approached reality with the formal, instrumental and managerial logic of late capitalism. ... Now a Church conceived and lived in this manner is already nothing but a residual fact: it is not only that the Church has lost any continuity with historical Christianity; it is that it no longer exists. And, since community and tradition are in any case the locus of rationality and morality, neither Christian faith nor Christian morality can long survive the disappearance of the Church.<sup>46</sup>

The last point is important for the purposes of this chapter. For Martinez' claim is that the eclipse of God is also at the same time the abolition of man, but is so precisely as the eclipse of the sacramental and ontological nature of the Church. Thus what he is asserting is that the full affirmation of God in a Christian sense means also the full affirmation of the Church as the sacramental presence of the Trinitarian God of love in the cosmos. But this is precisely what most Christians today struggle with, since they are infused with the agnostic disposition of Liberalism towards all finite forms acting as vessels for the divine. Thus the crisis that confronts the modern Church, as it seeks to combat the eclipse of God and the abolition of man, is also an internal crisis of faith among her own. David Schindler puts it as follows: 'To put it in its most radical and indeed what seems

<sup>46</sup> Francisco Javier Martinez, 'Beyond Secular Reason': Some Contemporary Challenges for the Life and Thought of the Church,' *Communio*, XXXI, 4 (Winter, 2004), pp. 569–570.

to me also the most precise terms, the disappearance or indeed the death of God is a phenomenon occurring not only in the five per cent of Americans who do not profess belief in God but also and more pertinently in the 95 per cent who do.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the ultimate triumph of technocratic Liberalism is the creation of a new kind of subjectivity in the modern world: the atheistic Christian.

This fundamentally atheistic posture among putatively religious people points to the fact, it seems to me, that it is the naturalism of modern science that is the single most important cause of the current situation. Liberalism in the political sphere and capitalism in the economic are but different faces for what is in essence a purely mechanical, reductionist and materialistic view of human nature and human culture; and insofar as religious people in any era, Christians included, are deeply influenced by the cultural thought forms of their own time, it makes sense that the predominant mental attitude of many Christians is a kind of reductive scientific naturalism. In such a scenario, the affirmation that God exists is certainly expressive of a sincere disposition in favour of the possibility of God or the idea of God, but is also a mask that hides a deeper existential crisis of faith where belief in God runs counter to the deep naturalistic assumptions that animate the modern mind. For four hundred years Western culture has been steeped in the fact/value distinction and the scientific reduction of the truly real to the realm of the quantifiable. Galileo and Newton taught us to view the world as a closed machine and God as a distant observer. Darwin taught us to view human nature itself as part of this naturalistic machine. And then Freud, Nietzsche and Marx taught us to take Darwin's insight to its final logical conclusion: humanity is not only not in the image and likeness of God, but is, for all intents and purposes, a meaningless piece of irrational meat tossed to and fro by the subterranean forces of our material substrate like a cork bobs on the open ocean. No matter how strongly we might reject such views on a purely intellectual level, the fact of their cultural influence remains.

Finally, it is precisely because of the reductive empiricism of natural science that Liberalism acts as a secular parody of Christianity that has no power to integrate the One and the Many without reducing the one to the other. By this I mean that Liberalism, as a secularized version of Christian catholicity, operates as if it were a religion, but ultimately fails. And it fails because of its largely reductive view of existence. Thus in a radically nominalist world, where all that exists does so as a mere aggregate of individuals whose interrelationships are categorized in extrinsic, force-based models of efficient causation, no real unity of the human race on a deeper metaphysical level can take place. True unity in such a view can only arise mathematically rather than metaphysically and therefore must also be the product of coercive action. Where there are no natural spiritual and metaphysical ties that bind, then artificial ties must be invented and imposed. The Many become One through a process of coercive force that tends toward the dissolving of legitimate

<sup>47</sup> David Schindler, 'Religion and Secularity in a Culture of Abstraction: On the Integrity of Space, Time, Matter, and Motion,' in *The Strange New Word of the Gospel. Re-Evangelizing in the Postmodern World*, Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (ed) Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2002, pp. 33–4. Quote in Martinez, p. 570.



differences for the sake of an ersatz unity of the human race, a unity that does not exist naturally in the very metaphysical order of things, but rather exists only in the minds of those invested with the powers of unification. Viewed in this light, the modern technocratic Liberal project is a form of globalization that can only happen through a process of cultural and religious homogenization. The problem, however, is that such homogenization often comes at the cost of human blood, and when the homogenizing is being done in the name of scientific and cultural progress the dangers are very, very real. As C.S. Lewis puts it: 'The manmoulders of the new age will be armed with the power of an omniscient state and an irresistible scientific technique: we will get at last a race of conditioners who really can cut out all posterity in what shape they please.'<sup>48</sup>

Ultimately it is human reason itself that will be eclipsed, since the tendency of modern reductive naturalism to see through realities such as justice, reason and love will eventually destroy all that human reason holds dear, including the very reasonableness of reason itself. In other words, the modern world has reached the point where the spirit of reductive naturalism will be turned against man himself, creating a post-human world where we are free to reshape the form of human nature along strictly scientific lines. But even this project will eventually lose its lustre, since reductive naturalism can give no set of moral criteria to be used in guiding this process; the very post-human creations of science will lose their appeal as the constantly moving fluidity of artificially created human evolution will come to seem pointless. When we have succeeded in seeing through everything, including science itself, we will eventually come to the point where we are able to see nothing at all. And when this point is reached we will be on the threshold of the abolition of man. Lewis concludes as follows:

