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streams of the law of the Lord, the law that we encounter in Jesus, the word made flesh, in whom 'all things' (including Gaia, the Earth) hold together.

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Modern Alienation and Trinitarian Creation

Thomas Finger

ALIENATION

Few words sum up so many dimensions of modern experience as does 'alienation'. Alienation means more than conflict or discord in general. Alienation points to the profound, tragic sense that elements which should be interacting harmoniously, should be joyfully sustaining and enriching each other, have become deeply estranged and hostile. Contemporary alienation exists on at least three levels.

On a psychological level, many individuals feel alienated from their true selves: from experiencing, expressing or understanding their real feelings and desires, from the person they truly are or should be. On a social level, alienation exists all over the globe among races, social and economic classes, and even between the sexes. On the third, ecological level, modern society is increasingly alienating itself from the rest of nature.

These three levels are clearly interrelated. For instance, isolation from one's feelings and from others is intensified when people are uprooted from natural surroundings. Such surroundings are often destroyed in the interest of the wealthy, and at the expense of the poor, increasing the socio-economic alienation between them.

The focus here will be chiefly on psychological and ecological alienation, first exploring how these widely acknowledged problems are discussed in the public realm. Then, the kind of responses most often put forward in main-line Protestantism and Catholicism will be reviewed. We shall see that these often intersect with a burgeoning interest in 'Spirituality'. Finally, in dialogue with public and main-line Christian responses, a proposal for a more biblical perspective will be made.¹ [p. 191](#)

Psychological Alienation

¹ My initial approach might be called a 'public theology', for it deals with issues raised in the public realm and seeks to articulate a Christian response. It is not 'public theology' in the sense of David Tracy, who insists that 'the Christian faith is at heart none other than the most adequate articulation of the basic faith of secularity itself' *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 79. My approach is closer to Robert Thiemann's *Constructing a Public Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1991), 19–25. He argues that Christians make the most valuable contributions to public discussion by responding from their own particular standpoint, thereby introducing new perspectives and possibilities into the debate. However, insofar as I consider what the proper Christian perspective should be, I leave the public sphere somewhat to adopt a confessional standpoint.

For most of this century western civilization has been what Philip Rieff calls the therapeutic society.² Psychologists long ago replaced clergy as chief interpreters of the inner life. Most current psychological approaches to alienation fall into two main groups.

One is the psychoanalytic approach, stemming from Sigmund Freud. For Freud, the self, or human person, does not really exist at birth. All that exists are diverse and clashing physiological instincts which Freud called collectively the *id*. Each instinct aims simply at its own immediate satisfaction, operating on the *pleasure principle*. But to attain real satisfaction, gratification of some impulses must be delayed, and that of others attained through complex behavior. A self thus begins to form in early infancy when the *ego*, which operates by the *reality principle*, begins to arise—though Freud never really explained how this was possible—from the *id*'s blind energy.

Hardly has it begun forging some order among the chaotic instincts, however, before the fledgling ego is pressured from another direction. Traditional social restraints, collectively called the *superego*, block many avenues of instinctual gratification. The nascent ego, then, must constantly struggle to find some balance among conflicting instinctual impulses on one side and conflicting social demands on the other.

Our main point is that the self, for psychoanalysis, is something constructed in such a process. Self-identity must be forged, then continually reforged, amid conflicting forces that never can be perfectly balanced. Sometimes the superego will prevail, enforcing some degree of instinctual repression. At other times the instincts will break through, arousing a sense of guilt and inadequacy. The self will always be struggling against: (and thus somewhat alienated from), both its own physical drives and its social context. In this three-sided conflict, even a very healthy self will attain no more than repeated, temporary states of imperfect balance.

This Freudian portrait well depicts the widespread modern experience in which psychological alienation seems inevitable. Yet psychoanalysis is pessimistic enough—and, as a treatment, lengthy and expensive enough—that therapeutic practice, along with self-help literature and seminars, is increasingly dominated by a second approach.

Organismic psychology (whose proponents include Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and C. G. Jung), insists that humans have only one [p. 192](#) basic impulse: the drive towards *self-actualization*. The various physiological instincts are not separate, competing urges, but simply aspects of this overall master tendency. The self, then, is really a unified potentiality which exists from life's beginning.

But if we are really unified selves, why do we experience conflicting urges and demands so often? Basically, organismic theory replies, because society teaches us to repress many desires that are natural, and to act in other ways that are not. So we stifle inclinations that belong to our true self-actualization and attempt to follow behaviors that oppose it. This confusion can only be overcome, in Carl Roger's phrase, by 'listening to our organism,' by getting in touch with our real feelings, and allowing them to guide our actions. Then we will 'become our organism.' False restraints and values will disappear, and our authentic urges will merge into one self-actualizing flow.³

In sum, for psychoanalysis personal conflicts are three-sided: the ego struggles against instincts on one side, social norms on the other. But for organismic psychology, the conflict is more two-sided: the self and instincts are essentially harmonious, but society seeks to repress and divide them. Organismic psychologists are generally confident that if individuals are emancipated from false restrictions, their organisms will teach them

² *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper, 1966).

