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Years ago, I remember reading words of Tertullian affirming the divide between philosophers and theologians: “What, indeed, has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the church? What between heretics and Christians?” In the not too distant past some might have proposed substituting scientists for philosophers. But that is certainly no longer the case. To this end we have dedicated this issue to reflect the work of those striving to build bridges between science and religion, especially regarding the topic of creation.

The issue begins with a respected theologian engaged in the current dialogue with science, John Haught of Georgetown University, inviting readers to see the contribution an evolutionary perspective can bring to our understanding of the suffering that afflicts all living beings. He challenges readers to see how much theology has to gain by taking Darwinian evolution theory seriously. When one removes the often presupposed necessary connection between suffering and past human offenses needing expiation, the possibility of viewing suffering as having the character of a gift rather than a penalty begins to emerge, and an expiatory understanding gives way to an eschatological one rooted in hope. Perfection can then be located as a future possibility rather than a past loss.

Then, James Miller, a minister and senior associate at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, explores the idea that anomalous behavior can be the cause of new insight. Looking both to Scripture and to various developments in science over the centuries, the author shows how anomalies in life can lead to new glimpses of the workings of nature as well as to new insights about God. Rather than seeking God beyond nature, we can attend to nature’s own witness to discern God’s ongoing creative activity.

Contemplating creation from a Franciscan perspective, theologian Ilia Delio examines the environmental crisis today in view of the cosmos as our home. She asks, “Are we at home in the cosmos or not?” Directing readers to the example of Francis and the thought of Bonaventure for insights into ecological living today, she examines the need for change to insure a sustainable future.
Evoking wonder and awe by considering the beginning of the universe in a “big bang,” Old Testament scholar Joseph A. Wimmer, then, issues a call for what is described as an “anthropic spirituality”; that is, a spirituality based on “the totality of those aspects of our relationship with God, self, and others which derive more directly from the fifteen-billion year history which is an essential part of our past.” He finds support for this approach in the Old Testament texts of creation found in Genesis and in various texts of the Wisdom Literature.

Bill Durbin, a church historian, allows us to overhear some of the dialogue between Dr. Francis Collins from the National Institute of Health, who was the principal investigator of the Human Genome Project, and James McCartney, a philosopher and bioethicist from Villanova University. The theme of the conversation, held at Washington Theological Union in the summer of 1999, was genetics and the image of God. This gathering can be seen as one response to the urging of Pope John Paul II for “a more thorough-going dialogue” between science and theology.

Two articles follow that take readers in a different direction. Nathan Mitchell has transformed last fall’s Sophia Award Lecture given at the Washington Theological Union from a stirring address to an equally provocative essay on the future of liturgical language in postmodern cultures. And Francis Caponi reminds us of the important role Mary, mother of the Lord, continues to hold in our tradition, schooling us in the way of her Son.

Our columns feature topics of relevant concern. “Signs of the Times” presents Dr. Christina Puchalski, a Washington physician, who looks at the implications spirituality has not only for the healing of patients and for the role of caregivers, but for the health care system itself. In “Keeping Current,” Gilberto Cavazos-González, O.F.M., illustrates the rich contributions of Hispanic culture to liberation spirituality. And in “Word and Worship,” liturgical theologian Eileen D. Crowley offers suggestions for the use of visual art during the coming Advent season. Several book reviews round out this issue.

A word of farewell and gratitude to both co-editor Joseph Mindling and book review editor Kevin O’Neil, who departed the editorial board in June for well deserved sabbaticals. We want to take this occasion to thank them for their generous contribution of time, talent, and energy to New Theology Review.

And, a word of welcome. With this issue Dawn M. Nothwehr, associate professor of moral theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, becomes co-editor. She will be joined after the next issue by Richard McCarron, assistant professor of liturgy, also at Catholic Theological Union. Both have been serving on the editorial board the last four years and will undoubtedly continue to hold both your interest and commitment as New Theology Review approaches its third decade of publication.

Finally, in the name of all the past editors and editorial boards of New Theology Review, we wish to express our heartfelt gratitude to Mark Twomey, editorial
director of the Liturgical Press, on the occasion of his recent retirement. We will miss his gentle guidance and supportive presence at our editorial board meetings. Our prayers and wishes for God’s many blessings go with you, Mark. Thank you for your example of dedication and commitment.

Coming in February:

*The Church—who cares...*
The New Theology Review Essay Award in Theological Reflection

Encouraging New Ideas, New Voices, and New Approaches in Ministry

New Theology Review is a journal of Catholic theology that informs men and women in ministry of contemporary developments in Roman Catholic thought and its pastoral import for the Church.

THE PRIZE

In 1999, the publisher and editors of New Theology Review instituted the NTR Award for Theological Reflection, honoring an essay that offers insight, critique, or discussion in some area of pastoral ministry. Each year the winning essay is published in New Theology Review and the author receives $2,000.

THE CRITERIA

All submitted articles should focus on some aspect of pastoral ministry relevant to the audience of New Theology Review; i.e., Catholics of the United States and Canada engaged in, preparing for, or interested in the church’s mission. Submissions must be original work, not previously published, accessible to professional pastoral ministers, lay and ordained, provide new insight or synthesis of a pressing pastoral issue, and contribute to the ongoing theological reflection of pastoral ministers.

THE JUDGES

Submissions will be evaluated by a panel of distinguished authors who are experts in theological reflection on ministry.

THE RULES

All entries are due by May 1, 2006. If the judges find an essay worthy of the award, the winner will be announced September 15, 2006.
Essays should be submitted in English, accompanied by a cover page with author information (name, mailing address, e-mail address, phone number[s], institutional affiliation [if any], and statement of intent that the essay is submitted in the contest). Essays should be approximately 3,500 words in length and written according to the style sheet of New Theology Review (see following pages). No author identification should be on the pages of the manuscript. Judges will not be informed as to the identity of the author until after they determine the winning essay. The judges have the right to decide not to make the award.

The decision of the judges is final. Submissions will not be returned. Faculty and staff of Washington Theological Union and Catholic Theological Union are not eligible.

Please submit two copies of the printed text along with a copy on disk using a standard program (preferably Microsoft Word) in either PC or Macintosh format.

Send all entries to:

    The Editors
    New Theology Review
    5401 South Cornell Avenue
    Chicago, Illinois  60615
Style Sheet for the *New Theology Review* Prize in Theological Reflection

SPACING Begin the manuscript four double-spaces from the top of the page. Leave generous margins on the top, bottom, and left sides. Double space, including any indented quotations. Indent five spaces at the beginning of every paragraph.

CITATIONS *NTR* follows a modified version of the reference system of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, examples of which may be found in this issue. Neither footnotes nor endnotes are to be used. All relevant material is to be included within the body of the text. A listing of works referred to in the text can be placed at the end of the essay with the pertinent bibliographical information.

BIBLE Abbreviations for books of the Bible, mode of verse citation, and transliterations of the Greek and Hebrew alphabets follow the system of the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.

HEADINGS Texts should be appropriately interspersed with headings and subheadings. Keep these headings short and pointed. Headings are centered; subheadings are on the left.

LANGUAGE *NTR* follows a policy of using inclusive language. Plural forms are preferable to he/she or s/he.

TONE Articles submitted to *NTR* should be based on sound scholarship in theological disciplines, but should try as far as possible to maintain a pastoral focus of interest to those in ministry.

LENGTH The average length of an article should be 3,500 words, or between 12–15 pages double-spaced, including any references. Please use a standard 12 pt. font.

BIOGRAPHY A brief biographical note will appear in connection with your article. Please supply on a separate sheet your name, position, institutional affiliation, and any pertinent data (publications, pastoral experience, etc.) that you wish included. Also indicate the mailing and e-mail addresses to which future correspondence will be directed.
REGARD FOR PERSONS
Proper caution should be exercised in making, or reporting, negative judgments on individual persons. Such judgments should be omitted if a case is in litigation unless specific permission is granted by the editors.

EXPRESSIONS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES
Foreign terms (or phrases) should always include an English translation in parenthesis.

MATERIAL FOR SUBMISSION
Please submit two copies of the printed text, along with a copy on disk, using a standard program (preferably Microsoft Word) in either PC or Macintosh format. The hard copies and disk will not be returned. All manuscripts are subject to editorial changes.
What if Theologians Took Evolution Seriously?

John F. Haught

A noted theologian who has been engaged in the dialogue between theology and science invites readers to reflect on how a serious consideration of evolution could impact our lives, particularly our understanding of suffering. An evolutionary lens can change a view of suffering perceived as rooted in past human offenses and the need for expiation to one open to eschatological hope for all life in our world.

If theologians took evolution more seriously than they have in the past, I believe it would lead to constructive shifts in our thoughts about God, the meaning of our lives, our sense of human destiny and the meaning of suffering and redemption. By evolution I mean the conventional Darwinian—and now neo-Darwinian—understanding of the journey of life on earth. It would be salutary for theology to steep itself fully in the best and most up-to-date versions of evolutionary biology. Like all science, Darwin’s portrait of life is subject to constant revision. However, what will remain, no matter how much science shifts in the future, is the disclosure of life’s long struggle. And taking into account the pre-human chapters of evolution can allow theology to give voice to the silent striving of an entire universe, and not just human life, for the redemption promised by God.

I shall focus my comments on the suffering in evolution. However, it is necessary first to look at the question of whether evolution admits of any plausible theological interpretation whatsoever. After all, many Darwinians subscribe to a

John F. Haught is the Thomas Healey Professor of Theology at Georgetown University and the author of a number of books on science and religion, including God After Darwin and Deeper Than Darwin.
version of scientific naturalism that claims to be able to explain all aspects of life, including suffering, in purely biological terms; that is, without having to invoke the idea of God at all. As viewed by Darwinian biology, suffering (which I shall take to be inclusive of the sensation of pain by all sentient life), is nothing more than an adaptation that enhances the probability of survival and reproductive success in complex organisms.

Can theology add anything of explanatory substance to the Darwinian naturalist’s account? Darwin himself observed that suffering is “well adapted to make a creature guard against any great or sudden evil” (Barlow, 88–89). Suffering, he surmised, is life’s warning system, and if at times the torment seems exorbitant, this tragic overload is still consistent with a purely naturalist understanding of life. To many Darwinians, religious and theological responses to the fact of suffering have no comparably lucid explanatory value. Nowadays some neo-Darwinians account for the suffering of sentient life in terms of the “striving” of genes to make their way into subsequent generations. Genes somehow “understand” that they will not survive unless they fashion organisms equipped with sensory feedback equipment that can signal when their survival is in jeopardy. And so, genes cunningly engineer delicate nervous systems in order to guarantee their immortality. To the scientific naturalist such machination only seems intelligent, and to most evolutionists the process is at bottom blind and impersonal (see Sherrington, 266).

Darwin himself drifted away from belief in divine providence after observing such displays as ichneumon wasps laying their eggs inside living caterpillars so that the newly hatched larvae would have undecayed flesh to feast on. Resourceful as this snapshot from the life-story may be from the wasp’s perspective, it is difficult to attribute the caterpillar’s fate to divine providence. The outspoken evolutionist Richard Dawkins views such inconsiderate genetic productions as unambiguous cause for atheism: “So long as DNA is passed on,” he says, “it does not matter who or what gets hurt in the process” (Dawkins, 131). And so, any universe that puts up with such indecorous behavior is at bottom blind and pointless (133).

After Darwin, a plausible theological treatment of the fact of suffering cannot simply disregard ichneumon wasps and other instances of evolutionary insensitivity. Clearly nature, even independent of human evil, has never been paradise. Moreover, suffering, death, and mass extinctions always have been inseparable from the creation of life on earth. Christian faith encourages us to hope that, in the end, all tears will be wiped away and that death will be no more; and for
people of faith it should not be a terribly uncomfortable doctrinal stretch to extend such extravagant hopes to the suffering of all life. But theology still needs to consider in depth what evolution tells us about God, sin, evil, redemption, and especially the meaning of suffering. Of all the recent attempts to take into account the suffering (or pain) of sentient life, John Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love* is, in my opinion, the most impressive. Yet even Hick’s theodicy is not as deeply influenced by evolutionary biology as it might be.

The irrepressible question, “why suffering?” has led to the countless myths about the origin and end of evil. Accounts of how suffering came about have provided reassurance that life is not absurd, and their speculations about how suffering can be redeemed have opened up the spiritual space in which most peoples have lived, hoped, and aspired to ethical goodness. To ignore the traditional myths of evil’s origin and end would be to forfeit a great treasury of wisdom. However, none of the ancient narratives about evil and suffering had anything to say about evolution. This is entirely understandable, of course, but it is no mark of theological courage that most religious thinkers today still touch only lightly on Darwin’s science, if they mention it at all, in their reflections on the problem of pain and suffering. And yet, I believe that a sustained meditation on the suffering, loss, and death that occur in the whole story of life may prove to be a transformative theological adventure for Christians.

**Can Darwinism Fully Explain the Suffering of Sentient Life?**

Science is not even close to understanding the origin of life on earth, but in its notion of adaptive fitness Darwinian biology can at least claim to provide a powerful, if incomplete, account of life’s morphological diversity. Moreover, the notion of evolutionary adaptation can help explain why so much life became sentient to the point of suffering. The capacity to have feelings, both physical and affective, gives some organisms an adaptive advantage over others not so equipped. And even though the capacity for suffering is never perfectly adaptive, it can provide information to an organism about present danger, and thus promote the cause of survival and reproduction.

To the Darwinian naturalist, adaptive fitness is the ultimate reason why suffering occurs in living beings. Of course, the amount of suffering by sentient beings is often much more than the minimum that would be adaptive (as Darwin himself noted), but to the pure naturalist (one who believes that “nature is all there is”) this surplus is simply one more sign of the universe’s fundamental unfairness and impersonality.

Nevertheless, one may still wonder whether Darwinian science accounts fully for the facts of sentience and suffering. The latter, after all, are empty notions...
apart from the existence of subjects that can register sensations of pain or pleasure; and science, strictly speaking, has little if anything to say about subjectivity. Because of its methodological self-limitations, science, including biology, does not talk about subjective centers of feeling or awareness. It discards all discourse about inner worlds, and deals only with what is objectifiable. The throbbing, elusive interiority without which neither sentience nor suffering could exist at all, necessarily slips through the broad meshes of objectifying inquiry. And since science, including Darwinian biology, cannot comprehend the subjective centers that actually experience suffering, it cannot plausibly claim to explain everything there is to know about organic beings as such.

Above all, science says nothing substantive about why subjectivity bothered to enter into the universe’s evolution at all. Evolutionists are often content to view inwardness as a fluke, a purely contingent by product of natural processes in a world where accidents happen abundantly (Gould and Lewontin). But the fact remains that even the most rudimentary instances of subjectivity place the universe at least partly beyond the boundary of what can be captured cognitively by conventional scientific method. Evolutionary biology may account, at one level of understanding, for the gradual intensification of sentience in natural history, but it cannot provide an adequate account of subjectivity as such.

Moreover, only sentient subjects are able to strive; that is, to aim intentionally at a specific goal, and only a striving being could experience success or failure. Living beings, unlike non-living, are able to try, and, therefore, to succeed or fail in their various endeavors. Indeed it is only a personally intuitive awareness that organisms are able to strive, that allows biologists to distinguish the domain of living beings from the inanimate world (Polanyi, 327ff). Because of its objectifying method, science itself has no access to the sentient, striving, subjective centers in the life-world. Sentient, striving subjectivity, and, hence, suffering also, lies at least partly beyond the reach of scientific modeling of nature. And so Darwinian science can only presuppose the subjectivity, sentience and striving that it uses as explanatory categories. So frustrating is the fact that subjectivity, sentience and striving do not submit to full objectification that eliminative materialists such as Paul Churchland (1995) and Daniel Dennett (1991) in effect deny that they really exist at all (for a critique, see Wallace, 2000).

To ignore the traditional myths of evil’s origin and end would be to forfeit a great treasury of wisdom.
This denial makes it all the more ironic that contemporary Darwinism cannot banish from its own accounts of life a presupposed element of subjectivity in living beings. The theme of striving, subjective centers keeps showing up especially in contemporary gene-centered evolutionary explanations. Genes themselves are treated as subjects striving to get into the next generation (see Ridley, 92–94). The point is that Darwinism takes for granted the existence of sentience, striving, suffering and hence subjectivity. It cannot explain these since it uses them as explanatory categories. Darwinism can help us understand that suffering has adaptive significance, but it cannot tell us why striving subjects came into the universe at all.

**Theodicy after Darwin**

What theological meaning, though, can we discover in life's suffering after Darwin? And what shape will theodicies assume in an age of evolution? I doubt that these can plausibly remain the same after Darwin as before. The millions of years of life's suffering prior to human emergence challenge the predominantly human-centered theodicies in our religious traditions. As Buddhism emphasizes, there is suffering in all of life, so theodicy must stretch itself to encompass the whole biological world.

Theodicy in the classical sense has dwelt almost exclusively on human suffering and has typically construed our own suffering as in some sense the penalty for sin. The appeal of the traditional reading is that it seems to be able to safeguard the idea that God cannot be an accomplice of suffering as long as evil arises from the human heart. But evolutionary science now shows quite demonstrably that suffering and death have always been constitutive of the ongoing creation of life. So how can this wider vista of life's undeserved suffering make any theological sense? Often theology has avoided the issue by denying, in effect, that a larger arena of innocent suffering even exists at all. One assumption has been, for example, that nonhuman animals don’t really suffer. Theologian John Thiel (parallel to C. S. Lewis and John Hick) allows that animals experience pain, but not suffering. Even to make this distinction, however, seems to be an implicit dismissal of the issue of theodicy as pertaining to nonhuman life (Thiel, 1–31). Moreover, theodicy must address not just the issue of suffering, but also the perishing of every present moment of experience by all of sentient life (Whitehead, 340).

By ignoring the wider story of suffering, the dominant theodicies have set things up in such a way that in paying the price for guilt there might be an end to suffering. With Paul Ricoeur, one may call this the “ethical vision” of evil (Ricoeur 1965, 125; 1974, 455–67). In order to preserve the idea of divine justice the ethical vision, generally speaking, has assumed that suffering cannot be
separated from freedom and human fault: “All we, like sheep, have gone astray.” However, in Christianity the one exception to such straying is Jesus, whose innocent suffering pays the price for our own delinquency. Ricoeur recalls that the Suffering Servant theology of Second Isaiah adumbrates the Christian intuition that the innocence of an undefiled victim can transform suffering from penalty into gift, thus subverting the dominant role that the ethical vision has played in religious thought and spirituality (Ricoeur, 1969). What he fails to bring out is that this radical transformation in principle calls for a Christology in which the suffering of all of life must be translated from penalty into gift. And for this interpretation to be plausible, the suffering of all of life must somehow be seen as God’s own suffering.

