

The Logic of Creation

IN RECENT DECADES THERE HAS BEEN A COMMITTED AND SALUTARY EFFORT TO reenchant the cosmos. In part, this effort stems from a desire to counter the estrangement or futility people might feel when faced with a universe that may seem accidental, cold, or devoid of purpose. As the highly regarded biologist Ursula Goodenough put it in her book *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, “The scientific version of how things are, and how they came to be, is much more likely, at first encounter, to elicit alienation, anomie, and nihilism, responses that offer little promise for motivating our allegiance or moral orientation.”¹ This is why Goodenough committed herself to developing a religious naturalism that might help people feel awe and thanksgiving in the face of the beauty and grandeur of the world. “I have come to understand that I can deflect the apparent pointlessness of it all by realizing that I don’t have to seek a point. In any of it. Instead, I can see it as a locus of Mystery.”²

Of the people leading this reenchanting effort, one of the most influential has been the “geologist” Thomas Berry. Berry began his career as a Passionist Catholic priest and as a scholar of Chinese and Indian religious traditions. In a career spanning over six decades, he made contributions to a diverse set of scholarly fields including theology, comparative religion, cultural studies, cosmology, and ecology. Throughout his many articles and books he sought both to overcome the alienation people feel living in a supposedly pointless world, and to heal the antagonism toward Earth that was reflected in humanity’s abuses of it. The way to do this was to develop forms of spirituality that are responsive to the best insights of science, and

¹ Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xvii.

² *Ibid.*, 11. As we will see, what Goodenough means by “Mystery” isn’t entirely clear, since she also believes that science can explain the origins of life.

sciences that are responsive to the best insights of the world's religious and spiritual traditions. Berry believed that the universe encoded a scripture of sorts that could speak to humanity's need for meaning, creativity, and fulfillment. He argued that cosmological discoveries told a new Universe Story that began billions of years ago with a "Primordial Flaring Forth" of matter (his term for the Big Bang), that then, over eons of evolutionary development, resulted in the complex systems of life that are made conscious in humans. This is a universe meant to be cherished because it has produced incredibly diverse geographies and forms of life. It also witnesses to a "cosmological anthropic principle," which affirms that human beings, along with their aesthetic, moral, and spiritual yearnings, are the intended outcome of it all, for it is *in us* "that the universe comes to know itself."³

Although Berry was keen to bring representatives of the world's Indigenous and religious traditions together to address major ecological problems – something that happened beautifully when Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grimm convened the Harvard Forum on Religion and Ecology (a program that continues today as the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology) – he was convinced that traditional religious stories about the cosmos and humanity's place within it are frequently "dysfunctional," and thus needed to be updated with a more scientifically informed understanding.⁴ Monotheistic traditions are especially problematic because in their historical manifestations we see that: (a) they are often suspicious, if not hateful, of embodiment; (b) they encourage the kinds of dominion and subjugation that have done so much damage to Earth; and (c) they postulate that humanity's true home is somewhere else "beyond Earth." In opposition to these tendencies, Berry argued that the universe itself is the "supreme reality" and our "primary sacred community." The universe is "the supreme manifestation of the sacred." Every being, even the divine being, is what it is only because of the universe. "Only the universe is a text without a context."⁵

The practical aims of this new Universe Story are clearly commendable. As Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Swimme describe some of them, "Our human destiny is to become the heart of the universe that embraces the

³ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 52. Berry partnered with the cosmologist Brian Swimme to author *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era – A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Universe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). This telling of the story has been updated by Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker in *The Journey of the Universe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1990), 123.

⁵ Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 44, 176, 138.

whole of the Earth community.” Although being but specks in the universe, we have the unique capacity “to feel comprehensive compassion in the midst of an ocean of intimacy.”

Our challenge now is to construct livable cities and to cultivate healthy foods in ways congruent with Earth’s patterns. Our role is to provide the hands and hearts that will enable the universe’s energies to come forth in a new order of well-being. Our destiny is to bring forth a planetary civilization that is both culturally diverse and locally vibrant, a multiform civilization that will enable life and humanity to flourish.⁶

I support this ambition. My question, however, is whether or not the Universe Story can deliver on producing these good aims. If the universe itself is the supreme reality and the only text without a context, why should we think it is sacred? Could we not just as well say that the universe *is what it is*, and that the many paths of evolutionary development – including the path that results in humanity’s destruction of Earth – simply reflect random, pointless processes? To be sure, there may be some people who see grandeur and beauty, but there are also many others who see massive, useless pain and suffering. There may be some people who want to practice “comprehensive compassion,” but there are also others who want to practice maximum extraction and appropriation. For instance, Goodenough says,

As a religious naturalist I say “What Is, Is” with the same bowing of the head, the same bending of the knee. Which then allows me to say “Blessed Be to What Is” with thanksgiving. To give assent is to understand, incorporate, and then let go. With the letting go comes that deep sigh we call relief, and relief allows the joy-of-being-alive-at-all to come tumbling forth again.⁷

There is a kind of nobility in this stoic acceptance of the world, but we can also ask if and how something like a prophetic protest against the violation of creatures or places is possible within this naturalist position. Should one say “Blessed Be,” and give one’s assent to, *whatever* comes?

