LABOR OF LOVE: GOD AS CREATOR IN 
ECOLOGICAL ESCHATOLOGY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Lee University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies

Cleveland, Tennessee

December 2018
ABSTRACT
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The decision to overlook creation as a primary theological category and instead to emphasize the category of redemption has historically had a disastrous impact on Christianity’s relationship with ecology and environmental responsibility. One important area of focus involves the way in which Christian eschatology tends to come into conflict with an ecological sensibility. On the one hand, recent developments from within the fields of eco-feminism, creation theology, and process theology turn attention to the centrality of creation, resulting either in an emphasis on realized eschatology, or a rejection of eschatology altogether. On the other hand, more traditional Christian eschatologies with a clear futurized component tend to complicate the need for present ecological appreciation and responsibility. This project therefore seeks to develop an ecological eschatology, concerned with both maintaining an adherence to the tradition of Christian eschatology, and with motivating a strong sense of present ecological love and responsibility. Such an approach will be founded upon the guiding principle of God as Creator, demonstrating how creation is more fundamental than redemption, and thus re-interpreting the divine actions of redemption and glorification as essentially creative. The divine orientation towards the world will be presented as consistently creative love, providing a model for our own Christian ecological ethic.
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INTRODUCTION

The concept of God as the Creator of the world, while a foundational theme for Christian theology, is a complex and often seemingly esoteric doctrine, such that its specific implications have been debated for centuries. What exactly does it mean that God creates? Does it eradicate or secure human free will? Was the creation formed *ex nihilo* or from some sort of preexistent matter? Is there something distinctive about divine creativity that distinguishes God from created beings with their own creative capacities? Perhaps in light of these difficult nuances, creation as a theological category has often been held in the background of Christian theology and practice, which instead has historically turned its attention to the centrality of the Gospel message and the salvific work of Jesus Christ in the world. Especially in the tradition of the West, the love of God, displayed most prominently in the death and resurrection of Christ, became more important than the creating of God. Thus, redemption was emphasized as a theological category at the expense of creation, with the resulting rather anthropocentric focus on repairing human relations with God.¹ Instead of viewing creation, or the physical universe, as a means of connecting with the divine or as an integral part of God’s cosmic mission, it has become representative of the brokenness and finitude from which humanity seeks liberation in its formation of religious hope.

It is no secret that this decision to overlook creation as a primary theological category has in many ways had a disastrous impact on Christianity’s relationship with ecology and

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¹ Theologians that make and substantiate such a claim include, most notably, creation theologians such as Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry. See Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Sante Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1983), 11; Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 1988), 81. Also aware of this phenomenon is Elizabeth Johnson, who has recently drawn attention to the ecologically harmful results of focused attention on redemptive paradigms, especially penal substitution. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), xii.
environmental responsibility. Lynn White’s commonly cited essay, first presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1966, is a prime example of the increasing attention paid to this broken relationship in recent decades. Here White essentially places much of the blame for the current ecological crisis in the hands of Christian theology and its historical impact on modern Western science. His critique still rings true today, especially within modern American evangelical culture, and attempts at responding to this critique have been offered by Christian theologians within this context ever since. The developing tension between Christianity and ecology is multi-faceted and cannot be addressed in full by just one work, or even one person. A central difficulty that must be addressed with even more heightened attention, however, is one which White himself hinted at with his observation of the connection between the modern addiction to “perpetual progress” and traditional Judeo-Christian teleology. In other words, what may in fact lie at the heart of ongoing conflict between Christianity and ecology is the doctrine of Christian eschatology.

In reaction against ecologically dangerous theology, recent theological movements, most notably eco-feminism, creation spirituality, and process theology, have attempted to re-establish creation as a central category of Christian theology. Works within this realm have highlighted, for example, the inherently sinful nature of the destructive relationship humanity has developed over the rest of nature, the importance of shaping our Christian theology in harmony with the findings of modern science, and critiquing the inherent dualism and escapism at work in many Christian visions of the eschaton and ultimate redemption. What has developed within these

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3 Ibid., 37.
movements is a shift in focus away from the importance of eschatology, for the sake of turning increased attention towards the Christian’s responsibility to the earth. In many cases, eschatology is not only de-emphasized, but re-formed or discarded entirely. The possible difficulty presented by this alternative approach is its failure to earn the trust and dedication of those who are still largely influenced by more traditional forms of eschatology and are unwilling to surrender their vision of eschatological fulfillment so easily. More than that, it also seems to relinquish responsibility for safeguarding eschatology as an important tenet of Christian theology. The potentially dangerous effects of Christian eschatology, however, are perhaps nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the lingering effects of the teachings of dispensationalism that continue to form modern evangelicalism in America, perpetuating a distinctly negative view of the cosmos as playing an instrumental role at best in the grander narrative of humanity’s ultimate salvation from destruction. As Al Truesdale has pointed out, himself an evangelical, the eschatological teaching that the world will be completely destroyed in order to make way for an entirely new one (and it is often unclear just how “new” it will be) develops a feeling of despair towards creation, which then in turn leads to apathy in the face of environmental responsibility.