In forcing theology to consider the wider-than-human domain of life’s suffering as essentially having the character of gift (rather than penalty), I see one of the great consequences of a serious encounter of theology with evolutionary biology. Theology could be invigorated by an expanded awareness of the pervasively sacrificial character of innocent life in evolution’s vast sweep. Eons of living, subjective centers have all become de-centered by giving themselves over to death and extinction, thus allowing new life (including our own) to rise up continually on the mound of their great self-surrender. Theology and theodicy should not ignore the wider drama of life’s many instances of self-sacrifice, but instead seek to rescue some meaning from it all.

What meaning? At the very least, the innocence of life’s victims means that the theme of sacrifice has henceforth to be decoupled from the ethical vision’s emphasis on suffering as expiation. Where there is no guilt, there is no need for expiation. The massiveness of nonhuman suffering in the life-story spoils any tidy ethical solution to the theodicy problem. Perhaps, then, the suffering of sentient life has a profound significance in its opening up the future to new life. The suffering of life at bottom is not rendered meaningful solely by the notions of adaptation or expiation. Rather it can make sense at all only in terms of the biblical theme of expectation. Theology is encouraged by evolutionary awareness of the travail of nonhuman life to situate all of suffering primarily within the horizon of an eschatological hope that looks toward the definitive conquering of suffering and death by God’s redemptive love.

Science over the last two centuries has been demonstrating, at least to those who bother to look, that life’s suffering spills out over the boundaries of the ethical vision of evil. To some, the excessive suffering of sentient life is final vindication of the ancient tragic interpretations of life. But to Christians there is
available another space in which to situate life’s innocent suffering—that of life in God’s future. Here the meaning of suffering and sacrifice can be radically transfigured by a sense of promise that looks forward to new creation. Theology may be confident, after Darwin, that the long reign of the expiatory vision has, at least in principle, been overthrown by the power of the future.

However, the expiatory understanding of suffering is so deeply embedded in our spiritual and ethical sensibilities that it seems nearly ineradicable. It first took verbal shape in ancient stories about how an original cosmic perfection was spoiled by free human acts of rebellion. In the biblical world the Adamic myth, with which Paul Ricoeur associates the ethical vision of existence, represents the intuition that suffering exists mostly because of human freedom and sin (Ricoeur 1974, 294–95). The offshoot of this influential theodicy has been that even today, in secular as well as deeply religious societies, whenever suffering or misfortune occurs, people are inclined to look for culprits (Teilhard de Chardin, 81). The assumption that a price in suffering must always be paid for the defilement by human freedom of a primal purity of creation has underwritten the entrenched habit of looking for victims. It has legitimated a history of scapegoating that has only exacerbated violence and misery.

In 1933, Teilhard de Chardin wrote:

In spite of the subtle distinctions of the theologians, it is a matter of fact that Christianity has developed under the over-riding impression that all the evil round us was born from an initial transgression. So far as dogma is concerned we are still living in the atmosphere of a universe in which what matters most is reparation and expiation. The vital problem, both for Christ and us, is to get rid of a stain. This accounts for the importance, at least in theory, of the idea of sacrifice, and for the interpretation almost exclusively in terms of purification. It explains, too, the pre-eminence in Christology of the idea of redemption and the shedding of blood (81).

Unfortunately, theology and religious education still exaggerate the idea of an hypothesized primordial offense, which in turn usually assumes that God’s original creation was one of rounded off perfection. Western Christianity theology in particular has situated suffering in the context of myths that emphasize the primordial purity of creation. This only makes the original fault seem all the more enormous; hence, running the risk of unleashing demonizing expeditions to find someone or something to blame. The logic implicitly operative in an expiatory theodicy is that if a state of paradisal wholeness had preceded the original fault, then the fault itself could be no trivial matter. An expiatory view of suffering and sacrifice would then be called upon to make things right. And setting things right would mean the restoration of what has been, rather than an opening to new creation up ahead.

JOHN F. HAUGHT
The Meaning of an Unfinished Universe

It is important to ask, therefore, just what theological consequences would follow if the universe, as evolution implies, has emerged only gradually from a state of relative simplicity and still remains unfinished. What need would there be for expiation or scapegoating if things had never been perfect in the beginning? And what if the perfection for which humans yearn were envisaged as a future creation instead of a forfeited past? What if the idea of an “original” breach were closed off by the logic of evolution? Wouldn’t an evolutionary view of life call for a theology that purges sacrifice of its motifs of expiation, situating life’s suffering and sacrifice once and for all within the horizon of an open, redemptive future? These, it seems to me, are questions that evolutionary science invites theology to explore.

It is no coincidence, after all, that expiatory interpretations of sacrifice find endorsement in myths that suppose a primordial paradise. A sociologist of knowledge might even speculate that it has been the social and psychic infrastructure of expiation and victimization that gives rise to mythic superstructures and theologies that project perfection back into a sacred paradisal past so as to lend religious sanction to entrenched habits of retributive violence and expiatory sacrifice.

I am asking, then, what might be the consequences for theology were it to think out fully and conclusively the implications of the evolutionary claim that a state of complete cosmic integrity in the realm of created being has never yet been an actuality. By ruling out any past epoch of created perfection, our religious aspirations may henceforth be turned more decisively than ever from regret and remorse, and more decidedly in the direction of hope. A clear and consistent understanding that the universe and life have emerged only gradually, and that there has never yet been any actualized paradisal perfection in the cosmos, might permit our religious aspirations to turn irreversibly toward the eschatological future, the only arena in which the fulfillment of our longing for perfection could conceivably be realized. At the very least, such a turn of events would align theology more closely with biblical theologies of promise and hope.

Unfortunately, however, the story of human religiosity has often been more one of nostalgia for an imagined past perfection than an eschatological anticipation...
of new creation. Even in religions descended from the biblical environment a longing to restore or recover some idyllic past has at times suppressed the spirit of Abrahamic adventure into the unknown future opened up by a God of promise. To rephrase my question, therefore, what would be the implications of situating the longed for realm of perfection in the not-yet-future instead of in a remote cosmic Urzeit, or in a Platonic realm of present perfection hovering eternally above the flow of time?

I believe that one of the consequences of a serious encounter between eschatology and evolutionary science would be a relativizing of the expiatory interpretation of suffering. Simultaneously, a vivid awareness of evolution would no longer permit our theodicies to overlook the possibility that a great portion of life’s suffering has been tragic and innocent, having nothing at all to do with guilt. Sentient forms of life have been subjects of striving and failure for many millions of years prior to human emergence. After Darwin, a sense of our human solidarity with the suffering of all sentient life, therefore, can no longer permit our interpreting suffering, including human suffering, as primarily punishment. Rather, suffering is essentially the tragic consequence of the fact that life is still emerging in an unfinished universe. Therefore, going far deeper than the Darwinian understanding of suffering exclusively in terms of adaptation, theology may emphasize that the meaning of suffering—at the very least—is that of turning the story of life, especially in its recent mode of human sensitivity and striving, irreversibly toward a new future, one in which suffering will be healed and all tears wiped away.

Consequently, the task of theodicy henceforth should not be to fit the fact of suffering onto the grid of guilt and punishment. Instead, if it hopes to get closer to the truly substantive issue, theodicy might ask why an all-good and all-powerful God would create an unfinished, imperfect, evolutionary universe in the first place rather than one that is complete and perfect from the beginning. Could it be that a truly good and deeply powerful God has no choice? This is material for another essay, but I believe the short answer is that any imaginable world that is completely finished and perfected ab initio (from the beginning) could not really be distinct from God and could not really be a creation at all. An originally finished creation, as Teilhard and others have emphasized, is theologically inconceivable.

**Conclusion**

What if theologians really began to take seriously the evolutionary understanding of life and the universe? What if they realized that the cosmos, earth and humanity, rather than having wandered away from an original plenitude of perfection, are even now, in spite of all failures, tragedies and dead ends,
invited to fuller modes of being? Evolution, I believe, is incompatible with a backward looking nostalgia for an hypothesized state of original cosmic or human perfection. But it is quite compatible with hope for a final future fulfillment. That Christianity is essentially a religion of the future should make theology leap with excitement at the fact that evolution is inconsistent with seductive dreams of reinstituting an imagined past perfection. Evolutionary biology and cosmology have closed off this retrograde path to salvation once and for all. For this, theology should be grateful.

Theodicy—if it is to survive at all after Darwin and contemporary cosmology—must take advantage of the entirely new setting in which the universe is pictured as still emerging into being rather than having been complete from the beginning. Of course, it would be an act of violence on the part of theology to wrest from the human heart its native tendency to project itself toward some idealized state of perfection. An evolutionary theology must remain entirely continuous with the history of religious longing for perfection. However, it has not been demonstrated that we need to picture the perfection to which our hearts aspire as though it were something that once was and has now been lost or besmirched. It may be more appropriate instead to picture perfection as a state that has never yet been actualized but that we may hope will come into being in the future, not just our own future, but also that of the entire universe.

The biblical accounts of creation and promise are themselves struggling to bring about just such a radical reconfiguration at the roots of the human longing for perfection. The ancient narratives of a promising God, the God who always opens up a new future whenever dead-ends appear, encourage us to move beyond nostalgic obsession with a lost Eden, and outward into an open future that relocates the essential domain of perfection in the domain of the “up-ahead,” in the direction of a creation yet to come. The Bible’s eschatological orientation arouses hope for an unprecedented future, even as it deflects our nostalgic pining for a paradisal past. Evolution sits comfortably in such a setting.

Finally, in order to offset predictable protests against my proposal, I want to close by insisting that what I have said here in no way entails a diminishment of a sense of sin, or of the need for genuine remorse for the evil humans bring about, and hence of our need for redemption from sin. In fact, just the opposite is the case. What I have been proposing is that evolution, were we to take it with full earnestness, requires our replacement of the expiatory vision and its obsessive dwelling on an idealized past with a fresh emphasis on the future of creation and the Christian promise of creation’s ongoing divinization. Sin, in this light, is essentially our resisting God’s will to gather creation more and more intimately into the differentiated unity of the divine life. Failure to acknowledge evolution, I believe, allows theology too easily to persist in expiatory explanations of suffering and an excessive anthropocentrism that leave most of life’s history outside of the process of the world’s creation. What is worse, such an oversight can lead
theology to close us humans off from the world's future, the true palace of God, the horizon from which the redemption of the world arises anew everyday.

References


Attending to Balaam’s Ass
Or Seeing the Divine through Nature’s Eyes

James B. Miller

The author challenges readers to attend to nature to deepen our awareness of the movements of the Creator. The anomalies of life in the natural world continue to offer new insights into theological truth. Diversity of being, connected in time and space, sings of the work of God whose word calls into being.

The Bible is seldom described as being humorous, yet there are humorous stories here and there. One of my favorites is about Balaam and his ass—or donkey, if your sensibilities prefer (Num 22:21-38). In short, Balaam has begun a journey at the request of Balak, the King of Moab, who wants him to curse the people of Israel. Balak has concluded that this newly arrived company of the Exodus is a threat to his kingdom. But YHWH has told Balaam that the people of Israel are blessed and not to be cursed. After several entreaties from Balak’s emissaries, YHWH allows Balaam to go to Balak, but only to say what YHWH has allowed him to say: No curse!

This is where the story gets interesting because, apparently, YHWH is not certain that Balaam will be able to restrain himself when he is in the presence of Balak, not least because of the material inducements that have been offered. So, three times during the journey YHWH places an angel with a deadly flaming sword in front of Balaam. Unfortunately for Balaam, only his ass can see the angel.

The ass’ response is sensible: it tries to avoid the angel. First, it wanders off the path. Then it presses to the side of the narrow passage, scraping Balaam’s

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foot against a wall adjoining the pathway. Finally, it lies down and refuses to budge. In each instance Balaam beats his donkey and is eventually so exasperated that he wishes he had a sword to kill it. It is then that the ass is given the power of speech, Balaam’s eyes are opened to see the angel, and all is revealed.

What is of particular note is that the ass does not refer to the angel at all. Instead it asks Balaam why he did not recognize that there was something extraordinary going on. After all, in the past the donkey’s service to Balaam had always been faithful.

**Attending to Anomalies**

This story offers a hint to the way that science and theology work at their best. In science, it is the exceptional or anomalous behavior of some aspect of nature that provides a clue to a newer, deeper insight into natural processes and structures. The peculiar activity of rocks clouding photographic plates was one of the clues that led to a fundamental revolution in physics and the discovery of the atomic and subatomic domains of the world. Analogously, in the Bible the anomalous failure of the royal theology of the Davidic monarchy (2 Sam 7:5-16), which held that David’s household was established in Jerusalem “forever,” led to two profound theological insights. With the Babylonian invasion, the hereditary monarchy of the descendants of David came to a shattering end. In the face of this deep failure of expectations, the people of Israel were, on the one hand, led to identify with the image of a “Suffering Servant” (Isa 52:13–53:12) and, on the other, to transform an idealization of the Davidic kingship (first expressed over a century earlier at the time of the Assyrian threat [Isa 9:6; Mic 5:2-5]) into the post-Babylonian messianic hope.

In the New Testament we also find such a pattern. The historical failure of Jesus to fulfill the political expectations of the messianic hope (Isa 11:1-9) and to establish an earthly messianic kingdom led Christians to create a theological synthesis, which, on the one hand, integrated the Suffering Servant tradition with that of the Davidic Messiah, and, on the other hand, projected the fulfillment of messianic hope into a Second Messianic Coming.

The anomalies of life, the contrariness of our experience over against our expectations (whether scientific or theological) can lead us to new glimpses of the true, whether of nature or of nature’s God. Furthermore, because theological understanding assumes as a foundation some view of what the world is like, new insights into the nature of the world by means of the sciences can generate theological anomalies that can then lead to theological insights.

This is not a new issue for Christians. In the fifth century St. Augustine indicated the danger of failing to attend to such anomalies when he wrote:
Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn (Augustine, De Genesi, bk. 1, ch. 19, 39).

Developments in Science

I want to illustrate this dynamic of theology in the light of science with a brief consideration of the way that Christians have addressed particular developments in science over the past three hundred years; namely, those developments which have led to a historical understanding of nature and its processes, what Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield have called “the discovery of time.”

Let me begin in the relative present with John Paul II’s statement to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 22, 1996. He wrote:

Today, almost half a century after the publication of the encyclical Humani Generis, new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis. It is indeed remarkable that this theory has been progressively accepted by researchers, following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge. The convergence, neither sought nor fabricated, of the results of work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favor of this theory (John Paul II, #4, p. 7).

He then provided an excellent definition of what a scientific theory of this scope is when he asked, rhetorically:

What is the significance of such a theory? To address this question is to enter the field of epistemology. A theory is a metascientific elaboration, distinct from the results of observation but consistent with them. By means of it a series of independent data and facts can be related and interpreted in a unified explanation. A theory’s validity depends on whether or not it can be verified, it is constantly tested against the facts; wherever it can no longer explain the latter, it shows its limitations and unsuitability. It must then be rethought (John Paul II, #4, p. 7).
As late as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the commonly held view among Western scholars was that the world (the universe) was relatively young (e.g., 6,000 years old). The diversity of things in the world from rocks and trees to animals and human beings was understood to be the result of minor variations among a limited number of original distinct kinds that had been directly created by God in the beginning. This collection of beings was seen to be organized in a hierarchy. That hierarchy was known as “The Great Chain of Being” with, of course, humans, who alone were “made in the image of God,” at the top. These ideas represented an integration of Aristotle’s natural philosophy (classical science) with a Christian theology, which was itself informed by Aristotelian metaphysics.

However, the mid-seventeenth century witnessed the birth of modern geology. One of the midwives for this birth was Nicholas Steno (1638–86). Based on his observations of strata in the earth he proposed the “principle of original horizontality” (that rock layers form in the horizontal position and any deviations are due to later disturbance) and the “law of superposition” (that layers of rock are arranged in a time sequence, the oldest being on the bottom and the youngest on the top). He also proposed that fossils were chemically transformed remnants of organisms.

Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707–88), proposed that the earth had been formed from the collision of a comet with the sun and so had a hot molten origin. He performed a series of cooling experiments with spheres of various compositions to simulate the composition of the early earth. On the basis of the observed cooling rates, he calculated that the earth, given its current surface temperature, was about 75,000 years old. (Although his calculations did seek to take into account the heat generated from solar radiation, he was unable to take account of the heating due to the radiation of nuclear decay, which is the primary source of terrestrial heat.) He also proposed a more integrated view of relationships among organisms in the organic world, even suggesting that humans and apes were related.

But it was the theoretical development of geology by the Scotsman James Hutton, in his *Theory of the Earth, or an Investigation of the Laws Observable in the Composition, Dissolution and Restoration of Land upon the Globe* (1785),
followed by the work of Englishman Charles Lyell in his *The Principles of Geology* (vol. 1, 1830, and vol. 2, 1832), that established the uniformitarian foundation of modern geological theory. The theoretical rival to this view was catastrophism, the view developed by Baron Georges Cuvier in the late-eighteenth century. Cuvier, perhaps the greatest paleontologist of his day, held that a series of geological “revolutions” or catastrophes had brought about the extinctions exhibited in the paleontological or fossil record. He held that whole new sets of organisms were created to repopulate the Earth following each major catastrophe. Others adopting catastrophism speculated that Noah’s flood was the last of these catastrophes. In contrast the uniformitarians held that the geology of the Earth was due to presently observable natural forces (e.g., sedimentation, volcanic up-thrusting, wind and rain erosion) operating over very long periods of time.

**Darwin and Mendel**

In 1831, Charles Darwin (1809–82) left on his six-year round-the-world voyage as naturalist aboard the survey ship *The HMS Beagle*. He took with him volume 1 of Lyell’s *Principles*, and he received volume 2 while on the voyage. Reading it, he was transformed from a catastrophist to an uniformitarian and began to look at the biological world in a similar historical manner.