³ *On Becoming a Person* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 103, 111, 118, 189.

how to behave socially.⁴ They often imply that if everyone followed their organisms, all needs and desires would balance each other in a social harmony like that which apparently reigns in the rest of nature.⁵ Then there would be no real alienation at all.

In many of its expressions, the organismic orientation acquires religious overtones. C. G. Jung called the primordial energy, or *archetype*, which guides self-actualization, the *self*. Jung's self is a wisdom and a striving deeper than the conscious ego—it seeks, in fact, to integrate the conscious with the unconscious, and all other aspects of the personality with each other. The self is that region most in touch with what people call God: Jung's varied language sometimes almost equates it with God.⁶ More recently, *transcendental psychologies* much inspired by Jung identify various levels of the self, the deepest p. 193 being the unbounded, non-objectifiable consciousness familiar in Eastern thought. At this level of awareness, spatial, temporal and personal differences are ultimately unreal.⁷

To recapitulate, for psychoanalysis, conflict among instincts, selves and social norms is inevitable. Selves must be forged and reforged as tenuous balances among these forces. For organicism, selves are unified strivings whose components will balance harmoniously if not distorted by social pressures. The greater one's awareness of one's actualization process, the less significant—perhaps even the less real—will instinctual and social conflicts become.

Ecological Alienation

In public discussion of ecological alienation, similar clashes between two paradigms of evolutionary history are often at the core. The first, which has affinities to Freud's approach, is the traditional Darwinian perspective. The second, more recent paradigm is organismic. We will call it the 'Gaian' perspective.

For Freud, blind strivings among clashing instincts in each individual comprised the ultimate sources of human behavior. Though Freud's ego injected some order into these strivings, he claimed that it too was merely the product of interactions among material forces. For Charles Darwin, clashes among the instinctual strivings of many organisms eventually produced the complexity of life-forms existing today. Like Freud, Darwin regarded states of relative harmony among them as unstable, temporary balances among competing forces. More emphatically than Freud, he insisted that complexity and order emerged by chance alone, not from any overarching purposeful agency. For Darwin, the individual creature's environment (comprised of its geophysical components and all other organisms) was basically hostile, something to compete against if one was to survive. Since the number of organisms exceeded what environmental resources could support, only the 'fittest'—which often meant the strongest—would succeed.

As the science of ecology has developed, it has become increasingly evident that any organism's survival depends on complex interrelations with its habitat. Survival involves cooperation as well as competition. This emphasis has captured much public attention through the Gaia hypothesis: the theory that the entire Earth, or at least its *biota* (its living organisms) comprise a single interrelated, self-regulating organismic p. 194 system. Gaia's

⁴ They will not act selfishly, for socialization is one of their organic needs. *Ibid.*, 194, 353.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 177–181, 194, 348–349.

⁶ In more popular psychology, the *Inner Child* often sounds much like this self. See John Bradshaw, *Homecoming* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 38. The *Inner Child* merges into the unobjectifiable Transcendental Self in Charles Whitfield, *Healing the Child Within* (Deerfield Beach, Fl.: Health Communications, 1987), 137.

⁷ See Michael Washburn, *The Ego and the Dynamic Ground* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988).

macro-dimensions have been sketched by the atmospheric chemist, James Lovelock.⁸ The Earth's atmosphere, Lovelock argues, has for several billion years maintained a temperature and a mixture of gases suitable for life, yet one exceedingly unlikely to arise from physio-chemical interactions alone. This balance could have persisted only if some biological processes (such as exhalation) had regularly replaced chemicals that were being depleted and removed others (say, by decomposition and burial).⁹ Gaia's micro-dimensions have been delineated by the microbiologist Lynn Margulis. She argues that evolutionary life has been built up through mergers, or *endosymbioses*, among bacterial parasites and hosts. Living in dependence on each other, they eventually shed redundant or inefficient functions to become single microorganisms. All living beings are composed of combinations and recombinations of these minute entities.¹⁰

The Gaia hypothesis has attracted enough attention among scientists that large-scale interactions among biological and geo-chemical systems are now being explored. But very few scientists have embraced its strong form: that the Earth itself (or its biota) is a single, self-regulating system. This hypothesis is probably too sweeping to ever be decisively confirmed or refuted. Scientifically, its main function will be to stimulate investigation.¹¹

Yet this has hardly deterred numerous environmental enthusiasts from speaking familiarly of 'Gaia', meaning something like the name's original referent, the Earth goddess. Effective environmental action, as many have stressed, requires a change in consciousness. For most modern humans, alienated from the rest of nature, complicated scientific conjectures will not accomplish this. Deep-down, most need to feel that things are one, some archetypal symbol to help them sense the interconnections enmeshed in every breath we take, every morsel we consume. So Gaia is frequently invoked in environmental publications and rallies. Among New Agers and some radical feminists, Gaia is worshipped.¹² Here in the 'public' discussion of ecology, as in psychology, the organismic perspective often slides into religion. For the sense that oneself, or nature, is (at some depth p. 195 beneath conscious penetration), a harmonious unity, is really a religious intuition.

