

## HEALING THE RIFT? CHRISTIANS AND ECOLOGY

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*A further implication of the doctrine of creation from nothing is that all of God's creatures are intimately connected to one another in an echo of the primordial coinherence of the Trinitarian persons. Since all creation is centered in God, all finite things, despite their enormous differences in size, position, quality, or metaphysical status, are linked together as ontological siblings. When Francis of Assisi spoke of "brother sun and sister moon," he was using language not only poetically evocative but metaphysically precise.*

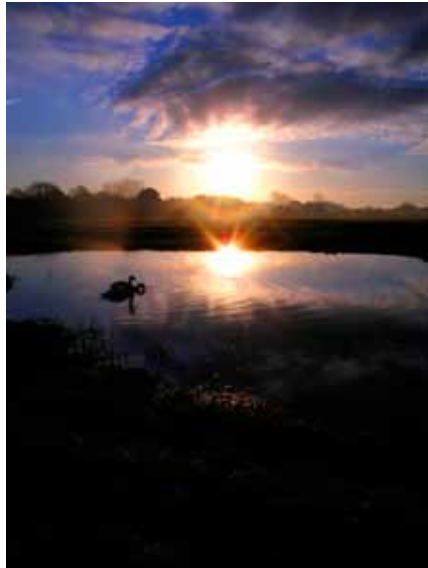
—Robert Barron<sup>1</sup>

When we think of the antagonism and disagreements that obtain between Christians and "Greens," we usually think of issues such as animal rights versus human rights, or population control. Or perhaps we remember Lynn White's influential 1967 essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." Using deliberately provocative language ("Christianity ... insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature"), White traced the ecological crisis back to the presumed call of Genesis to "dominate" the earth (a misconstrual of "to have dominion"). But it is unlikely that we think of Martin Heidegger's negative critique of Western science, metaphysics, and technology. That critique had such an

overwhelming and profound effect on philosophies of nature that it often passes completely unnoticed, like the air we breathe. Indirectly, but surely, it entered the thought processes, the concepts, the very foundations of almost all schools of environmental thought. Popular environmental authors – who perhaps have never heard

of Heidegger – repeat his concepts without knowing it. He even has a part to play in the thought of those who repudiate him.

Though his critique of technology and his re-invigorating of ontology were praised by many, the key issue I want to concentrate on is his view of creation. Heidegger said, "One must start by rejecting the first article [of Christianity], that the world was created by



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God, that what exists is merely an artifact, something made by a divine craftsman. *This was the origin of the false devaluation of the world, contempt for the world, and denial of the world.*<sup>2</sup> His contempt for what he sees as the understanding of a Creator as merely “First Cause” is palpable:

Abandonment of being is strongest at that place where it is most decidedly hidden. That happens where beings have – and had to – become most ordinary and familiar. That happened first in Christianity and its dogma, which explains all being in their origin as *ens creatum* [created beings], where the creator is the most certain and all beings are the effects of this most extant cause. But cause-effect relationship is the most ordinary, most crude, and most immediate, what is employed by all human calculation and lostness to beings in order to explain something, i.e. to push it into the clarity of the ordinary and familiar.<sup>3</sup>

Some ecologists (Arne Naess, George Sessions, Bill Devall, Michael Zimmerman, etc.) are quite clear about their debt to Heidegger; he has been called “the metaphysician of ecologism.”<sup>4</sup> True Being, Heidegger says, has now been obscured, and is seen *only* in relation to created beings as their First or Highest Cause. Its dynamic nature has been congealed into static presence. We have confused the ontical for the ontological, individual beings for Being itself, and, as so many ecologists repeat, we have created a two-tier or two-level reality – a transcendental, distant, supernatural Above and an immanent, natural Below. This is the source of all our problems, they think; the solution to which is the rediscovery that that the two realms are one, a single “identity,” whether naturalistic or pantheistic.