Moreover, we should also ask if Berry’s “anthropic cosmological principle,” the idea that the universe finds its maximum realization in human self-consciousness and that the universe comes to know itself *in us*, especially when combined with the hubristic *scientism* reflected in the writings of scientists like E. O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins, has the effect of normalizing the Anthropocene and endorsing humanity’s managerial

⁶ *The Journey of the Universe*, 115, 116–117. ⁷ *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, 47.

role. As Lisa Sideris has put it, “The generally anthropic modes of wonder underwritten by mythopoetic science are well-positioned to *applaud* the ascent of the human in the Anthropocene Age, and rather powerless to critique planetary dominance . . . the new cosmology *is*, quintessentially, paradigmatically, an Anthropocene narrative – and a problematically upbeat one at that.”⁸ The Universe Story yields what Sideris calls a distorted and deracinated wonder because it installs scientists as (if not fully yet, eventually to be) omniscient knowers who have little patience for what we might describe as the miracle of life or reality’s gracious givenness.

Another way to frame my concern is to suggest that without a transcendent, divine context that is, in some way, both “beyond” the universe itself and “within” it at the same time, the grounds for speaking of the universe *as a sacred gift* to be received, cherished, and celebrated evaporate. Affirming a transcendent source is crucial because it communicates a divine “intention” that desires for the universe to be, and in its creation also affirms its being as good and beautiful. Put another way, Berry’s reduction of theology to cosmology, of making what is all that there is, and of reducing all processes to natural processes, has the effect of rendering normative and aesthetic judgments as little more than statements of personal or group preference. Thoroughgoing naturalism makes it difficult to argue against processes that are degrading or violent, because these processes can be characterized as essential moments and movements in the “flaring forth” of matter. If the universe is all that there is, can we speak of the world’s gratuity and grace, perhaps even its healing and redemption? The Universe Story leaves us stuck in the inexorable unfolding of a flaring forth that, without intent and without mercy, produces massive amounts of suffering and pain, and, if we are lucky, some pleasures along the way.

A better way forward, I will now argue, is to recover and restate the logic at work within creation stories that speak of life as a sacred gift. This logic isn’t a fanciful imposition upon the world. It has developed over centuries and across cultures as people have reflected upon the depth of significance – what we

⁸ Lisa Sideris, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 9. Sideris argues that efforts to invest science with sacred meaning and purpose can have the effect of conflating science and religion, even making science into a religion. When this happens, the possibility for genuine wonder evaporates because everything is finally going to be explained. Sideris argues that true wonder depends on living with what the poet John Keats described as “negative capability,” which is “an ability to dwell in doubt, mystery, and ambiguity and to resist the categorization of all phenomena and experience into a system of knowledge” (11).

might also call the miraculous character of life – embedded in their encounters with each other and with their places.

SPEAKING OF CREATION

Although affirmed by a wide assortment of people, the idea that the world is created by God is easily misunderstood. The potential for confusion happens at multiple levels: (a) what people believe a creation account is meant to describe, (b) who the God is who creates, and (c) the practical difference belief in a created world makes. This is why it is important to be clear about the “logic of creation,” and not simply as a metaphysical exercise but as a way of understanding humanity’s place and vocation in a world characterized as sacred.

As I have already noted when speaking about the Garden of Eden creation story, it is important to stress that the story’s point is not to give a scientific description of “how it all began.” When mischaracterized this way, the idea quickly turns into a debate about mechanics, or an analysis of the cause and effect relationships that make things happen. People then start to wonder when, where, and how God *intervened* in the world so as to bring it about. Was it roughly six thousand or many billions of years ago? Where did God set off the Big Bang? Did God use evolutionary processes as the means to create the diversity of life that populates our planet?

From a theological point of view, it clearly matters that people say God *creates* the world; but it is also crucial to insist that “God creating” is not the same thing as “people making” something. Why? Because our making clearly is an intervening in existing states of affairs so as to produce something that did not exist before. We are causal agents bringing about an effect. To say that God creates the universe, however, is fundamentally different because what is at issue is the possibility of anything existing at all. God does not create by stepping into existing cause and effect relationships – something that a mechanical account of making presupposes – but by establishing the possibility of any kind of cause and effect relationship at all.

Aristotle famously argued that by narrating the four causes of things (the material, or what things are made of; the efficient, or the agency by which they become what they are; the formal, or the specific shape that enables us to identify them as the distinct things that they are; and the final, or the end toward which things are moving) we come to an understanding of what things are. But what Aristotle failed to appreciate is that there might also be a fifth cause, what we can call an “existential” or “ontological” cause that makes possible a world in which the four causes can be at work. Put another

way, Aristotle assumed a world that has always existed, and then developed various analytical tools to make sense of it. He did not wonder that a world exists at all. He could not imagine what I and others call the gratuity and grace of being itself. Not surprisingly, Aristotle did not include in his philosophical account a place or role for a personal God or a divine intention.

If God does not create by intervening in an existing state of affairs but by establishing the conditions – the time, place, and processes – in which various states of affairs become possible at all, we can then appreciate why theologians say that God’s creative “action” is timeless. Although scripture may speak of God creating “in the beginning,” it is not a “first” time in a chronological sequence that is being imagined but the possibility of time itself. Similarly, God does not create heaven and earth in a place, because what is at issue is the creation of any and every place. Augustine addressed both of these matters when he said, “You created all times and you exist before all times . . . It is not in time that you precede times. Otherwise you would not precede all times.” And then again, “The way, God, in which you made heaven and earth was not that you made them either in heaven or on earth . . . Nor did you make the universe within the framework of the universe. There was nowhere for it to be made before it was brought into existence.”⁹ This description of God’s creative “action” assumes a divine being quite unlike any created being we might encounter.