The theoretical emphasis of the organismic ecological paradigm is 'interrelatedness'. Its practical imperative is 'cooperation'. This means, at a minimum, that we ought to live harmoniously with other species if we want to preserve ourselves. (Only this kind of appeal in fact, is likely to gain broad public support.) But most environmentalists emphasize preserving and enhancing all sentient species—and some include non-living things—for their own sake. They advocate going to great lengths to save the most threatened.

While the organismic paradigm sharply critiques Darwinism, it still affirms many features of the latter. It acknowledges that at least five major extinctions, annihilating seventy to ninety percent of the extant species—along with numerous smaller extinctions—have occurred. Lynn Margulis affirms that over 99.9% of species that ever existed are now extinct. All proponents admit that even when nature preserves species, it

⁸ See Loren Wilkinson's helpful essay on the Gaia hypothesis in this volume including his description of the work of Lovelock and Lynn Margulis.

⁹ *Gaia: a New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹⁰ Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Microcosmos* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1986), esp. 69–98.

¹¹ See Lawrence E. Joseph, *Gaia: The Growth of an Idea* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 74–94.

¹² *Ibid.*, 52–73, 200–247.

seems terribly callous about the fate of individuals. One might ask to what extent a full-blown ethic of cooperation and preservation really flow from this organismic theory.

ECOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

In public discussion of alienation, two contrasting approaches are heard: the Darwinian-Freudian, whose roots are Newtonian, and the organismic. How have Christians entered the conversation? Seldom by adapting elements from the first approach. Indeed, Darwin and Freud have long been regarded as anti-religious. Christian response to date has very largely followed the organismic line.

There are, of course, different Christian approaches. Some incorporate biblical themes, in varying degrees. In published literature, however, one fairly consistent, readily identifiable perspective appears most often. It owes much to Teilhard de Chardin and/or Process thought. Representative proponents include Thomas Berry, Sean McDonagh, Matthew Fox, John Cobb, Charles Birch, Jay McDaniel and Sally McFague.

Their key theme is interconnectedness. 'The universe is a seamless web of existence in which all things are enfolded into the constitutions of all other things'.¹³ This web stretches back 20 billion years. Today's p. 196 humans are constituted by exchanges of atoms and molecules with contemporary creatures—exchanges continuously interlinked with all that ever occurred, back to the first sub-atomic particles. This history is treated as a revelation. Catholic exponents frequently regard it as superior to Scripture. (Process theologians often add that the love revealed in Jesus underlies the process.)¹⁴ While all acknowledge that evolutionary history involves much violence, they affirm that its overall trend has been towards greater differentiation, subjectivity and communion.¹⁵ These, they then conclude, are the values which should guide us today, leading us to promote a diversity among species and peoples that they claim will lead to richer harmony among them.

Given the interconnections among all beings, proponents of this perspective call the view that humans are superior to others *anthropocentrism*. However, they also claim that subjectivity, or consciousness, has attained a unique breakthrough with our species. Through us, the twenty-billion year process is first becoming aware of—and is called to take responsibility for—its own direction. Humans have an awesome capacity for enhancing or damaging our planet.¹⁶

To overcome the alienation among species, what psychological or spiritual perspective is required? The interconnectedness of all things must be deeply *felt*. One

¹³ Jay McDaniel, *Earth, Sky, Gods and Mortals* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990), 103. See also McDaniel's *Of God and Pelicans: a Theology of Reverence for Life* [Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1989].

¹⁴ McDaniel, *Earth, Sky, Gods and Mortals*, 42–44, 54.

¹⁵ See Thomas Berry's 'Twelve principles for understanding the universe and the role of the human in the universe process'. The first is: 'The universe, the solar system, and the planet earth in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge'. The fourth principle is: 'The three basic laws of the universe at all levels of reality are differentiation, subjectivity, and communion. These laws identify the reality, the values, and the directions in which the universe is proceeding'. Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, ed., *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 1987), 107. See also Berry's *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988), esp. 123–137 and Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986), 77–128. Matthew Fox supports Berry's claim that 'Nature itself is "the primary Scripture" ...' *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983), 38.

