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First Steps to a Theology of Nature

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'Nature' is a slippery term, with a wide variety of meanings and nuances,[1] which can all too easily encourage the unwary writer or reader to slide from one to another without making necessary distinctions and to carry the evaluative nuances of one sense over to another. In theology it has several distinct usages. It can mean the essence of something (the divine and human natures of Christ in Chalcedonian Christology). It can mean the whole of the created world, as distinguished from God the Creator, or the whole of the observable world, as distinguished from the 'supernatural' (which includes more than God) (cf. the distinction between *natural* philosophy and meta*physics*). It can mean the world (including and especially humanity) in its created state, prior to the effect of God's redemptive activity, nature as opposed to grace (cf. also natural and special revelation; natural and revealed religion; natural law; natural theology). This last usage often conceals an ambiguity about the extent to which 'nature' is as God intended or perverted by sin. Finally, as used in modern discussions of the 'theology of nature,' the term means the observable non-human world—not excluding any part of the universe but tending to focus on the natural environment of human life on this planet.

This last usage, the one most relevant to this article, has problems,[2] in that it seems to presuppose a misleading distinction between 'nature' (so defined) and humanity. The distinction is being made between 'nature' and human culture (in the widest sense) or human history. But humanity is so rooted in 'nature' that either one might argue for a distinction between 'natural' and 'cultural' aspects of human life (i.e. between humanity as studied

[1] See especially C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, ²1967), ch. 2.
[2] These are pointed out by G. D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia, 1981), ch. 8.

by the natural sciences and humanity as studied by the social sciences and the 'humanities'), *or* one might argue that the continuity between (the rest of) nature and human culture and history is such that no distinction should be made: humanity is simply part of nature. The more one becomes aware that the former of these two proposals is making an artificial distinction, impossible in practice, the more attractive the latter proposal becomes. In many forms of conscious human behaviour it is impossible to disentangle 'natural' and 'cultural' aspects. We certainly cannot distinguish between instinctive behaviour as 'natural' and learned behaviour as exclusively human and therefore 'cultural.' Blue tits, for example, have learned to remove milk-bottle tops, an accomplishment which over a period of twenty years spread to become a universal ability of British blue tits. Welsh sheep have recently learned to traverse cattle-grids by tucking up their legs and rolling across, while chimpanzees, taught sign-language by American researchers, now spontaneously teach this to their offspring. It is not difficult to see many aspects of human cultural behaviour as very much developed forms of aspects of animal behaviour: animal 'language' (since animals undoubtedly use *some elements* of what we call language in humans), use of tools, home building, courtship display, etc. This is not to say that there is nothing distictively human about humanity. It does mean that the distinctively human emerges from a deep continuity with the rest of nature and is by no means easy to define. If humanity is therefore seen as one distinctive phase within the whole process of nature, it is not at all obvious that the distinction between humanity and the rest of nature should be seen as the single momentous distinction, as compared, for example, with the distinction between inanimate and animate nature. If we make a distinction between humanity and the rest of nature, we must recognize that while this distinction may be justified for certain purposes and from certain points of view, other distinctions will be needed for other purposes and from other points of view. The recognition that the distinction between humanity and the rest of nature is not an absolute one has become very obvious though modern science, but has often been part of ordinary human reflection on humanity's place in the world, and is in fact present in the Genesis 1 account of creation. On the one hand, the writer recognizes five fundamental distinctions which divide the created world into the work of the six days, and from this point of view he sees humanity as one of the land animals, created on the sixth day (1:24–31). On the other hand, he also makes a highly significant distinction between

humanity and the rest of the animal creation (1:26–28). Both lines of distinction are valid from different points of view.

To make, for certain purposes, the distinction between humanity and the rest of nature is justified, initially at least, because we do in fact experience ourselves as distinguished from the rest of nature, which we (perhaps alone among rational creatures on this planet) are able to conceptualize as a whole distinguished from ourselves. We think of ourselves not only as within nature, but also as external to it, contemplating it, studying it, acting on it.[3] But since we do also know ourselves to be part of nature, a theology of nature cannot simply presuppose a distinction between humanity and the rest of nature: it must itself investigate that distinction. Even if it uses (as I shall do) the term 'nature' as convenient shorthand for 'nature (excluding humanity),' it must concern itself with humanity's relationship with nature. It may in fact avoid some pitfalls if it begins with that relationship.