In light of the developing ecological crisis, contemporary Christian eschatology is beginning to face a crisis of its own. But rather than merely contributing to the ongoing polarization between these two camps, what is needed is the development of a third way, a strategy for preserving both ecology and eschatology in a way that is mutually beneficial. In this work, I will thus seek to develop a responsible eco-eschatology that successfully balances a

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5 Ibid., 117.
celebratory love and responsibility for present creation with a robust hope in God’s ultimate transformation of the cosmos in the future. I plan to do so by positively re-imagining the categories of creation and created-ness through the lens of a God known primarily and consistently as Creator. By demonstrating how God is Creator in the acts of creation, redemption, and glorification, I will seek to emphasize the continuity between the “already” and the “not yet,” as well as between the work of the Spirit and the Son in the world. Highlighting creation, rather than redemption, as the primary means of God’s interaction with the world will provide a foundation for the enjoyment and care of creation found in the work of ecofeminists, creation theologians, and process theologians. At the same time, demonstrating how redemption is in fact a dimension of the act of creation itself will leave space open for the ongoing need for redemption also present within creation, as shown by the concern of theologians who emphasize futurized eschatology.

In my first chapter, I will discuss how within many theological responses that attempt to prioritize ecological concerns, an over-emphasis on realized eschatology presents the danger of neglecting a genuine hope in total divine healing of the cosmos in the future by focusing all its attention on works of social justice and redemption that are to be accomplished by humanity in the present. Those operating within an eco-theological perspective, most notably eco-feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sallie McFague, and those within the field of creation

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6 Others have begun to turn their attention to this particular dilemma and I am by no means the first to raise it as a theological topic in need of consideration. The recent works of Elizabeth Johnson and John Haught stand out as important examples. See Elizabeth Johnson, Creation and the Cross; John Haught, The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1993). Another important example is Theodore David McCall, The Greenie’s Guide to the End of the World: Ecology and Eschatology (Adelaide SA, Australia: ATF Press, 2011). McCall’s project is in many ways similar to my project here, with the stated purpose of developing an eschatology “which takes seriously the environmental crisis facing us and yet doesn’t abandon the traditional hope of a transformed.” (24). While McCall ultimately focuses in on the same dilemma and dialogues with similar theological voices, his constructive portion turns a more liturgical direction, utilizing Elizabeth Johnson’s use of memory and Alexander Schmemann’s concepts of remembrance and thanksgiving in the Eucharist in order to emphasize humanity’s responsibility to creation in the liturgy (203-66).
spirituality such as Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry, tend to fall into this camp, highlighting the inherent goodness and beauty in all creation at the expense of giving due attention to those aspects of creation that remain unredeemed. Much of the work of process theology, including that of Charles Hartshorne and Catherine Keller, likewise tends toward this perspective. Within these paradigms futurized eschatology of any kind is essentially abandoned for the sake of providing a convincing and urgent ethic for creation care in the present. There are invaluable aspects, however, within each of these systems that can contribute to a holistic eco-eschatology. These include compatibility with science, a critique of the *ex nihilo* doctrine, the celebration of intrinsic value in creation, and a foundation for human responsibility for creation in the present. These qualities all contribute to a general understanding of the value of creation and created-ness that is essential for an ecological sensibility.

In my next chapter I will discuss another prominent response: the emphasis on *futurized* eschatology, which tends to take the form of either an escapist or at least anthropocentric approach. The escapist approach can lead to the danger of apathy in the face of present-day concerns and the inability to genuinely enjoy present creation, as can be seen in the lingering effects of the work of Hal Lindsay and the dispensationalist movement still lurking in the background of American evangelical theology and practice. More positively, recent developments, such as the evangelical focus on stewardship, seek to develop a distinctly *eschatological* imperative for ecological awareness, yet in their emphasis on responsibility fail to also highlight how present *enjoyment* and *love* of the created world as it exists now might also be important. As will be shown later in the development of a more comprehensive doctrine of creation, the most effective means of motivating creation care must incorporate a fundamental attitude of love rather than simply providing a call to responsibility. These theologies of
futurized eschatology do provide, however, a clearer sense of how ultimate redemption and meaning will be established for creation, and importantly argue that ultimate responsibility for redemption cannot not lie in human hands alone.