The kind of explanation that explains things away may give us something, though at a heavy cost. But you cannot go on explaining away forever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on 'seeing through' things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it are opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to see through first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To see through all things is the same as not to see.<sup>49</sup>

It is precisely technocratic Liberalism's penchant for 'seeing through' all metaphysical claims that renders their own claims problematical. And what this further points out is the impossibility of an ersatz morality and/or religion. Moral norms that are actually operative within a society, and not the ones to which we merely pay lip-service, are effective precisely because they have evolved organically within the culture and the religion that nurtured them. I am not arguing for a cultural relativism of moral norms or that critical reason plays no role in the development of moral ideals. I fully subscribe to the tradition of natural law moral reasoning found

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<sup>48</sup> *Abolition of Man*, p. 60.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p. 81.



within the Catholic intellectual tradition. My point rather is that reason alone cannot do the job and that moral reason is not *sui generis*, i.e. moral reasoning is not a process whereby human beings concoct moral ideas out of thin air based on some occult principle imbedded with reason itself (such as intuition). Moral reason requires embodiment within an on-going moral tradition that is usually linked to important social institutions. In more ancient civilizations morality had little to do with religion, but was sustained in such social institutions as the family and the customs of the *polis*. With the advent of monotheism and its Transcendent and good God, there emerged in Western civilization a direct linkage between moral norms and the institutional aspects of the synagogue and the Church. But the common link is that there never has been in any society a culturally entrenched set of moral norms that were the product of the pure reason of the moral philosophers. The role of philosophy with regard to morality has always been one of clarification, rational justification and nuance, rather than the pure creator of morality as such.

So the problem we face is that technocratic Liberalism has 'seen through' traditional Christian morality and has made every effort to ridicule out of existence the Catholic natural law tradition, but has no power simply to create a new moral vision to replace the old one. However, the simple fact of the matter is that nobody actually lives a 'Liberal life' because it is impossible. Almost everyone (I leave room for the deranged here) adheres to some set of moral values rooted in a metaphysical claim of some kind. Almost everyone favours his or her local community over humanity in general. Almost everyone finds the meaning of their life by placing it within a range of social hierarchies: the family, the school, the workplace, the government and even the local rotary club: all operate according to hierarchical models of competence and authority. Pure egalitarianism and inclusiveness and diversity and tolerance are not only impossible, they are not even desirable. Indeed, morality becomes totally meaningless in a purely egalitarian world, since the very core of morality is the idea that there are objective moral principles that exist independent of the subjective self and to which that self ought to submit. The Liberal attempt to make morality a pure construct of the social contract between the State and the individual self is therefore inherently impossible. In point of fact what usually happens in Liberal cultures is that they continue to operate out of the moral vision provided by the very Church they have relentlessly attacked as anti-Liberal. But over time the moral vision loses its appeal as the cultural memory of the Church that gave it birth fades into obscurity. Thus it takes time for the moral bankruptcy of Liberalism's ersatz morality to become evident. The great naïveté of the Enlightenment was the idea that one did not need the apparatus and moral traditions of the Church in order for the enlightened morality of Jesus to be justified on the basis of secular reason alone. They were wrong. Bryan Appleyard, in a brilliant and acerbic dissection of technocratic Liberalism's inherent nihilism makes the same point:

A reason to live cannot be invented. . . . People live unliberal lives. They have values, convictions, preferences and loyalties by which they order their world and make it work. . . . It is, I believe, humanly impossible actually to be a liberal. Society may advocate liberal tolerance and open-mindedness, but nobody practises it. In fact,

this is what preserves liberal society. For a complete personal acceptance of scientific-liberalism would reduce society to passive, bestial anarchy. There would be no reason to do anything, no decisions worth making and certainly no point in defending one position as opposed to another.<sup>50</sup>

What we are left with once the moral capital of Christianity disappears from Liberal culture is a world of 'men without chests' as C.S. Lewis puts it. Putting his own spin on Plato's anthropology, Lewis affirms that the 'head rules the belly through the chest'. What he means by this is that the intellect does not control and place in a proper hierarchy the basic impulses of the body in a direct way. Rather, the mind, being a combination of both intellect and will, deals with bodily impulses and the base desires of the soul through a combination of intellect and moral virtue. But absent the idea of virtue as the mind's habituated response to an objective Good, the intellect alone cannot properly adjudicate competing desires within a moral framework. Rather, the mind falls prey to the most powerful impulses of the moment and then develops ersatz moral reasons for justifying them. However, in reality there is no moral vision at all but merely a situation where the intellect is pressed into the service of Dionysius as it turns its back on Apollo; and what is lost is the very root of our humanity. Lewis observes: 'It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal. . . . It is not excess of thought but defect of fertile and generous emotion that marks them out. Their heads are not bigger than ordinary: it is the atrophy of the chest beneath that makes them seem so.'<sup>51</sup> This places scientific Liberal culture in the impossible position of mandating what it cannot possibly expect, indeed, of mandating the very thing it has worked so hard to destroy. Once again, Lewis concludes:

And all the time – such is the tragic comedy of our situation – we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more 'drive', or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or 'creativity'. In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid geldings be fruitful.<sup>52</sup>

Likewise, Christian faith itself has come under withering attack, an attack that has been so successful that millions of Europeans and Americans no longer describe themselves as Christians, a number that increases every year. But once again, Liberalism has no power simply to create a new Liberal religion to take the place of Christianity. To be sure, the last two centuries have witnessed the grand experiment of wide swaths of the Christian ecclesial world apostatizing from the historic Christian faith in order to attempt a new Liberal version of Christianity.

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<sup>50</sup> Bryan Appleyard, *Understanding the Present: An Alternative History of Science*, London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2004, pp. 240–1.

<sup>51</sup> *Abolition of Man*, pp. 24–5.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

The trend began first among Protestants and then metastasized to infect Catholics in the middle part of the twentieth century. Put forward precisely as a new form of Christianity, its creators were very open about the fact that it represented a rupture with all traditional forms of Christianity. It was to be a second Reformation that would complete the unfinished business of the first one. In many ways there was a logic to this rhetoric since the original Protestant Reformation was itself a form of the Christian faith which arose out of the very same Liberal impulses that were also instrumental in the rise of the Enlightenment. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your point of view, this attempt to create a Liberal version of Christianity has been an abject failure. The reason is obvious: it was an attempt to create a new religion by borrowing elements from an older religion that was discredited by the very people doing the borrowing; so once the residual social halo that surrounded 'going to Church' began to disappear, there was no longer any good Liberal theological reason to continue to attend. The very Gnostic theology of Protestant and Catholic Liberals, with its denigration of religious institutions and sacraments and authority, and its direct appeal to the religiosity of Cartesian interiority, came back to destroy them. For why do I need to go to Church to be a good person? As a non-Church going friend of mine once said to me: 'Going to Church does not make one a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car.' Only an intelligent person whose mind had been thoroughly indoctrinated with Liberal ideology could view the fatuous stupidity of such a statement as cogent. Once again, it merely drives home the point that there is no such thing as an invented religion, a fact pointed out by none other than Max Weber:

The need of literary, academic, or café-society intellectuals to include religious feelings in the inventory of their sources of impressions and sensations, and among their topics for discussion, has never yet given rise to a new religion. Nor can a religious renaissance be generated by the need for authors to compose books, or by far the more effective need for clever publishers to sell such books. No matter how much the appearance of a widespread religious interest may be simulated, no new religion has ever resulted from the needs of intellectuals nor from their chatter.<sup>53</sup>

### *E. Non-Liberal Naturalism*

Therefore, in light of everything we have discussed in this concluding chapter, it seems apparent to me that what is needed for a truly new social narrative will not be forthcoming from the dominant Liberal culture. The only possible conclusion from this basic sociological reality that I take to be a non-negotiable observation is that the way forward must be forged by a chastened form of ecclesial Christianity that understands that its current historical vocation is the development of pockets of cultural/humanistic/spiritual retrieval and preservation. However, this cannot be conceived along antiquarian lines as the mere preservation of the past as past. Rather, the retrieval must be creative, with an eye towards the unique challenges

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<sup>53</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, tr. Ephraim Fischhoff, Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1964, p. 137. Quoted in *Understanding the Present*, p. 231.

posed by science and modern Liberalism. Nor do I like the term 'countercultural' since it automatically assumes a defensive and hostile posture towards the dominant culture. There is much in scientific modernity and in Liberalism that is worthy of acceptance and consideration; thus what is needed is a true act of intellectual discernment where the practitioners of various modern academic disciplines, who also happen to be Christians, take it upon themselves to negotiate the interface between modern critical scholarship and the historic Christian faith. There can be no substitute for such creative retrieval on the part of scores of individual Christian scholars in a variety of academic disciplines. Theology alone, in other words, is not the answer. I have offered a model of Trinitarian theological discourse that can act as the fundamental ground for the interaction between God and world, faith and reason. Theology is, therefore, for the Christian scholar, an absolutely necessary organizing and catalytic principle which forms the umbrella under which all Christian scholarship can find its context. Thus, it is appropriate for a renewal of theology to lead the way towards a renewal of Christian scholarship in general. Nevertheless, in order truly to transform the culture a broad spectrum of influential Christian scholars needs fearlessly to tread into secular waters, armed with nothing more than a different metaphysical vision of existence and the competence acquired through the mastery of their discipline.

Thus when I say what is needed are pockets of intellectual retrieval, no spatial or material literalness is implied. Just as with Augustine's division of history into the City of Man and the City of God, where there is no neat material division between the two realities such that one can locate members of the City of God in the Church and members of the City of Man in civil society, so too here. The role of the Christian scholar is not to retreat into an intellectual ghetto but to engage the world through forging intellectual coalitions with scholars of good will who are open to the idea of a new metaphysical model that rejects the application of reductionist categories to all areas of human existence. One may find, for example, non-believing scientists who, precisely in and through their science, have reached the conclusion that mechanistic reductionism is a deeply flawed approach to the understanding of nature. Wherever such coalitions can be formed, one may find the pockets of cultural retrieval needed to begin anew the scientific project.

