

Nature Praising God

*Towards a Theology of
the Natural World*

Dermot A. Lane

with a Foreword by Margaret Daly-Denton



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FOREWORD

I WRITE these words in a *déjà vu* moment, when yet another dire warning has come from the United Nations: that it is now or never if our world is to avoid the worst impacts of the climate crisis. The UN set up its Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1988. The thirty-four years since then have seen considerable progress, but also much inertia. Sadly, the panel's sixth Assessment Report, just published, reflects what UN Secretary-General António Guterres calls 'a litany of broken climate promises'. Ireland remains a climate action laggard, with emissions still on a rising trajectory, and with pledged sustainable initiatives slow to materialise. We who claim the colour green should hang our heads in shame! Except that here in Ireland we can boast that there is a lively ferment of environmental awareness and action, particularly in faith communities. A prophetic leader, inspiring the Irish Church's growing ecological consciousness, is our own Dr Dermot Lane, an internationally recognised theologian who has been devoting his golden years to channelling a lifetime of theological learning into passionate advocacy for earth-care and climate justice. This he does in whatever time he has left after serving as a priest in Balally Parish for thirty years, where he ministered as a creative and far-sighted pastor for twenty-five years, utterly committed to the Second Vatican Council's vision for the Church.

The potential of the world's religious traditions to instil in their adherents an attentiveness to the earth that can spill over into a greater respect for it has long been recognised, even by many scientists. It has become painfully evident that graphs and statistics tend not to touch human hearts. But if people of faith can see the ecological crisis as a wake-up call to their religious and moral imagination, then powerful energies for restoration and renewal can be unleashed. And this is where the work of theologians comes in. The task of taking a new look at the Christian view of the natural world has, as Dermot explains, taken on a new urgency because of the climate crisis, the ongoing loss of biodiversity and the global pandemic. The challenge for theology today is to develop a new idiom that chimes with contemporary experience, culture and science. Far from being an esoteric scholarly pursuit, remote from everyday life,

this quest has never been more pressing and more crucial for the future of our planet. It is a matter of helping today's followers of Jesus to move beyond the otherworldliness and dualism that distorted the theology they imbibed from childhood, enabling them to discover a new theology of nature in which earth-care is integral to Christian faith.

Following on from his 2020 book, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue: The Wisdom of Laudato Si'*, Dermot now argues for a retrieval of the forgotten, or at least underappreciated, biblical insight that nature praises God. This is a concept familiar from the Church's liturgy, where phrases such as 'All you have created rightly gives you praise' (Eucharistic Prayer 3) frequently occur. He brings his readers back to the biblical roots of the idea that nature praises God independently of human beings, drawing out its implications for eco-theological ethics and for Christian worship. This biblical tradition is a powerful antidote to the anthropocentric and instrumentalist view of nature that has allowed our planet to be ravaged. Dermot thinks outside the anthropocentric box to work out a fresh and theologically rich understanding of the natural world. This springs from his central intuition that attention to the capacity of nature to praise God will open us up to a new sense of our participation in a community of praise that embraces the entire earth. For Christians this involves recognising that the enlivening and rejuvenating Spirit of God is active in the whole creation and that this liveliness of the Spirit has been personified with the becoming flesh of the Word of God in Jesus and his sharing in the interconnectedness of the whole living community of earth.

Among the signs of hope for a healing of the damage we have done to our common earth home, Dermot mentions the 'turn to nature' that became evident over the last two years when church buildings were closed for public worship because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has surely inspired people with a new sense of creation as an expression of the praise of God and an invitation to become part of that praise by 'giving voice to every creature under heaven' (Eucharistic Prayer 4). This can happen both through worship and through work to ensure the flourishing of all that God has created. Perhaps the recovery of a forgotten biblical insight has, as Dermot suggests, something to say to the much-needed reform of Christian worship in the twenty-first century. It will certainly give us

a new understanding of what we mean and what we are committing ourselves to when we sing, 'Heaven and earth are full of your glory!'

Margaret Daly-Denton

6 April 2022

CHAPTER 1

Retrieving a Lost Conversation

*Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
the rest sit around and pluck blackberries.*

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1806–1861)

ANYONE FAMILIAR with the Hebrew Bible will notice that now and again different texts appear that portray nature praising God. This is particularly true of the Psalter, in which there is a fairly consistent theme of nature praising God.

a. A Sample of Texts on Nature Praising God

However, there are also other texts in the Bible with nature praising God. These include:

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Lord has comforted his people
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.
(Isaiah 49:13)

and

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and shouting. (Isaiah 35:1–2)

Other examples in the Bible include: 1 Chronicles 16:31–33; Isaiah 40:10, 43:19 and 55:12; Philippians 2:10; Revelation 5:13.