While the eschatological approaches noted above intersect with ecological concerns and largely represent valuable perspectives, each of them appears to be incomplete. My most pressing concern will be in providing a *grounded* eschatology that highlights the continuity between the present world and its glorified future, and allows for enjoyment of and concern for the created world *now*. At the same time, I would like to attempt a more robust vision of eschatology that maintains hope in God’s creative capabilities for future restoration. Thus, in my final chapter, I will place at the very center of my theology the identity of God as *Creator*, which will have profound implications for both ecology and eschatology. Understanding God primarily as Creator first requires us to re-conceive of creation and created-ness as being essentially *good*, although they can be corrupted, thus affirming the celebratory love of creation found in ecofeminism, creation theology, and process theology. It also paves the way for an interconnectedness between the doctrines of creation and redemption that will enable an eschatological vision that is both present and future-looking, both appreciative and critical of the present state of the created world. A vision of the eschaton as *new creation* here becomes central: it is new but it is still *creation*, in continuity with what has come before it through the creative-transformative work of God. Thus we will conclude with a vision of ultimate glorification of the cosmos grounded in the creative love of God, which love will become a model for the creative responsibility of humanity to contribute to the redemption that is in fact promised by Christian eschatology. In this way, the theological groundwork will be laid for a re-envisioned eschatology.
with promising implications for ecologically responsible and sustainable practices in the present world.
CHAPTER ONE:
LOVING CREATION IN REALIZED ESCHATOLOGY

Introduction

While creation as a means of understanding and relating to God has always played some role in Christian teaching and practice, a comprehensive theological understanding of the doctrine of creation has not always been consistently upheld as a core component of Christianity, with the resulting forgetfulness of the doctrine as if it were a sort of expendable addendum to the Christian faith. In recent years, however, more socially and environmentally conscious theological movements have begun to re-construct much of traditional Christian theology in the hopes of repairing some of the damage and re-instituting creation as an indispensable key to understanding and loving God. Ecofeminism, represented by various names including Rosemary Radford Ruether, Carolyn Merchant, Mary Daly, and Sallie McFague, turns its attention first to the patterns of oppression established against women throughout our mostly patriarchal human history, and then examines the ways in which these patterns have also played out in humanity’s abuse of nature. Creation spirituality, represented by Christian theologian Matthew Fox as well as essayist Thomas Berry, and following along in the tradition inspired by the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, can be characterized by its critique of the Christian fixation with the fall/redemption narrative, as well as its invitation to delight in the beauty and healing power of creation. Finally, process theology is a theological movement birthed out of the philosophical system developed by Alfred North Whitehead, with the intended aim of constructing a theology that is harmonious with a dynamic evolutionary understanding of natural processes. Because of its focused attention on the interrelated nature of all things, the works of process theologians including Catherine Keller, Marjorie Suchocki, Jay McDaniel, and John Cobb, have included a
unique sensitivity to the importance of creation and ecological responsibility. Each of these three movements will be addressed in this chapter by examining the work of a few of their most notable representatives. My goal here will be twofold: 1) first, to establish key facets of each of these movements that demonstrate invaluable insight into the theological importance of creation and therefore must be maintained for the ultimate task of formulating a well-rounded eco-eschatology, and 2) second, to demonstrate how these ecologically sensitive perspectives tend to emphasize realized rather than futurized eschatology, and thus remain incomplete for eco-eschatology on their own.

**Ecofeminism**

Rosemary Radford Ruether

The foundational teaching of ecofeminism that Rosemary Radford Ruether represents is the inherent link between the patriarchal domination of women and the domination of the earth, demonstrated by the historical tendency to connect women with all things earthly and physical. Within this system, both women and other material dimensions of the physical world have, for the most part, been treated as possessions, and therefore as symbols of wealth and status. According to Ruether, older agricultural societies that existed before the formation of organized religion were matriarchal in origin, and therefore allowed for a more holistic, egalitarian society. It was apparently only after some time in the first millennium B.C. that this more communal worldview began to break down. Hence, Ruether connects much of the damage done to

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perceptions of women and the earth with the development of certain cultural alienations introduced into society by the influence of Christian cosmology. Much of Ruether’s work focusses on critiquing early Christian dualism, influenced by the Greek philosophical tradition of Plato. Here the preference for the soul as the exclusive component of human existence capable of immortality and transcendence created a cultural alienation from the body and the general physicality of the earth, and thus the physical world became the “collective prison of incarnated souls.” 10 While this perspective was compounded by the influence of Neo-Platonism and especially by its exaggeration within Christian Gnosticism, Ruether finds even in Paul the general identification of the natural world with the evil condition, and the transcendent world with the redeemed life. 11