To illustrate this point, imagine being asked to give an account of the existence of your own life. You could say that you exist because your mother gave birth to you, and that she exists because she also had a mother. One can readily suppose the line of mothers to extend backward indefinitely. But what if I ask about the conditions for the possibility of any kind of mothering/birthing process? Here you might speak about human communities and natural habitats that support human life. You might speak of a planet and biochemical processes that are so well-suited to enable not just human life but all the life forms upon which people depend. Now ask about the conditions for the possibility of planet Earth and its remarkable biospheres. You might respond by saying that Earth only exists as it does because it moves within a solar system that is itself within the Milky Way galaxy, one galaxy among countless others. It doesn’t take long before you gesture toward the existence of an unfathomably immense universe, and

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans, Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), XI.16 (230) and XI.7 (225).

come to the realization, as many people have, that you are an embodied, if distant, effect of stardust.

What do you say if asked about the conditions for the possibility of the universe? Historically speaking, a number of reasonable people have rejected the question altogether. To them, the question doesn't make sense because it is impossible for something to come from nothing (as some Greek philosophers supposed). Thinking in a mechanical or cause and effect manner, they can only imagine the existence of things in terms of other things. Something can only come about from something else. If the universe is the totality of all somethings, there can't be some other "thing" *outside* of it, no matter how big or powerful, that brings it into being since, as a thing, it would already exist *within* the totality of things. The universe just is what it is. It consists of material objects existing in cause and effect relationships. There is no reason, at least from a materialist/naturalist point of view, to posit a nonmaterial reality at all, since such a reality, by definition, is beyond the bounds of what scientists can speak about.

Goodenough reflects this position when she says that scientists are vulnerable to an "existential shudder" when they contemplate the mysteries of life and wish that the foundations of life were something other than biochemistry and biophysics. This shudder does not arise as a flirtation with nihilism. Instead, it reflects a longing for a world in which the language of the soul operates, but then recognizing that this spiritual world is closed to her. As she sees it, "the workings of life are not mysterious at all. They are obvious, explainable, and thermodynamically inevitable. And relentlessly mechanical. And bluntly deterministic. My body is some 10 trillion cells. Period. My thoughts are a lot of electricity flowing along a lot of membrane. My emotions are the result of neurotransmitters squirting on my brain cells."¹⁰ As a committed naturalist, the whole of reality is what appears to the scientific eye.

In *The Experience of God*, David Bentley Hart argues that the idea of naturalism, which assumes that only the physical order exists, is "radically insufficient" in terms of its explanatory range. "The one thing of which it can give no account, and which its most fundamental principles make it entirely impossible to explain at all, is nature's very existence. For existence is most definitely not a natural phenomenon; it is logically prior to any physical cause whatsoever." The trouble with naturalism, Hart argues, is that "it is impossible to say how, in the terms naturalism allows, nature could exist at

¹⁰ *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, 46–47.

all.”¹¹ By focusing on *how* things exist, the strangeness of the fact *that* they exist at all stays off the table.

Put another way, physical reality cannot account for its own existence because all physical things, by definition, already exist. But if we probe deeper into *existence* itself, what we discover is that “it” is not a discrete, measurable “thing” (which is why scientists should not be faulted for their silence about it). This realization does not make existence unreal. Instead, it suggests that in our encounters with physical things we are also encountering a reality of a different order, a miraculous order that speaks to the surprising realization that they exist at all. A problem arises, however, if people claim that only physical things are real. A reductionist claim like this is not a scientific claim but a prejudice that has the potential to render reality shallow or superficial. If we are to speak about the conditions for the possibility of the existence of physical things of any sort, we must, therefore, speak of what theologians and philosophers sometimes describe as a “supernatural” or “hyperphysical” reality. This nonphysical “reality,” which serves as the condition for the possibility of the universe’s existence, commonly goes by the name “God.”

It is important to say at the outset that this divine reality is fundamentally unlike the material reality in which we move. As the Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe argued, “when we speak of God we do not know what we are talking about. We are simply taking language from the familiar context in which we understand it and using it to point beyond what we understand into the mystery that surrounds and sustains the world we do partially understand.”¹² One can well imagine a person asking, “Who or what created God? Does not God also require something that is the condition for its being?” These questions, however, are wrongly put. “If God is whatever answers our question, how come everything? then evidently he is not to be included amongst everything. God cannot be a thing, an existent among others. It is not possible that God and the universe should add up to make two.”¹³ God does not make the universe out of something, nor is God a something that makes the universe. To use literal language, God is no-thing. This does not mean that God isn’t real. It just means that God’s “reality” is fundamentally unlike any reality we move within. If God is not a something,

¹¹ David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 18. Hart argues against Berry’s reduction of everything to cosmology when he says, “Cosmology simply cannot become ontology” (98).

¹² Herbert McCabe, “The Logic of Mysticism,” in *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2002), 27.

¹³ Herbert McCabe, “Creation,” in *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 1987), 6.

then it doesn't make sense to ask who or what caused it. God is beyond every cause and effect chain.

Stated theologically, God as the creator of all things must not be confused to be a creature among creatures, no matter how powerful we might imagine this creature to be. God is not *a* being among fellow beings but the ineffable *source* of all beings. God is "beyond being," as philosophers and theologians sometimes put it, because God exceeds our conceptual grasp and every attempt at comprehensive description. But we can also say that God is "being itself," insofar as God is intimately present to each and every creature as its inexhaustible source.¹⁴ It is precisely because God is *transcendent* or "beyond" all beings that God can also be *immanent* to them, more "intimate" to things than we can properly imagine, moving within and through them as the animating being that supports and makes possible their being.