The two exemplars from Isaiah above show that the praise of God takes place in the present and at other times in the future with the advent of the Messiah or the enthronement of the King.

The praise of God by the natural world is more evident in the Psalter. It is instructive to note that the last psalm in the Psalter concludes by saying: ‘Let everything that breathes praise the Lord’ (Psalm 150:6), as if to say, this is the purpose of the Psalter, a challenge not only for humans, but also for everything that breathes. The praise of God takes place on earth in his sanctuary (v. 1) and in the heavens (v. 1). This suggests a connection between earthly and heavenly praise of God.¹ All, in heaven and on earth, in the present and the future, are invited to join in the praise of God.

The best-known psalm in which everything that breathes praises God is Psalm 148. This psalm is largely post-Exilic and was probably recited in public worship (as was the first creation story in Genesis 1:1–28). The psalm has a number of striking features.

It begins and ends with the injunction ‘Praise the Lord’, addressed to all beings in the world. The word ‘all’ appears eight times and is addressed to all living creatures. Two broad categories are called to praise: the heavenly and the earthly. Within the earthly, you have humans alongside a long list of creatures from the natural world. The outreach of the invitation to praise God is comprehensive. The praise begins from above the earth:

1. John Endres, ‘Psalm 150’, in *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*, edited by J. Enrique Aquilar et al., Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2018, 520.

Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens
and you waters above the heavens! (Psalm 148:3–4)

Then it turns to the creatures on earth:

Praise the Lord from the earth,
you see monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command! (Psalm 148:7–8)

Next comes the human community:

Kings of the earth and all the peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together. (Psalm 148:11–2)

All of this praise is addressed to the Lord, ‘for his name alone is exalted’ (v. 13). The distinguished and highly respected UK scripture scholar Richard Bauckham describes this psalm as representing ‘a cosmic choir of praise’ or ‘a symphony orchestra’.² John Endres notes that ‘the psalmist avoids any sense of an exalted status for humans’, preferring instead to focus ‘on what they share in common, the call to worship’.³ Both Bauckham and Endres point out that ‘created beings praise God by being what they were created to be and fulfilling their own tasks and duties’.⁴ For Bauckham, this praise of God by all creatures in Psalm 148 is:

the strongest antidote to anthropocentrism in the biblical and the Christian tradition.⁵

2. Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*, London: DLT, 2010, 77 and 78.

3. John Endres, art. cit.

4. *Ibid.*, 520, and Richard Bauckham, *op. cit.*, 79.

5. Richard Bauckham, *op. cit.*, 80.

In recognising this capacity of the natural world to sing praises, the psalmist is going beyond a purely instrumental view of nature. This call to join creation in praising God is not exclusive to Psalm 148. It can also be found in other psalms, such as Psalm 98:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises ...
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,
the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the Lord ... (Psalm 98:4, 7–8)

Other examples exist outside the Psalter:

Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it;
shout, O depths of the earth;
break forth into singing, O mountains,
O forest and every tree in it! (Isaiah 44:23; similar texts can
be found in Isaiah 55:12 and Joel 2:21–22)

This sample of texts emphasising nature's praise of God prompts a number of questions. What does it mean to say that nature praises God? How is it possible for the natural world to sing the praises of God? To modern ears, this sounds far-fetched. How can there be the praise of God without the exercise of free will?

There are several traditional answers to these questions, even if, in the end, they are unsatisfactory. The first suggestion is that nature inspires human beings to praise God. It is not nature in itself, therefore, that praises God, but human beings who praise God on behalf of nature. Nature functions as a prompt or a stimulus for the worship of God by human beings. This is clearly an anthropocentric response. It assumes that only human beings can praise God, even though we know that nature preceded the advent of the human.

A second explanation of these instances of nature-praising texts proposes that these texts are eschatological. Nature will praise God in the

future by being part of the promised new heaven and the new earth. This response sidesteps the question of nature itself praising God and projects it into the future. In effect, nature praising God in the present is ruled out. Nature is seen in the future as a utilitarian or decorative add-on to the new creation. There is no recognition that nature in itself might be able to praise God in the present or that it might be part, in itself, in its own right, of the new creation.