According to Ruether, Greek influence can also be held responsible for the development of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, or “out of nothing,” since it was highly concerned with maintaining the contingency of creation and the independence of the divine life. 12 This concern with maintaining the transcendence of God over creation left the doctrine of creation in ambiguity concerning the actual relationship or connection between the divine and the material. 13 More recently, this antiquated rhetoric of alienation and harshly separated categories has come into debate with the challenge of scientific advances, and this is precisely the reason Ruether calls it into reconsideration. While even in the modern age, Newtonian physics still loomed large and influenced a deistic understanding of the cosmos as made up of distinct entities, the new

10 Ruether, Gaia and God, 26.

11 Ibid., 127.

12 Ibid., 26.

13 Ibid., 27.
cosmology has revealed a more fluid “web of relationships” constantly in motion and affected by one another.\textsuperscript{14} Thus the task of contemporary ecology becomes in part the celebration of this inter-relationality of all things, emphasizing the need for cooperation and interdependency.\textsuperscript{15} As Ruether points out, the introduction of scientific innovations like evolutionary theory and the narrative of the Big Bang challenges our tendency towards anthropocentrism and separation from the rest of the created world, and seems to emphasize creation as a richly complicated and inter-connected process rather than a finished or self-enclosed product.\textsuperscript{16} For this reason, Ruether argues that it is time to turn our theological attention to divine immanence in order to heal from the Christian obsession with transcendence. Utilizing the Gaia hypothesis first developed by James Lovelock, Ruether proposes a doctrine of God as the “immanent source of life,” in some sense restricted by the limitations that make the interdependence of all life possible.\textsuperscript{17} Ultimately Ruether’s critiques lead her to argue for the intrinsic value of nature, wherein each and every element of creation is owed a certain level of respect as belonging ultimately to God rather than existing primarily as potential human property.\textsuperscript{18} Thus her vision of ecological responsibility involves the re-establishment of the harmony of the whole, where the needs of humanity are to be balanced with the equally important needs of the rest of the rich diversity of beings in the world.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 38.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 48

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 34, 41-8.


\textsuperscript{18} Ruether, \textit{Gaia and God}, 210-11.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 257.
Ruether’s specific engagement with the Christian doctrine of eschatology begins with an analysis of the development of Jewish apocalyptic thought. She describes how the prophetic vision of Israel’s future gradually shifted from local and temporal blessing as well as punishment against the enemies of Israel, into a more cosmic drama detailing the ultimate destruction of the forces of evil and the total vindication of God’s people. It is within this historical shift in thought that the overcoming of mortality is also first introduced as a dimension of this redemptive vision. While Hebrew religion before the Greek period mostly viewed mortality as altogether natural, although something to be mourned in cases of premature death or unrewarded righteousness, after the development of apocalyptic thought resurrection became a future hope that was applied not only to human individuals but also to the rest of creation. As the influence of Plato continued to increase, this hope for redemption became more and more detached from the earth and fixated upon an altogether other-worldly salvation restricted to the immortal soul. The tradition of Apocalypticism, which continues in various forms today, is based, according to Ruether, on a “fantasy” that denies the life of the biosphere because of its mortality, and perpetuates an understanding of God as ultimately removed and unrelated to all things physical and mortal.

It is from here that Ruether launches into a re-evaluation of the nature of death, criticizing the idea first developed by Paul that death is somehow related to the introduction of evil into the

20 Ibid., 67.
21 Ibid., 71.
22 Ibid., 119-20.
23 Ibid., 83.
world through the sins of the first human couple. Ruether notes instead the essential role played by death in the very process of the life cycle itself; without the elements of dead organisms constantly being broken down and renewed into nutrients for new growth, the process of ongoing life would be impossible. According to Ruether, the real miracle of “immortality” lies in this natural cycle of recycled life, and the human fascination with connecting finitude with the consequences of sin, as if it were a punishment, misses the point entirely. It is in fact the very flight from mortality that has led historically to patterns of sinful domination and exploitation over other humans and the earth. In light of this, Ruether suggests that for the purpose of more responsible ecological living, we must return to the early Hebrew understanding of mortality as a natural condition and redemption as temporally and historically located within finite limits. In this way, Ruether’s redemptive and prophetic hope becomes restricted to the physical here-and-now, and obliterates any literal notion of life after death or even the full restoration of the earth. She argues that an ecologically responsible reconciliation with the earth will involve a reconciliation with finitude, not through transcendent eternity but by making peace with death itself as a friend of the life process of Gaia. Her more practically understood “new earth” is not