¹⁶ E.g., Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983), 101.

should enjoy and be profoundly moved by the beauty, diversity, and rhythms of nature. These can be felt by people in tune with their bodies and emotions—with those dimensions most similar to natural creatures. Ecological spirituality must emerge from, and enhance, a wholeness of self.

Matthew Fox calls ecological and social alienations *dualisms*. Dualisms arise because we are out of touch with ourselves. Because we are uncomfortable with certain desires and fears, and especially p. 197 with our bodies, we project such feelings onto other human groups and natural creatures. We then regard them as sharply distinct from, and opposed to, our own groups and ourselves.¹⁷ According to Fox, dualism is overcome by the attitude of compassion, which is rooted in awareness of interconnectedness. Compassion is based on the insight ‘that the other is *not* other; and that I am *not*. In other words, in loving others I am loving myself and indeed involved in my own best and biggest and fullest self-interest’.¹⁸

When humans *feel* this interdependence with other groups and species, Fox supposes, they will cease exploiting nature. When people stop fearing and rejecting those who are different, Earth’s resources will be distributed more equitably. Ethnic and class hatreds will cease. War will give way to peace. Even religions will discover that they are interconnected; they will not only learn from, but also be transformed by, each other.¹⁹

This organismic spirituality emphasizes the great diversities among peoples and species; it acknowledges that many conflicts presently rage among them. But since it assumes that greater differentiation inherently leads to richer communion—for evolution, it claims reveals this trend²⁰—its proponents seem to expect that once the right psycho-spiritual attitude is attained, destructive conflicts can rather quickly be overcome. The key lies in opening oneself to the diversity of one’s experience. Matthew Fox, echoing Carl Rogers, calls this ‘a psychology of trust and expansion’: trusting the basic goodness of all one’s organic experiences, from which increased appreciation and compassion for all others will flow. Christianity’s emphasis on sin, Fox complains, teaches us to distrust our organisms.²¹

Since this perspective evaluates pluralism positively, it tends to assume that tragic conflicts arise only when diversities among instincts or creatures are rigidly segregated or suppressed. Conflict emerges when intellectual theories, revealed religions and powerful socio-economic p. 198 interests impose artificial limits and categories upon nature’s rich spontaneity. Since all things are interconnected, God must be too. The concept of a God whose essence is distinct from that of the universe is often regarded as the chief dualism, in which all others are rooted. In such a monarchical model, Sally McFague complains, ‘God is worldless and the world is Godless: the world is empty of God’s presence. Whatever one does for the world is not finally important in this model,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49; cf. McDaniel, 26–29.

¹⁸ *A Spirituality Named Compassion* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 33.

¹⁹ See especially Fox’s discussion of ‘deep ecumenism’ in *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 228–244; cf. McDonagh, 143–153 and McDaniel, *Earth, Sky, Gods and Mortals*, 135–162.

²⁰ The ‘law of diversity’ according to Thomas Berry is: ‘The greater the differentiation, the greater the perfection of the whole since perfection is in the interacting diversity; the extent of the diversity is the measure of perfection’. This is why many religions are needed for adequate expression of religious truth (Loneragan and Richards, 31).

²¹ *Original Blessing*, 81–87.

for its ruler does not inhabit it as his primary residence, and his subjects are advised not to become too enamored of it either'.²²

The antidote for this 'monarchical' perspective is a *panentheistic* one. This is not *pantheism*, where God is literally equated with reality as a whole. In *panentheism*, God's being is, indeed, intrinsically intertwined with the universe; yet God also transcends the world, somewhat as humans transcend their bodies. Ecological panentheists often recommend that we envision the world as God's body, though God is also like its mind, or perhaps its beating heart.²³ Only through models like this, they they claim, can we sense how deeply God nurtures, is affected by, and is involved in all creatures. And we will stop harming and start enhancing them when we believe that, by so doing, we stop harming and start enhancing God.

THE NEWTONIAN WORLD-VIEW

Before leaving the public discussion, we can deepen our understanding by outlining the world-view in which, many claim, modern alienation is rooted. This paradigm, often called 'Newtonian', originated with Isaac Newton's physics. Newton held that all physical objects are composed of tiny, indivisible particles. Each one is distinct and separate from every other. These particles attract or repel each other according to mathematical laws. Such laws, however, are not forces independent of or superior to the particles (though their names, like 'law of gravitation', seem to suggest this). They are simply descriptions of relationships among particles.