It is important to stress that divine transcendence and immanence are not opposed to each other. When we appreciate that God is not an object like other objects, and thus not spatially limited like objects are, we can also see why God can be present to every creature and every place at the same time. Absolute transcendence and absolute immanence complement each other.¹⁵ If God is a creature among creatures, a thing among things, then God could not be omnipresent in this way, because a discrete being can only be in one

¹⁴ Hart summarizes these points by saying God

is not a "being," at least not in the way that a tree, a shoemaker, or a god is a being; he is not one more object in the inventory of things that are, or any sort of discrete object at all. Rather, all things that exist receive their being continuously from him, who is the infinite wellspring of all that is, *in whom* (to use the language of Christian scriptures) all things live and move and have their being. In one sense he is "beyond being," if by "being" one means the totality of discrete, finite things. In another sense he is "being itself," in that he is the inexhaustible source of all reality, the absolute upon which the contingent is always utterly dependent, the unity and simplicity that underlies and sustains the diversity of finite and composite things. (*The Experience of God*, 30)

¹⁵ The early church (fifth- to sixth-century) writer Pseudo-Dionysius argued that our language depends on the being of finite, creaturely things, which is why language inevitably fails to communicate the reality that God "is." God's "supra-essential being" did not, however, mean that God is distant from or disinterested in the lives of creatures. God

is at a total remove from every condition, movement, life, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, thought, conception, being, rest, dwelling, unity, limit, infinity, the totality of existence. And yet, since [God] is the underpinning of goodness, and by merely being there is the cause of everything, to praise this divinely beneficent Providence you must turn to all of creation. It is there at the center of everything and everything has it for a destiny. ("The Divine Names," I.5 in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* [New York: Paulist Press, 1987], 54)

place at a time. Finite creatures are by definition circumscribed, but God's reality is infinite and unconstrained, and thus bound by no particular place. Because God is the source of every being and every place, God can be present to everything as its animating, sustaining power. God's transcendence, as the early church theologian John of Damascus said, communicates a chasm in *natures* or kinds of being, rather than a chasm of *location* or of separation spatially conceived. "All things are far from God: not in place, but in nature."¹⁶

This account of the transcendence and immanence of God enables people to say that in their encounter with a created being they also encounter – however perfectly understood, however inarticulately expressed – something of the reality of God. Although God cannot be said to be circumscribed *in a place*, since that would reduce the infinite to the finite, nonetheless, and as the source and sustenance of everything, God is present to each and every place. This means that every place witnesses to God's "activity" as the "power" that nurtures and sustains it, and every creature testifies, in the various modes of being proper to it, to some aspect of God's animating presence. The whole world, in a sense, is therefore the place of God, or what the Reformation theologian John Calvin called, the theater of God: "those places in which His operation is plainly visible to us, whether it is realized in the flesh or out of the flesh, are called places of God."¹⁷ Every creature is both "ontologically fortuitous," since it is the material expression of a gracious divine giving, but also "ontologically poor," because it is not the source of its own being.¹⁸

If God's transcendence is affirmed in this way, then it is impossible for God and creatures to exist in a competitive relationship with each other. Competition presupposes a shared plane of reality. Since creatures do not exist on the same level of reality as God, they do not need to become small in order for God to be great. Quite the reverse. Insofar as creatures realize to the maximum the reality or life they are created to achieve, the more God is glorified. Why? Because the more creatures realize their creaturely life, the more God's power is made manifest in the world for each creature to enjoy

¹⁶ John of Damascus, "An Exact Exposition of the Christian Faith," I.13, in *Saint John of Damascus: Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase, Jr. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 199.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 198. Like many other theologians before and after him, John of Damascus does not say that God is the power at work in the evil that appears in this world. Evil represents a twisting or distortion of God's animating power.

¹⁸ Hart, *The Experience of God*, 91.

and be benefited by.¹⁹ The idea that God would be made jealous of the successful living of a creature is to express a category mistake. Jealousy can only occur between creatures that share and are jockeying for position on the same plane of reality. Put another way, God has no interest in limiting the freedom of creatures to become themselves.²⁰

As theologians thought about God creating the universe, some of them argued that God creates *ex nihilo*, or from nothing. Again, it is important to underscore that this way of speaking is not attempting to give a mechanical or causal account of creation, as if there is some “nothing” that already “exists,” and from which God then draws out life. Greek philosophers, thinking in mechanical, causal terms, were quite right to declare the impossibility of something coming from nothing. Rather than thinking of this “nothing” as a mysterious “something” that is the basis for God’s creative act, and upon which it depends, we are better served by understanding creation *ex nihilo* as a teaching that declares divine love to be the sole reason for there being anything at all. In other words, it is best to understand creation *ex nihilo* as also creation *ex amore*, as being “from love” and nothing else. *Ex nihilo*, in other words, enables people to say that life’s gratuity is gracious rather than mendacious.