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24 Ibid., 128.
25 Ibid., 53.
26 Ibid., 104-5.
27 Ibid., 141. Here I wonder whether the source of the problem is the hope for immortality itself, or simply the fear of mortality. While hope can be an empowering and harmonizing force in the world, fear leads more easily to destructive and manipulative behaviors, practiced for the purpose of self-preservation. Such a distinction is important, because it leaves open the possibility for a more holistic eco-eschatology if hope for immortality can be safeguarded while the more damaging fear of mortality is overcome. I believe it can be demonstrated that the former does not necessarily require the latter.
28 Ibid., 139.
30 Ruether, Liberation Theology, 125.
one found at the end of history, but instead can be instituted by human agents at any time; the vision is ours for the fulfilling, and it is up to us whether such a restoration is achieved or whether we allow the patterns of oppression to continue.31 Ruether thus closes the possibility for any futurized element in her own eschatology, instead utilizing eschatological and apocalyptic elements only sparingly in order to highlight the importance of action in the world now, before it is too late. For Ruether, the notion of ultimate *telos* beyond human control is simply too dangerous, although she does note the importance of addressing the fears and hopes connected with traditional apocalypticism in our development of a more healthy spirituality.32 Unfortunately, whether or not she accomplishes this successfully in her own work is debatable, since her placement of responsibility for the earth appears to rest solely in human hands, leaving little left for God to do in the work of redemption, besides being the source of energy and interconnectedness that makes life possible in the first place.

Anne Primavesi

Anne Primavesi seeks to explore the historical associations made between nature and femininity, and how they have led to the male fascination with transcendence from the body and the earth as sources of feminine “weakness.”33 Like Ruether, she evaluates how this has influenced the dualistic tendency to separate the soul from the body and the heavenly order from the earthly order.34 A hierarchical understanding of ontology allowed the male perspective to view itself on the highest tier of physical existence, closer to God and the heavenly realm than

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31 Ibid.
32 Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 84.
34 Ibid., 88
the other lower tiers of women and nature.\textsuperscript{35} This in turn led to the development of a harsh distinction between the sacred and the material, wherein the profanity of the material somehow possessed the ability to corrupt the sacred.\textsuperscript{36} Because the natural world lay so far down on the gradation of being, it possessed no capacities for relating to the divine and thus was deemed valueless.\textsuperscript{37} Along with Ruether, Primavesi seeks to combat the lingering effects of this perspective by harmonizing her work with contemporary science and the interconnected vision of the Gaia hypothesis. She uses the related nature of all reality to demonstrate our inherent connection with the rest of the non-human world and the all-pervasive love of God for creation.\textsuperscript{38} She then uses this as a basis for her argument for the intrinsic value of every element in creation, each responsible for playing an important role in the maintenance of the biotic system of life as a whole. Such intrinsic value is also rooted in each created being’s unique relationship to God.\textsuperscript{39} Here intrinsic or innate value is emphasized over the more commonly appreciated instrumental value of creation, in order to safeguard against a merely anthropocentric focus on caring for creation in a way that prioritizes human need.\textsuperscript{40} This turn to intrinsic value also awakens the appreciation for diversity and differentiation, wherein the rich variety of life forms and natural phenomena become a source of wonder and celebration of the earth as it is, inspiring the perception of beauty over and against the modern obsession with utility and efficiency.\textsuperscript{41} This

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 102.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 103-4.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 152.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 152.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 56.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 94, 156.
then provides a way for us to see matter again as sacred in its own right, made valuable by the empowering spirit of life within.  

Primavesi makes a startling comparison when she demonstrates the similarities between alarmist apocalyptic theology on the one hand, and environmentalists concerned about the imminent ecological crisis on the other hand. Her insight is that both groups share the use of apocalyptic imagery and judgment to illustrate a future threat that inspires action in the present. Primavesi notes certain distinctions, however, such as the fact that “green apocalypticists” tend to have a generally negative outlook, and only reveal interest in a future vision of salvation and wholeness if it involves the entirety of creation. Furthermore, environmentalists do not look forward to divine intervention, but expect victory or failure in the eco-war to be dependent upon human will alone. The contemporary apocalyptic narrative influenced by Fundamentalism, on the other hand, dismisses human responsibility from the equation with its assertion of divine interventionism. Unfortunately this vision also usually entails the violent destruction of the current planet as a pivotal stage in the drama of glorification. Thus, Primavesi is critical of traditional apocalypticism, and yet she does note the importance of some concept of heaven when it serves as a source of comfort, courage, and ethical action. Ultimately, though, she finds it unacceptable to value eternal life above and at the expense of life on earth, because such a