Humanity and Nature

Since, in traditional theology, the Bible has too often been read in the light of non-biblical kinds of distinction between humanity and other animals, and in the light of an excessively anthropocentric view of the world, it is necessary to look carefully at how the Bible itself (and here especially the Old Testament) characterizes humanity's relationship to nature and to avoid reading alien ideas into the text.

The Old Testament clearly recognizes humanity's fundamental kinship with other animals. As already noticed, in Genesis 1 humanity is created on the sixth day along with the land animals. According to the second creation account, in Genesis 2, both Adam and the animals were created out of the ground (Gn. 2:7, 19: in both cases the picture is of God making clay figures). Adam thus created was lifeless until God breathed into his nostrils and he became 'a living creature' (2:7). This God-given life he shares with the animals, which are also 'living creatures' (2:19; cf. 7:15). Although 2:19 does not explain how God brought the animals to life, Ps. 104:29–30 leaves no doubt that it was by means of his own breath (Spirit). Nothing here distinguishes Adam from the animals. Whether Gn. 2:7 intends to distinguish Adam as having received the breath of life directly from God himself[4] is unclear,

[3] Cf. *ibid.*, 234.

[4] So E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London, 1958), 159.

but even if this detail does indicate Adam's special *status* in God's sight, it indicates nothing about human *nature* which distinguishes it from the animals. However received, the same divine breath animates all living things.

Apart from the characterization of humanity as made in God's image (to which we shall return), the Old Testament seems to draw no hard line of distinction between human nature and the animals. It does not, for example, claim that human beings are rational and animals not, or that human beings are free moral agents (persons) and animals not. On the contrary, it shares the nearly universal human observation that animals are sentient beings which seem to act with conscious purpose, and tends therefore to personalize them (cf. Gn. 3:1–5; Nu. 22:28–30; Jb. 39:16–18). Old Testament writers can even speak as though animals are conscious of God (Jb. 38:41; Ps. 104:21, 27; cf. Rev. 5:13?), in language which cannot be pressed to supply revealed information on the matter, but which certainly will not support dogmatic assertions that human beings are the only creatures on earth capable of awareness of God. The Bible in fact tells us no more than our own observation can teach us about the degree to which other 'higher' animals may approach the characteristics of personhood, as we understood it in human beings. Neither the Bible nor, as yet scientific investigation can tell us whether there are, in this respect, differences in kind or only differences of degree between human beings and other animals. Nor can we even exclude the speculative possibility that, for example, dolphins might be as self-conscious and as capable of responsible moral decision as ourselves, and might enjoy a conscious relationship with God less clouded by sin than is available to human beings on earth. Biblical theology does not exclude such possibilities, which cannot be excluded in advance of scientific study.[5]

What distinguishes humanity, according to Gn. 1:26–27, is creation in the image of God, and this also accounts for the special value which God sets on human life, according to Gn. 9:5–6, which prescribes that human life must be avenged, by contrast with animal life, though the latter is also precious to God (9:4). Genesis does not tell us (and scholars cannot agree)[6] to what

[5] As a matter of fact, traditional theology, which believed in the existence of angels, was less guilty of arrogant assumptions about what is distinctively human than much recent theology has been.

[6] For the various views, see C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (London, 1984), 147–55.