A third suggestion replies that these nature-texts are merely metaphorical, or examples of poetic licence, or just forms of a rhetorical flourish that can arise out of the enthusiasm that sometimes accompanies intense experiences of the beauty of nature or mystical moments within prayer. This response seems to ignore the peculiar character of theological language. Theological language is, at its best, metaphorical, poetic, rhetorical and analogical. It is because of these literary devices that theology has insisted that every 'is' statement should be followed by an 'is not' statement. So, for instance, we might say that God is the creator of everything there is, but is not a 'thing' like other things. It is only in and through this dialectical relationship between what is and is not that we can get to know and experience the presence of God in this life. Thus some theologians see God as 'the ground of being', but not a particular being (Tillich). Without careful attention to this dynamic within theological language, we run the risk of reducing God to an object alongside other objects and ending up perilously close to idolatry. Acknowledgement of this peculiar character of theological language has been a constant within the Christian tradition. It can be found in Augustine (if you claim to understand God, then it is not God), in Aquinas (who insists on keeping the 'is' and 'is not' together), and the Council of the Lateran in 1215, which taught that there is no similarity between God and creatures without a greater dissimilarity. It is also worth noting that the great mystics brought together positive statements (*kataphatic*) and negative statements (*apophatic*) in their discourse about God. This emphasis has, over the centuries, given rise to a variety of theologies of symbolism, dialectic and analogy.

A fourth response to nature-praising psalms is to suggest that these are marginal and esoteric exceptions. However, before taking this stance, we should remember that a few similar texts can also be found in the New Testament in a saying of Jesus in Luke 19:40, in Revelation 4 and

in Romans 8, which talks about creation groaning. In addition, some of the early Church Fathers echo the language of creatures other than human beings praising God, including Basil of Caesarea, who likens such praise to that of a chorus, and St John of the Cross, who saw such praise as a symphony.⁶ Further, it should be noted that the idea of nature praising God can be found in a few places in the liturgy of the Catholic Church, for example in Eucharistic Prayer 3, which prays that:

You are indeed holy, O Lord
And all you have created rightly gives you praise.

Further, the Exultet in the Easter Vigil talks about the ‘earth rejoicing’ in the light of the resurrection. In addition, the dawn and midnight Masses for Christmas quote psalms praising God, such as

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar and all that fills it;
let the field exult and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the Lord, for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth. (Psalm 96:11–13)

Similar psalms appear in the Midnight Mass and the Mass during Christmas Day, such as Psalms 96:11–12 and 97:1–6.

What started out as a fairly straightforward examination of a few texts in the Bible portraying nature praising God has turned out to raise far more complex issues. Important questions arise about the capacity of the natural world in itself to praise God without taking refuge in an anthropocentric or a merely utilitarian view of nature. To guide us through some of the liturgical and theological complexities of these questions, we will outline the views of four scripture scholars who have dealt, in detail, with the significance of the nature-praising-texts of the Bible. But

6. Taken from Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014, 276, who in turn refers in a footnote no. 17 to the work of James Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Ecological Ethics*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009.

before we consider what scripture scholars are saying about nature praising God, we should consider the significance of the personification of nature in the Bible.

b. A Note on the Personification of Nature

One way of opening up the discussion about nature praising God is to look at the personification of nature in the Hebrew Bible. Personification is about the attribution of human characteristics to the natural world, such as speaking, dancing and proclaiming. In the ancient world, personification was employed as a rhetorical device, designed to draw attention to neglected features of the world. As such, it is a linguistic convention that opens up the meaning of human experience and our encounter with the world around us. The personification of the natural world is found in literature and is by no means exclusive to the Bible.

From a theological point of view, the personification of nature in the biblical tradition is a multi-layered device. For example, what stands out in the Hebrew Bible with the personification of nature is the marked contrast to the deification of nature in surrounding cultures. In the neighbouring religions, nature or aspects of nature were often deified, especially among the polytheistic religions. For Israel, the personification of nature was a way of drawing attention to the supremacy of Yahweh over other nature-gods. One of the hallmarks of Jewish faith is the clear affirmation and strict adherence to the unity, oneness and sovereignty of Yahweh. Another dimension to the personification of nature is the way Israel highlights the capacity of nature to give praise and glory to the one God.