Charles was not the first Darwin to have evolutionary ideas. His grandfather, Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802), had offered one of the first theories of common descent in his *Zoonomia, or, The Laws of Organic Life*, published from 1794–96. But he did not have a clear view of how new species were formed. The Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829) also proposed an evolutionary theory in which organisms acquired new characteristics in the process of their living. These new features were then passed on to their offspring. What was missing in these and other early evolutionary proposals was a credible mechanism by which new species could emerge. Darwin’s reading of Thomas Malthus’ *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) suggested such a mechanism. In Darwin’s words:

In October 1838, that is, fifteen months after I had begun my systematic enquiry, I happened to read for amusement Malthus’ *Population*, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be a new species. *Here then I had at last got hold of a theory by which to work* (emphasis added; Darwin, 1876).
For the next twenty years Darwin worked to develop his theory in which the principle of natural selection inspired by Malthus was the keystone concept. But it was a 1858 letter and essay from a younger colleague, Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), in which Wallace referred to a process of “natural selection” virtually identical to Darwin’s, that finally prompted his publication in 1859 of On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life. As Hutton, Lyell, and others before them had given the geosphere, the earth, an ancient and dynamic history, now Darwin did the same for the biosphere, for life on earth.

In 1866, a contemporary of Darwin, Gregor Mendel (1822–84), published a report on plant cross-breeding entitled “Experiments in Plant Hybridization.” Mendel demonstrated with mathematical precision the process of genetic inheritance and variation, a process that Darwin could observe but did not understand. With this relatively obscure publication, the age of genetics dawned but in a mist. It took forty years for Mendel’s work to be rediscovered independently by three scientists.

At first, some thought that genetic processes alone could account for the emergence of new species. Thus, Mendelian genetics was initially viewed as a theoretical rival to Darwinian evolutionary theory. But in the early twentieth century, these two strands of scientific development were integrated to form what is today the Modern Synthetic Theory of Evolution, where genetics explains variation and natural selection explains the reproductive advantage of some variations, which taken together eventually lead to the emergence of new species.

Cosmology Precedes Theology

As the Pope noted in his statement to the Pontifical Academy, it is “discoveries in various fields of knowledge” that have led to the adoption of an evolutionary outlook. He was not referring simply to terrestrial sciences like geology, paleontology, biology, and genetics. Physics, astronomy and cosmology, sciences of the very great and the very small have also lent their support to a historical developmental understanding of the universe. In first quarter of the twentieth century there were multiple revolutions in the scientific efforts to determine the age of the universe and its large and extremely small scale structure. Researchers like Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen (1845–1923), Marie Curie (1867–1934), Albert Einstein (1879–1955), Niels Bohr (1885–1962), Erwin Schrödinger (1887–1961), Edwin Hubble (1889–1953), Abbe Georges Lemaitre (1894–1966), Werner Heisenberg (1901–76), and many others opened up the structure of the subatomic world, the galactic structure of the cosmos, and historical dynamics of the origin of the universe in a “big bang.” It may be hard to believe but less than one hundred years ago we did not know that the universe was populated
with a myriad of galaxies like our own “milky way,” let alone that these galaxies were receding from one another as space itself expanded. Today we know not only that the cosmos has been expanding for 13.7 billion years, but that the rate of that expansion is increasing.

Furthermore, we have now observed (not directly, but by virtue of their astronomical effects) more than 130 extrasolar planets (planets circling stars other than the Sun) and are poised to discover life beyond the earth; perhaps on Mars or Europa, one of the moons of Jupiter, or perhaps through a spectroscopic analysis of the atmosphere of one of the extrasolar planets.

The universe that science has come to describe over the past two centuries is not simply a very different world from the one in which the Holy Scriptures were written or the early creeds were formulated. It is a world that the great doctor of the church Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) could not even have imagined. It is a universe of such scope and depth and historical dynamism before which the Puritan divines who helped form the Royal Society of London, founded in 1660, would stand agog. It is a world described not in terms of mathematical certainties but probabilities, one in which very small differences in initial conditions can have incalculable consequences.

What we have come to discover is a world in which:

• everything is in motion;
• everything is connected to everything else;
• every “thing” is its history;
• everything could have been and will be different.

Is this new understanding of the universe extraneous to Christian theology and the expression of that theology in worship? The only way this could be the case would be if an understanding of the world were not constitutive of theological formulation. But we are in the world before we are in the world in a theological sort of way. In that sense, at least, cosmology precedes theology. After reflecting on this issue, that is, the relation of an evolving universe to the doctrine of God as creator, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote these words to a friend in 1947:

> When we speak of a “theology of modern science,” it obviously does not mean that by itself science can determine an image of God and a religion. But what it does mean, if I am not mistaken, is that, given a certain development of science, certain representations of God and certain forms of worship are ruled out, as not being homogeneous with the dimensions of the universe known to our experience. This notion of homogeneity is without doubt of central importance in intellectual, moral and mystical life. Even though the various stages of our
interior life cannot be expressed strictly in terms of one another, on the other hand they must agree in scale, in nature and tonality. Otherwise it would be impossible to develop a true spiritual unity in ourselves—and that is perhaps the most legitimate, the most imperative and most definitive of the demands made by man [sic] of today and man [sic] of tomorrow (221).

Yet, this notion of homogeneity, of unity “in intellectual, moral and mystical life” is not the only strategy that might be employed to deal with anomalies between our theological tradition and “the universe known to our experience.” Another strategy is to divide the world into separated domains: the material (or natural) on one side and the spiritual (or supernatural) on the other. This has been the dominant strategy in the West since the seventeenth century. It is reflected in some of the most sophisticated theology of the twentieth century.

Theology and Science

When John Paul II affirmed the scientific standing of evolutionary theory in his 1996 statement, he also included a very significant caveat; namely, that an evolutionary account of human evolution could not in principle do justice to the distinctive and essential character of human nature. First, he noted that scientific findings are always interpreted within some broader philosophical framework. He wrote:

[W]hile the formulation of a theory like that of evolution complies with the need for consistency with the observed data, it borrows certain notions from natural philosophy. And, to tell the truth, rather than the theory of evolution, we should speak of several theories of evolution. On the one hand, this plurality has to do with the different explanations advanced for the mechanism of evolution, and on the other, with the various philosophies on which it is based. Hence, the existence of materialist, reductionist and spiritualist interpretations. What is to be decided here is the true role of philosophy and, beyond it, of theology (John Paul II, #4, p. 7).

Then he rejected the idea that what constitutes humanness can be an emergent property of human material existence in the natural process of evolution. He wrote:

Consequently, theories of evolution which, in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them, consider the spirit as emerging from the forces of living matter or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man [sic]. Nor are they able to ground the dignity of the person.
With man, then, we find ourselves in the presence of an ontological difference, an ontological leap, one could say. However, does not the posing of such ontological discontinuity run counter to that physical continuity which seems to be the main thread of research into evolution in the field of physics and chemistry? Consideration of the method used in the various branches of knowledge makes it possible to reconcile two points of view which would seem irreconcilable. The sciences of observation describe and measure the multiple manifestations of life with increasing precision and correlate them with the time line. The moment of transition to the spiritual cannot be the object of this kind of observation, which nevertheless can discover at the experimental level a series of very valuable signs indicating what is specific to the human being. But the experience of metaphysical knowledge, of self-awareness and self-reflection, of moral conscience, freedom, or again of aesthetic and religious experience, falls within the competence of philosophical analysis and reflection, while theology brings out its ultimate meaning according to the Creator's plans (John Paul II, #5–6, p. 7).

The Pope adopts an epistemological dualism not unlike the idea of “nonoverlapping magisteria” that the late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould proposed in response to the Pope's 1996 statement on evolution. In an article in *Natural History* Gould wrote: “The lack of conflict between science and religion arises from a lack of overlap between their respective domains of professional expertise—science in the empirical constitution of the universe and religion in the search for proper ethical value and the spiritual meaning of our lives” (18).

Fairly put, the Pope's philosophically informed theological position cannot be refuted by any empirical evidence. Nor does contemporary evolutionary theory deny, in principle, such an extranatural interpretation of human origins. On the other hand, since the eighteenth century one of the foundational principles of scientific inquiry has been that all phenomena in nature lend themselves to an explanation in natural terms. What is called by some “methodological naturalism” is, on the one hand, an affirmation that science only concerns itself with natural explanations. But this approach to the acquisition of knowledge also assumes that the structure and processes in nature are such that they are open to adequate explanation in natural terms without recourse to extranatural (some might say supernatural) causes. Of special note, historian of science Ronald Numbers has pointed out that this epistemological view originated within the Christian community (Numbers, 265f). This would suggest that while theological interpretations of human origins are appropriate, theology is superfluous to an explanation of the particular processes of human origins.

What is interesting is that there is in the Christian tradition a classical theological warrant for affirming that God's action in the world does not require intervention in or disruption of natural processes, but is fully consistent with
and, therefore, indistinguishable from natural processes. Again, we can turn to Augustine and find this view. In one of his critical works against the Manicheans he wrote: “God, the Author and Creator of all natures, does nothing contrary to nature; for whatever is done by Him who appoints all natural order and measure and proportion must be natural in every case” (321).

**Conclusion**

If God’s creative acts are “natural in every case,” then we need not look for causes beyond nature to account for any particular aspect of nature. Why there is any nature at all requires an answer beyond nature. But, to answer the question why there is any particular thing in nature, a human being for example, perhaps we need only to listen more clearly to what nature is saying through her actions. What the “heavens are declaring and the earth showing forth” is a dynamic, innovative emergence of a diversity of being interconnected in time and space. Listening to nature’s witness, we may more clearly discern God’s creative activity, not so much as a monarch who decrees order or a potter who molds chaotic clay into an ordered vessel, but more as a word that calls upon the creation to bring itself forth or the leader of a jazz jam session who without a score evokes new and unexpected harmonies. When we attend to nature, the actions may be those of an ass but the meaning divine.

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Are We at Home in the Cosmos?
A Franciscan Perspective

Ilia Delio, O.S.F.

The author combines Franciscan spirituality and theological acumen in drawing us into a Christian ecological vision of creation as revelatory of the presence of God. Such a vision can lead to an examination of our relationship with the world in which we live, and move us from an “I-it” to an “I-Thou” relationship with the creation entrusted to our care.

There is an age-old saying that captures the sacredness of place where lies our deepest sense of peace and comfort, of all that we are and strive to be, where memories are drawn and dreams unfold. “Home is where the heart is,” not only speaks to every weary traveler who arrives safely home after a long trip but to anyone who searches for that place in the world where one can truly be oneself. The Franciscan theologian, Bonaventure, captured this idea in his own way when he wrote: “You truly exist where you love not merely where you live.” In other words, you truly are yourself and the fullness of all you can be where you love, and where you love is truly where you live. If loving and living are so united, we may question whether or not we truly love where we live. For we live in creation, in the natural world of created things. Scientists today tell us that creation is our “home,” that we are biologically related to other living forms of life and that, on a broader level, we are joined to the cosmos “at the hip.” But do we love our “home”?

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The diagnosis today on environmental disturbances reveals a critical situation. Scientists indicate that changes in global climactic systems and collapsing global biological diversity pose fundamental threats to the very future of human society. We are on the brink of humanitarian and ecological catastrophes, and the risks they pose are not arrayed equitably. The life of the poor is imperiled disproportionately. In a world where forty percent of the people live on two dollars per day and social development is stalling or backsliding, environmental disruption looms ominously (Warner, 55). In 1990, a group of distinguished scientists, including the late Carl Sagan and physicist Freeman Dyson, wrote a letter appealing to the world's spiritual leaders to join the scientific community in protecting and conserving an endangered global ecosystem. “We are close,” they wrote, “to committing what in religious language is sometimes called crimes against creation” (Toolan, 9–10). That the scientists appealed to the religious community is not surprising. Lynn White, in his controversial article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” claimed that the source of environmental problems is religious in nature. Christianity, he indicated, with its emphasis on human salvation and dominion over nature, “made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (White, 1205). Although White’s argument has raised questions among scholars, his thesis highlights the need for religion to heal the wounds of Mother Earth. “Since the roots of our trouble are largely religious,” he claimed, “the remedy must also be essentially religious. We must rethink and re-feel our nature and our destiny” (White, 1207).

It is in light of the need for religion to bind up the wounds of the earth that the Franciscan tradition has a prominent role to play. As a tradition rooted in the Incarnation, it takes seriously the whole of creation, including the natural world, in the search for God. The basis for a Franciscan ecology is found in the life of Francis and expounded in the theology of Bonaventure. To understand Bonaventure’s contribution to a Franciscan theology of creation, therefore, we must first look to the life of Francis, especially as Bonaventure reflected on that life. The insights of both Francis and Bonaventure can help us in our desire to restore health to the earth and join with it on the journey to God.

**Francis of Assisi and the Family of Creation**

Religion by definition means to “bind back” [re-ligare] to the ultimate source, to be “reconnected” so as to be made whole. Francis of Assisi was a religious person in the truest sense of the word. His search for meaning and identity led him to the God of compassionate love whom he encountered in the person of Jesus Christ. Bonaventure wrote that while at prayer one day, Christ Jesus appeared to Francis “as fastened to a cross. His soul melted at the sight, and the memory of Christ’s passion was impressed on the innermost recesses of his
heart. From that hour, whenever Christ’s crucifixion came to his mind, he could scarcely contain his tears and sighs” (Bonaventure 2000, 534). This feeling of compassion for the Crucified led Francis to share his clothes with the poor and to serve among the lepers whom he formally despised. Bonaventure captured what became central to Francis, namely, the power of love. Love opened up for Francis the mystery at the heart of everything and allowed his heart to touch the pulse of life. As Francis grew in love in and through Christ, his eyes opened up to the truth of God in creation. He came to realize that the Incarnation sanctifies all of creation; thus he came to feel for the things of creation.

Francis’s feeling for creation was at the same time a growth in connectedness to creation. In his Major Legend of Saint Francis, Bonaventure described Francis’s relationship with Christ as one of deepening piety. The word piety (pietas) means “blood-related” or “family-related.” It can be defined as an attitude of respect toward those to whom one is bound by ties of religion, consanguinity; of relationships between human beings. Bonaventure highlights the idea that through his relationship with Christ, Francis came to realize his “family” relatedness to everything, including the tiny creatures of creation. Francis’s piety was the fruit of his ongoing conversion. Growing in union with Christ through the Spirit gave Francis a new relationship to a new nature, one in which grace and innocence prevailed, not sin and conflict. His piety was the source of his reverence for animals and he recognized them as fellow creatures and signs of Christ. As Thomas of Celano wrote: “He calls all animals by a fraternal name, although, among all kinds of beasts, he especially loves the meek” (354).

Bonaventure claims that everything in creation “spoke” to Francis of God. He came to “see” God’s goodness in every aspect of creation, so that everything ultimately led him to Christ, the Word of God. In Bonaventure’s view, Francis came to “see” God in creation because he contemplated God in the things of creation. Contemplation is a penetrating gaze that gets to the truth of reality. Bonaventure describes the contemplative vision of Francis as “contuition,” that is, seeing things for what they truly are in God. In Major Legend of Francis he wrote: “In beautiful things he contuited Beauty itself and through the footprints impressed in things he followed his Beloved everywhere, out of them making for himself a ladder through which he could climb up and lay hold of him who is utterly desirable” (596–97). These footprints of God impressed on the things of creation enabled Francis to find God wherever he went in the world, and finding God in the things of creation led him to embrace Jesus Christ, for Christ is the Word of God made visible in the world.

The life of the poor is imperiled disproportionately.
Bonaventure described Francis's world as one imbued by the goodness of God so that he was “aroused by everything to divine love.” Duns Scotus later formulated a doctrine of individuation known as haecceitas which captured Francis's attentiveness to the details of nature. The notion of haecceitas points to individuality at the core of each thing—its very being (Delio, 37). It refers to that positive dimension of every concrete and contingent being which identifies it and makes it worthy of attention. Haecceitas makes a singular what it is and sets it off from other things like it to which it might be compared. It can only be known by direct acquaintance, not from any consideration of common nature. What Scotus indicated, in light of Francis, is that things are God-like in their specificity. Thus, regular, daily attention to the wider world of creatures/nature is fundamental to realizing that the world is charged with the grandeur of God.

Francis's life shows us that feeling connected to creation is brought about through a fundamental change in values. Only when we come to realize that the center of our lives, the divine mystery of love, is the center of creation can we begin to relate to the things of nature as brother and sister, joining with them on the journey into God.

**Bonaventure and the Book of Creation**

While Francis lived in creation as brother, Bonaventure reflected on the life of Francis and highlighted the role of the human person in creation. Bonaventure's theology of creation takes as its starting point the Trinity of love. He described creation like a river that flows from a spring, spreading throughout the land, and eventually flowing back to its point of origin. Thus he indicated the deep, intimate relationship between creation and the Trinity. He described created reality as sharing in the mystery of the generation of the Word from the Father. Creation is a limited expression of the infinite and dynamic love between the Father and the Son. To say that creation flows out of the infinite fountain of divine love is to say that God is creative and loving. As a work of art, creation is intended to manifest the glory of the Artist-Creator. In order for divine glory to be consciously expressed, God creates human beings who are capable of participating in and manifesting that glory. Thus, God freely creates a glorious universe and calls forth within this universe human persons who are endowed with the freedom to participate in this divine artistic splendor.

Bonaventure used two images to describe creation in its natural beauty: mirror and book. As a mirror, creation reflects the power, wisdom, and goodness of God. We can compare the manifold beauty of creation to the stain-glassed windows of a great cathedral. Just as light strikes the various panes of glass and diffracts into an array of colors, so too the divine light emanates through the Word and diffracts in the universe, producing a myriad of colors in a myriad of
things, all reflecting the divine light in some way. Bonaventure also described the created world as a book in which its Maker, the Trinity, shines forth and is represented at three levels of expression: a vestige, an image, and a likeness (Delio, 29). The difference in these levels of expression reflects the degree of similarity between the creature and Creator, the copy and the model. The vestige is the most distant reflection of God and is found in all creatures. That is, every grain of sand, every star, every earthworm, reflects the Trinity as its origin (efficient cause), its reason of existence (formal cause) and the end to which it is destined (final cause). The image, however, is only found in intellectual (human) beings, indicating that the human person is an apt receptacle for the divine. Those humans conformed to God by grace, according to Bonaventure, are similitudes, since, through grace, they bear a likeness to God. The universe, therefore, appears as a book representing and describing its Maker. Every creature is an aspect of God’s self-expression in the world, and since every creature has its foundation in the Word, each is equally close to God (although the mode of relationship differs). Since the Word of God is expressed in the manifold variety of creation, Bonaventure views the world as sacramental. It is a symbolic world, full of signs of God’s presence. The world is created as a means of God’s self-revelation so that, like a mirror or footprint, it might lead us to love and praise the Creator. It is meant to lead humans to what it signifies, namely, the infinite Trinity of dynamic, eternal, and self-diffusive love.