To say that creation is *ex nihilo* is to say that God was not constrained in any way in the creation of the world. God did not have to overcome recalcitrant matter or do battle with an evil force or principle. There was

¹⁹ Kathryn Tanner has argued that competitive models, besides confusing the creator/creature distinction, also rest on a God quite unlike the God revealed in Jesus Christ:

This non-competitive relation between creatures and God is possible, it seems, only if God is the fecund provider of *all* that the creature is in itself; the creature in its giftedness, in its goodness, does not compete with God’s gift-fullness and goodness because God is the giver of all that the creature is for the good. This relationship of total giver to total gift is possible, in turn, only if God and creatures are, so to speak, on different levels of being, and different planes of causality – something that God’s transcendence implies. (*Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001], 3)

²⁰ In his essay “Freedom,” McCabe argues that we should characterize human freedom not as apart from God (as if we could exist independently of God) but as the realization of God at work within us. “We are free not because God is absent or leaves us alone, we are free because God is more present. . . . God is not an alternative to freedom, he is the direct cause of freedom. We are not free in spite of God, but because of God” (*God Matters*, 14–15). Tanner speaks similarly, saying that if God creates the *whole* plane of creaturely life, this does not mean that creatures have thereby become passive. “Instead, the creature receives from God its very activity as a good” (*Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 4). God, so to speak, creates the conditions for the possibility of creaturely activity. The more possibility that a creature realizes in its own life, the more it testifies to the reception of the gifts God gives.

no other force with which God needed to negotiate or contend. That creatures exist is *only* because God wants them to. Importantly, this means that God's creative power is not a coercive or dominating power that, like an earthly tyrant, achieves its results by forcefully (or violently) bringing unruly subjects under control. Instead, God's creative activity is the sort that creates the times and the places in which creatures can take root and grow. The moment anything comes into being, it is the material manifestation of a divine intention that expresses how good it is for it to be. Each creature, we can say, is God's love variously made visible, tactile, auditory, fragrant, and nutritious.

Ian McFarland has recently argued that "from nothing" can be parsed in three ways: (a) "nothing but God," which is to say that the existence of creatures depends on nothing but God's will for them to be; (b) "nothing apart from God," which is to say that without God no creature could possibly be, because no creature is the source of its own being; and (c) "nothing limits God," which is to say that no created thing has the effect of causing God to be something other than what God is. The upshot of this way of speaking, says McFarland, is "God's total and unrestricted dedication" to creatures.²¹ God creates in freedom, without constraint, and only out of love.

The practical implication that follows from this claim is of the greatest importance because it means that there is no other principle or power that can take credit for the life of anything. Divine love alone is the power at work in every created thing, which is also to say that every creature is cherished by God.²² Recalling the Sabbath character of creation, we can say that God delighting in the existence of creatures is also the modality by which they are brought into and sustained in their being. Every creature, simply by being the creature that it is, is a material embodiment of a divine intention and energy that rejoices in its flourishing. Insofar as people perceive fellow creatures as beloved by God, their most important and enduring task is to participate in the care and nurture of their lives. Put another way, no creature simply *is*. All creatures are, instead, the material, gratuitous, and

²¹ Ian McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), especially chapter 4 (the quotation is on p. 106). In this book, McFarland gives some of the history behind creation *ex nihilo*. He also shows how the problem of evil can be addressed from out of this teaching.

²² Saying that love alone is the power animating creatures is not to deny that the forces of evil are also often present and active. They are, but not as a substantial, self-subsisting power. Theologically framed, evil is a perversion of God's creative and sustaining power. Evil, we might say, hijacks the power of life, distorts and twists it, and so creates the pain and suffering that causes God to mourn and lament rather than rejoice.

gracious expression of a divine desire that they realize the fullness of their being.

The histories of so-called Christian nations and their leaders provide ample evidence that creation *ex nihilo* has not often enough been understood to be creation *ex amore*. Instead, the logic of this teaching has been perverted and deployed to legitimate imperial and colonial projects that stifle and degrade places and creatures alike. Thinking (falsely) that God's power is coercive and controlling, Christian leaders have twisted the doctrine of creation into a "doctrine of discovery" that appropriated and privatized lands, decimated Indigenous populations, and put in place the processes that commodified the diverse human and nonhuman bodies of this world.²³ The god assumed in this horrid history had little to do with the God described in Jewish and Christian scriptures. Instead, this was a deist god suited for a world characterized as a mechanism, and thus open to endless manipulation and control. As Willie Jennings has noted, "the vision born of colonialism articulated a Creator bent on eradicating peoples' ways of life and turning creation into private property." Rather than creating places and communities of mutual sharing, healing, and deep communion – places in which creatures come to share in God's Sabbath rest – colonists and imperialists created a world that fragments, segregates, and commodifies life. Having rejected the logic of creation, we now live in a profoundly lost and disoriented condition that points to "deep psychic cuts and gashes in the social imaginary of western peoples, but also to an abiding mutilation of a Christian vision of creation and our own creatureliness."²⁴

CREATION THROUGH CHRIST

The twin set of ideas that the world is created and that creatures are sacred gifts is shared by multiple religious and Indigenous traditions. Although not necessarily subscribing to each aspect of the logic of creation as I have so far articulated it, people from around the world have been drawn to the idea of a divine creator because in their engagement with places and fellow creatures they often encounter a depth of significance and a plenitude of being that communicates what I call the graciousness of the world. To be sure, there is ample acknowledgment of creaturely pain and suffering, but beneath the

²³ For a description of this history, see Whitney Bauman's *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics: From Creation ex nihilo to terra nullius* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

²⁴ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 292–293.

terror and the tragedy there is a mysterious and incomprehensible power that is believed to be more primordial, and that is generative of life's ever-fresh natality. It isn't simply that people can be amazed by life's intricacies, flavors, and beauties; it is the realization that raspberries, meadowlarks, and newborns, although hardly needing to be, exist, and that their existence is fundamentally good. Although scientists have done excellent work helping us understand how these creatures come to be what they are, *that they are at all* remains as a source of constant astonishment and, if one is appropriately humble and grateful, also an inspiration to be hospitable to and generous with others.

