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# Reflections on Creation Care Through Critical Appropriation of Radical Orthodoxy

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## RÉSUMÉ

Deux tendances problématiques apparaissent souvent dans le discours théologique sur le soin à apporter à la création. Ou bien Dieu est considéré comme trop détaché de sa création, de sorte que la création se trouve objectifiée, ou bien Dieu est assimilé à la création, de sorte que la transcendance divine est niée. Cet article tire parti des apports de l'orthodoxie radicale, en proposant une position constructive

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im theologischen Diskurs über die Bewahrung der Schöpfung tauchen oft zwei problematische Trends auf: Entweder sieht man Gott als ganz und gar losgelöst von der Schöpfung, so dass die Schöpfung vergegenständlicht wird, oder man setzt Gott mit der Schöpfung gleich, so dass Gottes Transzendenz verloren geht. Dieser Aufsatz macht sich Erkenntnisse der *Radical Orthodoxy* zu eigen (Kritik des Säkularismus und der kantischen Metaphysik, Anm. d. Übers.) und schlägt eine vermittelnde konstruktive Position zwi-

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## SUMMARY

Two problematic tendencies often arise in theological discourse on creation care. God is either seen as too detached from creation, so that creation is objectified, or God is equated with creation itself, so that God's transcendence is lost. This essay will appropriate insights from Radical Orthodoxy, suggesting a mediating, constructive position between these two negative tendencies. I will argue that creation should

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### 1. Introduction and terms

At least two unhelpful tendencies often arise in discussions about creation care among Christians.

moyenne entre ces deux tendances négatives. Je soutiendrai que la création ne doit ni être réduite à un produit de Dieu, ni considérée comme identique à Dieu. Bien plutôt, elle pointe vers Dieu et participe à la révélation de Dieu. Dieu se révèle par sa création qui présente des traces et des marques d'un créateur transcendant. Nous devons apprécier, garder et prendre soin de la création, non seulement comme des gérants responsables, mais comme ayant part au don divin qu'est la révélation.

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schen diesen beiden negativen Trends vor. Der Autor vertritt das Argument, dass die Schöpfung weder auf ein Produkt Gottes reduziert, noch als mit Gott identisch angesehen werden soll. Vielmehr weist dieselbe auf Gott hin und hat als eine Form seiner Offenbarung Anteil an ihm. Gott offenbart sich durch die Schöpfung, welche die Spuren und Kennzeichen eines transzendenten Schöpfers aufweist. Wir müssen die Schöpfung wertschätzen, bewahren und für sie Sorge tragen, und zwar nicht nur als verantwortliche Haushalter, sondern als Teilhaber am Geschenk der Offenbarung Gottes.

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neither be reduced to a product of God nor regarded as identical to God. Rather, it points towards God and participates in God as his revelation. God discloses himself through creation, displaying the traces and markings of a transcendent Creator. We must cherish, guard and care for creation not simply as responsible stewards, but as participants of God's gift of revelation.

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One is that God becomes too detached from creation, so that creation loses its impact as a pointer to God as it was intended. As a result of such a strin-

gent Creator – creation dualism, creation becomes that which ‘belongs’ to humans to master, harness, control and dominate. Since the earth will pass away, humans may do with it as they please until this order of life disappears. Although God created the natural world, it is objectified, observed and used, apart from its profound connection to God. The second mistaken tendency is that creation is seen as equal to God. In this way caring for the earth becomes identical to caring for God. God is Mother Nature, indistinguishable from the created world; his transcendence is levelled and lost. This model also objectifies creation, but the object is essentially equated with God himself (pantheism) or recognised as part of God’s being (panentheism).

In my view, both these tendencies fail to move beyond the Cartesian subject-object divide which predominates in modernist thinking. By critically appropriating insights from Radical Orthodoxy, in particular from John Milbank, this paper will show that both tendencies are wrongly directed. Creation should not simply be reduced to a product of God, as a mere resource to be exploited, nor must it be seen as identical to the being of God. Rather, it should be regarded as reflecting God, pointing towards God and participating in God as his revelation. Creation is how God discloses himself to us, and it displays the traces and markings of the transcendent Creator. Creation gives both the context for our understanding of God’s activities and provides the space for physical embodiment, including the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. Hence we must cherish, guard and care for creation not simply as responsible stewards, but as participants within the playground of God’s wonderful gift of revelation.

Before we proceed, some terms should be clarified. First, when we discuss creation care, what do we mean? What is ‘creation’? We often think of the earth and our environment. From that perspective ‘caring for creation’ is responsible stewardship for all the earth’s ‘natural resources’, including water sources, sunlight, air, trees, forests and electricity. Together with this, we perhaps think of preserving the beauty of Earth from pollution, including the protection of all God’s creatures in the animal kingdom.