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42 Ibid., 220.
43 Ibid., 67.
44 Ibid., 72-3.
45 Ibid., 73.
46 Ibid., 127-8.
perspective simply provides no way of seeing the earth as our home and valuing it in a way that motivates responsibility to it.\textsuperscript{48} While she does not deny the importance of spiritual hope, her “eschatology” is really that “heaven is here, and now, for us,” and that our opportunities for life and growth do not extend beyond finite limits.\textsuperscript{49} She does offer her own “image of Paradise,” but it is in many ways a radical one, which includes not only all other aspects of creation, but also death itself as a pivotal link in the creative process of the world.\textsuperscript{50} She argues that the “interactions between life and death” are what in fact create the conditions for life, joy and fulfillment.\textsuperscript{51} She also critiques the way in which God has been seen as altogether separate from, or even the opposite of, death; when in reality without death creation as we know it would not exist, and God would not be Creator. Thus, much like Ruether, she encourages her readers to view death as an intrinsic good, and not to allow transcendent visions of heaven to keep them from making peace with it as that which makes life possible in the first place.\textsuperscript{52} While Primavesi’s approach is in many ways similar to that of Ruether’s approach, she does provide a unique insight into the surprisingly apocalyptic rhetoric of eco-alarmism, and offers what are in some ways more hopeful openings toward salvaging some piece of the traditional Christian concept of eschatological glorification. Her use of such concepts, however, tends to be mostly figurative, and in the end she shuts down the possibility for an authentic eschatology when she only allows space for its realized component.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 106.
Sallie McFague

Sallie McFague is perhaps the most widely known and consulted source when it comes to the topic of Christian eco-theology. While she writes within much of the same context as the previous two writers and recognizes the same patterns of oppression against women and nature, her most foundational as well as unique contribution is her notion of the world as God’s body. Like her colleagues, she begins with the intention of constructing a theology that is more compatible with the cosmic vision of contemporary science, or what she calls the “common creation story.”53 As a supplement and perhaps even a corrective to earlier creation narratives, what the contemporary vision reveals is that we as humans are not in any sense separate or superior in comparison to the rest of creation, but are instead products of the same evolutionary processes and related to everything else.54 In her own attempt to overcome the damage done by Christian dualism, she seeks to develop a model of the universe as God’s body in order to demonstrate both the transcendence and the immanence of God, and unite the two in one mutually beneficial doctrine.55 After evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the typical models of the natural world, the organic, agential, and mechanical, she moves forward with a modified version of the organic and agential models that recognizes the presence of the divine not only in the rational or spiritual nature of the human being, but in the physical body as well.56 This model provides a way of seeing God as present not only within individual bodies (living as

54 Ibid., 46-50.
55 Ibid., 20.
56 Ibid., 35-7.
well as non-living) but also in the body of the earth as a whole, which becomes the “visible reality of the invisible God.”  

57 Her suggestion is not that God be thought of as having a body, but rather that matter itself might be understood as somehow being sourced out of the God’s own being.  

58 Her talk of God relating to the world as the spirit does to the body provides a foundation for divine transcendence, and allows her to combine elements of both the organic and the agential models in her paradigm.  

59 She also chooses to use pneumatological language because it provides a more fluid metaphor for the life-energy found in all living creatures dependent upon breath, and illustrates intimate divine relationship rather than control.  

60 It is here as McFague develops her somewhat panentheistic vision of the God-world relationship that she provides her critique of the traditional doctrine of creation ex nihilo. She draws inspiration from a procreative model which emphasizes that the world is in some sense part of and formed from God rather than out of nothing or even out of some other co-eternal material.  

61 Rather than simply being a divine parent, however, God is to be thought of as the very life of the body of the world, thus constituting both the world’s continuing dependence on God and God’s eternal independence from the world.  