In this section I now turn to an explicitly Christian characterization of the logic of creation, not because I think it is the only legitimate one but because it is a characterization many Christians fail to appreciate and understand. More specifically, my aim is to give an account of what it means and why it matters for Christians to say that creation is *through Christ*. The man Jesus of Nazareth isn't only the embodiment and full realization of what it means to be a human creature. In his ways of being he is also the Christian key to the logic of creation as a whole, specifying the character of the divine power that creates, and realizing what Rowan Williams calls perfect creatureliness.²⁵ By turning to an examination of his particular life, we have an opportunity to see how one faith tradition works out and enfleshes the abstract logic I have been describing. In other words, by attending to his life, a space opens through which all life can be perceived and engaged as the sacred reality that it is.

As Christians understand it, the eternal, divine power that creates and daily sustains the world and all its life coincided and came to embodied expression in the person Jesus of Nazareth. The classical text for this position is the prologue to John's gospel.

In the beginning was the Word (*Logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us. (John 1:1–4, 14)

²⁵ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 226. Williams writes, "Christology is a key to the 'logic of creation' because Christ appears as the *perfect creaturely*: the unlimited, unconditioned reality of the divine Word animates within creation the active, energetic interweaving of intelligible life that makes finite reality a *universe*, not a chaos" (226).

Another crucial text reflecting the early Christian community's attempt to make sense of Jesus's life, and its cosmic significance, took the form of a hymn.

He is the image/icon of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together . . . For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15–20)

Together, these two passages (and others besides) make clear that Christians believed Jesus to be both the creator and the savior of the whole world. Attending to his various ministries of feeding, healing, forgiving, and reconciling others, Christians believed that they encountered in embodied form the eternal power that has been circulating through all of creation from the beginning. Seeing how Jesus lived his life and the way he moved his body, these Christians also believed that they saw what creaturely life is fundamentally about and what it is ultimately for.²⁶

Undergirding this way of thinking is the idea that in Jesus of Nazareth there is the coming together of a fully human and a fully divine life. As the Colossians hymn says it, in this man “the fullness of God” came to dwell. Based on what I have already said, it would be a serious mistake to characterize this “coming together” in mechanical or causal terms, as if two “things” are being mixed together to create a third thing. Something much more profound is happening and being presupposed. First, the incarnation of God in Jesus teaches that creaturely reality is fully open to divine reality. To be in communion with God, creatureliness does not need to become something else, overcome, or done away with. Second, God does not stand at an indifferent remove from creatures. Instead, God abides deeply and desires to dwell intimately with creatures in all their struggles and joys by living in

²⁶ The eminent biblical scholar Richard Bauckham argues, “Christians included Jesus in the unique divine sovereignty not only eschatologically but also protologically, not only in the present and future, but also from the beginning . . . including God’s unique creative activity in the beginning as well as his providential ordering of all things and his future completion of his purpose for his reign over all things” (*God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998], 35–36). In other words, to encounter Jesus was to meet a human being, but it was also to meet the eternal power and life of God. To perceive what Jesus was doing in a particular place and time – in the flesh – was also to perceive what God has been doing everywhere from all of eternity.

our flesh. Third, in Jesus' human flesh we see what it looks like for divine life to be realized here and now in a particular body. In Felix Heinzer's succinct phrasing, in Jesus we encounter the divine "how" working itself out in the human "what" that we all share.²⁷ Jesus, in other words, is an embodied site that creates a double opening through which people can peer into and participate in the depths of divine and human life at the same time. And fourth, the incarnation of God in Christ teaches that creator and creation do not add up to make two, as if a divine thing and a creaturely thing stand in opposition to each other. Creaturely life is always already a sharing in the divine life, because no creature could exist at all if God was not intimately present to it at every moment and in every place. What Jesus reveals in the ways that he interacts with other creatures is what complete sharing in the divine life looks like, and the difference to this world such sharing makes. This is why Jesus can be said by Christians to be the "heart of creation."²⁸

The gospels give multiple examples of how Jesus was believed to embody and make practical God's creating and sustaining power. Consider, for instance, Jesus' encounter with the man known to us as the Gerasene demoniac. Both the gospels of Mark and Luke record Jesus as meeting a man who lived in a graveyard. He was a dangerous man, possessed by an evil, death-intoxicated spirit that harmed others and himself. The "power" animating his body was clearly not conducive of life's flowering. This is why neighboring people put him in chains, trying to restrain his violent acts. Their chains, however, were useless. The demon-possessed man easily broke and smashed them to pieces. No one, Mark says, had the power to restrain or help him (5:4). And so he "lived" night and day among the tombs, howling on the mountains, and hurting himself with stones.

The story compels readers to ask about the quality of this man's life. Although he clearly "exists," it is also clear that he "lives" in a way that degrades life. The fact that he lives alone, in tremendous pain, among tombs,

²⁷ Felix Heinzer, *Gottes Sohn als Mensch: Die Struktur des Menschseins Christi bei Maximus Confessor* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1980), 125, quoted in Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 105. Williams argues that this formulation helps us appreciate that Jesus differs from other humans not because he has a different human nature but because he lives the "how" of his life differently, that is, with a how that is fully open and receptive to the eternal, divine life of God.