The role of the Christian scholar in this process is to show that the best way to understand the world, especially the world of human beings, is to place everything in the light of the Gospel. This will first require subversive acts of intellectual demolition. The reason for this is simple: as noted above, one of the greatest achievements of Liberalism is that it has convinced almost everyone that it is not a metaphysical ideology but merely a form of procedural governance that opens up a neutral playing field for a wide variety of differing views to be expressed. What goes unnoticed is the extent to which this claim is utterly false, since the putative neutrality of Liberalism is no such thing, and that Liberalism, in point of fact, colours almost every form of discourse in contemporary society. Thus the first task of Christian scholars must be that of exposing this falsehood and of prying open the first principles that govern Liberalism in order to submit them to the glare of critical reason. As Francisco Martinez puts it: 'Liberalism ... has an immense ability to disguise and mask itself, to present itself as "the natural way," the way

things have always been, and should always be. We therefore have to make a great effort, both intellectual and moral, to unmask its strategies, to show its ideological character, both outside and inside the Church.<sup>54</sup>

The very first principle that needs to be so examined is the assumption that reductive scientific naturalism is the best way to describe the material cosmos. Indeed, as stated above, it is my contention that political Liberalism and economic capitalism are the two faces of reductive naturalism in the modern world. Liberalism and capitalism become impossible forms of discourse in any metaphysical model that places the moral and theological spheres of human existence as the central constitutive norms for our existence. For if the cosmos really is the sacramental manifestation of a creator God, who has placed his image in human beings in particular, and who has called upon them to adopt a posture of humble contemplative receptivity before his offer of Covenant, *then that fact redefines everything from the ground up*. Thus if this claim is true, then Liberalism's putative neutrality towards the God question is actually a fundamental misreading of reality. Therefore Liberalism requires as the ground of its very possibility a cosmos that is not the sacramental representation of its creator, but rather an inert field of mere matter. For Liberalism's neutrality towards God is only justified in a world where God is absent in any meaningful sense in the world. That is why in the early stages of Liberal culture there was such a heavy lean toward Deistic forms of Christianity, forms that eventually gave way to agnosticism as the very redundancy of the Deist God became clear. But that is why the essence of Liberalism is agnosticism, since its internal logic absolutely requires the absence and irrelevance of God for our political management of society. Scientific naturalism, in its mechanistic and reductive modalities, provides Liberalism with just such a cosmos.

Modern science too, for its own part, is only too happy to play this role since the standard narrative of the rise of modern science among scientists themselves is one of the triumph of science over the forces of religious obscurantism. Given this narrative, it stands to reason that most scientists are more than happy to place their endeavours within the context of Liberalism's overall project of secular agnosticism; just as Liberal politicians are more than happy to make use of reductive naturalism, so too does the scientific establishment view itself as intrinsically oriented toward servicing the ambitions of the modern, secular nation state. That is why I have chosen to conclude this text with such an extensive discussion of the relationship between science, postmodernism and Liberalism: they are all deeply related aspects of the same modern movement towards greater and greater autonomy from theological orientations. To the extent that the Church has accommodated herself to this regime she has also undermined the very reason for her existence. As a Roman Catholic, it is easy for me to say that reductive naturalism and Catholicism are incompatible. However, it is much more difficult for any Catholic to say that technocratic Liberalism is opposed to the faith. But say it we must, for it is true. There is no way to retrieve a sacramentally oriented Liberalism since by its very nature Liberalism is predicated upon the rejection of any such claim. In other

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<sup>54</sup> Martinez, p. 573.

words, Liberalism is in its core the very antithesis of a Christian vision of the cosmos and therefore must be opposed.

There are several reasons why this opposition to reductive naturalism and its political manifestation in Liberalism can be successful. I say, 'can be' rather than 'will be' because nobody can determine in advance how a particular culture will respond to intellectual ideas and their institutional embodiments. Nevertheless, there are two basic reasons why we may yet save our culture from the barbarians. First, there is the fact that reductive naturalism is more of an ideology than a proven scientific principle. Granted, the two have become so inextricably united that for all intents and purposes modern science is inherently reductive. That is why I argued earlier that neat distinctions between science as such and the ideology known as scientism are often overly facile. However, it is possible to think scientifically in non-reductive ways, and thus in non-Liberal ways. Second, the human thirst for God cannot be eradicated and therefore the message of the Gospel will never be obsolete. Therefore, an alternative Christian wisdom remains an attractive possibility. We will now examine both of these propositions in turn with an eye towards how modern science can be read through a non-Liberal, non-reductionist lens.

### *1. Non-reductive science*

The success of modern reductive/Liberal science in the technological sphere is well documented and cannot be minimized. As I write these words on my computer I am reminded of how much easier the writing process is now from when I was an undergraduate typing my papers on an electric typewriter. Every time I go to the doctor to get antibiotics, or to the dentist to have a cavity filled, or call friends in Europe with full video capability via my computer, I am reminded of how much we owe to modern science. Furthermore, science has achieved so much precisely through a process of abstracting parts from wholes and then explaining the latter in terms of the former. Thus even if I may not like the metaphysical implications of all this, is it not simply honest to acknowledge that the reductionists are correct?