62 The model of God as mother and the world as within the womb of God is thus a helpful metaphor that must at the same time be balanced with others. McFague’s model of God also allows her to re-imagine the incarnation of Christ as

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57 Ibid., 102.  
58 Ibid., 19.  
59 Ibid., 141.  
60 Ibid., 143-5.  
61 Ibid., 151.  
62 Ibid., 153.
simply “paradigmatic of what we find everywhere,” demonstrating in a unique but not exclusive sense the way in which God is present in all places of the world.\textsuperscript{63} For McFague, it is in fact this incarnational emphasis that makes Christianity equipped for the task of meeting the current ecological challenge, providing us with “permission to love the world by the incarnation of God in the world.”\textsuperscript{64} This ability to love and find value in the world introduces us to the intrinsic value of the natural world, which can be celebrated at a distance from instrumental or pragmatic value.\textsuperscript{65} Harkening back to God’s initial proclamation in Genesis that the creation was good, this aesthetic distance allows for the opportunity to look and see the goodness in creation without the need to devour or possess.\textsuperscript{66} Central to McFague’s work has been the need for establishing anthropological responsibility for the ecological crisis as well as for ecological recovery. While we do not enjoy special value or privilege over the rest of creation, because of our unique creative abilities and our capacity for wonder, we must be seen as partners with God in the project of creation, sharing responsibility for the ultimate fate of the world.\textsuperscript{67}

McFague is highly critical of the Christian notion of life after death and apocalypticism because of the way in which they have engendered apathy, and in many cases even hatred, towards bodies of any kind, including the body of the earth.\textsuperscript{68} This is based on what she calls a misunderstanding concerning the doctrine of the resurrection, which has not allowed God to be

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\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{64} Sallie McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 34.
\textsuperscript{65} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 166.
\textsuperscript{66} McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology}, 74, 112.
\textsuperscript{67} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 105; McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology}, 75.
\textsuperscript{68} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 16.
\end{flushleft}
seen as a permanent presence in the world, because such a presence could only become possible
when we join God in the fullness of resurrected life.\textsuperscript{69} In contrast, she insists that we are earth-
bound creatures, who could not have become what we are without the physical world and could
not exist without it in any kind of meaningful future.\textsuperscript{70} Thus whatever our eschatology, it must
embrace the idea of earth as our home, and of our destiny being inextricably bound up with the
destiny of the earth.\textsuperscript{71} McFague’s contemporary eschatology can be characterized as a realized
eschatology because she herself defines it as “an ethical mandate for how we ought to live
now.”\textsuperscript{72} Rather than promoting hope in a literal future utopia, this eschatology serves as the
guiding vision of the world which we are to begin building in the here-and-now.\textsuperscript{73} She
emphasizes the spatial rather than the temporal aspect of eschatology, describing a vision of
sustainability and harmonious living as the salvation that takes place in concrete times and
spaces.\textsuperscript{74} Here the resurrection, like the \textit{eschaton}, also functions as a \textit{symbol} of God’s presence in
the world at all times and places, and of the way in which death organically functions as the way
to new life.\textsuperscript{75} McFague attempts, however, to balance her rather sobering call to action with
words of hope, utilizing the metaphor of the cosmic Christ as an example of the fact that the
“cosmos is moving toward salvation.”\textsuperscript{76} She suggests that ultimate hope does not rest in the

\textsuperscript{69} Sallie McFague, \textit{Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age} (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress

\textsuperscript{70} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 56-7.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 63.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 199.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 198.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 181.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 60, 191.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 180.
hands of the natural world alone, and that God will “make all things well” even if our attempts to save the planet ultimately fail.\textsuperscript{77} The notions that we are merely partners with God in the acts of creation and redemption, and that God will have the last word, are welcome nuances to her thought.\textsuperscript{78} They are, however, difficult ones to harmonize with the rest of her work, which is highly concerned with emphasizing the presence of God in creation and dismissing God’s ability to control or unilaterally affect events that take place in the world. The vague nature of McFague’s last word on hope seems to reveal a weakness in her argumentation, where her safeguard against ultimate despair ends up leading to confusion regarding our actual role in healing creation.

Preliminary Conclusions

As we have seen, the genre of ecofeminism provides us with a rich array of insight into the importance of rightly orienting ourselves to the rest of creation in a way that promotes healing and reconciliation with the earth itself as well as with one another. An important aspect of this is becoming willing to challenge and modify our implicit religious biases as Ruether, Primavesi, and McFague have bravely done. Constructing an ecologically healthy theology thus first requires consultation with the insights of contemporary science. Theories and discoveries about the natural world provide the Christian narrative with the needed material for further reflection on the world which God creates, and the ways in which the inner workings of that world reveal the very heart of God. Thus we must open ourselves to what evolutionary theory, the Big Bang, and the Gaia hypothesis, among other things, can teach us about the God-world

\textsuperscript{77} McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology}, 170.