²⁸ I here follow Williams, who says

creation is at its optimal level of action and well-being when finite love and intelligence are in accord with the uncreated love and intelligence that the Word eternally exercises. This is the sense in which Jesus Christ is at the heart of creation . . . as the one in whom the movement or energy of eternal filial love and understanding is fully active in and as finite substance and agency. (*Christ the Heart of Creation*, 223)

hurting himself and potentially others, indicates that his existence is a failure, even a perversion, of what creaturely life is about and what it is for. He “lives” a form of being, and he realizes a way and power of life, that are violent and deathly at their core. When Jesus appears, this man senses in him a contrasting form and way of life, a different power that presents an entirely other way for him to be.

What does Jesus do? He casts out the legion of demons that had come to occupy and animate his body, thus freeing him to live a life that is no longer violent or a threat to others.²⁹ He liberates this man from death-promoting ways of being so that he can enter into ways of being that enhance, rather than degrade, life. Having been healed and restored to his right mind, the man begs to be with Jesus. Having recognized Jesus to be the Son of God, he wants to be near the divine power that gives life. But Jesus tells him no. He must, instead, tell others and witness to what God has done in and through his body. He must tell of how God has shown mercy and restored him to life.

Following the story of the Gerasene demoniac, the Gospel of Luke records that one day a leader of the Jewish synagogue by the name of Jairus fell at Jesus’s feet, begging him to come to his home. His twelve-year-old daughter was dying, and Jairus thought that Jesus could help. Surrounded by a crowd, Jesus proceeded to the man’s house. While on his way, a woman with a twelve-year-old hemorrhage pushed through the crowd, touched him, and was immediately healed. Although she had spent all of her money on doctors and treatments, nothing helped. But the mere touch of Jesus’s clothes was enough to bring the hemorrhage to a stop. Jesus stopped to ask who had touched him because he noticed that “power had gone out from me” (Luke 8:46). The disciples were puzzled. The presence of the crowd meant that

²⁹ Readers of this story are often puzzled and dismayed that Jesus allows the demons (at their own request) to enter a large herd of swine that numbered around 2,000. Upon entering the swine, the whole herd ran down a steep bank and into the sea (or lake), where they drowned. Why did Jesus allow this? Does Jesus really hate pigs? It is, of course, difficult to know exactly what Jesus was thinking at this moment, but one plausible interpretation would suggest that the death of the herd was Jesus’s indictment of intensive and abusive forms of ancient Roman agriculture practiced on latifundia in the provinces and around the Mediterranean that were known to degrade the land, creatures, and farm workers (many of whom were slaves). To raise a herd that large means that one can no longer properly care for or fully respect the integrity of each pig. In a herd that size, the best that a pig can do is register as “a unit of production” (to borrow a term from today’s industrial agriculture). It is important to note that Jesus did not send the demons into the pigs. The demons asked to be located there, sensing (perhaps) in the pigs’ abusive condition a place where their violent, demonic ways would be at home. If this interpretation is correct, then this story expands the scope of Jesus’s concern for the integrity and value of creaturely life beyond the man to include the pigs as well. Jesus, in other words, seeks to undo the powers that degrade people and pigs.

numerous people were touching him all along the way. Why ask about a particular instance of touch in a crowd where touching of all kinds was going on? Jesus answered that the woman's touch was different because it came from a person who believed that he had the power to heal and restore life to its proper condition. He said to the woman, now having emerged from the crowd, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (8:48).

While all this was going on, someone from Jairus's house informed Jairus that his daughter was now dead and advised that Jesus should no longer trouble himself with the journey. But Jesus refuses to abide by the recommendation. Instead, he says, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved" (8:50).³⁰ He continues to the house where, with his disciples and Jairus and his wife, he enters the daughter's room. Jesus pronounces that the girl is not dead, she is merely sleeping. Although others laughed, Jesus took the girl by the hand and called her to get up. Luke records, "Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat" (8:55).

These stories, and many more besides, demonstrate both the character of the divine life that creates and sustains the world, and how the incarnation of divine life makes a practical difference in how life is lived in the here and now. Jesus performs through his body, and in the particular encounters he has with specific others, the divine agency that is present to the whole world in every place and time. Another way to put this is to say that when Jesus encounters another, he does not simply see them at a surface level but perceives the divine power that is always at work within them but is, for a variety of reasons, being currently distorted or frustrated. Jesus recognizes that hunger, disease, alienation, guilt, demon possession, violence, and death are obstacles to a life lived maximally. This is why so much of Jesus' ministry centers on feeding, healing, befriending, reconciling, forgiving, exorcising, gently touching, and resurrecting people.

These performances of the divine life are often characterized as miracles or supernatural events. When speaking this way, it is important to be clear that a miracle is not an *interruption* of the laws of nature. Putting it this way is already to assume, like many deists customarily have, that a creaturely body is a self-standing mechanism that functions quite well on its own, until it doesn't. When malfunction happens, God is then supposed to intervene

³⁰ It is important to note that Jesus's injunction to "believe" is not an injunction simply or dispassionately to assent to a cognitive position. It is, rather, an invitation to orient one's entire life in a new direction, and to place one's hope elsewhere. To believe is to trust in such a way that one's body is oriented in the world in a new way. As such, believing is an embodied, affective, volitional, and cognitive act all at once. For a helpful discussion on the dispositional character of "believing," see Nicholas Lash's *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostle's Creed* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

from outside to rearrange the machine and set the functioning right again. This way of speaking is misleading. If a divine power is already at work within each creaturely body, animating it from within as the ever-fresh source of its being, then the talk of interruption actually confuses what is happening. A much better characterization is to say that Jesus's miracles are acts of *liberation* that free people from the conditions that impair, distort, or frustrate their ability to be. What Jesus is doing in his ministries is creating a world in which the divine life within creatures can more fully take root and thrive. He is creating the practical, social, and structured environments in which sacred life can be affirmed and cherished. A miracle does not call people into another world from the one that they are currently in. Instead, it calls them to live this life in a new way because each miracle reveals what life could be if it was no longer frustrated, degraded, or wounded.