The congealing of Being into conceptualization is what Heidegger calls “ontotheology.” He derided any attempt to bring God down into philosophy as a First Cause or Highest Being, declaring that all of Western philosophy since Plato is tainted with ontotheology; in fact, metaphysics *is* ontotheology. Ecologist Bruce Foltz summarizes Heidegger’s position:

Ontotheology is problematic because it has substituted for the “divine God” the “god of philosophy,” an ontic god, a highest being, whose primary role is to lead and legitimate our understanding of an ontic realm: nature as *ens creatum* [created things, created beings]. Especially important for environmental philosophy is Heidegger’s claim that this ontotheological concept of God as *prima causa* has not only denigrated (and indeed, blasphemed) the divine God, but degraded and “de-natured” nature as well, “dis-enchanted” (*Entzauberung*) and even “de-deified” (*Entgotterung*) nature, freeing it for the new “enchantment” (*Verzauberung*) of technology. If what is wrong with metaphysics is ontotheology, and if what is wrong with ontotheology is this understanding of the relation of God and nature, then at the same time it seems clear that what is discreditable about metaphysics is epitomized in the medieval scholasticism where these concepts come of age and assume a predominance that persists throughout modernity.<sup>5</sup>

A clearer statement of the hostility in which the Christian idea of creation is held can scarcely be imagined.

### Overcoming antagonism

Eco-philosophers tend to see Catholics as world-denying Gnostic dualists, trapped

by an other-worldly, anti-material, rule-bound dualism. But Gnosticism is rightly condemned by Catholic teaching as well. Catholics, too, reject, along with postmodernism, the hegemony of calculative, instrumental reason alone; a representational, rather than participatory, epistemology that requires a mediator between mind and the world; ethics as reduced to Kantian moralism; Being as a static, ontic *concept* rather than an event; a “two-tier” division of the world in which God is remote.

Yet hardly ever referenced in the eco-philosophical literature is the broad and deep watercourse of Catholic ontology and phenomenology: it is as if the entire twentieth century of Catholic thought, with the profound work of Stein, Guardini, Pieper, *The Acting Person* and the Theology of the Body, the towering achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar, and so much more, never happened; to put the matter simply, in every instance ecologists confuse neo-Scholasticism or the “manual theology” that had its heyday when Ratzinger, Balthasar and Heidegger were in school with Catholicism itself. (There has, however, been a growing interest in Eastern Orthodoxy, perhaps because Lynn White’s essay contrasted the Eastern Christians of the Patristic period, of whom he approved, with Western ones, of which he did not. He does not acknowledge that these Fathers are part of the Catholic tradition as well.)

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The antagonism between secular and Catholic ecological views seems impossible to overcome. But at least part of the negative effect of White’s essay has been softened through dialogue on the real meaning of “stewardship”; secular ecologist J. Baird Callicott, something of an *eminence grise* in the field of environmental ethics, says:

I think that those who have argued that the stewardship interpretation is better supported by the text [of Genesis] than White’s despotic interpretation have entirely won their case.... I would like to further say that the Judeo-Christian stewardship environmental ethic is elegant and powerful.<sup>6</sup>

The roots of the antagonism lie deep, and in order to reach them we need to understand the Christian notion of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), and of “first cause.” This is usually reduced to a purely materialist understanding, akin to misinterpreting the creation stories in Genesis as scientific accounts. The grip the materialistic understanding has on the mind has proven extremely difficult to break; as with an optical illusion, it seems the path of least resistance, and it is notoriously difficult not to revert back to it.

As far as the “first” in “first cause” is concerned, the materialist presupposition of ecologists is that creation is supposed to have been something that happened once in the distant past, almost as if there were a *positive* “nothing” or emptiness awaiting the material

creation to fill it up. Stephen Hawking said that if the universe had a beginning, the supposition of creation might make sense, but “if the universe is really self-contained... it would have no beginning nor end: it would simply be,” in which case creation was a meaningless addition.<sup>7</sup> This entirely misses the point; creation is not “the thing that happened first.” Creation is an *ongoing relationship*, not a one-time episode lost in the mists of time. Aquinas understood that whether the universe is eternal or not, it needs a creator, and – against ecologists who see Catholicism as creating an abyss between immanence and transcendence, preferring *identity*, that is, the material immanence of emergence or the spiritual immanence of pantheism – the creator is immanent precisely *because* he is transcendent, in *unity* with creation precisely in his *difference* from it:

God is present in all things, but not as part of their nature, nor as a modification of their being, but in the way something which acts is in contact with what it acts upon... Since God is by nature sheer Being, it must be he who causes being in creatures as his characteristic effect... God has this effect on created realities not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are kept in being, as light is caused in the air by the sun as long

as the air remains illuminated. So, for as long as anything is, God must be present to it in the way that it has being. But ‘to-be’ is that which is the most intimate to each thing, and what most profoundly inheres in all things: everything else about any reality is potential compared to ‘to be.’ So God must be in everything, and in the most interior way.<sup>8</sup>

Emergent ecologists claim that “there is a way in which the universe is re-enchanted each time one takes in its continuous coming into being.”<sup>9</sup> It may surprise them to find this very idea at the heart of the Catholic vision of Creation.