Here in Belgium, we follow an aggressive recycling programme for plastics, metal, paper, cardboard and garden waste. Many people take part in this, no doubt, not for altruistic reasons, but simply because of the savings it offers on garbage

collection fees. Nonetheless, it remains a responsible community activity, but is this genuinely ‘creation care’? Do we need to distinguish between care of the ‘earth’ and care of ‘creation’? Creation is a vast theological category with various conceptions and complexities; it cannot simply be reduced to the Earth or its environment.<sup>1</sup> Creation, essentially, is all that God created. It includes everything we see and understand (or think we understand), and all that we do not understand and do not see. The Nicene Creed affirms that God is the ‘Maker of all things visible and invisible’. Michael Welker puts it this way: “Creation” is the construction of associations of interdependent relations between realms of life that are relatively accessible to us and those that are relatively inaccessible to us.<sup>2</sup> Creation includes the macro world of stars, galaxies and black holes as well as the micro world of amoebas, atoms and particles. In fact, ‘creation’ also includes all the ‘nothingness’ of space – which physicists tell us is really ‘something’ after all.

I will not embark on a complex doctrine of creation here, so I will keep my description as straightforward as possible for the scope and purposes of this article. Creation is everything that is not God, yet it is fashioned (to some extent) by the initial free act of God’s grace in its process of becoming. As humans, we are both part of and inhabitants within God’s creation. Despite this connection, in the often-perceived radical dualism between God and his creation, many important connections are lost. As a result, we do not effectively reflect ‘care’ values for creation nor do we engage in daily practices that reflect ecological concern. This article attempts to provide a propaedeutic foray towards restoring this connection.

Returning to my initial observation of at least two negative approaches regarding creation care, I will describe these tendencies as ‘creation as product’ and ‘creation as the embodiment of God’ respectively.

## **2. Creation as product: God detached from creation (human dominion model)**

As mentioned above, we inhabit creation, we are part of creation, and we creatively participate in creation. It is important to consider Jürgen Moltmann in this regard, for he develops an ecological doctrine of creation. For Moltmann, modern theological tendencies portray God as an ‘absolute subject’, a transcendent ruler who has become more and more detached from his creation. As

Creator, God is 'Lord of the world', Moltmann reasons, so the human, created in God's image, 'had to endeavour to become the lord and owner of the earth'.<sup>3</sup> This activity, along with the advancement of the empirical sciences and an increase in specialisation, failed to recognise the interrelatedness between 'objects' and human relationships.<sup>4</sup> In my view, this reduces creation to a 'product' to be manipulated, whether for good or bad. As an alternative, Moltmann proposes a return to a view of creation as participation, connection and relationship, understanding that 'Life is communication in communion. And conversely, isolation and lack of relationship means death for all living things, and dissolution even for elementary particles'.<sup>5</sup>

Some are lured into thinking of the creation mandate (Gen. 1:28) solely in terms of domination, mastery and control, instead of responsibility, care, love and stewardship.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, irresponsible neglect and abuse of natural resources cannot be theoretically or theologically justified from the creation mandate. Nevertheless, we have often unwittingly and subtly appropriated such thinking in practice with our latent understanding of God as detached from creation and his 'giving it up' into our hands to manage until the coming of the new creation. Richard Bauckham argues that this 'vertical relationship' perspective, 'whether it be called rule or dominion or stewardship or even priesthood, ... has been one of the ideological driving forces of the modern technological project of dominating nature'. Bauckham submits that this western perspective stems from the Renaissance, when people 'forgot their own creatureliness, their embeddedness within creation'.<sup>7</sup> Such perspectives may not be explicitly articulated, but are often implicit in a manner of thinking that can be seen from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and the resulting industrial revolution.<sup>8</sup> This thinking produced a modernist, progress-centred, humanistic optimism, achieved by harnessing the earth and its resources for the sake of capitalist advancement, without regard to the consequences for the environment.

### 3. Creation as the embodiment of God

Others affirm, as Bauckham put it, our 'embeddedness within creation'<sup>9</sup> but go so far as to suggest a full theistic biocentrism – where God and creation merge into one. In Sally McFague's eco-theology, for instance, God is the 'embodied spirit' of the universe and the natural world is the body

of God.<sup>10</sup> Mark I. Wallace notes, 'All creation bodies forth the divine life in McFague's pan-en-theistic model of God: God is *in* every living thing and all living things are *interanimated* by the divine life source.'<sup>11</sup> McFague herself concedes that her model is just that – a model. Nonetheless it is a model that attempts to 'look at everything through one lens' of seeing the universe as 'God's body'.<sup>12</sup> It is not the only model for God, in McFague's opinion, but one that is invaluable for our current times and the ecological crisis of our planet.<sup>13</sup> However, Wallace finds McFague's immanent reading of God and the world unclear. At one point, McFague seems to make God identical with the universe, but at another she indicates that God is not completely dependent upon the universe. This equivocation, Wallace observes, 'betrays a residual dualism' in McFague's theology.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Wallace urges a more full-scale identification of God and the world where the 'specter of ecocide raises the risk of deicide', where God's fate and the world's fate are tied together.<sup>15</sup>