Due to its success in explaining physical reality, the Newtonian paradigm was extended to society. Here individuals took the place of particles. No individual, so conceived, had any intrinsic relationship p. 199 with any other. Each acted solely from self-interest. Yet when everyone did so, the endeavors of one would balance those of others in such a way that the best result would be attained for all. This paradigm formed the basis for democratic political theory (where conflicting opinions would balance each other in compromises, which would become laws);²⁴ and for capitalistic economic theory (where competition among employers and workers, buyers and sellers, would lead to the most satisfactory wages and prices for all).²⁵ The processes by which this balance would arise were often called laws; the whole process, it was sometimes said, was guided by an 'invisible hand'. Yet neither these laws, nor any political or economic institutions that individuals would form had any independent, superior reality. The ultimate realities were individuals. Corporate structures would be formed and dissolved in accord with their desires. Social laws merely described how this occurred.

Freud's and Darwin's theories were modeled on this paradigm. The separate instinctual drives, each aiming solely at its own gratification (or, more minutely, the individual neurons through which they passed), formed the basic, independent units of

²² 'Imaging A Theology of Nature: the World as God's Body' in Charles Birch, William Eakin and Jay McDaniel, eds., *Liberating Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), 209–210.

²³ McFague, 211–219; see her fuller discussion in *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); cf. McDaniels, *Earth, Sky, Gods and Mortals*, 102–106; Fox, *Original Blessing*, 88–92.

²⁴ The classic statement is John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* ed. & intro. Thomas P. Peardon (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1952). (originally published in 1690).

²⁵ The classic statement is Adam Smith's *The Wealth of the Nations* (originally published in 1776).

Freud's system.²⁶ Darwin's individual organisms, each competing against the others for scarce resources, paralleled the capitalist economic struggles of his day. For both Freud and Darwin, some degree of balanced order emerged, unintentionally, from the clashes among these individual strivings. Yet these theories showed more clearly than classic democratic and capitalistic models that such strivings produce great oppression, suffering, and alienation too.

The Newtonian paradigm has guided western society for three centuries. Many critics argue that when it sanctioned the unrestricted pursuit of self-interest it simply legitimated the exploitation of the weak by the strong. It allowed employers to victimize workers and western colonialism to subjugate other peoples. Nature, which it conceived as composed of passive material particles, could be treated any way humans wished. For when individuals regard themselves as unrelated to others and are encouraged to act however they desire, the results are not mutually advantageous arrangements, but wars of all against all. And even the victors, estranged from their competitors, their victims, and nature itself, suffer from alienation. Consequently, these critics insist, a more organismic paradigm, in which all things are intrinsically interrelated, must replace the Newtonian.

The Newtonian paradigm also conceived of God (although Isaac Newton himself did not), as remote and aloof from the universe. God, too, was an independent individual, intrinsically unrelated to everything else. Some critics argue that the deepest roots of competitive western individualism lie in this conception of the God-world relationship. Alienation, accordingly, can be overcome only when God and the universe become intertwined.

QUESTIONING PARADIGMS

It is understandable why Christians usually favor organismic over Darwinian and Freudian models. If God be Creator, God surely has formed both human individuals and the cosmos with some overarching goal in view. The components of each must certainly possess tendencies towards harmonious interaction. The final word cannot be blind, merciless, instinctual conflict from which direction and harmony emerge by chance.

Psychological Questions

In the psychological realm, Christians can affirm that humans have something like an intrinsic 'self'—a reality most directly indicated when Scripture speaks of the depths and intimacy of 'the heart'. And when the Bible talks of following a call, or of growing up into Christ's image, something like a self-actualization tendency is attributed to humans ([Eph. 4:14-16](#); [Phil. 2:12-13](#), [3:12-14](#), etc.).²⁷ In ways like these, organismic psychology and the Scriptures may converge.

But does the Bible support organismic psychology's claim that one's basic biological instincts merge harmoniously into this self-actualizing drive, so that no significant divisions need exist within the self? Are all important internal conflicts reactions to social

²⁶ This was especially clear in Freud's 'Project for a Scientific Psychology' of 1895. For a discussion, see Raymond Fancher, *Psychoanalytic Psychology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 63-97.

²⁷ See Thomas Finger, *Christian Theology: an Eschatological Approach*, vol. 2 (Scottsdale, Pa.: 1989), 122-128. God's call through Christ comes from beyond finite persons. But since it comes into conflict with other directions people may be following, theology can infer that selves are structured so as to move towards some goal or other.

restraints, so that individuals, apart from false prohibitions and expectations, would attain wholeness spontaneously? p. 201

Is it not more likely, as Reinhold Niebuhr suggested, that most human instincts are distinct from each other and from our deeper selves? For when an organic instinct arises, we can often choose whether or how to respond to it, at least to some extent. Some range of responses is possible precisely because humans are more flexible and adaptable than other creatures. But this means that potential for conflict also exists among our instincts and among possible directions for self-actualization.²⁸