actual characteristics of human nature creation in the image of God refers. What is clear is that it enables human beings to be God's representatives on earth (like the images of kings, representing kings, in the ancient world), a function which they exercise in their dominion over nature (1:26, 28). In other words, because they are created in God's image, human beings are able and commissioned to share, as God's vicegerents, in his rule over the rest of the world (so also Ps. 8:5–8). Creation in the image of God seems to refer, not to the dominion itself, but to whatever characteristics of human nature make human beings capable of this dominion. What the writer of Genesis 1 is really doing is starting from the empirical observation that human beings are the dominant species on earth, and providing a theological interpretation of this; that God in creation intended human beings to be the dominant species on earth and intended them to exercise their dominion as his vicegerents, responsible to him. Thus creation in the image of God commits us to no dogmatic position on the distinctiveness of humanity, beyond the claim that we are the dominant species on earth, which already in Old Testament times was a plausible claim to make from observation and has now become indisputable. The Old Testament text leaves it an open question, for our own observation to answer, precisely what features of human nature have put us in this position and therefore constitute the divine image in our nature. There is no problem about seeing these characteristics (in modern evolutionary terms) as rooted in our continuity with the rest of the animal creation. The theological interpretation of them as constituting the divine image does require human beings to be capable of relationship to God, so that they may exercise their dominion as responsible to him. But it does not require (whatever may empirically be the case) that they be the only creatures capable of relationship with God, any more than the prime minister needs to be the only subject who knows the king. It must simply be that human beings are capable of the *kind* of relationship with God which those creatures who dominate and are responsible for the rest of the world need to have. If dolphins know God, they know him as creatures with different roles and responsibilities from those of humanity.

The point of these remarks is not to minimize the difference between humanity and other animals, differences which in many respects have become more and more apparent as human domination of the earth has come to mean much more than it did in Old Testament times. The point is simply that the Bible's account of the differences focuses only on our observable status as

the dominant species and does not require us to assert absolute discontinuities (in terms of personhood or knowledge of God) between humanity and other animals. Whether there are such absolute discontinuities is an open question so far as biblical theology goes. But against the purely romantic naturalism which denies any distinctively human status vis-à-vis the rest of nature,[7] the Bible does not require humanity to assume the responsibilities which belong to the dominant species.

If ideas about distinctively human nature have often been read into the Bible, so too have ideas about the distinctively human status on earth. Genesis has very often been supposed to teach that the rest of nature was created *for* humanity.[8] But this is implied neither in Genesis nor, so far as I can tell, elsewhere in the Bible, except perhaps in 2 Pet. 2:12, which makes polemical use of a popular pagan view of wild animals.[9] Gn. 1:26, 28 gives human beings the status of rulers of the world, but it is not a biblical view of government that subjects exist for the sake of their rulers! If anything, the reverse is the case (cf. Mt. 20:25–28). Humanity's rule over nature is not intended to be tyranny, in which the ruler exploits his subjects for his own benefit, but good government, exercised responsibly for the good of the subjects. It is a share in God's rule over the world, and is therefore intended to reflect the fact that God does not exploit the world for his own benefit, but bestows his love and care on it because he values it.

Perhaps Gn. 2:18–20 comes closer to saying that the animals

[7] For this problem, cf. the remarks in C. Lasch, *The Minimal Self* (London, 1985), 255–257.

[8] The origins of this idea have yet to be studied. There are grounds for supposing that it owes more to Aristotle and the Stoics than to the Old Testament, but it must be admitted that some later Jewish writers already interpreted Gn. 1:28 in this way (e.g. 2 Baruch 14:18), while the pagan Celsus already attacked Christians for assuming that the rest of nature exists for the sake of humanity (*C. Cels.* 4:99). This certainly became the traditional Christian theological view (e.g. Calvin, Inst. 2:6:1), but even in its heydey there were prominent Christians, such as Francis of Assisi and the English Protestant martyr John Bradford, who denied that animals were created only for human benefit, while in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, for example, the biblical idea of human stewardship over creation was often held to imply that animals should be treated kindly and respectfully: see K. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London, 1983), 17–25, 151–167. J. Cohen, 'The Bible, Man, and Nature in the History of Western Thought: A Call for Reassessment', *JR* 65, 1985, 155–172, argues that study of the history of ideas about the relation of humanity and nature has suffered from the lack of a history of the biblical idea of human dominion over nature, and promises a forthcoming full study of this biblical theme in Israelite and Christian history.