As the gospels present Jesus to us, it is clear that they assume him to be a hermeneutical key that unlocks what the created world means and what it is for. One way we know this is that they show creation and creatures *responding* to Jesus in ways that welcome, even yearn for, his life-affirming and life-empowering presence. The birth of Jesus, for instance, is described as an event of cosmic significance, with a star arising and signaling the location of his birth. The baptism of Jesus is an event in which the heavens open and the Spirit of God descends upon him in the form of a dove. At his transfiguration, a cloud overshadows him so that his disciples can hear that Jesus is the beloved Son of God. In his various ministries, sick bodies respond to his touch and are made whole – eyes that had become blind, see again; leprosy is cleansed by his touch; hemorrhaging bodies stop their bleeding and fevers depart; withered hands are restored; a body with dropsy sees its swelling go down – and dead bodies respond to his command and come to life again. While on a boat with his disciples, a threatening wind and a stormy sea are calmed by his rebuke. At Jesus's crucifixion, darkness descends on the whole land and an earthquake shakes its very foundations. The animating power that is at work in creatures, we can say, is tuned to the power that is at work in Jesus.

This characterization of creation responding to Jesus yields a profound insight: the created order in its most fundamental constitution and meaning is *personal*. This world is not reducible to a dead collection of objects or a pile of so many disconnected fragments; it is a diverse, complex, dynamically alive realm marked by the potential for communion.³¹ Things do not simply

³¹ The personal character of reality found an early and profound articulation in the work of the seventh-century theologian Maximus the Confessor. Maximus argued that Jesus, as the one

relate to other things, like the various parts of a mechanism can be said to relate to each other. Rather, creatures are turned and tuned to each other so as to anticipate and be responsive to each other in sympathetic ways. Here it is important to recall that the Greek term for a person is *prosopon*. The preposition *pros* means “toward,” while the noun *ops/opos* means “eye,” “face,” or “countenance.” A person, therefore, is a face turned toward another.

To say that creation is personal is to reject the idea that the world consists of self-enclosed or windowless monads, and to affirm instead that creatures are open to each other from the start and always. Apart from this openness, they could not exist at all, because reality is the receiving and sharing of the gifts of life. Reality is personal at its core because each thing, whether conscious or not, presents as a “face” that is turned to the diversity of others on which it constantly depends. Reality is also fundamentally ecstatic and erotic because each creature is marked by what we can call a longing for relationship. This “longing” is not necessarily, or even fundamentally, conscious. But what this way of speaking communicates is the (widely shared) acknowledgment that a personal dimension runs throughout reality. If a personal God creates the world and is constantly (if mysteriously) present to it as its sustaining and nurturing source, then we should expect creatures to witness to this personal power in their being.

Creation *through Christ* teaches that created life flourishes when it is ordered to, and animated by, the self-offering love he embodied. By showing how well creatures (and we ourselves) respond to the exercise of love and care, Jesus reveals that the heart of creaturely life is itself animated by the powers of love and care. This is a power that is gentle insofar as it recognizes creaturely life to be contingent and needy, and vulnerable to suffering and

through whom all creatures come to be, is the divine *logos* or word who is thereby in personal relationship with the *logos* of every creature. Each creature exhibits a *logos*, which refers to the intelligible form that enables it to be the distinct and consistent kind of thing that it is, and a *tropos*, which refers to the patterns and paths of its development in history. Maximus argued that creatures attain the fullness of their being (their *logos*) when their ways of being (their *tropos*) are most aligned with Jesus’s way of being. This is not an anthropocentric argument for the humanization of every creature, because Maximus is clear that each creature has its own distinct ways of being in relation with God. Williams puts it well when he says “the more a created nature moves toward its optimal actuality, the closer it is to the Creator” (*Christ the Heart of Creation*, 104). Jesus’s way of being, his *tropos*, in other words, creates the embodied conditions in which creatures of every sort can realize the potential that is uniquely theirs to achieve. For further treatment on the personal character of reality, see Christos Yannaras’s *Person and Eros*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007) and Alexei Nesteruk’s *The Universe as Communion: Towards a Neo-patristic Synthesis of Theology and Science* (London: T & T Clark, 2008).

pain.³² But it is also a strong power that engages and ultimately defeats the violent and death-dealing forces that seek to deform and degrade life. Of course, given the enormous scope of this power's action, people should not expect to comprehend this power in all of its manifestations; nor should they expect that its realization will always be pleasing or of direct benefit to them. But when people are themselves inspired and animated by the divine power Jesus embodies, their lives will help create the conditions in which the various fruit described by the apostle Paul as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, can grow (Galatians 5:22–23). These are the ideal conditions in which life can be welcomed and nurtured. They are also the best practices that can form people who contribute to the healing of a wounded world.

³² In her nuanced meditation on the power of gentleness, Anne Dufourmantelle describes it as a form of intelligence that teaches people to be patient and tender in the relationships they have with others. "Being gentle with objects and beings means understanding them in their insufficiency, their precariousness, their immaturity, their stupidity. It means not wanting to add to suffering, to exclusion, to cruelty and inventing space for a sensitive humanity, for a relation to the other that accepts his weakness or how he could disappoint us" (*Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, trans Katherine Payne & Vincent Sallé [New York: Fordham University Press, 2018], 15).