Whereas organismic psychology usually stresses the opposition between individuals and social structures, Scripture sees them more integrally connected (which is, properly speaking, a more 'organismic' perspective). Biblical terms such as 'body' and 'flesh,' in fact, often indicate that selves exist only in intimate connections with human and nonhuman others.²⁹ And since individuals can act and develop in many different ways, the need for flexibility and adaptability—and the potential for conflict—exists among individuals and groups too. Disagreement, compromise, willingness to limit one's freedoms for the sake of others—these and the laws and customs which make corporate life possible are restrictive, but not necessarily repressive. They are integral to self-actualization because self-actualization is not possible apart from group actualization.³⁰

This discussion has been restricted to humans as created; it speaks of struggle, disagreement and self-limitation, not yet of war, oppression, and exploitation. I am assuming that the former triad can exist without expanding into the latter; and that life marked by the former, where discovering ourselves and loving others often takes thought and effort, may be exactly what God designed us for as *finite* creatures—not for some romanticist paradise where needs are met and conflicts resolved automatically.

But even if this brief sketch seem somewhat speculative, Scripture surely indicates that in our present, sin-pervaded world, conflicts among different bodily drives and personal life-directions, and among individuals and social groups, are omnipresent. One's inner voices, no matter how carefully heeded, cannot always provide clear, consistent p. 202 direction. For even in the Christian, they are caught up in the titanic struggle between Spirit and flesh, life and death, righteousness and unrighteousness ([Romans 5–8](#)).

Self-actualization, then, cannot simply flow from listening to and becoming one's organism. For our inner urgings suggest different possible directions, and outer circumstances necessitate adjustments and compromises. People need guidance from outside as well. We need guidelines and norms. We require ethical teaching, concretely exemplified in communal life. Individuals must develop capacities for self-correction, self-restriction, and when sin is involved, for repentance and confession. But if these teachings and capacities cannot all arise from within, whence shall they come?

Ecological Questions

²⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner's, 1941), 27–43; see Don Browning's discussion in *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), esp. 82–87.

²⁹ Finger, vol. 2, 116–121.

³⁰ Kurt Goldstein, often regarded as the founder of organismic psychology, stressed such things far more than Rogers, Maslow, and the recent 'Inner Child' movement. See his *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology* (New York: Schocken, 1940), 201–223.

All Christians can affirm that in a providentially ordered cosmos there truly is a balance and harmony as stressed by the Gaian paradigm. Yet we can still raise fruitful questions concerning the internal consistency of organismic ecological emphasis.

This emphasis, we noted, incorporates many Darwinian elements: repeated mass extinctions, eventual elimination of almost all species, nature's apparent indifference to individuals. Such a picture is modified by stressing that cooperation as well as competition aids survival, and that any species' well-being is intertwined with that of its habitat. But even if differentiation, subjectivity and communion have increased over many aeons through this 'kinder, gentler' process, does it teach compassion directly for each creature, especially those most threatened? If we seek to derive our ethics directly from the evolutionary process, might we not arrive at other conclusions—for instance, that while success is not usually attained when individuals or nations take on the world alone, it often is when the strong join to subdue the weak? Or perhaps that widespread elimination of the 'unfit' is still necessary for more differentiated creatures to evolve.

Yet Christians, most will agree, *do* affirm compassion and preservation of the weak. These values, however, do not seem to be unambiguously taught by the Gaian organism any more than are personal norms by the human organism. But if they are not, from whence shall they come?

A TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVE

For the organismic perspective, balance and health arise spontaneously within the human and Gaian organisms. Alienation occurs only **P. 203** when these internal processes are disrupted. Yet if, on the contrary, these processes do not automatically produce harmony, but can be sources of alienation themselves, then balance and health must involve forces from outside the organism. If we ask what these might be, we reopen the question of God.

Panentheistic ecological approaches often sketch two, and only two, portraits of God. There is the impersonal, individualistic deity, aloof from worldly processes. Then there is the God whose being is intrinsically intertwined with the cosmos. The former obviously cannot enhance the interrelatedness and compassion essential for personal and ecological health. So if we wish to promote these, the argument concludes, we must choose the latter.

The former, however, is undoubtedly a pale caricature of the biblical God. And Christians have traditionally believed that this God is distinct from the cosmos—that God's being is not intrinsically intertwined with it. We must ask, then, whether there is a way of emphasizing this transcendence which supports not dualism and competition, but inter-connection and compassion.

In its doctrine of God, Christianity's distinctive emphasis has not been monotheism (which it shares with other religions), but Trinity: the claim that God, while indeed being one, is in some very real sense also three. Some have claimed that this teaching is not biblical, and/or is simply the product of outdated Greek metaphysics. Since either charge would disqualify the trinity as a contemporary evangelical understanding, let us briefly consider how it might be derived from Scripture.