[9] R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentary 50; Waco, Texas, 1983), 263.

were created for Adam, but it should be noticed that if we draw this conclusion we must also conclude that Eve was created for Adam. In fact, the passage is considering the animals only from one point of view (are they adequate companions and assistants for Adam?), which can scarcely have been the only consideration in their creation. In naming the animals, Adam gives them a place in the human world, where things are named, but in so doing he respects their God-given place in creation, which does not become redundant when they prove unable to fulfil the role of Eve.[10]

Elsewhere the Bible takes it for granted that nature has its own intrinsic value in God's sight, independent of its usefulness to humanity. The so-called Noahic covenant in Genesis 9 was made by God with all living creatures, not just humanity. According to Jesus a human being is of more value than many sparrows (Mt. 10:31), but the argument presupposes that sparrows are valuable. It is surely impossible to read Job 39 or Psalm 104 and suppose that the authors thought the animals described existed only for human benefit.[11] Kindness to animals (required by Dt. 25:4; Pr. 12:10) has no ethical basis if animals exist only for our use. Fortunately, the Bible does not require us to suppose that the dinosaurs lived for millions of years solely to provided pleasure and interest for modern scientists and small children!

Further reflection on humanity's God-given dominion over nature and its relationship to the intrinsic value of nature may suggest that it has at least two aspects. (1). Human beings as *masters* of nature. This role covers the whole process of technological control over nature, from the most primitive hunting and farming to computers and nuclear weapons. It includes scientific study of nature insofar as this has been directed towards technological use of nature. In this role, human beings have controlled, used and transformed nature in order to meet human needs. They have increasingly adapted their natural environment into a humanly made environment, more congenial to them. (2). Human beings as *curators* of nature. In this role human beings do not use nature, but appreciate it. It covers everyone's everyday appreciation of and enjoyment of nature, disinterested scientific study of nature, artistic celebration of and interpretation of nature, and various kinds of religious response to nature. In itself appreciation of nature may not seem to be part of 'dominion', but when combined with role (1), which puts us in

[10] Cf. Westermann, *op. cit.*, 228–229.

[11] On Ps. 104, see W. Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality* (San Francisco, 1984), 57–58.

a position of control over nature, it leads to a caring, respectful exercise of this power, which aims to preserve the intrinsic value we perceive in nature.

Now role (1). is in itself quite legitimate: nature is to some extent intended to meet our needs. All living things must use their environment in order to live. As the dominant species which populates the whole earth, humanity makes use of the whole natural environment. However, unrestrained human exploitation of nature has led to the ecological crisis and the nuclear threat, both of which threaten human survival by threatening to destroy features of nature on which human beings are inescapably dependent, since in becoming masters of nature they remain also part of nature.[12] A response to these threats can be made within the scope of role (1): natural resources and the natural conditions necessary for human life can be conserved so that humanity can continue to make use of them. At this level the need is for individuals and groups to control nature for the benefit of all humanity, including future generations, rather than for their own benefit solely. But recognition that humanity is dependent on the preservation of certain features of nature which need to be respected can also lead on to a sense that role (1). must be exercised in conjunction with role (2).

Against the danger of a purely exploitative exercise of 'dominion', the usual Christian safeguard has been to emphasize that human beings are only stewards of the world which belongs to God. This is valid, but needs to be combined with emphasis on the recognition, which is universal to some extent, of the intrinsic value of nature. Appreciation of nature, in its various forms of expression, is not, of course, purely altruistic, but like the pleasure we gain from knowing other people (as distinct from the benefit we gain from using other people) it entails a sense that nature does not exist simply for our benefit, but is inherently valuable ('good,' as God called in Genesis 1). At least in the case of creatures with some degree of rational consciousness, we can move on to recognize that they have a value for themselves, as we do for ourselves, and therefore deserve some degree of altruistic love, such as we give each other. Our dominance over nature, which we cannot evade, now becomes a responsibility to restrain

[12] For brief surveys, see *ibid.*, ch. 1; E. Drewermann, *Der tödliche Fortschritt* (Regensburg, ³1983), Part 1. For some theological discussion with reference especially to the nuclear threat, see my articles: 'The Genesis Flood and the Nuclear Holocaust', *Churchman* 99, 1983, 146–155; 'Theology after Hiroshima', *SJT* 38, 1985, 583–601.

our use of nature in order to conserve what we appreciate in nature, both so that other human beings (and God) may enjoy nature, and so that other species, whose right to survive we must respect, can do so.