**Incarnation and Creation**

While Bonaventure’s theology of creation reflects harmony and order, it is a harmony that finds its center in the person of Jesus Christ. For Bonaventure, as for Scotus, creation is intended for Christ because Christ is the beloved Word of the Father. Whether or not sin ever existed, Scotus claimed, Christ would have come. Both Bonaventure and Scotus held that Christ is first in God’s intention to love; the whole creation is made for Christ. Everything is patterned on the Word of God and, we might say, is a “little word” of God. Creation, therefore, is not mere physical matter; rather, it expresses God’s infinite love. God “speaks” the depths of his heart in the rich diversity of creation. Because creation reveals the glory of God, in the same way that Jesus Christ reveals the Father, creation is sacred. It is a holy earth that speaks to us of the holy love of God. But how do we come to know the sacredness or holiness of this creation? How do we come to feel this God-filled center of creation? Bonaventure’s insight to the mystery of Christ as the center of the human soul and center of creation can help us here. Essentially, he claimed, the more deeply we come to know Christ at the center of our personal lives, the more deeply we come to know Christ at the heart of creation. Prayer helps us realize that Christ is the one
through whom we and all creation are made and in whom we will find our completion. In Christ we realize the fullest possible life in God, which includes all of creation.

In view of Francis's life, Bonaventure claimed that humans are not created to stand in a position of superiority or domination over nature but in a central position of mediation, joining together the physical/material world of creation and the spiritual love of God. The whole material world cries out for perfection, he wrote, but is unable to attain it on its own. The human person, therefore, stands in the center as one who is capax Dei (i.e., has a capacity for God) and who can lead non-human creation toward its God-intended fulfillment through relationships of harmony and goodness. To stand in creation in openness to God requires an ability to relate to others outside ourselves as essential to ourselves. We must see beyond the mere surface of things. Prayer is that life-giving relationship with God that opens our eyes to the truth of the world around us. Contemplation enables us to see into the depths of things or rather to see things as they are in relationship to God. To see things in their individual creation is to realize that each aspect of creation is uniquely loved into being by a God of infinite love. Only in this way do we recognize that each aspect of creation is where we encounter God and the truth of ourselves in God.

The problem today, however, is that we no longer know how to dwell in mystery.

While relationship, according to Bonaventure, is the key to life in God, we can resist or desist from relations by choice and thus diminish the fruitfulness of creation by stripping it of its goodness. Sin is the refusal to participate in creation's web of life. It describes the personal history of one who was created for communion and refuses it (Kopas 1994, 178). It is the rejection of our identity as part of an interdependent world in which God's power as creative source expresses itself through shared power with other creatures. To sin is to reject responsibility for those to whom we are connected by refusing to accept the “other” (the “Thou”) as the one who addresses us, discloses our responsibility and calls us into question. Sin, therefore, bears its consequences in a broken human community and in abandonment of the natural world. The desire to overcome sin is the desire to overcome all obstacles that stand in the way of the accomplishment of God's creative aim, which is the fullest possible sharing of life and love between God and creation. There can be no real healing of the earth unless we humans are on the way toward healing and wholeness. Personal re-creation is the basis of cosmic re-creation. A spirituality that includes mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace is one that can nurture a new creation both on the
human and cosmic level. Only life-giving relationships that reflect a God of
generous love can heal the earth of its wounds.

**Challenges Today**

While the emphasis of Francis and Bonaventure on the holiness of creation
is inspiring, the sacramental world of the medievals has yielded to drastic
Baconian measures of modernity giving rise to a radical desacralizing of nature.
This desacralization has, in turn, permitted us to treat the earth as an instrument
of good rather than a value in itself. We have lost vision of the inherent goodness
of creation and its sacramental character. This loss, I would argue, results from
estrangement in two principal areas: a crisis of feeling and a loss of connected-
ness. It is not that we no longer think of the sacredness of creation, but rather
that we no longer feel its sacredness. Contemporary culture thrives on apathy
and indifference. What happens to the earth affects us neither one way nor the
other, unless it affects us personally. This estrangement of feeling may corre-
spond to the larger cultural spiritual crisis of alienation. A sense of loneliness,
isolation and disconnectedness mark contemporary western culture with its pen-
chant for materialism and technological devices. The crisis of feeling and
[dis]connectedness that underlie the environmental crisis today may indeed be
religious in nature because it is a loss of a fundamental “I-Thou” relationship
that affects the heart of creation.

To live as an “I” in relation to a “Thou” is to dwell in mystery and it is no secret
that the depth of the Christian vocation depends on mystery. It depends on our
relationship to God in and through Christ and our ability to dwell in the mystery
of Christ, as we encounter that mystery in our lives and in our world. This
“I-Thou” relationship was key to Francis’s fraternal life which included his sense
of creation as family. The problem today, however, is that we no longer know how
to dwell in mystery. Modern technology, Richard Gaillardetz writes, has reshaped
our daily existence in ways that can make it difficult to experience the grace of
God in our lives (11). The loss of “feeling” at the heart of creation is a loss of
mystery at the heart of creation. Because we are no longer grasped by mystery
we no longer relate to anything outside ourselves as essential to our selves.

Christian responsibility for the natural world demands that we think of the
earth, and the entire cosmos for that matter, as our home. We must shift from
technological “I-it” thinking to ecological “I-Thou” thinking, from device and
control mechanisms to constructing nature as an active partner in the pursuit of
God. If Francis learned to feel solidarity with creation through a deep, prayerful
relationship with Christ, what do we need to feel part of the whole? How can we
regain a sense of mystery in our lives where we can recognize creation as a mani-
festation of God’s gracious goodness, where the inherent dignity of each living
being is recognized and valued as expressing the infinite love of God? We need, as Gaillardetz points out, a new asceticism to accompany an ecological spirituality that incorporates the web of life in religious expression. On a practical note, we need to make choices that include the environment, when choices are presented to us.

A Christian ecological vision requires a feeling of belonging to nature here and now. Only if we spend time with nature will we be impelled to act on behalf of nature. We must learn to contemplate God in creation and not apart from it, which means seeing things in their individual creation, each uniquely loved into being by a God of infinite love. But this type of penetrating vision requires time to deepen. A technological mindset cannot comprehend that “dead time” of which modern technology tries to rid us is often the arena of grace. In her Madeleva Lecture, Kathleen Norris observed that “it always seems that just when daily life seems most unbearable . . . that what had seemed ‘dead time’ was actually a period of gestation” (Norris 1998, 10). In our feverish obsession to fill our lives with more things that give us what we want, instantly, without effort or engagement, do we cut ourselves off from the graced dimension of ordinary life?

The pursuit of the mystical involves attentiveness to ordinary things as mediations of grace and occasions of divine blessings. We need focal practices and communal gatherings and celebrations that disengage us from the artificial environments we immerse ourselves in and direct us to the goodness and beauty of creation. A disengagement from the world of artificial devices and engagement with the embodied world of God’s presence demands a conscious decision to waste time among the ordinary and mundane. Francis’s biographers indicate that he spent time in solitary places, in mountains and caves, and wandered amidst the flowers and the fields. The modern day promise of immediacy, expediency and enjoyment lures us away from attentiveness, fidelity, perseverance and the ability to spend time in the simplicity of nature. We may no longer feel the world as God’s good creation because we have lost the ability to love the simple and the ordinary.

Bonaventure indicates that love is the reason for creation and the bond of unity in creation. The one who, like Francis, lives “in Christ” learns to love like Christ and, thus, becomes an indispensable member of a living Body which includes the simplest creatures of creation as brothers and sisters. Only when we choose to live in God through love do we begin to feel the things of this earth as God’s embodied love, and thus do we realize our responsibility for creation—bringing it with us on our journey into God. Bonaventure emphasized that fulfillment of the universe lies in the mystery of the human person through the power of love, and he calls us to contemplate the goodness of God in creation. To see and to love must lead to solidarity with all creation; to recognize the primordial mystery of love as the source of all life. Only in this way can we realize that the justice and peace we long for must be a justice and peace of the earth which in turn means right, loving relations with the natural world of God’s good creation.
Francis became a brother in creation through the love of the crucified and glorified Christ. Through his relationship with Christ he came to realize that the earth will not be annihilated or destroyed but together with humanity will be transformed in the love of God. This indeed is the hope of the journey into God as it embraces the whole of creation. But lest we fail to perceive our vocation, we bear the revolt that awaits us. I conclude with the words of Bonaventure:

Therefore any person who is not illumined by such great splendor in created things is blind. Anyone who is not awakened by such great outrages is deaf. Anyone who is not led by such effects to give praise to God is mute. Anyone who does not turn to the First Principle as a result of such signs is a fool. Therefore open your eyes; alert your spiritual ears; unlock your lips, and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love, and adore, magnify, and honor your God lest, the entire world rise up against you (Bonaventure 2002, 61).

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Is creation an accident or part of a divine plan? Biblical scholar Joseph Wimmer directs our attention to creation and evolution as giving expression to the “anthropic principle.” He finds support in the Old Testament and proposes a new way of living in the universe which he calls “anthropic spirituality.”

One of the many truly awesome things about creation is the fact that according to science it took almost fifteen billion years to form the stuff of our human bodies. The materials necessary for the formation of humans, notably carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen, were first fashioned in second-generation stars, which themselves came to exist because of the explosions of first-generation stars composed of hydrogen and helium. In line with that reality is the list of almost unique parameters at the very beginning of the Big Bang without which humans could never have come to exist anywhere in the universe. That list is based on what has been called the “cosmological anthropic principle.” Some writers think that there is nothing extraordinary about the list; it simply records what did happen to bring us about. It doesn’t prove that we are not just accidental blips on the big screen of universe activity. Others believe that these initial conditions were determined by a divine Creator precisely so that we humans (and quite possibly intelligent beings on other planets) would some day be formed.

This is where philosophy, theology, and the Bible come into play. Does the universe show directionality? If so, toward what? Did it come to exist merely of

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itself, spontaneously, by chance, out of sheer nothingness, or was it created, either directly or indirectly? This is a philosophical question of contingency, and, if it points to the existence of a Creator, then we may turn to the Bible, which contains a number of important texts on creation. But there are also hermeneutical questions about the interpretation of those biblical texts within the religious community. The practical result of these reflections may be termed “anthropic spirituality”; that is, if all the above is true, then how does that impinge on my essential relationships toward God, the universe, others, and self?

**A Scientific Explanation of the Origin of the Universe**

According to the Standard Model, the most commonly held scientific explanation, the universe originated about fifteen billion years ago with a Big Bang, the fantastic explosion of all its matter and energy compressed into the size of a pencil point. Exactly how that began, or even how all the matter and energy of the universe got so compressed is not known, but scientists have been able to track the continuing development and expansion of the universe an infinitesimal moment later, usually expressed as $10^{-42}$ of a second, or a ten-millionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a second after the initial event. The temperature at that time was $10^{32}$ degrees Kelvin, or a hundred million trillion trillion degrees. Complex changes took place, most of them almost immediately. About one ten thousandth of a second later protons and neutrons, plus antiprotons and antineutrons, were formed, leading to a massive explosion as matter and antimatter annihilated each other, except for a residue of matter. After about a minute the temperature fell enough to allow protons and neutrons to form the nuclei of hydrogen and helium, which, together with photons and electrons, was a highly energetic mixture for about 300,000 years. At that point the temperature of the mixture dropped to 3,000 degrees Kelvin, the photons no longer dislodged the electrons, and the basically stable elements hydrogen and helium were finally formed. The photons traveled at the speed of light in all directions, an event discovered in 1964 as “background cosmic radiation” by researchers Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson of Bell Laboratories in New Jersey.

The process of the formation and dispersion of hydrogen and helium was not totally uniform, and it created certain “wrinkles” which served as “seeds” for the later organization of hydrogen and helium into stars and galaxies, about a billion years after the Big Bang. These “wrinkles” were discovered in 1992 by the massive Cosmic Background Explorer project (COBE) under the leadership of George Smoot, and removed the last major scientific hesitations about accepting the Big Bang theory. The burning of hydrogen and helium in the interior of these first-generation stars brought about the synthesis of heavier nuclei to produce carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and iron, which are necessary for the production
and maintenance of human life. These stars eventually exploded and cast their heavy elements into the interstellar gas while allowing even heavier elements to be formed. Millions of second-generation stars were then condensed from this element-rich interstellar gas, including our sun at about ten billion years, that is, about five billion years ago. Through complex interactions of the gases surrounding the early sun, the planets were formed, including the earth about 4.6 billion years ago.

**Evolution of Human Life on Earth**

About 3.5 billion years ago the first living cells were formed on earth, with a genetic code that is common to all later life forms. Through the passage of time more and more complex flora and fauna evolved, species died out and new species came to be. At a certain point there were pre-humans, especially chimpanzees about five million years ago. They are our closest “relatives” with about 99.4 percent of similar DNA, followed about four million years ago by our more immediate ancestors, *Australopithecus* (“southern ape”). Then came various stages of *homo* (Latin for “human”), such as *homo erectus* about three million years ago, *homo habilis* (or toolmaker) about two million years ago, and archaic *homo sapiens*, who knew how to manage fire, about 900,000 years ago. A group of *homo sapiens* known as Neanderthal originated in Europe and the Middle East about 130,000 years ago, but there are minimal signs of intermarriage with the modern *homo sapiens* known as Cro-Magnons, our most immediate ancestors who came from Africa to Asia and Europe about 100,000 years ago.

**The Cosmological Anthropic Principle**

In 1986, John D. Barrow and Frank J. Tipler published a book entitled *The Cosmological Anthropic Principle*, in which they gathered a whole set of extraordinarily precise initial conditions that existed at the origin of the universe and which were necessary if human life was to develop here on earth almost fifteen billion years later. They named the principle underlying this list of initial conditions the “cosmological anthropic principle.” The principle has two forms, strong and weak. The strong cosmological anthropic principle asserts that God deliberately caused these initial conditions to be the way they are in order to bring about humanity on earth. The weak cosmological anthropic principle merely points out that if these special initial conditions did not exist, humans could never have evolved. Thus, for example, if the gravitational force in the universe were ever so slightly weaker, then the earth would not have formed; if it were ever so slightly stronger, the universe would have collapsed before life could have arisen. If the
strong nuclear force were slightly greater, no hydrogen could exist and the atoms essential for life would be unstable; if the force were slightly less, no elements heavier than hydrogen would exist, and again human life would be impossible. If the weak nuclear force were slightly greater, too much helium would have been formed in the Big Bang and no heavy elements could have been ejected from stars; if it were slightly less, too little helium would have been formed, leading also to a lack of ejection of heavy elements necessary for life—carbon, oxygen, nitrogen—from stars. If the universe were much smaller than the present one with its thirty-plus billion galaxies, it would have collapsed before advanced life could have arisen.

The reality of this list is not in doubt, but its value is hotly debated. To some it simply shows what randomly happened as a result of which humans came to exist; it does not “prove” that an intelligent Creator set those initial conditions precisely in order to bring us about. Others would argue to the contrary. It seems at least legitimate, theologically, to conclude that if God wanted humans to exist as spirit in the world, then it took very precise initial conditions and fifteen billion years of evolution to bring us into existence, and that God must have had us (and possibly other rational creatures on other planets) in mind from the very beginning.

God’s Involvement in the Process of Evolution

Not everyone agrees that God had anything to do with evolution. There are atheistic understandings of evolution, such as those proposed by Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Steven Jay Gould, and Peter William Atkins, which see neither Creator nor direction or purpose in the universe. Atkins writes, “In the beginning there was nothing. Absolute void. . . . There was no space, nor was there time, for this was before time. . . . By chance there was a fluctuation. . . . From absolute nothing, absolutely without intervention, there came into being rudimentary existence” (Atkins, 149). And Daniel Dennett claims, “Even the human mind is an eventual . . . outcome of an utterly mindless sequence of physical occurrences” (266).

However, these approaches focus too much on the externals of the process of evolution, especially on its randomness, which is only part of the picture, and neglect to take into account fundamental considerations of philosophy. The primary question is that of contingency: Why is there something rather than nothing? Thomas Aquinas had already said that even if matter were eternal, as the Greeks claimed, God would still be their creator, eternally, for how else could one explain their existence? (ST I, q. 46 a. 2). Contemporary authors agree. John Polkinghorne points out that the concept of creation is concerned with ontological origin and not temporal beginning. Whatever the mechanics of the origin of
the universe, God is the source of it and is distinct from it (73). Ian Barbour notes that the error of atheistic evolutionists is a switch from methodological reduction, considering only that which can be tested and proved or disproved by experiment, which is quite appropriate for any science, to an ontological reduction, the declaration that nothing exists beyond that which is subject to scientific verification or falsifiability. The error consists in the move from scientific to philosophical questions. To say that organisms consist of “nothing but atoms” is the assertion of a “metaphysics of materialism,” a broad philosophical claim that matter and energy are the only realities in the universe (Barbour, 165ff.).

**Direction in the Process of Evolution**

Although writers like Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Steven Jay Gould claim to find no sense of directionality in the process of evolution, from simple to more complex forms, other interpreters, such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Ian Barbour, John Polkinghorne, Brian Swimme, John Haught, and Pope John Paul II, disagree. Over eighty years ago, Teilhard formulated a simple but basically effective principle of evolutionary development, that of complexity-consciousness. This principle argues that in the course of time life forms on earth could be hierarchically viewed as progressing toward ever more complex nervous systems and concomitant higher degrees of consciousness. Humans would have the highest degree of both complex nervous systems and consciousness, notably reflexive self-consciousness, a trait unique to humans. Does that make humans “higher” than the other life forms? Teilhard would have said yes, not in a fit of self-righteous pride, but as a scientist using the measurement of complexity-consciousness, and as a Christian seeking to harmonize his scientific findings with his understanding of the Bible and of theology. He noted the progressive movement of the earth through time from non-life to life, and eventually to the whole world of plants and animals, with ever increasingly complex nervous systems, arriving at the evolutionary development of the human mind and spirit. As a philosopher and theologian, he concluded that the only adequate explanation of such a process is the work of a divine creative “force” or Omega; namely God, as the source and term of the whole universe, especially at its spiritual human level, which could acknowledge and enter into a relationship through faith and love with the very Person of God.