Why did Christians ever develop such a strange, seemingly contradictory doctrine? Basically, because the agencies the first Christians came to know as Father, Son, and Spirit acted as only Israel's God could.³¹ Only God could save ([Isaiah 43:10–13](#), [45:21–23](#), cf. [Phil. 2:5–11](#)). Yet the Holy Spirit bestowed, and was, the saving life of God ([Rom. 8:10–11](#), [John 3:3–8](#), [1 Peter 3:18](#)). To partake of this life was to participate intimately in Christ

³¹ For this general approach, see Finger, vol. 2, 379–455.

([John 14:20–21](#), [Gal. 2:20](#), [Col. 3:1–4](#)), a Christ worshipped as only God could be ([1 Cor. 16:22](#), [Phil. 2:9–11](#), [Rev. 5:8–14](#)). These present experiences were rooted in the historical initiatives of these three intertwined agencies. The saving activity of Jesus was inseparable from the loving affirmation and guidance of the Father whose work he did, and the inner dynamism of the Spirit who energized it. At the cross, the Father delivered over his beloved Son, who offered himself up through the Spirit ([Rom. 8:31–32](#), [1 John 4:9–10](#), [Heb. 9:14](#)). Then the Father p. 204 raised the Son through the Spirit's life-energy ([Rom. 1:1](#); [4, 8:11](#); [1 Tim. 3:16](#)). In short, all three agencies struggled together under the burden of sin and the assault of opposed powers, and overcame them together.

This entire process was God's coming into the midst of the people. This coming was unexpectedly concerned with the least in society: with beggars, the blind, the lame; and with the socially marginalized: the poor, gentiles, women. Since all these were invited into the kingdom on equal terms with others, their response would involve social realignment and economic redistribution.³² God's unexpected concern for society's downtrodden was paralleled by a similar attitude towards nature. Even though the grass that flourishes so briefly in the Palestinian heat is soon cut down, it is arrayed more beautifully than Solomon ([Matt. 6:28–30](#), cf. [26–27](#)). And God notices each of those creatures lowly enough to provide meat even for the poor: the sparrows ([Luke 12:6–7](#)). This incarnational movement, in other words, revealed that God is far more compassionately concerned about inconspicuous and suffering creatures, human and otherwise, than straightforward observation of society or nature would suggest.

This whole process was the coming of the God who was high and lofty, exalted far above creation. Its character and goal, however, hardly affirmed individualism and competition. This was a process, instead, of uniting, of drawing together. It was God's taking on our struggles and sorrows; assuming our creaturely condition in the most intimate way possible, in the Son, uniting with us inwardly through the Spirit. And from this same unifying movement people from all nations, races, and tongues are drawn together, and the groanings of alienated nature healed ([Rev. 5:9–10](#), [Rom. 8:18–25](#)).

Yet radical as this self-giving, self-emptying process is, this Trinitarian God remains distinctly *other*. God's intertwining with creatures thus evokes heightened wonder, for it proceeds not from natural necessity—not because we already are God's body—but from grace. Divine compassion streams forth not as love of one's own body, but as self-outpouring for those who are very different. And since this cruciform process reveals how strongly creatures resist God, the extent of our separation, and thus of the divine love necessary to overcome it, are further magnified. When God takes on and suffers under evil's consequences, the sharp distinction between God and evil is illuminated. p. 205

In a panentheistic perspective, however, where everything is part of God, evil must be too. The more directly that the evolutionary process, with its countless instances of suffering, is located within the divine being, the more direct does God's involvement in events like mass extinctions and the elimination of the weak become.³³ But how consistently can such a God be enlisted in the struggle against environmental despoliation and economic exploitation? Will not far more energy for confronting these evils be unleashed if one believes that divine reality is clearly opposed to them?

³² Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vol. I (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1985), pp. 277–291.

³³ Process theologies seek to avoid this implication by denying God's omnipotence while affirming God's loving character. So conceived, God opposes evil, but cannot prevent much of it (see McDaniel, 45, 99). Such a love, however, seems to flow in part from God's natural limitations (because God's fate and being are interdependent with the world's), not from transcendent grace. Moreover, evil seems to be a permanent, perhaps even necessary, feature of the cosmos from this process perspective.

The divine *kenosis* accomplished in Jesus' coming casts further light on the whole creation. This coming was an outflow of the love between Son and Father, actualized and energized by the Spirit. One can conclude that creation originated out of the same loving relationships.³⁴ It began when the love and energy flowing among the Trinitarian persons overflowed, as it were, producing creatures whose variety and interrelations would mirror the multi-faceted splendor of their source.