I appreciate Wallace's emphasis on the participation of creation in God, but his distinction between Creator and created is extremely ambiguous, to say the least. Is it necessary to make God fully immanent in creation in order to be able to argue for a strong ecological motivation in our theology?<sup>16</sup> Is it not possible to argue for a strong view of the transcendence of God without it resulting in the seeming onto-theological dualism of God and creation that Wallace suggests? Steven M. Studebaker puts forward this possibility by arguing for a pneumatological panentheism that affirms 'God is present as the animating source of life and redemption in creation'.<sup>17</sup> For Studebaker, the Spirit is integrally present in creation and redemption in such a manner that the traditional differences between common and special grace vanish. Hence, the care of creation is participation in the missional, eschatological, redemptive work of the Triune God and is a crucial aspect of our sanctification.<sup>18</sup> For example, Studebaker believes it may be possible to demonstrate our Christian character just as much by purchasing 'organic fair trade coffee and turning the heat down' as we can by 'praying, attending church, and fasting'.<sup>19</sup>

Wallace agrees that God and creation are not identical. Nonetheless, with his theological model it is difficult to identify the difference.<sup>20</sup> Since all life forms are embodiments of the Spirit of God, no particular form of life (human, animal or other) is worthy to dominate the other in the shared eco-

system; we are all intertwined and connected. All forms of life are fundamentally worthy of equal protection.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Studebaker's pneumatological panentheism is careful to maintain both the distinctions between the life forms as well as the priority of humankind with respect to the rest of creation. As he puts it:

To be sure, pine trees will not participate in the eschaton in the same way that human beings will; nonetheless, in some way God promised to redeem creation, and it will share in the eschaton in a way appropriate to its life form.<sup>22</sup>

Studebaker's insightful comments help us transition to this article's proposal of a critical appropriation of the theological sensibilities of Radical Orthodoxy to provide a more nuanced understanding of creation as participation and pointer to God.

#### 4. Creation as participation and pointer towards God

##### 4.1 Radical Orthodoxy

Radical Orthodoxy is a theological sensibility that has offered a robust view of God's manifest presence in creation, while at the same time maintaining a strong view of his transcendence. For the purposes of this paper, I will not go into detail regarding the background of Radical Orthodoxy, as this has been done competently elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> Instead, I will simply make a few cursory comments. Radical Orthodoxy has a diversity of expressions, but its origins are credited to John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, who in 1999 edited and contributed to the publication of a collection of essays under the simple title *Radical Orthodoxy: A new theology*, the ideas of which were already germinating with John Milbank's previous publication, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond secular reason*, which first appeared in 1990.

Proponents of Radical Orthodoxy submit that modernist secularism has wrongly framed the world by removing God from its narrative. As Milbank begins *Theology and Social Theory*: 'Once, there was no "secular".'<sup>24</sup> The world around us has come to be seen as independent from God, that which we can dominate and apprehend for ourselves, rather than being understood by its connection with God as his creation.<sup>25</sup> Radical Orthodoxy desires to restore a sense of this connection. It is radical in the sense of the Latin word *radix*, that

is, 'root' – desiring to return to the patristic and medieval roots of theology with an 'Augustinian vision of all knowledge as divine illumination – a notion which transcends the modern bastard dualisms of faith and reason, grace and nature.'<sup>26</sup> It is orthodox also in this way, by affirming its commitment to historic creedal Christianity that was displaced after the late Middle Ages.<sup>27</sup>

The modern world has objectified creation as a series of objects 'out there' which are available to consume and dominate, so the society in which we live has lost any notion of transcendent value. Instead, value is sought only in and through objects themselves, which John Milbank calls 'immanent spacialization'. This reality is construed outside of a theological vision, so it is merely ornamental – ultimately empty and dead. Radical Orthodox theologians, such as Milbank and Pickstock, believe that this is simply the modernist agenda of reason imposing itself on reality and creating a pseudo-reality, hence doing violence to the richer fullness of reality itself. For them the world around us is not simply a set of facts or contingencies to be mastered and controlled, but it is a gift from God. Creation must always be seen with reference to God, and created things seen as 'marked' with God's handprint, as sacramental pointers to God. According to Milbank, Radical Orthodoxy is offering a full-orbed embodied view of reality and corporeality that does not end with the despair of decay and death. Instead, corporeality is renewed and redeemed in view of Christ's incarnation and resurrection.<sup>28</sup>