The short answer to this question is 'no'. But why is such a 'no' justified? First, there is the philosophical awareness that just because reductive science can explain how the material aspects of my existence work, it still cannot explain, nor will it ever be able to explain, the utterly non-reductive aspects of existence. Of course, there are constant attempts to see through these so-called non-reductive elements, but they all end up merely begging the question. For example, science can explain the colour blue by discussing the various wavelengths of light and the internal workings of human sight. Nevertheless, science cannot, for all that, explain my subjective experience of blueness. Even if a neuroscientist were to locate in my brain the exact location where colours are processed and then stimulate that part of my brain electronically to induce artificially my experience of blueness, it has still not explained that experience precisely as a subjective experience. In other words, reductive science can demonstrate that a certain material condition is necessary for my subjective experience, but not that it is a totally sufficient explanation of

the same. All attempts to reduce all aspects of existence to smaller and smaller particles fail, philosophically, since they all exempt their own arguments from such reduction. In other words, the very arguments of the reductionists seem to imply that rationality is real (since no argument makes sense outside a rational context), that those reading about these things have the ability to understand and freely to accept or reject the arguments, and that somehow or another it really does matter what people think about such things because truth is its own warrant. But all of these implied affirmations resist the very reductionism in the argument as such.

An example of the reductionist mentality and its shortcomings can be found in a documentary I recently saw on television where a neuroscientist was able to induce quasi-religious or mystical experiences in test subjects by stimulating the temporal lobe of the brain with electromagnetic pulses. He then went on to conclude, with great reductive confidence, that he had finally explained (i.e. 'seen through' as Lewis would say) religious faith in God as the simple product of brain activity. Of course, this is simply a colossal exercise in question begging. The neuroscientist in question is clearly presuming that religious people all have an essentially Cartesian view of the soul and that if he can show that there is a deep interconnection between mind and brain then he has disproven religion. However, the incarnational and embodied concept of the soul in Christianity would completely expect *that there is some material substrate for every one of the soul's experiences*. In fact, as a Catholic theologian, I would be most shocked to discover that there was no correlation whatsoever between spiritual states and brain states. Furthermore, the scientist in question was content with the mere fact that the test subjects reported certain types of quasi-mystical experiences. However, he did not follow this up with any kind of an analysis of the quality of these experiences or of the test subjects' own interpretation of what was going on. Without such in-depth analysis of the quality of the experiences or of the subjects' interpretation of them, the science in question here remains incomplete and acts as an example of how reductive assumptions in science are actually a hindrance to true science rather than a help. For a complete analysis of these experiences the scientist would need to do an in-depth study of religious mystics with regard to the quality of their experiences, and how it was that they came to believe that these were real experiences of the Transcendent and not just the effects of the psychedelic mushrooms they had on their pizza for lunch. Finally, the reductive conclusions reached by the scientist were also predicated upon a prior reduction: that of religion to mystical feelings. This reduction fits nicely with the Enlightenment's narrative that religious faith is essentially an emotional state only loosely associated with the rational intellect. But of course this is patently false. In fact, it is *demonstrably false*, showing once again that reductive assumptions are often contrary to the empirical evidence at hand.

This reductive *a priori* in science can also be challenged by science itself. To be sure, scientists who are anti-reductive are in the minority, but their influence seems to be growing owing in great measure to the scientific stature of many of the leaders of the movement. Thus it is not easy to dismiss the anti-reductive scientists as simply fringe cranks who don't understand real science. For example, the biologist Simon Conway Morris has argued, convincingly it seems to me, that evolution proceeds with a clear directional teleology towards the emergence of



intelligent life. He accepts evolution as a fact, but rejects the idea that the process is one of brute force and random chance. But he does not merely assert this, but shows through a meticulous comparison of biological structures among widely disparate and separated animal lines that evolution proceeds by way of 'convergence'. By this he means that it can be shown through comparative biology that evolutionary processes, far from being accidental and random, are constrained by the laws of nature to proceed in certain well-defined directions. Nothing else can explain why nearly identical biological structures evolved in animals that have no evolutionary connection to one another. Critical of both the ultra Darwinists (his term) and creationists who reject evolution, he charts a middle path whereby evolutionary science is clearly advanced using strictly scientific means, while at the same time resisting the distorting effects of reductionism and leaving the door open to forms of metaphysical causation other than efficiency. Needless to say he has been roundly criticized by the scientific establishment for his views; but what is most telling in these criticisms is that most of the time they do not attack his science so much as question his 'hidden agenda' (Christian faith). Thus the very criticisms themselves show that Morris is on to something when he criticizes reductive theories on the grounds that they operate more as ideological dogmas rather than as real science.<sup>55</sup> It should be noted as well that Morris is not the only biologist who argues along these lines, but his name is the one associated with this approach and thus I use him as an example of a broader movement within the scientific guild.