Human art, whether literary, visual or even musical, can, as expressing and fostering human appreciation of nature, be part of our curatorship of nature. It also alerts us to the fact that we cannot relapse into a one-sided preference for 'unspoiled' nature over nature adapted by human skill and art, a romantic view which is based on what we have seen to be an artificially sharp distinction between nature and human culture. In varying degrees, my garden, a David Attenborough wildlife programme, a Constable landscape, a diamond necklace, Rilke's animal poems, are all examples of human art which 'use' nature, but they are at the same time ways of appreciating nature. They take us beyond the role of mere spectators of nature's spectacle towards engaged contemplation of nature and appreciative participation in nature.[13] Similarly, although the conservation of unspoiled wildernesses is important, we also rightly wish to preserve nature where it has in fact been extensively affected by human activity (in this country, for example) and think it none the less valuable for that. Thus we may tentatively[14] suggest that curatorship of nature must in fact verge towards a third role: (3). human beings as cocreators with God. Since we cannot simply preserve nature as it is, but must all the time, even in our efforts at conservation, be involved in continual adjustments of the balances of the world's ecosystems, we must see our role in this ongoing process of nature as a form of cooperation with God's continuing creative work in nature, rather than as mere exploitation for our own benefit. In the context of role (3). it may then be possible to overcome the simple distinction between (1). and (2). in a cooperative relationship (in ecological terms, symbiosis) in which humanity's responsible participation in the process of change in nature works to the benefit both of humanity and of nature.[15] But the symbiotic element in this concept must be

[13] Cf. R. Faricy, *Wind and Sea Obey Him* (London, 1982), 53: 'The artist transforms nature by giving nature a new material interpretation. He interprets nature and in so doing he transforms it, raises it to a higher level, recreates it.'

[14] With A. R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford, 1979), ch. VII.v.E.

[15] Cf. Faricy, *op. cit.*, 21–23; J. Moltmann, *The Future of Creation* (London, 1979), 128–130.

stressed if it is to be protected from arrogant exaggeration of human powers to change nature for the better.[16]

An interesting aspect of the comparison between role (1). and role (2+3). is that (1). is simply the human version of what every species does. Every living species uses its environment to live, many adapt their environment in various ways, some not only eat other living things but also use them in other ways for their own benefit. In role (1). humanity behaves like every other species, but using all the capacities which have made us the dominant species and to the degree appropriate to the dominant species. But role (2+3). is much more distinctively human in character. True, we cannot be dogmatic about the extent to which other animals appreciate aspects of nature, and we cannot rule out rare cases of altruistic behaviour towards individuals of another species (including ourselves). Once again, we cannot dogmatically assert an absolute discontinuity. But for humanity to rise above a species-centred view of the world and to assume responsibility for the preservation of other species is undoubtedly a more novel kind of enterprise than role (1). It is in this role, more than in (1). that humanity really behaves as God's vicegerent in the world, participating in God's appreciation of and care for his world.

But this focuses a larger and familiar problem. It conforms to a pattern whereby we think of men and women as most like God in their most distinctively human characteristics. God is personal and moral, and even if (as I have suggested) we do not need to confine personality and morality wholly to humanity among the animals, it is still the case that creation most resembles God in its 'higher' reaches, as personality and morality emerge. This, however, raises problems when we try to relate the rest of creation to God. For example, if, as I have suggested, our concern for the preservation of other species reflects God's appreciation of and care for his world, and if God has been at work in the whole process of nature, why has the process of nature in fact been prodigiously wasteful of species? Why is our appreciation of nature marred by features (such as its cruelty and competitiveness) which we find repellent precisely from the point of view of those human values which the biblical God seems to endorse as divine values? These questions will recur in the following two sections.