According to Catherine Pickstock, the divine pervades our reality but also transcends it; it is always beyond our reach. For instance, when we consider an object in nature, such as a tree, we must realise that the tree is an object in creation that cannot be simply grasped as it is. Since the tree was created by God and participates in God, it will always elude our grasp *in toto*. That is, the tree is more than an end in itself, and it is received as more than itself – as both a gift from God and pointer to God.<sup>29</sup> A key theological framework for Pickstock, and Radical Orthodoxy in general, is that of participation; participation that 'refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity'.<sup>30</sup> This is neither a materialist reductionism nor some sort of mystical spiritualism or pantheism. It recognises the material along with our embodied participation in and with the material, but realises that there is more than simply meets the eye. Radical orthodoxy

'actually saves the appearances by exceeding them ... one is insisting that behind this density resides an even greater density'.<sup>31</sup> To put it another way, 'all real knowledge involves some revelation of the infinite in the finite'.<sup>32</sup>

With this brief overview of key themes in Radical Orthodoxy in mind, we can readily notice several significant implications for our reflections on creation care. As human beings, we are part of creation, we act in and through creation; God incarnated himself through creation, and creation continually points us to God. In this, creation leads us beyond creation itself. God is neither lost in creation nor disassociated from its revelatory aspects. Drawing from Radical Orthodoxy, we say that creation is sacramental in character in that it displays the givenness of God's grace, without being itself divinised or made equivalent to God in some fashion of eco-theological immanentism. That is, God always exceeds creation as its Creator. As a gift of God, creation is not simply reduced to a gift-object that must be cared for and managed, but is rather intrinsically sacramental as a pointer back to God.<sup>33</sup> Richard Bauckham observes the distinction between 'divine' and 'sacred', words which are related but not synonymous: "'Sacred" means, not "divine", but "dedicated to or associated with the divine". In the Bible (and the Christian tradition before modern times), nature is certainly de-divinised but it is not de-sacralised'.<sup>34</sup> While referring to creatures (although we could surely add 'creation' in general), Bauckham insists that they 'are not divine, but they belong to God, are valued by God, and point us to God'. If viewed correctly, 'they do not let our attention rest purely on themselves, but take us up into the movement of glorification of God that is their own existence'.<sup>35</sup> This perspective is not an obscure pantheism, but rather a profound recognition of the otherness of creation in its own interconnectedness (such as between creatures and nature) and its integral connectedness to God as the creator and sustainer of creation.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4.2 Participation in creation

John Milbank rightly values environmental concerns; he would oppose the indiscriminate application of technology, and would find himself, as he says, 'in substantial agreement with much of the Green programme'.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, he strongly opposes an eco-theological immanentism that merely seeks to re-sacralise nature.<sup>38</sup> With Milbank's perspectives in mind, we can see that

both aforementioned problematic positions (i.e. creation as product and creation as the embodiment of God) are more closely aligned with each other than may be initially evident. As mentioned above, both tendencies have inherited the modernist subject-object dualism along with its inherent hubris. In both instances, creation is objectified as something radically external to mankind. When creation is seen as a product given into our hands, it is often seen as our tool to possess, manipulate and exploit as we will. On the other hand, when creation is understood as the full embodiment of God, where God and nature run together, then creation is also objectified as that which must be ultimately rather than penultimately revered. Ecology in this model is seen as the 'new natural law' where the 'arms of nature' are the support for the 'new objectivity'.<sup>39</sup> An eco-theology of this sort simply perpetuates a 'modern natural theology' that makes faith the divine lure of a suffering God who suffers with humanity, instead of a divine God who promises freedom from sufferings and sin.<sup>40</sup> This eco-theological modernist recapitulation to the objectification of nature is then ultimately a disguise for another mode of 'power and domination'<sup>41</sup> and even, as Milbank submits, masking 'the ruses of human power and ambition'.<sup>42</sup> In his affirmation of Milbank, Steven Shakespeare weighs in on this by pointing out that if one denies God's transcendence in such an eco-theological model, it implies fatalism; as God 'is no longer free and loving in relation to nature, but is trapped by it'.<sup>43</sup>