In some instances, the psalms present natural phenomena, such as the earth quaking (Psalm 99:1) and the sea roaring, and all that fills it, and the field exulting and everything in it (Psalm 96:11–12), as praising God. In other instances, you have nature singing, shouting and proclaiming the praises of God (Isaiah 42:10–12; 44:23; 49:13; 55:12). In some instances, the heavens, the earth and all that is in them are presented as praising God together (Jeremiah 51:48).

According to Hilary Marlow, the personification of nature in the Psalter operates at a number of different levels. It brings together nature and humans in praising God. Everything that has breath is called to praise the Lord (Psalm 150:6). This invitation to the whole of creation is spelt

CHAPTER 4

Towards a New Narrative about Nature

*Hope is never dead
until this bewildered earth
stops throwing up roses.¹*

THE PURPOSE of this chapter is to outline a number of small, preliminary steps towards the construction of a non-anthropocentric theology of nature. This chapter will be followed by two specific chapters which will deal respectively with pneumatological and Christological aspects of a non-anthropocentric theology of nature.

a. Nature as a Living Community

The first step in developing a non-anthropocentric theology of nature is to move out of a human-centred model of creation into a recognition of creation as a living community. Whatever about the original intention and meaning of the divine command to ‘fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea ...’ (Genesis 1:28), the reception of these verses in the modern era became detached from the original intention of the divine command, and this has been detrimental to the life and integrity of the natural world. In turn, this modern reception has

1. ‘Flowers know nothing of our Grief’, in Moya Cannon, *Donegal Tarantella*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2019.

given rise to a licence to exploit the natural world for the exclusive use of human beings. There has been a damaging shift from dominion to domination, akin to a political shift from a commonwealth to a power-grab, with negative consequences for nature, especially in the areas of climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and the Covid-19 crisis. Many theologians have been critical of the damage done to the natural world in the name of dominion, and have moved towards the construction of a community of creation model.² It should be stated that this turn to the natural world as a living community is not about reducing everything to the lowest common denominator; instead, it is about recognising that everything has a unique place and a role to play within the wider community of creation. There are, of course, mutually enriching differences and diversities within the community of creation. These differences are not absolute, but relational, and find their origin and unity in the plan of God. The community of creation is a radically theocentric community, in contrast to the domination model, which has been predominantly anthropocentric. The uniqueness of human and non-human beings within the community of creation derives from their relationships within the plan of God. This community of creation recognises and respects the essential role that nature plays within the larger universe.

The community of creation model is inspired by Psalm 24:1: 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it'. This vision of the living community of creation includes all that makes up our universe: the birds and the bees, the trees and the mountains, creatures and humans, and the invisible world that makes the visible world possible. This living community of creation is manifested in the interconnectedness and relationality of everything in the world. Within this model, humans are not above other creatures, but alongside other creatures, not separated from other creatures but fellow creatures, not outside nature but inside nature. This community of creation is held together by the Spirit of God poured out at the dawn of time on all reality. The Spirit of God suffuses the whole of creation from the beginning of time to the present, and into the future with the promise of a

2. This can be found in the work of Elizabeth A. Johnson, Denis Edwards, Richard Bauckham, Seán McDonagh, Celia Deane-Drummond and Daniel Horan, to mention just a few.

new community of creation. The Spirit of God inhabits the natural world, as well as the human world, in a variety of different ways and in varying degrees.

Laudato Si' distances itself explicitly from the interpretation of dominion as domination. It acknowledges that 'We Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the scriptures'³ in this regard, and goes on to say: 'We are called to recognise that other living beings have value of their own in God's eyes'.⁴ Consequently, the encyclical points out that: 'In our time the church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinate to the good of human beings as if they had no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish'.⁵ Instead, other creatures have intrinsic value independent of their usefulness⁶ because each creature 'is an object of God's love'⁷ and, therefore, 'reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness'.⁸ Consistent with this view that all are precious in the eyes of God, *Laudato Si'* affirms that human beings 'are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it'.⁹ In effect, the human is not above or below nature, but exists as 'part of nature' and 'in nature'. Nature is alive through the energy of the Holy Spirit poured out 'in the beginning', and it is supported through the interconnectedness of all living creatures within God's creation.