Along similar lines, it has become a commonplace among even mainstream evolutionary scientists that the mechanism of natural selection does not fit as neatly into Darwin's Victorian, dog-eat-dog capitalist, paradigm as was once thought. Models for evolutionary change are being adopted that emphasize instead the symbiotic, coadaptational quality of natural selection. Mutualism in the natural world is now recognized as of equal or even greater importance than raw, individualistic competition. Granted, this does nothing to assuage the reductionist temperament of most evolutionary scientists, but at the very least it reinforces two key points. First, it demonstrates how speculative scientific theories that are not entirely empirically demonstrable in controlled experimental conditions are open to extra-scientific cultural influences, and even if a theory is empirically demonstrable, cultural influences still play a role in how such findings are contextualized in broader theories. Second, it also undercuts the arguments of people like Richard Dawkins that the evolutionary process shows us a cutthroat world of death and struggle, a world which he claims is completely incompatible with the God of the Bible. Notwithstanding the fact that Dawkins blithely ignores the Christian doctrine that this is a fallen world, the newer models that emphasize coadaptational mutuality show, at the very least, that one should not be so quick to place ideological labels on the evolutionary process or to deduce broad theological conclusions. If, as Dawkins is fond of saying, the superiority of science lies precisely in the fact that the truth it discovers is always open to further revision or even

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<sup>55</sup> Simon Conway Morris, *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003.



repudiation (i.e. it is non-dogmatic), then these newer models for natural selection should give us pause before we conclude, apodictically, that evolution and the Bible are simply incompatible. Obviously, even with the newer models, questions of theodicy will remain front and centre. However, at the very least, we can drop the polemical rhetoric about how brutally nasty the evolutionary process is from top to bottom.

What the example of Morris and the newer evolutionary models show us is that it is possible to engage in scientific research without the metaphysical assumptions of reductionism. Morris lays out his thesis in strictly scientific categories and, like a good scholar, submits his findings to peer review. The science behind his conclusions is, therefore, an open form of science that invites dialogue and criticism. Contrary to his many critics, therefore, the Christian world-view that animates his approach is not ideologically constrictive or distorting since the scientific conclusions in question are not put forward in an apodictic fashion, based on prior metaphysical commitments, but are, rather, offered to the scientific guild for analysis. Indeed, one could go so far as to say that his Christian metaphysical commitments, rather than pushing him down the path of bad science, actually open his mind to new approaches that may elude others precisely because of *their* antecedent metaphysical commitment to reductionist materialism. In other words, precisely because of his Christian world-view, Morris is actually doing *better science than his peers* who refuse to think outside the metaphysical box of monistic materialism. For example, the stubborn refusal of modern evolutionary biology to see any teleology in nature whatsoever seems to be animated by extra-scientific metaphysical commitments rather than the science as such. And any scientist who dares to assert that there is, in fact, teleology in nature is accused of being a closet creationist, an accusation that is meant as a conversation stopper, pointing to the dogmatic manner in which materialists cling to their views. In contrast, Morris is able to be more open-minded about the presence of teleology precisely because his world-view does not constrict discussion of that question. The accusation, of course, is that his world-view causes him to see teleology where no teleology exists, but that is something that needs to be demonstrated through an exact analysis of the science he puts forward to support his views. But that kind of critique rarely takes place, since most of his critics never proceed beyond the accusation that he is a creationist. Thus, Morris too concludes that the doctrinaire refusal of modern materialism even to consider theological questions is a sign of their own metaphysical pretensions:

More than one commentator has noted that ultra-Darwinism has pretensions to a secular religion, but it may be noted that, however heartfelt the practitioners' feelings, it is also without religious or metaphysical foundations. Notwithstanding the quasi-religious enthusiasms of ultra-Darwinists, their own understanding of theology is a combination of ignorance and derision, philosophically limp, drawing on clichés, and happily fuelled by the idiocies of the so-called scientific creationists. It seldom seems to strike the ultra-Darwinists that theology might have its own richness and subtleties, and might – strange thought – actually tell us things about the world that are not only to our real advantage, but will never be revealed by science. In depicting the religious instinct as a mixture of irrational fundamentalism and

wish-fulfilment they seem to be simply unaware that theology is not the domain of pop-eyed flat-earthers.<sup>56</sup>

This quote is taken from a chapter at the end of the book that deals explicitly with a theology of evolution. This might seem like a strange addition to a text that is otherwise completely devoted to scientific analysis. But its very presence in the text is an indication of a different way of doing science, where scientific analysis of material reality is allowed to open up at the end of its deliberations to a possible deeper wisdom. What it signals is Morris' conviction that what is needed in the modern world is a science that is open to the possibility of transcendence and does not seal off the scientific method from any possible religious insight. Morris is careful to proceed along strictly scientific lines when engaged in scientific analysis. But he also acknowledges that science is the product of the human need to understand – the same need that fuels philosophical and theological research as well – and thus does not resist fulfilment or complementary development by turning towards other forms of wisdom for insight. As I have said throughout this text, the true nature of modern science as a grand narrative that purports to be a total explanation of reality is no benign wisdom as far as theology is concerned. Thus an alternative form of science that is open to contextualization within a broader theological narrative is not only allowed, but is necessary. Furthermore, the inclusion of theological considerations in a scientific text serves as a reminder to those who would deify science that science, like all human endeavours, is limited. Indeed, it is one of the subtle prejudices of the modern world that science is a totalizing enterprise capable, eventually, of understanding everything about the cosmos. In contrast, Morris wishes to remind us that there is no shame in acknowledging that science does not have to be a total explanation of everything, that good science is still possible within the ambit of partial explanations.<sup>57</sup>