A variant approach is provided by John Haught, who focuses on information as an explanation for progressive development. Biological processes, which came later, manifest more information than the chemical, which themselves follow rules beyond those of physics. Haught concludes: “God could be thought of as the ultimate source of the novel informational patterns available to evolution” (73).
Pope John Paul II has also spoken about evolutionary directionality. In his 1996 message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, he clearly endorsed evolution as “more than an hypothesis,” stating that “the convergence, neither sought nor provoked, of the results of work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favor of this theory” (415). The pontiff hastened to add that materialist and reductionist theories of evolution were not acceptable, namely those which claim to provide a total explanation of cosmic and terrestrial development in purely natural terms. He did admit that in the evolutionary process “the moment of transition to the spiritual is not the object of . . . observation [of] the sciences . . . [which] describe and measure the multiple manifestations of life with increasing precision and correlate them with the time line” (416). But as proof that there was indeed a transition in evolution to the spiritual level of the human being, which the Pope attributed to God’s “direct” creation of the human soul, he then listed a number of items unique to humans: “The experience of metaphysical knowledge, of self-awareness and self-reflection, of moral conscience, freedom, and again, of aesthetic and religious experience” (416). It was important for John Paul II to speak in terms of “direct” creation of the human soul in order to underscore the uniqueness of each human being as created in the image and likeness of God and so enter into intimate communion with God through knowledge and love, “a relationship which will find its complete fulfillment beyond time, in eternity” (John Paul II, 416).

The Bible on Creation

The Church is now more aware than before that the Bible, the Word of God, was nevertheless written in human words, with certain inevitable consequences. The texts of the Bible are ancient and reflect the cultural world in which they were composed. We realize today that the portrayals of Genesis 1–3 are not to be taken literally, but they do contain important truths. From Genesis 1 we learn that God is the Creator of a universe which is “very good,” that humans were created “last,” and that they have “dominion” over the world precisely as “image and likeness” of God, that is, with compassion and concern for all of creation. From Genesis 2 we learn that a human being is a unified integral “living person.” Genesis 2:7 shows the Lord God as a potter, forming an earthling
(Hebrew *adam*) from the earth (*ademah*), blowing into his nostrils the breath of life, “and so the earthling became a living person” (my translation). The Hebrew word for person, *nephesh*, has a wide range of meaning, including “soul,” but it always focuses on something or someone living and breathing. Indeed, according to Numbers 6:6, a corpse is a dead *nephesh*, clearly not a dead “soul” but rather a dead “person.” The ancient Hebrew idea of a human being as a single, living entity is an insight of great importance still today. It places us squarely and solidly in the world, as deriving from it, but according to the will and action of God. We are of the earth, and also of God. God’s commands in Genesis 2–3 constitute a call to the responsible exercise of freedom in cultivating and caring for the world, in guileless community and mutuality with one another, with humility and obedience to the divine will in our heart, and acceptance of the gift of eternal life.

Proverbs 3:19-20 and other texts of the Hebrew Wisdom Literature acknowledge that God created the world “in wisdom.” From Job 28 we learn that the world is intelligible, created by the wisdom of God, which wisdom is then “found” in the world. Similar ideas are expressed in psalms of praise, especially of the beauty and grandeur of nature: “The heavens declare the glory of God, the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1); “You knit me together in my mother’s womb... a wonder am I, and all your works are wonders” (Ps 139:13-14). But besides the beauty of order, there is also chaos which remains in God’s created world and which demands God’s continuing providential attention. Psalm 104 praises God for creating an ordered world: “He established the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never totter” (104:5), but chaos can return at any time and all creatures need God’s caring presence: “If you hide your face, they are dismayed. . . . When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth” (Ps 104:29-30).

**Anthropic Spirituality**

Anthropic spirituality may be described as the totality of those aspects of our relationship with God, self, and others which derive more directly from the fifteen-billion-year history which is an essential part of our past. We rejoice in awe that God has been “waiting” for us all that time, while recognizing that God takes pleasure in the whole universe as such, which exists on a scale so vast it is difficult to imagine. “God’s ways are not our ways” seems all the more true as we contemplate the grandeur of the whole. There is a richness and value to reality in all its forms, especially the sentient and intelligent. In his book *The Divine*...
Milieu, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin urged us to turn directly to God in prayer, but once we are aware of God’s continuing loving presence in our lives, we can then give our full attention to “the most trivial or the most absorbing of occupations,” for “by virtue of the Creation, and still more, of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see” (Teilhard, 65). God is not “up there” while we are “down here.” We are immersed in the divine, and are called in love of God and of the world in which we live to grow into mature freedom. There is a new dimension to the love commandment, as enunciated by Elizabeth Johnson, quoting Brian Patrick: “Who is our neighbor? The Samaritan? The outcast, the enemy? Yes, yes, of course. But it is also the whale, the dolphin, and the rain forest. Our neighbor is the entire community of life, the entire universe. We must love it all as our self” (Johnson, 67). Anthropic spirituality teaches us to become responsible citizens not only of the world, but of the whole universe.

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Genetics and the Image of God
A Dialogue

William A. Durbin

A church historian offers a summary of a dialogue between science and religion on the topic of genetics. He summarizes the remarks of two representatives of science and religion respectively, Dr. Francis Collins and Rev. James McCartney, O.S.A. Both are believers and both are concerned with providing a “correct understanding” of this field and its ethical ramifications and theological implications.

In the last decade, the world (literally) has witnessed an expanding dialogue between science and religion. The scope of interaction can be seen at websites dedicated to this movement (see References). In all of this activity, basic questions about the nature of the dialogue continue to arise: Is this a bona fide exchange between equals in which both parties affect one another’s understanding of the world? Or does science have the upper hand in defining the terms of discourse? Likewise, are religious communities, in a spirit of dialogue, ready to adjust belief in light of new knowledge—and to perceive that adjustment as an advance in theological understanding? In short, is this a true dialogue, and can creative interaction function as a method of theology? This essay seeks to address these questions with an eye toward their relevance for ministry.

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That these issues do concern theology and ministry can, at the outset, be suggested in two ways. Sir John Templeton, a principal sponsor of the cultural dialogue, has described his aim in theological terms. Through his foundation Templeton has underwritten much of this engagement in order to foster “humility theology.” He envisions progress in our knowledge of God through the application of scientific methods to spiritual phenomena. He promotes a method of interdisciplinary theological reflection based on an openness to scientific knowledge, on the one hand, and to spiritual reality on the other (Templeton 1998; Herrmann 2000). At the same time, in Catholic circles specifically, Pope John Paul II called for “intense dialogue.” He endorsed “mutual interchange” between scientific and religious communities, fostered by “bridging ministries” in the Church (John Paul II, 1988).

In this dual light, Church leaders might do well to consider both the aim and method of theology developed in dialogue with science. This essay takes a step toward this goal by closely examining one actual “dialogue.” The complexities of this cultural interaction are spotlighted, suggesting that interdisciplinary theological reflection and the formation of bridging ministries require not only an exchange of knowledge but a framework for developing understanding and wisdom.

**Setting and Context**

The dialogue took place at Washington Theological Union in the summer of 1999. It was part of a series of public “conversations” between scientists and theologians in the presence of a diverse audience. Each conversation explored the value of science for “our understanding and experience of God.” This particular exchange, entitled “Genetics and the Image of God,” focused on the implications of the Human Genome Project (HGP).

This dialogue had, and continues to have, a particular timeliness. Less than a year later, on June 26, 2000, the president of the United States announced completion of the rough draft of the human genetic code. Flanked by leaders of both the public and private efforts to map the human genome, President Clinton declared: “Today we are learning the language in which God created life.” Indeed, it seemed that only religious language could capture the momentousness of the occasion. Dr. Francis Collins, director of the international Genome Project, added: “We have caught a glimpse of an instruction book previously known only to God.” Rhetorically, at least, possession of the genetic map of the human being signaled a basic connection between science and religion (see Recer, 2000).

This connection had been anticipated. From its inception in 1990, the HGP dedicated 5 percent of its budget to explore the “Ethical, Legal and Social Implications” of research. The ELSI program sought a “safe and effective integration” of this knowledge into society, including ways that genetics “may interact with a
variety of philosophical, theological and ethical perspectives” (Collins and others, 1998). In this context, our particular dialogue might be seen as an exercise in public theology, part of an ongoing interdisciplinary effort to interpret the full meaning of “genomics.”

Our principal discussants embodied this effort. They included Francis Collins who, as a public official, noted that he spent as much time on ELSI issues as on the basic science. An accomplished geneticist and medical scientist, Collins is also a self-proclaimed “serious Christian” (Collins, 2003). Sharing the dais was the Reverend James McCartney, O.S.A., a bioethicist and philosopher of law and medicine at Villanova University. Active in healthcare ethics, McCartney has been recognized for his work on behalf of AIDS patients and on the concept of human personhood (Caplan and others, 2004). As an Augustinian priest, McCartney’s ministry can fairly be said to involve the cure of body, mind, and soul.

A Symbolic Framework

Collins began by offering a symbolic framework for the discussion. He juxtaposed two images: one looking “down the barrel” of the DNA molecule; the other, the rose window of York Minster cathedral (for images see Collins, 2003). Collins interpreted the “striking similarity” in two ways. For the man of both science and faith, the comparison made clear how science can evoke an experience of worship. “You get this sense of a beautiful, elegant system; [a sense] that we just learned something that God knew all along.” At the same time, this pair of images suggested how science can replace traditional religion with alternative symbols of inspiration. “I’ve certainly heard representations of that kind—sometimes even in churches where you would think they were close to taking the cross off the steeple and replacing it with the double helix.” Collins stressed, therefore, that faith communities had a special interest in assessing “DNA’s significance for us as human beings.”

McCartney offered an unrehearsed, theological commentary on Collins’ symbolism. He distinguished between the “iconic” and “idolatrous” aspect of genetics. Icons, he said, like those on a computer, point to an invisible reality. In religious terms, they truly if inadequately reveal the presence of God. By contrast, idols absorb human gaze. We look around the world and our eyes fix upon something in creation. It could be a concept like genetics. We lock on these things as if they have the power to save, to bring us life and truth. Yet, we are their creators. . . . We make God that which is not God (see Marion, 1991).

For McCartney, “genetics, properly understood, is iconic.”
Right Understanding: A Scientist’s View

The dialogue, then, turned on the question of gaining right understanding. For his part, Collins pointed out that “getting the sequence [of human DNA] will just be a lot of letters unless we invest in methods to understand it.” Here he proposed both a general principle and a methodology for constructive dialogue. The method, which will become clear below, involved making careful distinctions. The principle was one of Collins’ “favorite” Scripture verses: “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge” (Prov 19:2). To enter into dialogue without being “well-informed by the facts,” he suggested, would be counterproductive. This requirement, he added, applied equally to scientists and theologians, since scientists “for the most part are ignorant of theology.” As a medical scientist, however, Collins stressed the importance of understanding the science.

To this end, he defined genetics as the study of genes or sections of DNA that carry instructions for the assembly of proteins and functioning of the entire organism. But the parts of the genes that code for protein make up less than 2 percent of the genome. Genomics is the study of all the DNA of an organism, including all of the regulatory information—not just the genes. A principal goal of the Human Genome Project (effectively achieved in 2000 and completed in 2003) has been the sequencing of human DNA. Information in DNA depends upon a particular sequence of chemical letters—A, C, G, and T. Each letter stands for a molecular base—Adenine, Cytosine, Guanine and Thymine—which link together to form the rungs of the double helix. Since a T always pairs with an A, and a G always pairs with a C, if “you know the sequence of one strand you can figure out what it must be for the other.” There are about 3 billion base pairs in human DNA, constituting an estimated 25,000 genes (apparently all that is necessary for our biological instruction book).

Knowing the sequence of chemical letters provides a genetic map of the human being. Once the map is known, Collins indicated, the real work of understanding begins. For the medical scientist, this means gaining a genetic understanding of disease. The map makes it much easier to identify and locate particular genes. Since most diseases have genetic contributions, genomics promises to greatly accelerate the pace of medical research. In sum, genetics has become the central science of medical research promising to produce the next generation of “blockbuster” cures.

Another product of this knowledge, and another goal of HGP, has been to determine where we differ. Variations in the genome sequence are common (there
is no “normal” sequence). Some of these differences constitute genetic flaws or “ticking time bombs” set to go off in the proper environment. (Since all of us have dozens of these flaws, Collins dubbed this biological condition “the genetic equivalent of Original Sin.”) Some common variations are the likely causes of common illnesses, like Alzheimer’s or asthma. At the same time, the study of human variation reveals that we are much more alike than different. Individual human DNA is 99.9 percent identical. This similarity, Collins noted, means that “separating human populations into precisely defined racial categories is scientifically unjustifiable.” It also supports the theory of evolution by highlighting genetic relatedness among human population groups and between species (the DNA of a chimpanzee, for example, is 98.8 percent identical to human DNA).

In his interpretation of genomics, Collins paused here to consider the theological implications. He acknowledged that, regarding evolution, “my role as a scientist and my role as a person of faith obviously require some harmonization.” He described his view as “theistic evolutionist”—an understanding shared by a number of other evangelical Christians who are scientists, perceiving God creating through evolution (see the American Scientific Affiliation report cited at the end of this article). “For me the compelling argument is that if God set about to create humans, and if God is not limited by time, then wouldn’t evolution be a wonderful mechanism to achieve that goal? . . . It’s incredibly elegant.”

In a similar vein, Collins raised the question: “Is this research in concordance with God’s intention for us as human beings—to be doing something as fundamental as studying our own DNA?” He acknowledged that, as a physician, “it would not be surprising” that he would answer yes. Noting how often the gospels speak of Christ healing the sick, he observed that “as children of God” we are called to do the same. “If you accept that research that promotes [healing] is ethical activity, then genetics, which is our strongest tool right now, falls under that umbrella.” For Collins, the value of genetics for medicine makes its pursuit both a moral duty and religious calling—making the work of understanding critical.

**Right Understanding: A Theological Perspective**

McCartney sympathized with Collins’ view. “As co-creators, we are called to use our intellect to understand genetic processes, and to use them to improve the life of the planet and human flourishing.” This anthropological position emerged from McCartney’s theological reflection, itself shaped by dialogue with science. Seeking to define the “revelatory value” of genetics, he drew upon Scripture, Tradition, and science to outline a trinitarian theology.

McCartney began with his own biblical admonition: “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). In our created state we always image the Divine.
These images, again, can be either idolatrous or iconic. They reflect our own lived experience and understanding of the world. Believers also draw upon the experience of God as narrated in the Bible and testified to in tradition. With these sources for reflection (informed also by process thought and evolutionary theology), McCartney offered an image of the Triune God in keeping with religious tradition and in tune with scientific knowledge (see Pittenger, 1979; Teilhard de Chardin, 1969).

As Creator, God is One, the “originary source of all being,” intimately involved in creation from the beginning. McCartney described this intimacy in terms of “spiritual energy”—a metaphor for divine presence linking scientific and religious understanding. A dynamic creation, McCartney suggested, is revealed in both genetics and Genesis. The DNA molecule, as the instrument of likeness and difference, stability and diversity, becomes an icon of the God revealed in Scripture as the source of order out of chaos, of both continuity and change.

For Christians, this divine engagement is “perfectly manifested” in Jesus Christ. In the Word made flesh, the decisive activity of God in creation is made known. In the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the “I-Thou relationship” at the heart of the divine life is revealed. In Christ, McCartney concluded, God is revealed as dual, and there are wonderful hints of this divine duality in science, especially in genetics. The double helical form of DNA epitomizes this dual relationality (for more examples see Templeton and Herrmann, 1999). “It seems as if genetics is revealing to us the presence of a spiritual energy that has harmony and synchronicity as defining characteristics.” Moreover, this energy can be described as centripetal, bringing things together, revealing the God of love.

Third, God is revealed in Christianity and in genetics as “plural.” McCartney argued that the New Testament depicts the Spirit of God “as creative change and diversity itself.” He cited Acts 2:4 in which the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit, receiving the capacity to speak in many tongues. In terms of spiritual energy, this aspect of divine activity is “centrifugal”—moving out from the center, “creating new possibilities,” encouraging variation and difference. In this theological light, the change and diversity evident in genetics again takes on revelatory value.

For McCartney, then, “contemporary genetics suggests an image of God that is trinitarian, but it is a trinity of number: singular, dual, and plural.” This divine image, McCartney added, does not deny a Trinity of Persons. However, to the
extent that a Trinity of Persons has ceased to be helpful iconically (“revealing to people the living God”), then perhaps “through an understanding of genetics we can get a more full image of the Divine within which we can place the Trinity of Persons.” Analogous to progress in science, the truth of the initial doctrine remains; its limitations are better understood. Ultimately, this contemporary image of the Triune God bore particular consequences for creatures created in that image.

**Ethical Knowledge**

In fact, for both discussants the quest for understanding led to a discussion of human responsibility and the ethical use of genetics. Collins, after characterizing genomics as a moral duty, quickly added: “That doesn’t mean that everything that you do with genetics is a good thing.” Careful distinctions had to be made—first and foremost between the medical and non-medical consequences of the science.

In medicine, Collins said, identifying a disease gene is just “the start. Once you’ve got it, the consequences can be considerable.” For example, genomics facilitates the development of genetic tests which can determine one’s risk for a particular disease. Such diagnostic tools would be good, Collins said, “if you have a preventative medicine strategy in place.” Likewise, in the emerging field of pharmacogenomics, knowledge of one’s particular genetic make-up could lead to drugs designed for the individual, avoiding adverse side effects. Further down the road, the development of gene therapies would either “prevent the disease altogether or treat it effectively once it has started.” In general, Collins envisioned a future of “genetic medicine” in which healthcare would be largely based on knowledge of genetic endowment.

This vision, Collins acknowledged, raised a number of ethical questions. “One of the questions many people are now asking is: would it be a good thing if you knew what your flaws were?” For Collins, a yes depended upon a number of social factors, including: laws to prevent discrimination in health insurance and employment; assurance that genetic tests are accurate, since choices made on the basis of this information could easily lead to life-altering decisions; effective oversight of testing procedures to ensure reliability; and trained genetic counselors.