Then, as if to drive home this point about the value of the natural world, *Laudato Si'* expands the vision to point out: 'Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give to those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all'.¹⁰ In highlighting the intrinsic value of the natural world, *Laudato Si'* is drawing on the unity that exists between creation and eschatology, between shared origins and shared destiny. For some, this may not go far enough, but

3. *Laudato Si'*, 67.

4. *Ibid.*, 69.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 140; see also 33 and 69.

7. *Ibid.*, 77.

8. *Ibid.*, 69.

9. *Ibid.*, 139.

10. *Ibid.*, 243.

for others it reflects, in contemporary language, some of the implications of the biblically based understanding of the whole community of creation. In this way, *Laudato Si'* is sowing the seeds of a more robust, non-anthropocentric theology of nature.

b. Nature as Grace-Filled

A second step in developing a preliminary theology of the natural world must be to address the question of grace. Nature is endowed with the grace of the Spirit of God. We live in a grace-filled universe. This large claim is grounded in a theology of the immanence of the Spirit of God poured out on all creation. The Spirit of God is described in the Hebrew Scriptures as present 'in the beginning', not only in the Book of Genesis (2:7 and 1:1-2), but also in the Psalms (36:6; 104:1-14), the Book of Job (12:10, 27:3 and 34:14-15) and Ezekiel (37:1-14).

The history of the relationship between nature and grace is multi-layered. There have been different emphases on grace down through the centuries from Augustine (uncreated grace), to Aquinas (created grace), to the Reformation (grace alone), to Karl Rahner's distinctive contribution in the twentieth century to a unified theology of grace summed up in what he called 'the supernatural existential', meaning that every human being is graced with a fundamental orientation towards God. All would agree that grace is about the gift of the Spirit of God to every human being and that this gift is unearned and unmerited. In the twenty-first century that gift of the spirit of God is perceived to embrace the whole of creation alongside every human being. In this sense we live in a world that is graced by the presence of the spirit of God. If sacraments are vehicles of divine grace, then creation is rightly recognised as a sacrament. The history of grace up to the twentieth century was played out within the confines of an anthropocentric theology of grace and did not have within its purview a contemporary recognition of the possibility of a non-anthropocentric theology of the natural world.

In the twenty-first century it is increasingly evident that the Spirit of God dwells in creation and is active not only in human lives, but also in the lives of other creatures and in the life of the earth (Psalm 33:6). It is worth noting in this regard that *Laudato Si'* points out that "The life of

the Spirit is not dissociated from the body or from nature or worldly realities'.¹¹ Rather the Spirit is present as embodied in the natural world, in human beings, in other creatures, and in the affairs of the world. Nature, the whole of nature, is graced by the Spirit of God from the beginning of time and throughout time into the future. Roger Haight, along with others, has developed a theology of a grace-filled nature.¹² This gift of grace is an expression of the love of God: it suffuses all reality, it holds the existence of creation in being, and it accompanies all of life. This grace is about the immanent presence of God in the world, in and through the gifts of the Spirit and the Word. The universal grace of God, present throughout creation, evokes wonder and gratitude, which leads to a response of prayer and worship.

In other words, the theology of grace, until very recently, was developed within an anthropocentric paradigm. This modern anthropocentrism operated out of a mechanistic, graceless understanding of the natural world. The natural world was not perceived as a place of grace. This outlook on the natural world as a domain devoid of grace is the subject of critique by a number of theologians. For example, Dan Horan points to the existence of an 'anthropocentric privilege that has had the effect of excluding the non-human world as part of the image of God and thereby granting a licence to humans for dominion over non-human creation'.¹³ David G. Kirchoffer challenges theology today to overcome the presence of 'an egotistic anthropocentric'¹⁴ understanding of existence which has diminished our appreciation of the natural world. Neil Ormerod and Christina Vanin talk about the existence of a 'hyper anthropological culture (which is) cut off from cosmological meaning and values' and so removed 'from the rhythms and cycles of nature'. The net effect of this is

11. *Ibid.*, 216.

12. See Roger Haight, *Faith and Evolution: A Grace-Filled Naturalism*, New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2019, especially Chapter 4.

13. Dan Horan, 'Deconstructing Anthropocentric Privilege: *Imago Dei* and Non-human Agency', in *The Heythrop Journal*, 60, 2019, 560–70, at 560–61.