On the level of physics, another prominent and respected scientist who rejects the metaphysical reductionism of modern science is David Bohm. Bohm was one of the leading quantum physicists of the twentieth century and described the physics of the universe in terms of an explicate and implicate order. By this he meant to convey that the physical universe that we observe empirically appears to us as a somewhat fragmented aggregate of discrete parts that seem to resist final unification in a grand synthetic theory. This empirically observable universe is what Bohm calls the 'explicate order' which he says is actually enfolded within a unity that resides in a higher dimensionality that he calls the 'implicate order'. Thus, all attempts to explain the explicate order through greater and greater reduction to the smallest particles will fail since it wrongly presumes that the unity of the cosmos is grounded in reduction to smaller and smaller parts rather than in contextualization in a higher dimension. This is precisely why physicists have such a difficult time trying to reconcile quantum theory and Einstein's theory of relativity: the quest for such unity continues to presume a fundamentally reductionist and mechanistic approach to the question. Bohm, of course, is not opposed to particle physics or

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. pp. 315–6.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 327.

the pursuit of the most basic building blocks of material existence. His point is that this legitimate scientific quest will continue to miss the mark so long as it hangs on to outdated reductionist assumptions. Once again, as with Morris, Bohm, though respected as a scientist, was criticized for being a crypto-theologian whose science was coloured by his antecedent metaphysical commitments. But this begs the question since, as we have seen, reductionism is also a metaphysical commitment. So the issue is not who has a metaphysical commitment since the answer to that question is self-evidently simple: we all do. The real question is whose metaphysical commitments are most congruent with the scientific pursuit of truth. Finally, as with Morris, Bohm is not alone in the guild of physicists. Indeed, modern physics, much more than biology, is filled with all kinds of speculative entrepreneurs who are willing to buck the reductionist dogma.<sup>58</sup>

Thus what unites both Morris and Bohm (and those who think like them) is the assertion from within science itself that reductionist and mechanistic models just do not work in the big picture. They work in a very limited way in terms of technological development, but fall short as adequate explanations of reality on a basic metaphysical level. Biologically, the mystery of life in particular resists the reduction of wholes to parts and gives evidence of a kind of teleology that contradicts the idea that everything is merely an accident of chance. In physics the on-going description of the fundamental forces of nature in terms of the mechanics of particles, waves and quantum fields, is a step beyond the crude mechanism of the past, but remains, nevertheless, fundamentally mechanistic. Bohm provides a strong argument from within physics itself for why such mechanism is a dead end.

This is not the place to delve into the fine details of Bohm's theories since it would involve detailed mathematical models and so forth. I will leave that to the physicists. The deeper point, however, is that Bohm gives us an example of a non-reductionist type of modern physics that is peer reviewed and maintains its status as a thoroughly scientific theory without recourse to direct metaphysical input. What it shows us once again is that scientific theories are truly provisional in character and therefore that all apodictic reductionist statements are contrary to the scientific method. Once again, David L. Schindler makes this point forcefully:

The point, then, is that, in either case, contemporary physicists cannot both refuse to consider alternatives to mechanism and legitimately continue to call that refusal provisional. On the contrary such a refusal can only – once again in light of the possibilities opened up in quantum theory – be called properly dogmatic.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Florence, KY: Routledge, 2002; *Beyond Mechanism: The Universe in Recent Physics and Catholic Thought*, David L. Schindler (ed.), Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986; Robert Nadeau and Menas Kafatos, *The Non-Local Universe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>59</sup> David L. Schindler, 'Beyond Mechanism: Physics and Catholic Theology' *Communio*, XI 2, (Summer 1984), pp. 188–9.

### Conclusion

In the final analysis, then, what I hope to have shown is that the Liberal scientific project of modernity and postmodernity threatens the eclipse of man precisely insofar as it also engages in the forgetfulness of God. Only the positive truth content of Christian Revelation can save us from this condition because Christianity, alone among the world's religions, gives us a model of Transcendence that is non-competitive with the world's finite structure. Christ, the God-man, unites the eternal and the temporal realms in his singular reality, a reality that allows us to affirm the theological and metaphysical importance of the world precisely as world. Furthermore, he alone allows us to affirm that the fragmented realm of the Many is not, as postmodernism would claim, an irreducible cacophony of difference, but is rather a reflection of the divine aseity as a triune unity-in-relation. Thus the modern attempt to reduce the positive truth claims of all religions through recourse to the apophatic agnosticism of pluralistic models is neither neutral nor benign in its stance towards this fundamental Christian truth claim. The Liberal scientific project, therefore, despite its many legitimate advances in human learning, technology, individual civil liberties in matters of conscience and democratic political theory, remains for all that a deeply flawed project – indeed, a fatally flawed project – unless it can overcome its continuing allergy to the question of the truth of God.