Creation, Fall and New Creation

Traditional theology tended to see nature as a static backdrop

[16] Cf. S. R. L. Clark, 'Christian Responsibility for the Environment', *Modern Churchman* 28, 1986, 24–31.

against which the real drama of human history happens. The stage of nature was set by God's creation at the beginning, and thereafter God's activity in nature is directed to preserving what he has once and for all created. This picture of a completed and static creation is no longer tenable. We now know that nature itself has a history, very much longer and more dramatic than human history, extending from the 'big bang' through the still continuing process of the expanding universe, and including within it the geological evolution of the earth and the development of life on earth, both of which still continue. Nature is an unfinished process, continually productive of novelty, and human history must be seen as one novel development in nature's history, a new departure (just as the formation of the stars or the origin of life were new departures) but still continuous with nature's history and inextricably entangled with the continuing history of the rest of nature, both being affected by it and affecting it.

This understanding of nature necessitates the now common theological notion of *continuing creation*. God's creative activity must be a continuing activity in the whole process of nature, not only sustaining and renewing what already exists, but continually bringing new things into existence out of the old. The fact that the Bible does not always make a sharp distinction between God's original creative activity and his continuing activity in sustaining, directing and renewing creation (Ps. 104:2–30; 147:8–19; Jb. 34:14–15, 38–39)[17] means that we need have no great difficulty in fitting our new perception of nature within a biblical view of the relationship between God and the world, even though our awareness of God's continuing creation of novelty cannot be attributed to the biblical writers, who in this respect were, of course, limited by contemporary understandings of nature. Moreover, the Bible is more willing than many theologians have been to see a continuity between God's activity in the creation of the world and his activity in human history (e.g. Is. 40–55). Finally, the notion of an unfinished creation leaves open the prospect of an eschatological completion of creation, such as the Bible also envisages.

Recognition that creation is continuing creation raises the issue of the relationship between creation and salvation. We can no longer be content with the old (though not universally accepted) picture:

[17] Eichrodt's view that the Old Testament actually teaches a doctrine of continuing creation probably goes too far, but need not be so completely rejected as it is by P. Addinall, 'Walther Eichrodt and the Old Testament View of Nature', *ExpT* 91, 1980–81, 174–178.

perfection at the beginning › fall › salvation=restoration to perfection

On this picture, creation (including humanity) was intended to be static, but the fall introduced history, which leads away from but eventually, through God's redemptive activity, back to the original perfection. We now need a more complex picture (not unprecedented in traditional theology):

a good start to the process of creation (=original creation) { continuing creation / fall › salvation } future completion of the process (=new creation)

Using this picture, we should not simply interpret fall › salvation *as* continuing creation, so that sin becomes just the imperfection of creation while still incomplete and salvation is simply 'the completion of creation' (Schleiermacher's definition). Sin is a radical departure from and opposition to God's creative purpose, which God must reconcile and overcome. Sin disrupts the continuity of the creative purpose of God. However, because of the fall, continuing creation and salvation become bound up together. Salvation is both restorative (repairing the damage done by sin) and progressive (moving the work of creation on to its completion).

This leaves the question: How does the fall affect nature? Is it only in human history that God's creative work is disrupted, necessitating a redemptive work, whereas in the rest of nature creation continues unaffected by the fall? This cannot be the case, because humanity is part of the interdependent whole of nature, so that disruption in human history must disrupt nature, and since humanity is the dominant species on earth human sin is bound to have very widespread effects on nature as a whole. The fall disturbed humanity's harmonious relationship with nature, alienating us from nature, so that we now experience nature as hostile, and introducing elements of struggle and violence into our relationship with nature (Gn. 3:15, 17–19; 9:2). Because we misuse nature, nature suffers and awaits our full redemption as its own liberation from the burden of our sin. (This somewhat demythologized interpretation of Rom. 8:19–22 may or may not be adequate.)