Instead, the sensibilities of Radical Orthodoxy intend to preserve the integrity of God as Creator, while equally affirming and preserving the integrity of creation's materiality. Steven Shakespeare helpfully furnishes two 'rules' that 'govern' Radical Orthodoxy's theological understanding of participation in this regard: First, participation does not equal identity. Being human or being creation is not the equivalent with the Being of God. Keeping this distinction is critical to guarding 'against idolatry, and all the domination and cruelty which flow from it'.<sup>44</sup> Second, participation assumes relationship. That is, we must 'understand the being of the world in relation to God' as 'God's creative act' – the infinite is manifested through the finiteness of creation.<sup>45</sup> Shakespeare's insights guide us to observe that God reveals himself in and through *creatio ex nihilo*, into the ongoing givenness of creation and into new creation. Preserving creation's integrity as the *creatio ex nihilo* gift of God requires both rules. As a gift of God coming directly from

his being, creation is integrally linked to God; it is not simply a done and settled event for humans to handle as they wish. God gave of himself in his act of creation, he gives of himself presently in and through creation, and he will give of himself as he redeems and renews creation in the future. As Ted Peters aptly states: 'For God to be able to deliver transformation of the present world, God must be transcendent to it.'<sup>46</sup>

### 4.3 Too Platonist?

Interestingly, with regard to their overtly positive outlook on creation, the primary original proponents of Radical Orthodoxy (Milbank, Pickstock and Ward), are unashamedly Platonic in orientation.<sup>47</sup> James K.A. Smith, who himself advocates a critical, even if modified Reformed appropriation of Radical Orthodoxy, has insisted that this unswerving, intentional commitment to a revived Platonism in the Radical Orthodoxy movement actually discredits its commitment to the integrity of creation.<sup>48</sup> With Plato's other-worldly emphasis, 'it is difficult not to see Plato suggesting that the body and time are indeed ladders that are kicked away once the ascent has been completed'.<sup>49</sup> Smith wants to guard the importance of the physicality of creation in Radical Orthodoxy, and for this reason he believes that it is important to distance himself from its forthright commitment to Platonism. Christians are committed to creation, incarnation, resurrection – all of which are crucial for embodied Christianity. Plato is more committed to leaving the materiality of creation behind than to embracing it, so the 'attempt to make Plato proto-Christian is deeply flawed'.<sup>50</sup> Instead, it is essential to move beyond the trappings of Plato that see creation as 'less real' than it is. Creation is a gift from God displaying God's handiwork, and it provides the 'theater of the Creator's glory' both now and into the eschaton.<sup>51</sup>

Due to space and scope, this essay will not consider rebuttals to Smith's critique, but at the very least his cautiousness deserves consideration.<sup>52</sup> N.T. Wright has also expressed caution regarding western Christianity's all too close (even if unwitting) embrace of Plato:

We have been buying our mental furniture for so long in Plato's factory that we have come to take for granted a basic ontological contrast between 'spirit' in the sense of something immaterial and 'matter' in the sense of something material, solid, 'physical'.<sup>53</sup>

For Wright, it is precisely this way of thinking that tends to devalue the physical. In agreement with Smith and Wright, this article affirms that physicality (in creation) is in fact the context for the incarnation and bodily resurrection of Jesus, and also for the renewal of creation and resurrection of God's people in the eschaton.

### 4.4 Too panentheistic?

Another question that may arise is whether Radical Orthodoxy's commitment to creation's participation in God is effectively distinct from panentheism. Amene Mir incisively argues for a panentheistic reading of Milbank in order to truly understand his notion of participation:

A panentheistic reading of Milbank explains 'in what sense' creation can be 'as itself' yet 'more than itself', as already 'engraced' as, in some sense, a 'portion of divinity'. For it is the intimate relation between the divine and creation by which all that is, all that is 'other' to the divine, is held and 'contained' within the divine.<sup>54</sup>

Mir submits that Milbank's preference for the immanent understanding of the Trinity along with a denial of a substance metaphysics of creation demonstrates his panentheistic link between creation and God.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Mir's point may be correct, but this reading depends on one's particular nuanced use of the idea of panentheism. In his broad survey of panentheism, John W. Cooper describes several branches and aspects of panentheism throughout the history of Western philosophy and theology, claiming that there are two broad theological strains of panentheism inherited from Plato.<sup>56</sup> One is the Neoplatonist perspective of a God who is 'both the wholly transcendent One, the Mind, and the World-Soul immanent in the world' expressed in process theology.<sup>57</sup> Although Milbank apparently has some sympathy with process theology, he would not ultimately concur with process theology's position on the passibility of God.<sup>58</sup> Rather, Milbank insists that God 'experiences nothing of evil, [who] does not in any way suffer, acts without fear in the world, does good for the first time in the world'.<sup>59</sup>

A second strain of panentheism mentioned by Cooper is one that equates or 'assimilates the transcendent aspects of the Neoplatonic divinity, the One and the Mind, into the World Soul' – a perspective found in the ecofeminism of Sallie McFague.<sup>60</sup> Milbank reacts strongly against McFague's position: 'Given that the world is God's

body, something approximating to a “distanced” love can only be conserved by reinstating the dualistic distance of body from spirit.<sup>61</sup> But for Milbank, such substitution will not do. This would not be a God who fashions a creation that ‘can freely offer him praise’, but instead it is one that ‘imposes limiting constraints upon him’.<sup>62</sup>

Milbank clearly heightens our sensibilities toward the integral relation between God and creation. It may not be entirely clear if Milbank’s position avoids all nuanced versions of panentheism, but he clearly distances himself from process theology and from eco-theological perspectives in this regard.