The hegemony of reductive naturalism in the popular consciousness of modernity creates a *de facto* atheistic culture that is only partially masked by the continuing prevalence of faith in some kind of God. This mask is becoming increasingly transparent as modern science seeks to reshape the very definition of human nature, in conjunction with Liberal capitalist culture. For the better part of three centuries the West has been content to wear the mask of religiosity even as it forged a largely atheistic social path. But the situation created by the very real threat of a technological reshaping of human nature makes this bifurcated situation increasingly untenable. Thus as the mask is removed a crossroads will be reached and a choice for or against the truth of God will be forced upon us.

Insofar as the choice will be unavoidable, the most important question that confronts modernity is therefore a theological one; thus theology, far from being a vestigial relic of the past, will emerge as an unavoidable imperative. Whether or not our culture will recognize this fact remains to be seen, but I highly doubt that it will. More than likely our culture will continue to be reactive in the sense that it will lurch, haphazardly, from one crisis to another, barely cognizant of the fact that most of these crises are of our own making and that their solution resides far beyond the competency of technology and science. Liberalism as a social project will continue to thwart every effort to view the struggles of the modern world through an ethical/spiritual lens and it will continue to propose that technology, science and market forces will somehow save the day.

I have endeavoured in this text to add my small voice to the theological counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of modernity. I have advocated a Balthasarian trinitarian ontology of love as the most fruitful theological project for recasting the relationship between immanence and Transcendence. For it is my deep

conviction that the modern world was forged in the furnace of a flawed theological construction of that relationship, a relationship that began to unravel in the various intellectual ruptures of the medieval world and then continued, unabated, through nominalism and the post-Newtonian mechanism of the modern world. In short, the theological guild was ill equipped to handle the challenges of modern naturalism and, like Napoleon in the Russian winter, began a slow, painful retreat into irrelevance. Therefore, it has been my contention that what is most needed, theologically speaking, is a new model for the God-world relation that takes account of the positive truth content of God's Revelation in Christ.

Metaphysically, this translates into an ontology of worldly being that analogously images the gift-reception-fruitfulness of God's intra-trinitarian life. Following closely the analysis of David L. Schindler, I have argued that this model of worldly being should also be construed as requiring a constitutively contemplative stance towards the source of all being: God. Action, of course, is also required, but the question of priority and emphasis is paramount here: unless worldly being is viewed first and primarily as contemplative openness to God, action will degenerate into a purely ideological project, leaving humanity open to ever new reigns of terror. Thus, as Schmemmann notes, the world is best viewed as a sacramental manifestation of God with man as the liturgical mouthpiece of creation: *homo adorans* is prior to *homo faber*. Only such a metaphysics can save the modern world from its post-human future, from what C.S. Lewis called the abolition of man. Finally, this metaphysical/theological wisdom can act as a new intellectual horizon for contextualizing the empirical data of modern science in non-reductionist terms and for combating the barbaric vulgarities of thinkers like Richard Dawkins.

Even on a purely worldly level, there is some justification for viewing the theological project I have outlined as a feasible alternative to the wisdom of modern reductionism. First, the human thirst for God, as I have indicated previously, cannot be eradicated and human beings will, therefore, continue to remain open to some kind of a theological wisdom. Second, and with the first reason in view, the floodwaters of modern scientific reductionism, while appearing to cover almost the entirety of the world, remain shallow, allowing for new islands of intellectual development to emerge and to punctuate the watery landscape with oases of hope. Finally, to continue the metaphor, Pope Benedict XVI, among many others, has advocated for a leaner Christian existence that eschews the trappings of worldly success, quantified by statistics documenting the number of people in the pews. What he seeks is a vibrant and evangelical faith where the Gospel, in all of its forceful particularity, is preached without reservation and without embarrassment. This is not a retreat from the world in the sense of a sectarian rejection of all that is not explicitly Christian or a retreat into some kind of intellectual ghetto. It is, rather, a contemplative catholicity that develops a truly universal message for the sake of the world, but which first requires a necessary intellectual distancing from that world in order to critique it from within the objective categories of the Gospel. For thus has the Church always proceeded: through contemplative theological analysis the Church has rejected those elements of culture that were contrary to the Gospel, even as it baptized those that were good and capable of being theologically uplifted and transformed.

So how pessimistic or optimistic should we be that the metaphysical/theological thinking I have proposed will gain traction in the modern world? I don't think pessimism or optimism are the correct categories for a Christian thinker in this context. Pessimism and optimism are rather ephemeral dispositions of character and are largely rooted in secular notions of psychological well-being. Rather, for the Christian, life must always be viewed through the lens of the eschatological *hope* provided by faith in the Revelation of God in Christ. The God who created the cosmos is also a God who seeks a dramatic interaction of divine and worldly freedom in Covenant. What this means, among other things, is that this God will never abandon his creation and therefore we have hope that no matter what our future holds, God's truth will eventually be vindicated since nothing is impossible with God. We have hope that the torturers and the sadists and the monstrous utopian ideologues of modernity will not have the last word. Indeed, our hope is that the last word shall be the first Word ever spoken: the *Logos* of the God of creation and covenant.

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