Finally, Collins pointed to a number of “non-medical consequences” which he felt most urgently called for a science-religion dialogue. While acknowledging a genetic basis for the range of human characteristics, he seriously challenged the claim, often appearing in the popular press, that genes play a strong role in determining personality or behavior. As a man of faith and science, he was particularly perturbed by one *Time* headline: “Infidelity: It May Be in Our Genes” (April 15, 1994). “Well, there’s permission if you needed it. It’s not your fault. It’s
your DNA.” Not only are such claims scientifically untenable, Collins argued, but to cite only heritable and nonheritable (environmental) causes for emotional states or life choices rules out our decision-making capacity—“a complicated issue which studying our DNA will never understand.” He wondered: “What happened to free will? What happened to our relationship with God? . . . What about Philippians 4:6: ‘Be anxious for nothing’? That’s hopeless. You have no choice.”

In this case, ethical knowledge (i.e., wisdom, as noted in Moltmann, 2003) seemed to require both an expert’s assessment of the limits of science and insight from other sources. On the one hand, Collins suggested that scientists “ought to do better” to clarify the limits of genetic determinism (ostensibly to curtail one type of zeal without knowledge). At the same time, he called upon “people of faith to take on the responsibility to be sure that the utilization of that knowledge be done in ways that God would not disapprove of.” In particular, Collins raised the very real question of how genetics should be used “in choosing the characteristics of our offspring.” He maintained that “for most of the things that people are talking about—like intelligence or physical attractiveness—DNA is very weakly determinent; the number of genes involved will be very large; and the ability to be very precise in selecting the characteristics of your offspring will be pretty lousy.” Nevertheless, he conceded that parents with access to the relevant genetic technology will likely seek the advantages genetics can offer. “Should we try,” Collins wondered, “to put up any kind of barriers or should we simply let couples do what couples want to do?” An underlying difficulty here lay in the inability to distinguish clearly between diseases and traits. Collins couldn’t say, for example, when obesity becomes a disease. Given the uncertainty, “we may not have state-mediated eugenics, but we might have homemade eugenics where couples that have the resources . . . can tweak the characteristics of their offspring using DNA technology.”

McCartney drew upon his trinitarian theology to address these ethical questions. In general, he said, “If humans are created in the image of the Divine narrated in the Bible and revealed iconically in genetics, then we are called to creativity, to love, and to diversity.” This three-part call, and our response to it, is itself not without uncertainties. The call to imitate the creativity of God, for example, aims for the human good; but our creative actions surely have unintended consequences. For McCartney, as for Collins, the ambiguity highlighted the need for prudence. At the same time, the susceptibility to error and evil ought not

[Then we are called to creativity, to love, and to diversity.]
forestall the pursuit of knowledge, nor prevent its proper understanding and ethical use. Citing a principle from Catholic moral theology, McCartney offered a guideline for that use: “abusus non tolerat usus”—just because something can be abused doesn’t mean its legitimate use should be taken away.” Ongoing dialogue, he suggested, would be needed to define legitimacy.

Conclusion

In his 1988 call for “a more thorough-going dialogue” between science and theology, Pope John Paul II expressed a sense of urgency. In the recent past, he noted, “The uses of science have on more than one occasion proved massively destructive, and the reflections on religion have too often been sterile.” He outlined a process of “mutual learning” in which each discipline would retain its distinct integrity; each would serve as an important resource of understanding for the other; and each would learn its limitations. This dynamic “relational unity” would constitute both a form of interdisciplinary theological reflection and a common ministry. In the Pope’s words: “We need each other to be what we must be, what we are called to be” (Pope John Paul II, 1988).

Our actual dialogue reflects something of the nature of and challenges to this mode of theology and ministry. In particular, it suggests the complexity of the role for “bridging ministries” envisioned by the Pope. Both Collins and McCartney personify this “key resource” in the “community of interchange”: men and women of faith who are active scientists or who are trained in both disciplines and who can help others integrate the worlds of science and religion or make “moral decisions in matters involving technological research and application” (Pope John Paul II 1988, m. 12). On a personal level, Collins’ and McCartney’s integration of commitments to both scientific and religious truth implies a dynamic internal process of dialogue for such a ministry. On a public level, the delicacy of urging scientists (and others in a scientific culture) to acknowledge the limits of science, while encouraging religious believers to amend their beliefs, suggests the controversial character of this ministry. At the same time, its interdisciplinary nature bears important implications for the structure and content of theological education (as the Pope himself acknowledged). Ultimately, our conversation points to a dialogic form of public ministry opened and dedicated to a broad cultural movement converting knowledge into understanding and wisdom.

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Other Voices, Other Rooms

The Future of Liturgical Language in Postmodern Cultures

Nathan D. Mitchell

Based on the Sophia Award Lecture, presented at Washington Theological Union in 2005, this noted liturgist addresses the need for post-modern Christians, who live in “recited societies,” to learn or relearn a liturgical language whose primary story and native narrative is the body itself.

Much of the history of Christian liturgy could be written, I suspect, as a chronicle of choices believers have made about the proper words to use in public worship. History confronts us with voluble liturgies that are a virtual raid on the inarticulate. Perhaps because it transgresses the silence that ought to surround a God whose name surpasses speech, liturgical language has always been caught in the cross-hairs of crisis. Its words are cataphatic; its instincts apophatic. Its doctrine is doxological, its doxologies doctrinal. It submits spontaneity to structure—knowing all the while that the church can never really regulate what it cannot control. In its heart of hearts, the worshipping community knows that dispossession is the only means by which we may “own” the objects of our thanksgiving and praise. Christians care deeply about ritual acts but they know these acts can be verified only by what Emmanuel Levinas called the “liturgy of the neighbor.”

This essay on the future of liturgical language in postmodern cultures will not directly address the current liturgical documents or debates within Catholicism.

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I have chosen instead to concentrate on the theology of the liturgical act itself—understanding it as “linguistic” in the broadest sense (i.e., as an action that simultaneously embraces the audible words of speech and the visible words of sacrament and ritual gesture). I will ask: How can we Christians defend our preposterous claim that human speech may (and/or must) be heard as God’s Word? And, how can we have the audacity to assert that all this happens preeminently within the worshipping assembly?

My focus, then, will be the fate of liturgical action within the context of postmodernity. The essay falls somewhat naturally into two parts. Part One, “Calling God Names,” deals with the postmodern problematic of liturgical prayer by concentrating on that problem’s two primary sources: Scripture itself and the Cartesian dualism that privileges mind/thought over body/action. In short, how and why did liturgy become not “something we do” but something we think about, discuss, plan, and then produce. Part Two asks how human speech itself has been altered within the “recited societies” of postmodern cultures and what impact this may have on the language of liturgy. I will suggest that liturgy’s native tongue is not textual but embodied and iconic.

Calling God Names: The Problematic of Liturgical Language

In a recent essay Laurence Paul Hemming makes a perceptive comment about postmodern experiences of public prayer: “We are no longer constituted liturgically in prayer,” he writes, “we constitute for ourselves the liturgy that best expresses our interior psychic life. Liturgy becomes style. It does not produce me, I produce it. In consequence, when I say that it ‘feels right’ I am saying that it fits an interior disposition I already have—if I think about it at all” (Hemming, 2001,446, emphasis added). One may reshape Hemming’s point as an aphorism: The liturgy no longer makes us; we make the liturgy. Public worship is perceived as selbst gemacht; a self-consciously planned, home-made fabrication rather than a selfless act of surrendering to the Holy One whom the ancient Greek liturgies (and the Roman liturgy of Good Friday) call “Holy God, Holy Strong One, Holy Undying One!”

Calling God names—“holy, strong, undying”—is not, of course, exactly the same thing as naming God. Postmodern theologians like Jean-Luc Marion remind us that, “The Name [‘God’] does not name God as an essence; it designates what passes beyond every name. The Name designates what one does not name and says that one does not name it” (Marion, 2002a, 157, emphasis added). Our willingness to call God names while refusing to name God results in a pragmatic theology of absence which is not, however, a theology of God’s non-presence. It is, instead, a theology whose very name-calling reveals that we cannot name, and
hence serves to shield God from presence (i.e., from confinement to or containment within the causal categories of traditional metaphysics and “onto-theology”). For as Marion and other postmodern theologians would argue, God is utterly beyond signification, and hence, surpasses any categories of “presence” or “absence.”

The unnameability of God is, as everyone knows, a major preoccupation of postmodern theology. This preoccupation is not purely speculative; it derives, in part, from the biblical record of revelation itself. In fact, I contend that the postmodern crisis of liturgical language has two distinct sources: one biblical, the other philosophical. Each of these deserves comment.

Irenaeus of Lyons (+ ca. 200 C.E.) once said that Christ’s coming “brought us all possible newness by bringing us himself. For Christ was announced in advance, and what was announced was precisely this: that Newness in person would come to renew and quicken humankind” (see Rousseau, 846–49 and Marion 2002b, 124). Commenting on this text, Jean-Luc Marion concludes that:

Easter innovates, and does so radically. . . . The innovation has a name—Christ—and a function—to render [hu]man[new]. . . . Since the Resurrection of Christ, . . . nothing will be as it was before. Since the Resurrection of Christ, we thus must relearn everything, like children (or rather, . . . like an old person, overcome by newness). . . . We are thrown forward into a world too new for us. (Marion, 2002b:124).

We might well expect that Christ’s radical newness would translate into a more immediate and palpable presence of God within the world—a presence that would not only let us call God names but also open us to know and experience God’s incomprehensible nearness in the risen body of Jesus. We are profoundly perplexed, therefore, to discover that in the Christian scriptures, Easter produces just the opposite: not a new and more certain presence, but a heightened (and daunting) awareness of absence. Thus, the Risen One’s first command to Mary Magdalene is “Back off! Don’t touch!” (John 20:17). And even if the tardy twin Thomas is invited to put his finger in the nail prints and his hand in the wounded side, Jesus chides his weak faith and implies that belief without the testimony of bodily evidence is better (John 20:27–29). Everywhere one turns in the gospel literature, the language surrounding Easter is ominously empty and distant. John and the synoptics speak of young men or announcing angels whose terrible message confirms that “He is not here!” (Jn 2Mt 28:6; Mk 16,6; Lk 24:6). The empty tomb has become a void, a vacancy, a stony icon of loss and absence.

Luke similarly surprises us. The disciples on the road to Emmaus meet a garulous Stranger who, when finally recognized in the breaking of bread, instantly “vanishes from their sight” (Lk 24:31). The Greek text of Lk 24:30 says; “He became invisible.” Nor does the Ascension scene in Acts console us. Far from confirming that heaven is a beatifying “place of presence,” Acts 1:9 tells us that “a
cloud took [Jesus] from their sight,” seized, concealed, swallowed him whole. This cloud snatches the Risen One away, abducts him, erases the evidence, exchanges Christ’s body for a void, and produces not a presence but a disappearance.

Paradoxically, then, Easter not only intensifies the problematic of presence; it further complicates the possibility of naming God. Wolfhart Pannenberg once wrote that in the Easter mystery, “the Revealer of the eschatological will of God became the very incarnation of [that] eschatological reality itself” (Pannenberg, 1977:367; text slightly modified; emphasis added). That is what Christians believe. But at the very moment when God’s eschatological promise to humanity is embodied and fulfilled in Jesus’ rising from the dead, our access to that presence is cancelled, cut off. As counterintuitive as it may seem, the very incarnation of the eschatological reality that embodies God’s decision to abide forever with us in the risen flesh of Christ is translated, in the Christian scriptures as a discourse of absence, disappearance, distance, and invisibility. As Acts 1 suggests, Easter and its aftermath end with Jesus going away, and with the speechless, clueless disciples looking up into an empty sky.

So the first source of the postmodern crisis in liturgical language is biblical; it flows from the Easter narrative itself. If God’s eschatological will and presence are revealed in the person and work of Jesus, why does Jesus have to “go away” in order to be present? Already in the gospels, the Easter mystery has become a message and Christ’s risen body an inscribed text, a topic of ongoing debate and discussion. The Emmaus story may reach its climax in a “request for presence” (Luke 24:29) but it begins and ends in gossip. Which is, of course, a short definition of Christian worship itself: the liturgy is the church’s public gossip about God, its rumors about One whose presence can be discerned, named, and known only as an absence.

The second source of our postmodern neuralgia about liturgical language is philosophical, and it arises, ancestrally, from the thought of René Descartes, especially his Third Meditation on First Philosophy. Space here allows only two brief comments about Descartes’ discussion of selfhood and God in that text.

The first concerns Descartes’ view of the human subject, the “self.” Descartes’ “Ego” is constituted by thought and autonomy, interiority and isolation. The human self emerges not from dialogue with other persons or the Other, who is
God, but from a wholly internal dialogue. It is no accident that Descartes’ celebrated formula—*Cogito, ergo sum*; I think, therefore I am—is formulated in the first person singular.

The second, concerns Descartes’ view of God as a clear and distinct idea whose reality is “eminent” (i.e., more “real” than us or the physical world at large). Descartes tells us:

> By ‘God,’ I mean a substance that’s infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, and supremely powerful—the thing from which I and everything else that may exist derive our existence. The more I consider these attributes, the less it seems that they could have come from me alone. So I must conclude that God necessarily exists” (Descartes, 1992:48).

Right; but there lies the fly in the ointment. Descartes protests that “the idea of God is completely clear and distinct and contains more subjective reality than any other idea.” But this creates a problem, not a solution. God becomes an idea—and those idea remains, at the end of the day, a conclusion reached by an autonomous, thinking subject. God is met, Descartes implies, not in body, history, and world, but in the self’s isolating interiority.

Such are the remote sources of the problematic of liturgical language. For us heirs of Descartes’ Third Meditation, prayer belongs to the interior world of thought and ideas; it is a psychological act, something we intend and produce. God is met not as the Hebrew Bible suggests, in the disruptive mode of revelation, in the tumult of bodies creating history together. Descartes’ God is an inference, a predication—not the sudden, unexpected eruption that leaps from the pages of the Hebrew Bible, flashing flames of fire, shaking the wilderness of Kadesh, and cleansing the prophet’s lips with a burning coal—while ever replenishing the widow’s cruse of oil and breathing gently on the back of Elijah’s neck. Of course, if God is an “inference from the self,” the very nature of public prayer changes. Liturgy becomes a function of the meanings, choices, and intentions that “I” and “you” (another solitary “I”) bring to the act. It becomes an intentional project, a production, a style through which we solitaries express our interiority. It is no longer the prayer of the body, and its language is inferred not from our bodily inscription into God’s Word, but from the interiority and autonomy of the thinking self.

**Postmodern Cultures and the Challenge to “Speak Liturgy”**

So where does that leave us? Can postmodern people still learn how to “speak liturgy”? And what is postmodernism, anyway? In response, I offer a snap-
shot of campus life at the University of Notre Dame campus during the last week of October, 2002. That week offered the following events: a reading by Irish poet Ciaran Carson; a celebration of the “Day of the Dead” in the Mestrovic Gallery; an Abendmusik concert of medieval plainsong by the ensemble Schola Musicorum in the nineteenth century faux-French-Gothic style Basilica of the Sacred Heart; a lecture on “Pluralism and Tolerance in Classical Islamic Law,” by Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah at the Law School; and the “Indian/American/French/Italian” picture Monsoon Wedding at the Annenberg Auditorium. That is postmodernism come to life—diverse but coexisting cultures, competing beliefs, colliding ethical traditions, and conflicting legal systems.

Many would agree with Michel de Certeau, that industrialized Western cultures have become “recited societies,” i.e., societies defined by their stories, especially by the fables proposed to us by marketers, spin doctors, and peddlers of information technology—stories interminably cited and recited as “gospel truth,” especially in the media. The real, Certeau argues, “no longer has its own proper place.” It enjoys neither a reserved “seat nor ex cathedra authority.” Instead, “an anonymous code”—information—stimulates and “saturates the body politic. Certeau continues:

From morning to night narrations . . . haunt [our] streets and buildings. They articulate our existences by teaching us what they must be. They . . . make our legends . . . Even more than the God told about by . . . theologians of earlier days, these stories [are believed to have] a providential and predestining function: they organize in advance our work, our celebrations, and even our dreams.

“These [stories] . . . have the twofold and strange power of transforming seeing into believing, and of fabricating realities out of appearances . . . (De Certeau, 1984: 186–87; slightly altered).

In a nutshell, as Graham Ward writes, people in recited societies “believe what they see, and what they see is produced for them,” largely through televised images (Ward, 2001:xxii). And, because ours is a world of technologized images, because our images are produced on screens, and because there is not necessarily any “original” behind or beyond those screens, it is very difficult for us to distinguish fiction from fact. We install “authorities” (news anchors, politicians, radio talk-show hosts) to tell us the difference. Thus, in the United States, we seem content with a regime that tells us black is white, down is up, squares are spheres, and weapons of mass destruction pose a clear and present danger in Iraq.

To meet the challenge “recited societies” pose for liturgical language two things are necessary. First, we must return to liturgy’s native tongue and primary speech, the language of the body itself. Christian liturgy seeks to subvert the Cartesian cognitive apartheid by retrieving the body as the premier site of ritual, of public worship, of communal celebration. The ancient Christian ritual
instinct was, I think, the right one: our bodies make our prayers. We pray as a body above all through gestures, postures, and the shared exertions of singing, responding, processing, lifting, moving, touching, tasting, saying, seeing, and hearing. After all, the mind will say anything you want to hear, but the body never lies.

Secondly, we have to learn (or relearn) that our bodies are icons. We do not look at icons; icons look at us. And it is not for nothing that Colossians celebrates the Jesus the Lord as eikon tou Theou aoratou, “the image of the invisible God, first-born of all creation . . . (see Col 1:15-18).