14. David G. Kirchoffer, 'How Ecology Can Save the Life of Theology: A Philosophical Contribution on the Engagement of Ecology and Theology', in *Theology and Ecology across the Disciplines: On Care for Our Common Home*, edited by Celia Deane-Drummond and Rebecca Artinian-Kaiser, London: T&T Clark, 2018, 53–63, at 57.

that 'the natural world is seen as simply a point of extraction (mining and agribusiness) and a site for dumping our waste'.¹⁵ This anthropocentric paradigm has resulted in a number of damaging dualisms, unsympathetic to a theology of the natural world: nature and grace, Spirit and matter, body and soul, materialism and mysticism, sacred and secular. As noted above it ignores the beauty, creativity and order in the world and defiles, sterilises and fouls the natural world.

To overcome these dualisms, we invoke by contrast Karl Rahner's theology of grace. This theology of grace has had an overarching influence on the whole of Rahner's theology, and is of particular significance for understanding a theology of the relationship between nature and grace today. For Rahner, the grace of God in the world is informed by two related but indivisible moments. On the one hand, we have what Rahner calls God's gracious self-communication to the world or, as he puts it at times, God's self-bestowal on everything in the world. This action of God takes place from the dawn of time and is, therefore, present and active in the world from the beginning, and not as a once-off but as a continuous, divine presence in the world. On the other hand, this action of God in the world affects the interiority, the very constitution of creation and humanity. This reality of God's self-communication brings about a particular disposition and orientation within everything in the world. Rahner calls the effect of this divine presence in the world the gift of self-transcendence. Everything in the universe has an underlying orientation towards self-transcendence. This allows Rahner to talk about the graced self-transcendence of material creation in the natural world and in the world of human beings. The self-bestowal of God on the world, given in the act of creation, brings about an inner dynamism of self-transcendence throughout the universe, not just in human beings, but in the whole of material creation.¹⁶

From the very beginning matter is graced with the gift of self-transcendence. There is no matter without grace, no grace without matter,

15. Neil Ormerod and Christina Vanin, 'Ecological Conversion: What Does it Mean?', in *Theological Studies*, vol. 77 (2), 2016, 328–52, at 341–42.

16. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1978, Chapters 2 and 3.

no gift of the Spirit without matter, no matter without the Spirit.¹⁷ It is this gracious presence of God in the world that enables transitions from matter to life, and from biological life to the emergence of conscious, self-reflective human beings. These particular shifts are the result of the ongoing presence of the endowment of creation *ab initio* with the gift and dynamism of self-transcendence. This gift of self-transcendence is made possible by the ongoing, enduring, gracious self-communication of God to the world through creation and its historical manifestation in the Christ-event.

One powerful but neglected expression of this omnipresence of the grace of God in the world can be found in the Christian doctrine of ‘creation out of nothing’, a doctrine that is more than just an account of the world’s origins, but also includes the ongoing presence of God’s grace holding everything together and contains an implicit promise of a new creation. We will return to this theme of ‘creation out of nothing’ in Chapter 7.

To begin to see nature as graced, we must move out of a static universe into a world that is open, dynamic and relational. Within this world, grace is not some kind of add-on to creation, but rather something that is interior and constitutive of creation itself. The grace of God is not some ‘thing’, but is the dynamic *relationship* that exists between God and the world and the world and God, a relationship that holds everything in existence. The grace of God is the enduring presence of God that began ‘in the beginning’ with the outpouring of the Spirit which continuously holds everything together, from nothing to something, from non-being to being, from non-existence to the gift of life. It is this grace of God that enables a dynamic movement from matter to living creatures and from living creatures to self-conscious human beings. This means we must see the natural world not simply in terms of being, but also in terms of becoming, not simply as static but also as processive, not only in terms of what is, but also in terms of what is yet to be. This dynamic outlook on the natural world accords with the revelation and promise of the new creation ‘in Christ’ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 8:18–23; Revelation 21:1–5).

17. I am grateful to Terrence W. Tilley for this succinct formulation of the relationship between grace and matter.

In emphasising the presence of the grace of God in the natural world, we must not forget the darker side of nature, summed up in words by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) that ‘Nature is red in tooth and claw’. On the one hand the natural world evokes a sense of awe and wonder, especially in terms of the cooperation, beauty and interconnectedness of everything in the world. On the other hand, however, nature is suffused with competition, suffering and violence, a subject that is too vast and important to address in this small volume. Nonetheless, any theology of nature must remind itself of the fiercely negative and dark dimensions of nature, which are not to be confused with treating nature as a point of extraction. These disturbing dimensions of nature seem to be more evident than ever before in the known history of the universe. Without this corrective one’s theology of nature will appear to be too idealistic and romantic. In approaching this conundrum of life, account should be taken of the resonance that exists between life, death and rebirth within the cycle of nature and the unity that obtains within the Paschal mystery of the historical life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ.