And since God was everywhere, was all that there was, before creatures arose, creation itself can be called a *kenosis*, a self-limitation, God's making space within herself, if you will, for creatures to emerge.³⁵ As long as this space remains 'empty' enough for creatures to retain distinct identities, this image need not be panentheistic. I think it can help us conceive how the divine love is not really distant from our world, but still surrounds us; and how sin may not be running from God so much as pushing away the One who longs to draw near. Yet some divine energies still flow through this space, still intertwining its inhabitants, and longing to sweep each one up more fully into a flow where its distinctiveness, precisely through the increasing richness of its interrelations, will be enhanced. p. 206

TRINITARIAN SPIRITUALITY

What kind of spiritual sensitivity might flow from the Trinitarian paradigm? How might it speak to the roots of psychological and ecological alienation? It would encourage one to regard individuals as both distinct and inseparably related to others. Individuals are not, by themselves, the ultimate realities. But neither are webs of relations. All creation mirrors its Trinitarian source, whose persons are irreducibly distinct, yet inseparably interrelated.

This means that creation's ultimate goal is not unity—if that means a merging of things into sameness—but harmony, which is possible only between real differences. Consequently, boundaries, breaks, and gaps will always exist among created things. Each creature, in its uniqueness, will always carry about an empty space, as it were, which only God can fill, yet never so fully that the creature becomes God. Experience of God, too, will involve an element of negation. God will be 'possessed' only through unquenchable desire for that fullness too full and too Other to ever be possessed. The divine light will be entered through rays of divine darkness.

Such a spirituality will experience the alienations produced by sin as wrenchingly real. They will not be overcome through penetrating to some inner, undisturbed quiescence that renders them illusory. Neither will all conflicts among creatures merge into harmony if each one is simply released from false external constraints. Ultimately, conflicts *will* be overcome and harmony attained, but eschatologically, as something thirsted and striven for—and, yes, tasted even now—by being caught up in the earnestness of the Spirit. The cross will witness unmistakably to the ruptures in self and world. It will judge us and the cosmos in this way. Yet the cross will also offer the only authentic remedy for enduring the anguish of these breakings: that of being taken up by Jesus into his sufferings, of experiencing the communion with Father and Spirit that enabled him to bear our sufferings. Such a communion, now irreversibly imprinted by the cross and resurrection, offers a rich inner experience of God. Yet it neither dissolves us in the divine nor takes away all suffering. Instead, we share in Jesus' sufferings, and in this companionship, that

³⁴ Finger, vol. 2, 402–404, 427–430.

³⁵ This image is suggested by Juergen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (New York: Harper, 1985), 88.

which makes suffering truly terrible—the fear of futility, hopelessness, abandonment—is banished.

In a Trinitarian spirituality, inner experiences of God also surge back outward. Having comforted us, Christ's suffering love flows back through us to others who suffer, intensifying our outreach—and often, even our sufferings. For any time we truly open ourselves to the God [p. 207](#) who is a fellowship of interacting energies, we are swept into their yearning to draw all other creatures into their flow. The more we are united with, or conformed to, God in this way, the more often are we separated, individuated—thrust back amid the alienations of this world—yet only that God's uniting love may more deeply surge among them. Our energy arises not from a romanticism that supposes that all things already are one, despite widespread evidence of alienation, but from the hope that they someday will become one through the cruciform love which inserts itself into the deepest pain.

Because the Spirit anticipates—and to some degree already actualizes—this hope in the present, the beauty, diversity, and rhythms of nature can be richly enjoyed as signs, or foretastes of its coming. The intricate design of creatures already reflects that Word or Wisdom who is the Son. The life-energy that flows through them is already breathed by the Spirit. And the interconnectedness of the whole reflects the Trinitarian interactions.

Humans, then, can surely experience something of God in the self-actualization process. Increasing awareness of God will always be intertwined with increasing knowledge of oneself. Yet because one's fully actualized self will remain future, and because one can organize one's present drives and interests in different ways, the true self cannot simply be read off from one's organism. To discern appropriate patterns of self-actualization, we will need models and guidelines. These must be derived chiefly, as is the entire Trinitarian perspective, from Jesus' incarnational way.

In a Trinitarian spirituality, the interconnectedness among all creatures will be deeply felt. Its transcendent God remains distinct, yet hardly aloof. The Spirit breathes, surges and groans through all things. So intimately does she³⁶ intertwine herself with creatures, seldom calling attention to herself, that the Holy Spirit sometimes seems identical with their life, or with the human spirit. Yet her groaning, yearning, enflaming and rebuking call creatures beyond themselves towards the hope of the new creation. And the groanings of the creatures, whose anguish she assumes, reveal that the natural world still suffers, still awaits liberation. By itself, nature hardly reveals God's loving goal. The love that directs all things—though glimpsed at times [p. 208](#) in human and other natural processes—is clearly revealed only in the astonishing self-emptying of the cross. Only from this vantage-point can those compassionate attitudes, which form part of both 'public' and Christian discussion for environmental healing, be truly perceived and enkindled.

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³⁶ For the rationale involved in referring to the Holy Spirit as 'she', see Finger, vol. 2, 485–490.