### 5. Lack of community as sign of the objectification of nature

Bronislaw Szerszynski points out that for Milbank the source of the ecological crisis lies in the crisis of our social relationships. Rather than attempting to re-enchant an already objectified nature, we must assist in cultivating a ‘common civic culture, which in turn would result in the de-objectification of nature’.<sup>63</sup> We need a restored relational ethic applied to our environmentalism that does not do violence to the earth by demanding its incorporation into God and persons. Rather, our ethics should respect it ‘as other’ while at the same time understanding that our identities are linked to the created other without being dissolved into ‘an undifferentiated miasma of internal relations’.<sup>64</sup> The basic or root problem then is relational, not environmental – we do not properly order our human needs and values relative to the needs of other humans or the environment. But navigating the space between the objectification of the non-human world and being appropriated into the non-human world is complex. As Duane Barron wisely notes, if we turn to nature as an objectified other to determine our hierarchy of needs, we ‘posit a kind of distance between humanity and the non-human natural world in which humans appear most distinct from the rest of the natural world’.<sup>65</sup> But, as Barron continues:

This is merely anthropocentrism turned on its head, the same kind of relation that environmentalists condemn in traditional ethical theories. Nature cannot provide these answers because humans are part of the natural world; therefore, human observers cannot escape to an objective position from which they can observe

nature and discover the values they seek. This would require a point of view that is possible only from an eternal perspective.<sup>66</sup>

In order to avoid this reductionism, we must look to human communities, not to nature. As Milbank insists:

For only within human linguistic communities are individuals, including animals and plants, fully valued, only within human community occurs aesthetic appreciation of nature, which must always include a productive discrimination. Humanity is the event of this sort of valuation, such that to deny anthropocentrism is inconsistently to deny the transcendental condition of possibility for a certain sort of ecological concern; that a ‘desirable environment’ cannot be dumbly, objectively realized ...<sup>67</sup>

If Milbank and Barron are correct, and I suggest they are, then we must position ourselves humbly with each other as fellow participants and parts of God’s creation, understanding it as God’s gift and a reflection of God himself. We remain in awe of our environment, while remaining equally in awe of our fellow human beings as embodied creatures, created in the image of God; we are the humanity in which God Himself incarnated, and in which God continues to reveal himself through his Spirit in the community of the Church as the ongoing embodiment of Christ.

### 6. Conclusion: Participation in God and in community for creation care

What does this mean for Christian theology? Sallie McFague argues that theology has a ‘special responsibility for the symbols, images, and language used for expressing the relationship between God and the world in every age’.<sup>68</sup> Since theology is human discourse about God this is certainly understood. But symbols are not merely reduced to symbols of other symbols. Our language and symbols take on a sacramental value as they point us beyond themselves to God’s transcendence, revealing traces of the Divine. Radical Orthodoxy’s insistence on participation in creation, while maintaining a robust view of God’s transcendence to creation, is critical in this regard. The symbols or images themselves do not lose their embodiment simply by taking on sacramental value.

Laura Smit provides insight in this regard as she expands a Calvinist understanding of sacrament. The entire created world remains physi-



cally before us, even though it points to the lasting eternal new heaven and earth fully reconciled to Christ. Bread remains bread but it links us symbolically to heaven in a very real way, beyond a mere theoretical notion of symbol. Smit submits:

Just as the bread is not univocal with the body of Christ, but is genuinely connected to that body and genuinely makes that body available to us, so too our everyday experiences of the world around us are genuinely connected to the kingdom of light of which we are now citizens and genuinely make that kingdom available to us, without being univocal with that kingdom.<sup>69</sup>

I find Smit especially helpful in ‘fleshing’ out the implications of Radical Orthodoxy’s emphasis on participation. In affirming ‘the priesthood of all believers’ we share in Christ’s mediatorial work as the body and community of Christ. We do this in part by our gratitude towards God for his creation, acknowledging the goodness of creation in ‘a way that references God as the source of that goodness and beauty’. But another part of our mediatorial work as God’s living priesthood involves a recognition that ‘things are not the way they ought to be, coupled with a ministry of intercession for the restoration of the creation.’<sup>70</sup> I agree with Smit, but it is important to emphasise that the intercessory aspect of this ‘shared mediatorial work’ also entails and results in a ministry of active participation in community-focused environmental care.