To learn the body’s iconic language, I suggest we begin with what Ivan Illich proposes in his commentary on Hugh of St. Victor’s Didascalicon (Illich, 1993). Illich notes that throughout the first millennium, Christian readers experienced written pages as tablature, notation, a performance piece, a musical score for mumblers. The words painted on a page were meant to be mouthed, read aloud, their meanings tasted and absorbed by the body (Illich, 1993:2). That is why Augustine was amazed to see Ambrose reading with his eyes only. In the ancient world, reading was done “out loud,” by devoutly munching the words that made the body itself the principal text, interpreter, and language of the liturgy. Liturgical reading was emphatically not the self’s withdrawal into Cartesian “interiority.” Books and bodies were well-nigh interchangeable: thus, both bodies and the written pages of gospel books were encircled by light and enswirled by fragrant smoke. Reading and chanting aloud kept alive the critical social connection that bound the reader’s body to God’s Word, that linked person to person, creating a community of devout “munchers” who understood human speech as a desire to touch and connect (Merwin, 2004:151). To read aloud is already to feel in one’s flesh the wonder and wound-edness of words.

Liturgical assemblies are thus called to be “recited societies” in reverse, where reading is a kenotic enterprise in which God’s Word, painted on pages, is re-inscribed onto human bodies. Liturgy embraces emptiness, powerlessness, the “absence” in human life where God’s Word and ours are surrendered into mutual presence that creates communion without suffering confinement. Worship’s structure is embodied and iconic; it makes us—we don’t make it. Why? Because liturgy is that moment when God’s own Word places itself at the mercy of history, human flesh, and the world.
Perhaps the best icon of Christian worship is found in the story of an anonymous woman in Luke 7:36-50. Like God, the woman is “nameless,” and so she enters the house of Simon the Pharisee to anoint the feet of Jesus. Namelessly, wordlessly, her own body enacts a eucharist: for she takes her costly jar of perfume, breaks it open, and gives it as balm and blessing. As she takes, breaks, gives, blesses, this nameless woman names Jesus as God’s Christos, Anointed One. Her body, broken open in love and tears, meets his body, broken open to receive her hospitality. Together, Jesus and this woman, form an embodied, eucharistic icon of Savior and Saved. Christ is anointed for his mission (culminating in the cross) and the woman is released into freedom and forgiveness. Luke’s story begins with name-calling, but it ends with God’s Word surrendered, as love and forgiveness, to the mercy of the body.

The point of Luke’s story is, I think, deliberately shocking and subversive. It tells us that God’s own Word is wounded. Just as Jesus’ body opened to that woman’s tears, love, oil, and perfume, so his own body, hung like a criminal’s on a tree, opened to the spit, the shame, the hammered nail, the thrust of the spear. Note well: God’s Word was “kenotic,” self-surrendering from the very beginning—and before. God’s Word is speech “given to,” “handed over,” in that communion of Persons who are givenness so utter and so complete that it makes them who they are. God’s tri-personal life is kenotic life; and personhood in God is constituted by self-emptying, mutual, self-surrender. God’s persons possess themselves precisely by dispossessing themselves.

Every liturgical act is an attempt to inscribe that trinitarian dispossession onto human bodies. That is why I’ve said that worship is God’s Word at the mercy of the body. It is also why any theology of liturgical language must appeal to the voice of an Other, to the Word’s own cry of dereliction on the cross, to the loud voice of Jesus’ blood. On the cross, crucified speech at last learns the obedience of worship. On the cross, the human tongue was at last loosed and began to sing the great, unending hymn of the liturgy, a hymn sung “by all, and for the sake of all.” On the cross, our crucified speech, silenced by sin and death, at last finds its voice. That is why we can accept the invitation to join the company of saints and angels and peoples of all times and places in that “unending hymn of praise.” We can do this because those persons whose communion constitutes the blissful life of God open up a space, in the crucified Word, to receive our wounded speech into their own life, making it their own. We may, at last, hear human speech as God’s Word.
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Becoming Christian in the “School of Mary”

Francis Caponi, O.S.A.

In this essay, the author examines several understandings of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. He plumbs their theological richness and their value for Christian formation and the life of faith.

A prominent theme in Roman Catholic and Orthodox theology, and a nascent one within contemporary Protestant theology, is the vivid role which the mother of Jesus can play in the process of becoming Christian. The interested inquirer, the catechumen entering into the mystery of new life, and baptized believers seeking a deeper commitment to Jesus Christ, can all receive encouragement and guidance through meditation on, and imitation of, the mother of Jesus Christ. Much of the Christian tradition regards attention to “the Marian dimension of the life of a disciple of Christ” (Redemptoris Mater, 45) as making an integral contribution towards “living for God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11). This essay will explore, within an ecumenical context, the theological roots of “the contemplation of Christ at the school of Mary” (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 7), and some of the practical benefits believers may gain from such a Marian “apprenticeship.”

Mary and Christ

Christians from a range of traditions have observed that there is coherence of Christian vision and life, the “organic unity, the ‘symphony’ of truth, the
central reference of which is Jesus Christ” (Ratzinger: III.2.b), exemplified by Marian theology and devotion. In the Roman Catholic perspective, Mary is the living moment in which Christian claims about sin and grace, service and prayer, faith and hope, are most powerfully realized, precisely because Mary is utterly transparent to Jesus Christ. In his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, Paul VI teaches that “in the Virgin Mary everything is relative to Christ and dependent upon him,” and it is this focus which gives Marian doctrine and cult its “great pastoral effectiveness and constitutes a force for renewing Christian living” (25, see also *Lumen Gentium*, 65). The Pope gives powerful expression to Mary’s ministry of forming the Christian faithful:

Devotion to the Mother of the Lord becomes for the faithful an opportunity for growing in divine grace, and this is the ultimate aim of all pastoral activity. For it is impossible to honor her who is “full of grace” (Luke 1:28) without thereby honoring oneself the state of grace, which is friendship with God, communion with him and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is this divine grace which takes possession of the whole man and conforms him to the image of the Son of God (cf. Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:18). The Catholic Church, endowed with centuries of experience, recognizes in devotion to the Blessed Virgin a powerful aid for man as he strives for fulfillment. Mary, the New Woman, stands at the side of Christ, the New Man, within whose mystery the mystery of man alone finds true light; she is given to us as a pledge and guarantee that God’s plan in Christ for the salvation of the whole man has already achieved realization in a creature: in her. (*Marialis Cultus*, 57)

This perspective on Mary as the teacher of Christians is present in other (non-Roman Catholic) communities. Anglican theologian John Macquarrie stresses the theological centrality of Mary: “Mariology is so far from being peripheral that it is rather the meeting place for a great many Christian doctrines, almost, one might say, like Crewe junction on the British railway system, the place where a great many lines meet and connections are made. Anthropology, christology, ecclesiology, hamartiology, soteriology—these are among the doctrines which all touch on Mariology” (Macquarrie, 58–59; also 92, 102, 112–14). The theology of Mary will “throw new light on the truths from which it had been derived and will thereby strengthen the coherence and unity of the many elements which together constitute the Christian faith” (Macquarrie, 59). And the Eastern traditions, which “pay high tribute, in beautiful hymns of praise, to Mary ever Virgin” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 15), also hold that “the manner by which we approach the question of the person and vocation of Mary, the Theotokos, is intimately related to our approach to the gospel and the church as well as salvation, eschatology, the communion of saints, and what it means to be a human person” (Fitzgerald, 81).
Recently, real recognition has been given in many Protestant circles of the loss sustained to their christology, ecclesiology, and worship by the neglect of Mary. Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson focuses on the ecclesial import of Mary, and advocates a Protestant recovery of the tradition of Marian prayer (Jenson, 56). Another Lutheran theologian, David Yeago, invokes the long tradition of “Marian consciousness” in the church, and calls upon Protestants to recognize and reclaim, on the basis of Scripture, the truth that every Christian’s relationship to Jesus Christ contains a relationship to Mary (Yeago, 63). Even further, he argues that Scripture supports the view that “Mary is present to the church and to the believer both as the proto-type and model of the church and the believer, and also as an active agent of the formation of the church and the believer” (Yeago, 59).

Mary’s Consent

Of course, deep differences remain among Christian approaches to the Blessed Mother. Perhaps most significant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican theologies of grace attach tremendous significance to the Biblical, patristic, and medieval teaching of Mary’s grace-enabled cooperation with the divine plan of salvation. For these traditions, Mary’s response to Gabriel (Luke 1:38) attests to the possibility of real active human cooperation in salvation. John Newman emphasized the antiquity of this perspective:

St. Justin, St. Irenaeus, and others, had distinctly laid it down, that she not only had an office, but bore a part, and was a voluntary agent, in the actual process of the redemption, as Eve had been instrumental and responsible in Adam’s fall (415).

This common theme is given magisterial cast by the Second Vatican Council, which teaches the “subordinate cooperation” of Mary with God:

For no creature could ever be counted as equal with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer. Just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by the ministers and by the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is really communicated in different ways to His creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source. The Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary. It knows it through unfailing experience of it and commends it to the hearts of the faithful, so that encouraged by this maternal help they may the more intimately adhere to the Mediator and Redeemer (Lumen Gentium, 62).
However, this theme remains neuralgic for most Protestants (Daniélou, 124–25; Barth, 146; Concordia, 83–106). Even here, though, new possibilities of rapprochement appear. Yeago observes that Mary's maternity is dramatically recounted by the Bible in a narrative form which stresses her personal role as one addressed by God, one to whom a promise is made, one in whom faith is evoked, and one who freely consents (66). Though a “thorny matter” for Protestants, Yeago insists that this Scriptural portrayal supports the active participation of Mary in the formation of a Christian. This formative agency is embodied in the Magnificat. He writes: “Just as a mother teaches her children by precept and example the ways of the family, and prepares them to live well in the surrounding human community, so Mary teaches the church and all the faithful the ways of God's household and forms them so that they may live well in the environment of his inbreaking reign in Jesus Christ” (78). Yeago uses the language of election and promise to claim that Mary's election and the gift of God's unmerited grace do not preclude an active role for the Blessed Mother in the mystery of divine Incarnation and human salvation.

**Curriculum of the Christian Faithful**

Enough of an ecumenical framework exists to suggest that the commitment of all the Christian faithful can be deepened by contemplation of Mary's unique call and response, as these take shape in the concrete events of her life presented in Scripture. Only a few of these instructive features can be considered here.

**A People of Constant Thanks**

To honor Mary as chosen by God and saved in Christ is to sharpen our gratitude for our own salvation, and to recognize the source and purpose of that salvation. Supported by grace at every point, Mary is the quintessential singer of God's praise, as Luther asserts: “The tender mother of Christ... teaches us with her words and by the example of her experience, how to know, love, and praise God” (1955: 301). Reflection on Mary’s life can waken the mind and senses to the daily, often unnoticed condescension of God to us. A vivid awareness of God’s goodness—“He has done great things for me” (Luke 1:49)—is the indispensable foundation for a life of constant thanks modeled by Mary's ever-grateful response.

**A people of holy heart**

The Christian life is a constant engagement with sin. We are creatures replete with faults-beings who, as Hamlet observed, have more offenses at our beck than
we have “thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act
them in.” Why, then, would we enroll ourselves in the school of Mary, a sinless
pedagogue? Is not Mary’s sinlessness an obstacle to a full Christian apprentice-
ship? In North American culture, in which people tend to trust experts who show
us a common, human face, why would anyone seek guidance from a woman who,
to all appearances, could only stare at us politely but blankly when we spoke to
her of our lust, greed, ambition, prejudice, and vanity? How can she who was
without sin, be imitated by fellows such as us, “crawling between earth and
heaven”?

Hans Urs von Balthasar gives us another perspective: “[H]er privilege . . .
only deepens her solidarity with mankind. Sin brings about isolation and
thwarts effective solidarity . . . whereas innocence makes it possible to be open to suffering
with others and to be ready, in love, to embrace such suffering. (1993:324). The truth is that
Mary’s sinlessness makes her more accessible to us, not less.

In this light, we can also say that Mary’s personal lack of sin is not the same thing as
ignorance of sin, no more than Jesus’ lack of sin exempted him from its intimate embrace. Once
more, Mary has something to teach us about Christ: “For our sake he made him to be sin who
did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (II Cor 5:21). Innocence
knows sin best. Mary knows sin, and she labors under no misapprehensions about its na-
ture and force. Pregnant before marriage, Mary entertained no hopes that her family and friends
would understand, that people, because they are basically good, would see past
her apparent sin and dishonor and accept her word that she bore within her the
child of the Spirit. The threat was real, the danger mortal, and her hope placed in
God alone, that He who had begun this mighty work would provide for its com-
pletion. So, too, standing beneath the cross, Mary has no shield from the effects of
sin, no deception with which to deflect the horror of the scene. Her flesh and
blood crucified, and no fantasies of revenge to give her succor; the impossible
son of impossible grace become a roadside attraction, and Mary has only the
words of the angel, now seemingly ancient, to hold her up: “Nothing will be im-
possible for God” (Luke 1:37). Mary is completely vulnerable, absolutely naked
before the wrath of a fallen world, not a single good, strong sin to grab hold of in
the roaring tide. We who sin know something about denying its truth and escap-
ing its scourge: Mary meets it full on because of her love for Christ. She knows
the hardness of the Way as no sinner ever has. She has much to teach us about the cost of discipleship.

_A Christ-like people_

Mary’s free cooperation with the divine plan of salvation bears visible fruit in the imitation of her son. In giving God thanks, in visiting those in need, in joining in the celebrations of sinners, and in offering the ministry of comfort to the dying, she lives a life of Christian discipleship. The good news of Jesus Christ is that the light comes to the darkness (John 1:9), the greater comes to the lesser, the high comes to the low, the holy reaches down to the level of the sinner. God who creates the universe becomes part of the earth, “taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7-8). Christ, who is eternal, drinks from the bitter cup of death for the sake of sinners (Rom 5:6-8). And Mary’s life shows her to be the first and the greatest of Christ’s disciples, because even before Christ is born, she is living this very gospel kenosis of the faithful disciple. This is manifest in her visitation to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56). On hearing of her cousin’s pregnancy, Mary immediately goes to visit her. Mary, the greater, goes to Elizabeth, the lesser, out of love and for the sake of service. In the Visitation, Mary imitates the Christ she carries, the Christ who did not wait for us to find him but came in search of us (Luke 15:4-6). Thus is Mary’s discipleship a school for souls, teaching us that we are called to nothing less than Christ-like lives, and given nothing less than the power of Christ to make our discipleship possible. The image of our greatest sister, Theotokos, Gate of Heaven, Queen of Angels, hustling through the hill country of Judea, with a sore back and morning sickness, just to bring a little joy and comfort to her cousin, can serve as a potent salve to the open wounds of pride and vanity which disfigure within us the image of the one who came, not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45).

_A People of the Eucharist_

Pope John Paul II has written with exceptional richness on the theme of Mary as a woman of the Eucharist. Present among the apostolic community who “devoted themselves with one accord to prayer” (Acts 1:14) and who “devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42), Mary “must have been present at the eucharistic celebrations of the first generation of Christians” (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 53). However, Mary’s relationship to the Eucharist precedes the celebrations of the first community. “If the Eucharist is a mystery of faith which so greatly transcends our understanding as to call for sheer abandonment to the word of God, then there can be no one like Mary to act as our support and guide in acquiring this disposition” (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 54). In the offer of her virginal womb for the Incarnation of God’s Word, Mary conceived the Son of
The mystery of the Eucharist is the mystery of the humble made great by God.
**Conclusion**

There is only one Theotokos, yet all Christians are called to be God-bearers. There is only one Fiat, yet all the faithful are called to give constant and ever-deeper assent to the will of God. There is only one Mater Ecclesiae, yet all the followers of Christ, as their conversion takes deeper root and blossoms more fully in faith, hope, and love, experience the divine call to give birth to praise and powerful witness.

Called by God, chosen for Christ, strengthened for discipleship, supported in suffering, strong in hope, and brought by the Father to His side, Mary is the Christian master from whom we lesser apprentices of the Lord can learn the basic skills of discipleship: complete trust, constant thanks, unsentimental service, compassionate yet uncompromising honesty about sin, and the humble posture of the unworthy herald whose greatness is given by Another. Mary’s single, simple message—“Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5)—proclaimed faithfully and heartily in joy and strife, has the unexpected, stunning effect of turning us from mere messengers into tabernacles, in imitation of her who was his first herald, his first temple, his first and finest follower.

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All quotations from official Church documents, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the official website of the Holy See: www.vatican.va.


Health care spirituality is the foundation for the health care system. Indeed, spirituality has implications for healing in health care. Numerous U.S. hospitals were started by religious groups, such as Catholic nuns, who came to care for the sick and the poor. With their mission to serve others in need, these founding health care professionals felt called to service, not primarily to work for monetary gain. Today, the effect of religion on health care continues in Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, and Episcopalian health care systems and hospitals.

Health care professionals still speak of a sense of calling to make a difference by serving others. The Association of American Medical Schools determined that of the four major attributes medical students should exhibit by the time of their graduation from medical school, the first attribute is “being altruistic” (see Association of American Medical Colleges). Further, physicians must always be compassionate, caring, and willing to listen to the patient. Thus, as implied in the Hippocratic Oath, physicians are expected above all to put their patients’ needs above their own and be attentive to the patient as a person with beliefs, values, and experiences that may affect the way the patient understands their illness or situation. This is the basis of the patient-centered approach to health care (see Astrow and others).

Nursing also recognizes the central significance of spirituality. “Spirituality, in its broadest sense, is a part of the ontology foundation of nursing; it is regarded as a basic characteristic of humanness important in human health and well-being” (Reed, 349). Nursing practice is rooted in compassionate presence and caring for the whole person. Nursing research speaks to the experience of spirituality in patients’ lives and in relation to their suffering and meaning (see Burkhardt). Thus, both the traditions and the oaths of the medical and nursing professions claim spirituality as the foundation on which health care systems are built.

In the last twenty years there has been an increased focus on the role spirituality plays in the lives of patients. Numerous surveys indicate that patients desire to have their spiritual needs addressed in the health care setting (see the George C. Gallup International Institute). Additional studies

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show the beneficial impact of spiritual beliefs in coping, recovery, and longevity, as well as in resiliency and stress modulation (see Stefano and others). Some of these studies looked at religious beliefs and practices; others studied broader definitions of spirituality that had to do with meaning and purpose in life (see Mount and others) or spiritual values such as hope (see Puchalski, 1999) and forgiveness (see Worthington and others).

Theologians caution scientists that religious and spiritual beliefs transcend any outcome orientation and that to fit studies into a reductionist model eliminates the full expression of religious and spiritual practices. Interestingly, many spiritual experiences can cause distress that is thought to be normal and even a desired part of spiritual journeys. St. John of the Cross clearly describes the experience of spiritual aridity in the *Dark Night of the Soul*. Suffering is considered by many religions to be a path to spiritual enlightenment (see Puchalski and others, 2004; Puchalski and others, 2005). Most religious traditions also pray that God's or the Divine's will be done, not our own.