Thus nature experiences the effects of our fall through our relationship with it. But is nature *itself* fallen? Is there, in other words, evil in nature? The fallenness of nature is a concept which has been used to explain various features of nature, such as cruelty and ruthlessness in nature itself, and nature's hostility to humanity in such forms as bacteria which live only by inflicting painful disease or destructive natural events such as earthquakes. No one who has observed the quite gratuitous cruelty of a cat playing with a mouse can be content to believe that nature is as good as it could be, apart from human influence on it.[18] If we can interpret such features of nature as amoral rather than immoral, then we may be able to see them as imperfections, indicative of the incompleteness of the process of creation thus far, rather than as departures from God's creative purpose. Alternatively, we may postulate that God has to some extent left nature (like ourselves) freedom to go its own way, both in the indeterminateness of inanimate nature and in the conscious freedom which is at least beginning to emerge in the 'higher' animals. However, we should be careful that by calling the mere randomness of subatomic particles 'freedom' we do not give it an evaluation which is really only appropriate for the freedom of rational agents. We can understand why God should value the latter, even at the risk of sin; it is harder to understand why he should, in effect, choose to create by throwing a dice, if the result is less than fully desirable. A final possibility is to postulate the activity of supernatural powers of evil in nature. For the present I can only leave these options open.

Whether we refer to nature's imperfection or to nature's fallenness, how does this relate to human sin? The traditional view was that the fall of Adam and Eve led to the fall of nature, and in terms of the effects of the human fall on our relationship with nature (as mentioned above) this sequence still has validity. But, apart from that, we must now wonder whether the sequence does not operate in reverse, i.e. we need to ask how far human fallenness is rooted in our continuity with the rest of nature. I leave this again as a question. However we answer it, we must not let it lead us back to considering sin as mere imperfection. Although, for example, human aggressiveness and violence can be seen as rooted in nature, we are said to be in fact the most aggressive and violent of all animals, and show no signs of evolving out of this characteristic.

Although much is obscure, one important point is clear: nature's fate (on this planet, at least) is bound with ours. Because of our dominance on earth, our fallenness has widespread effects on nature. The redemption and completion of the creation of

[18] Thus the correct observation that, in biological existence, death, decay and even to some extent disease are good (so E. Heideman, 'Beyond Dung: a theology of manure', *Third Way* 9/2, Feb 1986, 24–26) does not solve the problem of excessive pain and cruelty in nature.

nature likewise depend in part on human redemption and human cooperation with God's continuing creative purpose in nature.[19]

Religious Perceptions of Nature

Religious experience of nature, involving some sense of the divine in or beyond nature, is a very broad category of human experience, occurring in many different forms and within the context of many kinds of religous interpretation. Three forms (with theological interpretations) which have occurred within and are compatible with Christianity are: (1). awe or wonder at the vastness, splendour and richness of nature as the handiwork of God its designer or as the self-expression of the divine artist; (2). a sense of God's creative and sustaining presence as the immanent Spirit throughout nature; (3). a vision of the universe in God ('panentheism'). This threefold classification (into which, naturally, not all Christian perceptions of nature will neatly fit) corresponds to three relationships of God to nature: (1). the transcendent God before and beyond nature; (2). the immanent God within nature; (3). the God who both fills and contains nature. Of these, (2). and (3)., as well as (1)., are authentically Christian perceptions and should not be suppressed through a fear that talk of God's immanence in nature will lead to pantheism. A sense of the unity and vitality of nature as divine can be interpreted pantheistically, but can also be understood theistically as a sense of the presence of the transcendent Creator within his creation: the Old Testament God whose breath (Spirit) animates all living things. The following passage from the twelfth-century prophetess Hildegard of Bingen is a genuinely Christian vision of the Spirit in nature:

> Life, the fiery Spirit of holiness speaks: I am the fiery life of the substance of God who kindled all living sparks. Death has no part in me, and yet I parcel it out; therefore I am girded with wisdom as with wings. I am that living and fiery essence of the divine substance that flows in the beauty of the fields. I shine in the water; I burn in the sun and the moon and the stars. The mysterious force of the invisible wind is mine. I sustain the breath of all living beings. I breathe in the grass and in the flowers; and when the waters flow like living things, it is I . . . I formed the columns that support the whole earth . . . I am the force that lies hidden in the winds; they take their source from me, as a man may move because he breathes; fire burns by my blast. All these live because I am in them and am their life. I am Wisdom. The blaring thunder of the Word by which all things were made is mine. I permeate all things that they may not die, I am life.[20]

[19] For the interrelation of the doctrines of creation and redemption in an adequate Christian attitude to nature, see B. Horne, *A World to Gain* (London, 1983), ch. 3.