Amos Yong argues that ‘we are moral beings with moral obligations and liabilities, in relationship not only to one another but also to God as the creator and consummator of all things.’<sup>71</sup> For Yong, we

are symbiotically related not only to the animal world but also to the environment in its many layers of complexity. While the science may be disputed by some (a minority), we ignore environmental and ecological issues at our own risk in the long run. Even if our dispensationalist eschatology led us to believe that the end is near, that does not justify environmentally harmful behaviors and ways of life. The eschatological renewal of the whole creation invites us instead to care for the world, to the best of our abilities—now greatly enhanced by science—even as our anticipation of the final resurrection motivates us to care for our bodies. There is therefore this wider domain of the web of life as a whole that beckons our moral response.<sup>72</sup>

As much as we continue to respect the work of Karl

Barth, he perhaps did us a disservice with regard to his view of general revelation and its implications for how we regard creation. In his notable efforts to part with natural theology and its implications at the time, perhaps his seemingly unqualified separation of God from reason perpetuated a dualism of nature and grace which risked ‘allowing worldly knowledge an unquestioned validity within its own sphere.’<sup>73</sup> As a result, God has often been seen as so absent from creation that his intimate connection to it was lost. Indeed, we must guard against the objectification of creation, separating human beings from the ‘it’ out there, and at the same time respecting creation’s ‘quiddity.’<sup>74</sup> These brief and preliminary insights from Radical Orthodoxy give us insightful theological resources to help us keep this balance.

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## Endnotes

- 1 See Michael Welker, ‘What is Creation? rereading Genesis 1 and 2’, *Theology Today* 48.1 (1991) 56-71.
- 2 Welker, ‘What Is Creation?’, 67.
- 3 Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 1.
- 4 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 2-3.
- 5 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 3.
- 6 Ken R. Gananakan, ‘Creation and Ecology’ in William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (eds), *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008) 212-213.
- 7 Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the community of creation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010) 11, cf. 149.
- 8 This perspective may be traced back to the sensibilities of Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton, where nature is that given to us by God. Hence it is our duty to harness it and by so doing, come to a greater understanding of God. This is epitomised in Alexander Pope’s famous *Epitaph for Sir Isaac Newton*:  
Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in night:  
God said, Let Newton be! and all was Light.
- 9 Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 11.
- 10 Mark I. Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, violence, and the renewal of creation* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002) 139.
- 11 Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit*, 139 (italics original).

- 12 Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993) vii. For an astute, concise analysis of McFague's position see John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006) 294-297.
- 13 McFague, *The Body of God*, viii.
- 14 Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit*, 140.
- 15 Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit*, 141; cf. also Cooper, *Panentheism*, 296.
- 16 See Steven M. Studebaker, 'The Spirit in Creation: A unified theology of grace and creation care', *Zygon* 43.4 (2008) 957 n.15.
- 17 Studebaker, 'The Spirit in Creation', 957 n.15.
- 18 Studebaker, 'The Spirit in Creation', 954, 956.
- 19 Studebaker, 'The Spirit in Creation', 954.
- 20 See Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit*, 141.
- 21 Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit*, 9.
- 22 Studebaker, 'The Spirit in Creation', 953.
- 23 For starters, see John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy: A new theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a post-secular theology* (Grand Rapids, Milton Keynes: Baker Academic and Paternoster, 2004); and Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A critical introduction* (London: SPCK, 2007).
- 24 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond secular reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) 9.
- 25 David Cayley, 'On Radical Orthodoxy: Interview with John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock' in *Best of Ideas: CBC Radio One*, ed. Paul Kennedy (2007). Milbank and Pickstock trace this line of thinking back to the late Middle Ages (approx. AD 1300), with Duns Scotus and the nominalists following him, such as William of Ockham. Their thinking was that if the notion of 'being' was to be meaningful, it must be an all-encompassing category of understanding which must even include God. In the process, God came to be seen more as an 'inscrutable will' distant from our corporeal existence. See also Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 14, 302-303; and Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the liturgical consummation of philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 121-131.
- 26 John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, 'Introduction: Suspending the Material: the turn of Radical Orthodoxy' in *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2.
- 27 Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, 'Introduction', 2.
- 28 Cayley, 'On Radical Orthodoxy'.
- 29 Cayley, 'On Radical Orthodoxy'.
- 30 Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, 'Introduction', 3. Richard Bauckham reasons that people living in urban environments accompanied by 'the modern instrumentalising of nature' creates a deprivation of 'a living sense of participation in nature'. Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 79-80.
- 31 Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, 'Introduction', 4. One may draw a parallel here to Jean-Luc Marion's contrast between idol and icon, where the icon always points beyond itself to the divine beyond, rather than the idol's saturation of the gaze (as a mirror image of reality). See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 9-12.
- 32 Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, 'Introduction', 5.
- 33 As implied above, 'sacramental' in this context refers to that which manifests the 'givenness of God's grace'. Creation, in its materiality or physicality, holds a special significance that should point the observer of or participant within creation towards the Creator of that particular materiality.
- 34 Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 86.
- 35 Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 86-87. Elsewhere, I have compared this connection with Jean-Luc Marion's distinction between idol and icon. See Ronald T. Michener, 'A "Value" Prolegomenon for Creation Care: Theological appropriations from Marion and Levinas' in Steven C. van den Heuvel, Patrick Nullens and Angela Roothaan (eds), *Theological Ethics and Moral Value Phenomena: The experience of values* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018) 147-163.
- 36 See Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 87, 132, who refers to this as the 'community of creation', for which he credits the conservationist, Aldo Leopold, and Moltmann (i.e. for Bauckham's particular use of the phrase). Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 87, 191 n.50.
- 37 John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, language, culture* (Malden, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 257.
- 38 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 261.
- 39 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 258.
- 40 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 262, 263.
- 41 Bronislaw Szerszynski, 'The Metaphysics of Environmental Concern: A critique of eco-theological anti-dualism', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 6.2 (1993) 67-78.
- 42 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 262.
- 43 Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 20.
- 44 Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 22. This point is critical to the Radical Orthodoxy position and to a proper understanding of participation with respect to creation. For further reflections in this respect, see Ted Peters, *God - The World's Future: Systematic theology for a postmodern era* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). As Peters submits: 'Thus, to affirm creation ex nihilo is to affirm that God is creator, that humans are creatures, and that it is possible for God to keep the divine promise to transform humankind and the rest of creation into something new' (130).
- 45 Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 22.
- 46 Peters, *God - The World's Future*, 130.
- 47 See Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3.