Another movement to re-incorporate spirituality into the health care setting comes from an ethical and philosophical basis for its role in healing. In the last fifty years, however, there has been a gradual weaning away from the foundational values of care and service, shifting the focus to economics as the bottom line approach to delivery of care. Both patients and health care professionals are dissatisfied with this system. Increasingly unhappy patients are going to complementary and alternative practitioners.

Nurse turnover and burnout rates at hospitals are high and physicians are leaving the practice of medicine and going into other professions because they gain little job satisfaction when they are not able to practice medicine in a more patient-centered way. Many health care practitioners have advocated for changes in the health care system, the integration of spirituality courses in medical schools and residency programs.

In 1992, when only two other schools had a course covering religion and health, I developed a course on spirituality and health at the George Washington University School of Medicine. The course covered topics ranging from the role spirituality and religion plays in the lives of patients and health care professionals to practical ways to address spirituality with patients, including taking a spiritual history. The course at George Washington became a model for other medical school courses. The criteria and learning objectives for the courses were developed in collaboration with the Association of American Medical Colleges. Those standards require students to become aware of and to nurture their own spirituality and that of their patients. Thus, the overall goals of the courses are reflective of the bio-psycho-social-spiritual model of care (see Sulmassy). This, then, forms the foundation for patient-centered care.

Medical educators, clinicians, and ethicists collaborated to define spirituality. Their intent was only to provide a starting place for integration of spirituality into health care. Recognizably, it does not reflect the theological depth of spiritual experience. The definition is:

*Spirituality* is recognized as a factor that contributes to health in many persons. The concept of spirituality is found in all cultures and societies. It is expressed in an individual's search for ultimate meaning through participation in religion and/or belief in God,
family, naturalism, rationalism, humanism, and the arts. All of these factors can influence how patients and health care professionals perceive health and illness and how they interact with one another (Association of American Medical Colleges, Report III).

There are two overall categories of human meaning: Meaning with a capital “M” and meaning with a lower case “m.” Things that fall into the lower case “meaning” category might include activities, relationships, values that are meaningful to you but don’t define the ultimate purpose of your life. The components of upper case “Meaning,” then, are the beliefs, values, practices, relationships, experiences that lead one to the awareness of God/divine/transcendence and a sense of ultimate value and purpose. If one finds meaning in work but then becomes unable to work, what then sustains that person? Illness and aging strip away those things of meaning that ultimately do not sustain us. When we confront ourselves in the nakedness of our dying, it is then that we have the opportunity to find the deep and transcendent Meaning. It is then that we see the Holy, God, Divine or Mystery. The understanding of the concept of transcendence is deeply personal and varied, ranging from secular humanism to religious to mystical and/or the metaphysical.

The experience of illness, life events, and stress can trigger questions, which are existential and spiritual in nature. For example: A dying patient was in distress throughout his hospitalization. The residents did not know how to help him. Further discussion about his spiritual issues revealed that he thought he was being tested and that he did not yet feel ready to die. He had many issues regarding how he would be judged by God. Talking with a chaplain helped resolve some of his issues and moved him to a calmer state. Healing, then, is the integration of self—physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Finding meaning and purpose is central to this process (see Brody, 79–92).

Hope, forgiveness, love, and contemplation have all been shown to have benefit in physical health and spiritual health. Hope influences the coping process during times of loss, uncertainty, and suffering (see Breithart and others). People who can forgive themselves and others have better health outcomes, relationships, and abilities to cope with stress (see Worthington, 1998).

Altruistic love (see Post and others) and meditation (see Benson) have many healing benefits. All of these results also have theological grounding.

John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century mystic, noted that the “attachment to a hurt arising from a past event blocks the inflow of hope into our lives” (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, 1991). He also writes of hope as being essential during time of uncertainty: “The soul should persevere in prayer and should hope in the midst of nakedness and emptiness, for its blessings will not be long in coming” (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, 1991). Finally, St. Teresa of Avila writes that “. . . meditation is the basis for acquiring all the virtues, and to undertake it is a matter of life and death for all Christians” (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, 1991).

So the spiritual life and spiritual virtues are fundamental to our ability to find meaning in life, to withstand the daily stresses of our lives and to cope with illness, loss, and uncertainty. Medicine and health care organizations are beginning to see the importance of spirituality in the health care setting.

When we can truly, divinely respect ourselves, and others, we can open the door to
peace, acceptance and healing. This starts within each of us as individuals and moves to the people around us. By loving ourselves and others, we offer ourselves and others hope and the opportunity for healing.

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A need for spirituality was apparent in the 2003–2004 Annual Report of the Centre for Liberation Theologies (Catholic University of Louvain). It was raised in relationship to the struggle against poverty and inequality in the face of globalization. This call for spirituality seems to be based on the need for motivation that keeps the principles of liberation theology alive while adapting to concrete needs as poverty and inequality continue to spread in our postmodern world. Spirituality is the great motivator. It is at the heart of theology and is behind the face that Christians reveal to their neighbors.

In recent times, Christians have developed liberation spiritualities aimed at helping all of creation “share in the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). These spiritualities include feminist theologies, Latino, African and Asian theologies. The Christian desire for liberation goes back to Jesus’ Jewish faith; a faith founded on the experience of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. It was while celebrating the Exodus experience in a Passover meal that Jesus took the bread and wine of freedom and consecrated them as a memorial to his taking those who want to follow him through an exodus from the slavery of sin to the freedom of the children of God.

Many Latin Americans and U.S. Latinos understand salvation in Christ as the Christian Exodus experience. It is being saved from the slavery to sin and especially from all the effects of that sin. It is being liberated from the consequences of both personal and social sin; these are poverty, hunger, joblessness, war, divorce, abortion and all social disgraces that keep people down and creation subjugated to futility.

**Fidelity to Reality**

This emphasis on freedom from the social consequences of sin is a result of the Latino need for Christianity to be faithful, not just to our triune God, but also to the various realities and peoples in which the church incarnates itself (Comblin, 61f; Sobrino, 14–20; Casaldaliga and Vigil, 17–18). This contemporary incarnation happens through a process of enculturation.
that both comforts and challenges peoples and cultures (Cavazos, 2004, 50–51). Fidelity to reality embraces the concrete socio-political, religious, and economic conditions of a people in order to celebrate and enhance the positive elements of their lives. It also challenges anything in their world that promotes or is victimized by a “culture of death.”

Such a challenge demands conversion, both personal and social. Conversion is a response to having encountered Jesus especially in the least of his brothers and sisters (Mt 25:40). Meeting Jesus in the faces and lives of the lowly in this world presupposes the recognition of sin and its consequences in our lives and theirs.

At the heart of Jesus’ teaching and ministry was a spirituality that longed to collaborate with the reign of God. This is what was behind the face that Jesus revealed to his neighbors, especially to the poor and the marginalized. According to Archbishop Oscar Romero, collaboration with God’s reign, faithful to the reality in which we find ourselves, is what turns ordinary Christians into saints and it is founded on five provisions that I refer to as the five pillars of a Christian spirituality of liberation: contemplation, poverty, universal fraternity, Eucharist, and the cross (Cavazos, 2002, 146).

Contemplative Vision

A spirituality of liberation needs to be grounded in a contemplative vision that helps us to see God in all people and things. It also opens our historical memory to find God lovingly active throughout all of history. In his book *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, Gustavo Gutierrez describes how contemplation leads us to recognize and hope in God’s gracious generosity, which is to say in his divine providence (Gutierrez, 109–12).

A contemplative vision helps us to encounter God in the neighbor as well as to see and love the neighbor with the eyes of the God who made him/her as image and likeness of God. It especially helps us to appreciate the underprivileged as a sacrament of Jesus who “became poor for our sake” (2 Cor 8:9) and poverty as a road that leads to integral liberation.

**Preferential Option for Poverty**

A truly Christian spirituality that motivates and strengthens those who work for the liberation of the poor and marginalized needs to be founded on choosing poverty and simplicity as a way of life. In his *kenosis*, Jesus who “although rich, made himself poor” (2 Cor 8:9) showed us that sin is destroyed by becoming sin (2 Cor 5:21). We can only destroy the sin of poverty by becoming poor among the truly poor and marginalized. Like Jesus, many Christian saints have born witness to this Christian virtue that strengthens those who work for the integral liberation of God’s people (Casaldaliga and Vigil, 139–43). This poverty is at the heart of Christian fraternity.

**Universal Brotherhood/Sisterhood**

Christians are called to live a kind of “spiritual infancy” in which God is recognized as our parent, making every person and every creature our brother or sister in God (Gutierrez, 128–27). We choose to live poverty as a way of rejecting poverty and being in fraternal solidarity and communion with the poor. As brothers and sisters of all, we search to be at the service of God’s reign which encompasses much more than a socio-economic liberation. True liberation must be an integral liberation that leads to an understanding of life based on the concepts of sister/brotherhood and communion.
Eucharistic Communion

The spiritual journey can never be undertaken or traveled alone. Rather, as Christians, we are called to journey as a community united in God because Christian spirituality is one of communion.

For many Catholics, communion recalls the Eucharist. Eucharist is an act of gratitude instituted in the context of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. Eucharist commemorates his oblation made for the integral liberation of humankind (Balasuriya, 16). It is also how Jesus continues his presence among his own. The Eucharist is about gratitude, the communion of believers, bread broken and shared. It is about the sacrifice and liberation wrought by Jesus on the cross.

Sign of the Cross

Finally, as Christians we acknowledge that without the cross there is no salvation, no liberation, no conversion, and no Christianity. Walking in the spirit of the crucified savior requires the cross. The Latino spirituality of liberation proposes carrying the cross in the liberating spirit of Jesus to renew the whole world and ourselves (Casaldaliga and Vigil, 148). Ultimately, as Christians we can never be ashamed to say “we preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23). It is with the crucified one that we find our true path, and we cannot walk without the cross (Matt 16:24).

Conclusion

Indeed, spirituality is the great motivator. It must be at the heart of theology and behind the face that Christians reveal daily. In order to keep our motivation truly Christian, proponents of liberation theology cannot forget that Christian liberation is not simply a socio-political liberation. It looks to penetrate all aspects of the “socio-spiritual” life of the human race with God’s reign. By “socio-spiritual” I understand all of the aspects of the human life: socio = social, political, religious, economic, and material; namely, the exterior life. Spiritual = spiritual, educational, cultural, affective and psychological; namely, the interior life.

Anyone working for any type of liberation needs to ponder the life and ministry of Jesus in their heart (Lk 2:51) from a position of poverty. This process of reflection will hopefully awaken in them a spirituality that encounters the living and liberating Christ in the reality that surrounds them. Christians are thus called to walk in the spirit of Christ, the Savior, which is to say, the Liberator.

As “cultures of death” continue to threaten all of creation, Christians are called more than ever to foster a contemplative vision, a preferential option for poverty, universal brotherhood/sisterhood, a eucharistic communion, and living under the sign of the cross. In this way, the face and heart of Christian theology and ministry will show a continuous process of liberation from sin, from injustice, from death, and from the barriers that separate people and destroy creation.

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The images and voices lifting off the pages of our upcoming Cycle B Advent readings can be dizzying. They tumble by us week after week, Old and New Testament selections so rich and complex that we can barely digest them.

From the writings attributed to Isaiah, Samuel, Mark, Peter, and Paul, we hear proclaimed almost too much to fathom:

Pleading. “. . . we have all withered like leaves . . .”
Praise. “. . . we are the clay and you the potter . . .”

Admonitions. “Be watchful! Be Alert!”
“Comfort! Give comfort to my people.”

A voice crying out, “Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!”

Warnings. “The day of the Lord will come like a thief . . .”

A people awaiting, “. . . new heavens and a new earth.”

The desert. John the Baptist shouting, “Prepare the way of the Lord . . .”

The waters of the Jordan. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.”

Brothers and sisters, “Rejoice always . . . Do not quench the Spirit.”

A handmaid. An angel announcing, “And behold, Elizabeth . . . for nothing will be impossible for God.”

A pregnant Mary.

For parish ministers responsible for preparing the worship environment for this season, the Advent scriptures provide a stimulus for considering anew how they might use visual art in the domus ecclesia, the house of their church. How might it welcome the faithful to enter into the amazing array of images and metaphors that our Advent scriptures offer? How might it stir people to contemplate deeply even one Advent metaphor and to be open to whatever might arise in their hearts? How might visual art stop people in their tracks as they dash headlong toward nativity and surprise them with a glimpse of absolute mystery already present, yet still awaited? Peter Mazar provides a wealth of suggestions that no art and environment committee or liturgy team should miss (1995). For Advent, he urges us to realize the “decidedly mystical dimension” of this season.

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Re-discover Treasures in Plain Sight

How might new uses of visual art for Advent come about? Ideally, members of a liturgy or art and environment team would start with their own prayerful engagement with the scripture, songs, and liturgical texts of the season. Following Jesus’ exhortation, “Be watchful! Be alert!” they would do well to look around their own worship and other parish spaces for forgotten visual treasures.

In highly decorated and ornamented North American churches built along the lines of Romanesque, Gothic or Baroque European cathedrals, parish leaders may re-discover and emphasize for the assembly stained-glass and other two- and three-dimensional images already in the space that echo the Advent readings. Preachers could call worshipers’ attention to art that depicts the Annunciation or Mary and Elizabeth’s visitation. They might spotlight an image of the pregnant Our Lady of Guadalupe, not only because of her feast in December, but also because the very metaphor of pregnancy is so appropriate to this season of anticipation and expectation. A church with an image or statue of Mary under the title of the Immaculate Conception could also work with this metaphor, Mazar reminds us, since Mary’s evident pregnancy is typically part of its iconography (216). Worship spaces containing visual representations of St. John the Baptist at the River Jordan could likewise take advantage of art already in plain sight.

In some worship spaces, taken-for-granted images associated with Advent already are in place and can serve as a visual focus for preaching and continuing contemplation. Preachers can—and I would suggest, should—take advantage of their presence.

A New Option for Advent Art and Environment

But what about other worship spaces bereft of visual art? Many post-Vatican II church buildings were designed and constructed in the modern liturgical aesthetic of “noble simplicity” and exhibit minimal decorative or iconographic elements. In such cases, those responsible for creating an Advent atmosphere may find seasonal art can nobly serve.

Environment and art committees working within modern architectural spaces with expanses of bare walls or with installed media screens may want to consider a relatively new option: media art. Still or moving images can be projected onto light-colored wall surfaces, hanging or draped cloths, or even architectural features such as pillars, ceilings, and air conditioning ducts. Since the late 1960s, slide projectors have worked reliably for projecting photographs for meditation in liturgies. These days, a parishioner may own or may be able to borrow a video projector for this same purpose.

Alternatively, VCRs and video monitors could be arranged in a cluster, with the screens at various levels, to create a video installation dedicated to the sights and sounds evocative of Advent. Media students, teachers, or artists from a local art school might be willing to help a team of parishioners to develop this new approach to liturgical art.

A few years ago, a parish photographer at the Church of the Good Shepherd in suburban Cincinnati, Sister Tecla Jaehnen, developed a poignant Advent media meditation for that church’s media screen. Run before the Sunday liturgies during the prelude, the images showed the joy of the people who in the previous year had received Christmas presents from the truck-load of gifts the parishioners had donated.
These photographs, well composed and skillfully edited into a slide presentation, ran silently and repeatedly so that parishioners would encounter them as they assembled. In the weeks parishioners were bringing in the presents they had once again promised, this media art echoed the Isaiah passage for the Third Week of Advent: “. . . he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted . . .” (Isaiah 61:1).

Perhaps teams of young people and adults, confirmation classmates, or families might work together to create media art that takes its cue from Advent’s scriptural images or songs. Such metaphorical art might include well-shot, artfully edited video footage of local streams and rivers; withered leaves and barren trees; the changing colors of a winter’s sunset or an awakening dawn; a potter shaping clay on her wheel; highways and pathways; or pregnant women of every color and culture.

“Advent seems to require the backdrop of night and the subtlety and mystery of darkness,” Peter Mazar suggests, an atmosphere “often imagined to shine with distant lights” (206). It calls for celestial imagery and stars. To fill that bill, liturgy teams might explore the stunning cinematography on the DVD *Baraka: A World Beyond Words*. Shot on 70mm film in twenty-four countries on six continents, this cinematic work offers haunting footage of rotating starfields, an eclipse, a sunrise, and other wonders of creation suitable to inspire Advent reflection upon the promise of “a new heaven and a new earth” (2 Pet 3:13).

But, perhaps, its best use might be in compelling worshipers to “Be watchful! Be alert!” (Mark 13:33) Mazar writes that “seasonal materials are meant to summon us to face reality” (5). *Baraka*, meaning “blessing,” provides images of people around the world—respectful, reverent, and beautiful, though often also heart-wrenching. Shown during a time of reflection in a liturgy on the Second Sunday of Advent, these images could well challenge worshipers to ask themselves how in this world “kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss” (Ps 85:11).

Of course, psalms, songs, and texts for Advent evening services and reconciliation services could also provide the starting point for parishioners who volunteer to shoot or to locate single photographs to be projected as images for contemplation. The early darkness of an Advent night presents possibilities for media projection otherwise not possible in most churches during the day because of sunlight that floods the space.

**An Invitation to Become Mystics**

Regardless of the media of visual art employed in helping to create the environment for Advent liturgies, whether it is art already created or newly created, discernment still is a critical requirement. Questions liturgical and aesthetic apply. In the case of Advent, leaders can ask themselves, “Does this visual art serve to invite worshipers to imbibe more deeply the heady scriptures of the season? Is the art metaphorical and multivalent, rather than didactic and one-dimensional? Can the art open a window in our hearts so that we might catch a glimpse of the mystery we are and the Mystery that we celebrate?”

Theologian Karl Rahner predicted that “. . . the devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something,” or such people “will cease to be anything at all.” (15).

Visual art can invite those who create it, those who choose to display it, and those who encounter it in worship to experience “something,” the Mystery whom we cele-
brate in Advent as God-for-us. Using visual art is no guarantee that worshipers will have that experience. For some people present, though, seasonal visual art can perhaps “Prepare the way . . .”

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