To conclude this brief outline of nature as graced, it must be noted that we Christians see the community of creation which includes the natural world as ordered to Christ, the one who personally represents God’s invitational outreach to creation and, at the same time, as creation’s fullest response to that grace-filled invitation. This is a point that will be developed further in Chapter 6.

c. Nature as a Book

A third step in moving towards a non-anthropocentric theology of nature is to see nature as a book, to be read and interpreted. This approach is also found in Augustine, Aquinas, Bonaventure and the Franciscan tradition. In our time, *Laudato Si’* points out that: ‘God has written a ... book whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the world’.¹⁸ Nature as a book, and therefore as a text, does not interpret itself. It is like any other text, open to different interpretations; in the biblical tradition alone, many interpretations of the natural world are present. Indeed,

18. *Laudato Si’*, 85. Other references to nature as a book can be found scattered throughout *Laudato Si’*, at 6, 12 and 239.

the text of nature is itself deeply ambiguous, at times evoking awe and wonder and, at other times, inflicting fear and pain and suffering.

In reading the book of nature in the twenty-first century, we have at our disposal resources that were never available before: magnified microscopes, telescopes and nano-technology. Through the findings of the sciences, especially the new cosmologies, quantum physics and biological evolution, we can discover things about nature that were never seen before in the modern era. Modern science opens up new vistas and new questions about the natural world, requiring careful scrutiny and interpretation, as well as a constructive critique of biblical texts (see the discussion of David G. Horrell in Chapter 2).

This understanding of nature as a book is not new; it has been present in the Judeo-Christian tradition. A good example can be found in Saul, the Jew, drawing on his Jewish theology of creation, and Paul, the Christian, influenced by the Christ event. Paul writes:

Ever since the creation of the world, his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (Romans 1:20)

In the life of the early church, and in the Middle Ages, nature was seen as a resource for learning more about human existence and about the place of humans in the natural order, and the relationship between creation and the creator. In a well-known quotation, Augustine suggests:

Some people, in order to discover God, read a book. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above and below, note, read. God whom you want to discover did not make the letters with ink; He put in front of your eyes the very things that He made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?¹⁹

Within these different traditions it was not just idle curiosity but a deep appreciation 'that nature was a resource for learning about humanity and

19. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 16, and *Sermons*, 68.6.

its place in the cosmic hierarchy'.²⁰ In this regard, we need only think for a moment about how much nature has taught humanity about medical science, about the caring and healing of the whole community of creation. However, in the light of the ambiguous character of nature, and the incompleteness of nature, it is necessary to recover and interpret the book of nature alongside the book of the Bible. Nature is a work in progress, not a finished project.

d. Nature as Sacramental

Against this background of nature as a living community, as grace-filled and as a book to be interpreted, we can now begin to see some of the theological reasons for describing nature as sacramental. Nature is theocentric in virtue of the outpouring of the Spirit and the Word of God 'in the beginning', and the deep embrace of 'all flesh' in history through the Incarnation.

This sense of the natural world as sacramental has its roots in the Hebrew Bible. As already noted, Judaism has a strong, foundational theology of the natural world. For Jews, the universe is alive with the presence of the Spirit of God, especially in the light of the Spirit's activity as seen in Genesis and the Psalms. For Jews, the natural world is described by a number of different metaphors: the 'throne of God',²¹ the 'sanctuary of God', and a 'cosmic temple'.²² Given the liturgical orientation of the different theologies of creation in the Bible, especially in the Psalms and Genesis, creation assumes what we today would call a sacramental quality, embodying a divine presence throughout the whole community of creation. This outline is reflected in the sacramental liturgy of the tent, the tabernacle and the temple. A fundamental spiritual and sacramental presence permeates Judaism and Christianity. If we do not sense, indeed experience, the presence of the Spirit in creation, it is unlikely that we

20. Simon Oliver, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017, 101.

21. See Isaiah 6:1.

22. See William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science and the Ecology of Wonder*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, 37; and Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: the Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1988, 86.

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