- 48 Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 197-206, 219-220, 222.
- 49 Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 201.
- 50 Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 203; also see 201-205.
- 51 Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 222. See also Peters, *God – The World’s Future*, 130-131. Also cf. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 222. Here Smith affirms a ‘creation ontology’ which, like Leibnitz, begins ‘from the integrity of creation as the theater of the Creator’s glory without the Platonic desire to peek behind the curtain ...’ (222).
- 52 For some initial responses by Milbank to Smith’s critique of Radical Orthodoxy in this regard, see John Milbank, ‘Foreword’ in Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 11, 15-17.
- 53 Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007) 165, see also 92, 167.
- 54 Amene Mir, ‘A Panentheist Reading of John Milbank’, *Modern Theology* 28.3 (2012) 533. Mir refers to John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and pardon* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003) 76.
- 55 Mir, ‘Panentheist Reading, 534-536. Another author who ascribes panentheism to Milbank is William J. Meyer, *Metaphysics and the Future of Theology: The voice of theology in public life*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene: Pickwick, 2010), esp. chapter 9, ‘A Radical Orthodox Theology: The Approach of John Milbank’.
- 56 Cooper, *Panentheism*.
- 57 Cooper, *Panentheism*, 19.
- 58 Peter Leithart, ‘Milbank on Metaphysics, etc.’, *Patheos* (November 19, 2007) <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2007/11/milbank-on-metaphysics-etc/> [accessed 12/07/18]
- 59 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 229. Cf. Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 165; Leithart, ‘Milbank on Metaphysics’.
- 60 Cooper, *Panentheism*, 19.
- 61 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 264.
- 62 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 264; see also 261-265.
- 63 Szerszynski, ‘Metaphysics of Environmental Concern’, 73.
- 64 Szerszynski, ‘Metaphysics of Environmental Concern’, 70.
- 65 Duane Barron, ‘For God So Loved the Cosmos: The Good News, Ecology and Christian Ethics’, *Restoration Quarterly* 47.2 (2005) 69-82.
- 66 Barron, ‘For God So Loved the Cosmos’, 71.
- 67 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 261-262.
- 68 Sallie McFague, ‘The World as God’s Body’, *The Christian Century* (1998) 671-673, available on [www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=56](http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=56) [accessed 19/10/12]
- 69 Laura Smit, ‘“The Depth Behind Things”: Toward a Calvinist sacramental theology’ in James K.A. Smith and James H. Olthuis (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, covenant, and participation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 227.
- 70 Smit, ‘The Depth Behind Things’, 227.
- 71 Amos Yong, *The Spirit of Creation: Modern science and divine action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic imagination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 227.
- 72 Yong, *The Spirit of Creation*, 228.
- 73 Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, ‘Introduction’, 2.
- 74 Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 87. Here Bauckham is specifically referring to creatures within creation, but ‘quiddity’ with respect to creation at large is just as applicable: ‘It is attention to that quiddity that continually assists our praise of the God who gives them themselves and always surpasses them and us’ (87).