The problem with such a perception as this is not theological but the difficulty of combining it with a modern scientific understanding of nature.

Another difference between Christian perceptions of nature is whether the subject experiences nature as primarily something other than herself which evokes her wonder, or whether, like Francis of Assisi, he is primarily aware of being at one with the rest of creation as it joins in glorifying its Creator.[21]

I do not wish at all to contest the validity or value of religious experience of nature, but it has its limitations and problems. Nature is limited and ambiguous in what it reveals of the God behind or within it. Nature can be repellently strange and horrifyingly cruel, and consequently nature religions have often divinized destructive as well as creative forces in nature, while more sophisticated pantheisms which have developed from a nature-religion base include evil as well as good in the nature of God. The moral ambiguity of nature appears, for example, in this perception of nature as sheer will, unconstrained by morality:

> Yesterday there was a glorious thunderstorm, and I hastened to a hill in the neighbourhood. On the summit I found a hut, and a man who was killing two kids; his boy was with him. The thunderstorm discharged itself with great violence, accompanied by hail and tempest. I felt an incomparable elevation of spirit, and I saw how true it is that we only then understand Nature properly when we are forced to flee to her from our cares and harassments. What was man to me and his restless will? What did I care for the eternal 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not'? How different the lightning, the tempest, the hail—free nonethical forces! How happy, how strong they are, pure will, untroubled by the intellect.[22]

Religious appreciation of nature has very often been highly selective in the aspects of nature it appreciates. Aldous Huxley

[20] Translation from W. Lewis, *Witnesses to the Holy Spirit* (Valley Forge, 1978), 156–157.

[21] Here two different aspects of the human relationship to nature come into play alongside the three aspects of God's relationship to nature. For a suggestive recent interpretation of Francis' awareness of oneness with nature in praise of God, see M. Bodo, *The Way of St Francis* (Glasgow, 1985), ch. 33.

[22] Nietzsche, a letter of 1866, quoted in G. S. Hendry, *Theology of Nature* (Philadelphia, 1980), 48.

rather unkindly remarked of Wordsworth, that 'a voyage through the tropics would have cured him of his too easy and comfortable pantheism', while on a more trivial level G. S. Hendry points out that even with regard to the nature he knew Wordsworth was selective, in that his poetry seems to leave entirely out of account the rain which is so constant a feature of nature in the Lake District.[23] All this highlights the significance of the fact that the biblical God was known primarily from his acts in human history, and only secondarily perceived within and behind nature.

But if God is the Creator, how are these limitations and ambiguities of his creation to be explained? In the first place it is worth remembering that God creates what is genuinely other than himself, and creates it to be really itself, not an extension or aspect of himself.[24] Our perception of nature ought to be in the first instance an appreciation of nature in itself, not simply a looking through nature to God. Nevertheless, we may still expect nature to reflect something of its Creator. The comparison of God with an artist creating a work of art[25] may be helpful here. Great art expresses the personality of the artist, but often in highly indirect and complex ways. It would be absurd, for example, to try to reconstruct Shakespeare's personality by taking each of his characters as revealing some aspect of his own character. Shakespeare expresses himself through his ability to create characters which are not simply bits of himself. Artists may express themselves by concealing as well as revealing themselves in their work. If the whole of the still unfinished process of nature and history is God's oeuvre, we should not be surprised that large parts of it reveal him only to a limited degree or can even mislead those who try to read them as a book of revelation. Only when the oeuvre is complete, in the eschatological perfection of creation, will the whole creation unambiguously reflect the glory of God. The selectivity of religious perceptions of nature may therefore be justified insofar as they are provisional glimpses of what will eventually prove to be the unambiguous truth about the whole of God's creation.

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[23] *Op. cit.*, 47.

[24] Cf. D. W. Hardy and D. F. Ford, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise* (London, 1984), 78: 'God respectfully lets creation be itself.'

[25] Cf. Hendry, *op. cit.*, 154–157.