As for the term “cause” in “first cause,” modernity has reduced the term from the beautiful and luminous array of formal, final, efficient, and material causation to a mechanistic “pushing and pulling” alone. Creation is seen as the transition of one state to another: the arrangement or rearrangement of matter and energy. The creation stories – including scientific ones – of emanations, emergence, division, etc., all deal with a stage *after* the original question of why there is something rather than nothing. All of them presuppose *something*, some substratum, being there before a change is undergone. Even Stephen Hawking’s claim that “Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing,”<sup>10</sup> is still the claim of “a spontaneity



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latent within an original matter,” presupposed in many religious traditions,<sup>11</sup> even if that “matter” is now conceived as “negative gravitational energy.”

Aquinas long ago refuted “the opinion of the ancient natural philosophers who held that there was but one cause, a material one, from which all things were made by rarity and density. For these thinkers were obliged to say that the distinction of things which we observe in the universe resulted not from the ordering intention of some principle, but from the fortuitous movement of matter.”<sup>12</sup> We have to wean the mind away from a strictly material form of explanation, to dispel the trance that sees only quantitative differences, not the qualitative ones necessary for the mind’s opening up and breaking forth into the fathomless light of the mystery of reality. Creation concerns not the accidental motion of matter in this stage or that, but a *principle*. Without denying the emergent claim that all creatures share in matter and energy, the state of being “ontological siblings” or children of one Principle can be seen as deriving from the fact that all entities share in *act*, that by which something comes into being, and by participation in the Transcendentals of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, through cause understood as the communication of likeness.

### Creation as gift

Thus the Catholic vision of creation is something very different from what Heidegger and the ecologists imagined. Rather than the fabrication of a “product” which then can be dominated, manipulated, or used up, creation means that persons are already united at the deepest level, ontologically, not merely physically or biologically

or socially, with all that exists, with stones, plants, animals, the land, sea, and stars; second, it means that the mutuality of participatory giving and receiving draws the parties into a relationship deeper than the merely extrinsic:

When the true God creates, he doesn’t manipulate, dominate, or wrestle into submission anything outside of himself, but rather through a sheerly generous and non-violent act of love, he gives rise to the totality of finite reality. And because this act is *ex nihilo*, there is literally nothing that stands between God’s causal presence and that which he makes. Therefore, even as he remains ontologically distinct from the world, God is, to paraphrase Augustine, closer to creation than creation is to itself. In short, the *communio* universe nests non-violently in the primordial *communio* of the Trinity.<sup>13</sup>

The creature may feel himself or herself to be separate from God, but this is not the separation of a product from its manufacturer; it is the “separation” of a family member, of a newborn child from its mother, and it is “precisely when its essential finitude shows it to be something quite different from God that it knows that, as a real being, it has had bestowed upon it that most extravagant gift – participation in the real being of God.”<sup>14</sup>

The true act of giving is not like the “exchange” of a contract or business deal, nor is it a bribe, nor something for which one expects a return: its impetus is gratuitousness and freedom, not necessity. Kenneth Schmitz says that the concern is not with the “physics of transference” – how an object passes from one to another – but with an internal change, an interior bond, a

new relationship. “The giver does not hand over something outside himself but under his control; rather... [through] his own conscious intention as he attends to the receiver...he makes *himself* present to the receiver.”<sup>15</sup> When a child gives a small gift to its parent, this is really a “giving back” of what has already been received. Does this unequal relationship somehow make the gift meaningless? No: the very “valuelessness” of the gift makes it a transparent act of presence and love. The same would apply in a situation of absolute inequality, in the relationship between Creator and creature. “Now in this situation, nothing can be introduced from outside as from an independent source; the situation is *creation ex nihilo*.”<sup>16</sup>

At the heart of the vision of the creation as gift is the sense of the *radical contingency and dependency of all things*.

Though at one point this dependency may have been seen by some ecophilosophers as the very reason for the loss of the world’s integrity (for how can it have its own intrinsic value if it is dependent? Wouldn’t dependency undermine autonomy?), oddly enough, contingency and dependency have been re-discovered, and this is another point of contact with emergent ecologists (though the “dissimilarity” is greater):

Emergentism offers fresh ways to think about contingency. Whereas contingent is often understood to mean accidental or fortuitous, its etymology (*contigere*, to touch, meet) carries the sense of depend-

ency, of something being conditional on something else, and this certainly maps on to the core understanding of the emergentist perspective.<sup>17</sup>

Emergent ecologists would be surprised to learn that these are not “fresh ways” but very ancient ways; radical contingency is of central importance to Catholic teaching. Emergent ecologists say that their “perspective opens countless opportunities to encounter and celebrate the magical while remaining mindful of the fully natural basis

of each encounter;”<sup>18</sup> remove “fully” (and substitute “mysterious” for “magical”) and you have a precise Catholic characterization of a grace and freedom that are not in opposition to nature, but are its flowering.

It is sad that so many ecologists accepted the Heideggerian view that Christian theology made of God little more than the manufac-

turer of a product, and so began the road to ecological destruction. While they may never accept the doctrine of creation, if they at least understood what Catholics really believe, there would be the possibility for dialogue, and – dare we hope – perhaps even solidarity. It is not impossible: even the atheist (agnostic?) Marxist critic Terry Eagleton understood full well that “God for Christian theology is not a mega-manufacturer.”

He is rather what sustains all things in being by his love, and would still be this even if the world had no beginning. Creation is not about getting things off

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the ground. Rather, God is the reason why there is something rather than nothing, the condition of possibility of any entity whatsoever. Not being any sort of entity himself, however, he is not to be reckoned up alongside these things.... God the Creator is not a celestial engineer at work on a superbly rational design that will impress his research grant body no end, but an artist... who made the world with no functional end in view but simply for the love and delight of it. Or, as one might say in more theological language, for the hell of it. He made it as a gift, superfluity, and gratuitous gesture – out of nothing, rather than out of grim necessity.<sup>19</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Barron, “Evangelizing the American Culture,” *Second Spring* 3, 2002, 28

<sup>2</sup> S.J. McGrath, *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken* (Catholic University Press, 2006), 55, quoting Heinrich Buhr’s *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger*. Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger. *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Indiana University Press, 2000), 77.

<sup>4</sup> George Steiner, “The House of Being,” *Times Literary Supplement* (9 October 1981) quoted in Peter Marshall, *Nature’s Web: Rethinking Our Place on Earth* (Paragon House, 1994), 367.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce V. Foltz, “Nature Godly and Beautiful: The Iconic Earth,” in *Research in Phenomenology*, 31:1 (2001), 117.

<sup>6</sup> J. Baird Callicott, “Genesis and John Muir,” *Revelation*, 12:3 (1990), 32.

<sup>7</sup> *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Bantam books, 1988). 141.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 8, a. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ursula Goodenough and Terrence W. Deacon, “The Sacred Emergence of Nature,” *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford University Press), 867. Emergence theorists claim to reject the scientific reductionism of modernity. Higher-order properties emerge by virtue of the interactions between their constituent parts; the arrival of novel, unexpected, coherent structures, properties, or events, and even *the uniqueness of a particular thing* – which usually vanishes into the abstraction of the generalizations of natural science – can be explained by emergence, which includes the individual’s history. Emergence is legitimate, accepted, and useful form of scientific explanation for high-order properties. But it does not escape reductionism entirely. Formal theories or sequences like that of Fibonacci may “emerge” from numbers, and the sequence may have properties not found in the constituent numbers, but the sequence does not “transcend” the numbers, for it is on the same quantitative level; the mathematician transcends both the numbers and the sequence.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Hawking, *The Grand Design* (Bantam Books, 2010), 180.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Marquette University Press, 1982), 9. He mentions the Japanese *Nihongi*, the Chandogya *Upanishad*, and Polynesian, Bantu, Egyptian, and some American Indian myths.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 39, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Barron, “Evangelizing the American Culture,” *Second Spring* 3, 2002, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord IV: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity* (Ignatius Press, 1989), 404.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Schmitz, *The Gift*, 59

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>17</sup> Ursula Goodenough and Terrence W. Deacon, “The Sacred Emergence of Nature,” 866.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 867.

<sup>19</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (Yale University Press, 2009), 8