\textsuperscript{78} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 201.
relationship. This in turn will lead to a re-evaluation of certain Christian interpretations of scripture such as the theory of creation *ex nihilo* and the highly dualistic and escapist notion of life after death in heaven. The emphasis on realized eschatology within ecofeminism provides a compelling case for ecological responsibility in the present. What ecofeminism fails to provide, however, is any clear method for salvaging the doctrine of eschatology in its more complete, multi-faceted form. While lip service is sometimes paid to a notion of ultimate cosmological redemption, the basis for such an idea is not easily found within their arguments, and they fail to do the hard work of wrestling with the difficult tension between redemptive work being primarily our human responsibility in the present and divine unilateral intervention (or at least fulfillment of some kind) being a future possibility. Also, as Theodore McCall rightly notes in his critical evaluation of Ruether’s work, the connection that ecofeminists tend to make between the hope for immortality and total apathy in the face of ecological concerns is not necessarily an automatic one. In fact, the despair that can come as a result of the realization of finitude and impermanence can be just as debilitating when it comes to motivating action in the world. Thus, it seems that the key concern here, to which ecofeminists rightly turn their attention, is the destructive power of the *fear* of death, which possibly can be overcome by their organic paradigms, but perhaps is better addressed by futurized eschatology. We will revisit this concept in the following chapter in our discussion of futurized eschatology.

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Creation Spirituality

Matthew Fox

Matthew Fox is one of the leading voices in the theological movement known as “creation spirituality” or “creation theology,” his work being highly influenced by members of the mystic tradition such as Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, and St. Francis of Assisi, as well as the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. One of the key functions of this genre is the critique of the dominance of the fall/redemption model throughout Christian history, and a return back to the more fundamental “creation-centered” model in its place. Highly critical of the way in which the fall/redemption model has tied the Christian narrative to the concept of original sin, and consequently a vision of the natural world as inherently “fallen” and godless, Fox proposes a doctrine of “original blessing” which sees the blessing of creation as more fundamental than redemption. He is concerned with how privatizing and introspective the preoccupation with personal salvation has become, perpetuating a narrative of fear in regards to others and the physical world as possible sources of temptation or corruption. Since the fall/redemption model’s emphasis on redemption from sin is a highly anthropocentric one, another central concern for Fox is to build a theology that better correlates to the common creation story and adequately addresses the billions of years of evolutionary history that preceded human existence. Fox’s critique of theological dualism is a harsh one; he identifies dualism as “the sin behind all sin,” because of the way in which it forces separation, especially between God and the

80 Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, 11.
81 Ibid., 11, 22.
82 Ibid., 76, 82.
83 Ibid., 19.
Interestingly, while Fox utilizes what he himself describes as a panentheistic model of the God-world relationship, and even incorporates the metaphor of the world as the divine womb, he maintains the usage of creation \textit{ex nihilo} in his language of both divine and cosmic creativity.\textsuperscript{85}

Fox’s doctrine of original blessing provides the basis for a recognition of beauty and intrinsic value in all creation, which allows life to be “loved for its own sake.”\textsuperscript{86} For Fox, blessing is the loving source of all life and existence, and thus precedes even creation itself.\textsuperscript{87} This recognition of divine blessing present everywhere and at all times in turn allows for a celebratory love of creation as the most proper human response; here pleasure and passion actually become spiritual virtues.\textsuperscript{88} The enjoyment of original blessing thus cultivates within us the necessary reverence and respect for all other forms of life and existence and orients us toward the needs of the other in love.\textsuperscript{89} Fox is careful not to paint a perfect picture of the cosmos; he recognizes the imperfections of pain and tragedy in the world, but his primary concern is to demonstrate that God is not absent even from these more negative aspects, and therefore they deserve celebration as well, as sources of life, growth, and divine presence.\textsuperscript{90} In order to demonstrate divine presence in both the celebratory and painful aspects of the cosmos, Fox constructs a theology of the Cosmic Christ based on scriptural references to Jesus as the Logos.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 49, 89.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 23, 91.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 111.
and cosmic foundation of the world.\textsuperscript{91} Within this vision, which transcends that of the vision of the Incarnate Christ, all things are seen as coming into being through Christ, and as continuing to draw life and power to overcome sin and darkness through him.\textsuperscript{92} Thus the Cosmic Christ is continually birthed, or made incarnate, whenever and wherever love and reconciliation take place; a primary example of this in our time is the healing that must take place between the human consciousness and the rest of creation.\textsuperscript{93} Fox even suggests the image of “Jesus as Mother Earth crucified yet rising daily,” in order to demonstrate the presence of the Cosmic Christ in the oppressed and neglected earth.\textsuperscript{94}

While Fox works diligently to turn attention away from redemption as the primary locus of a healthy spirituality, he does not dismiss it as a wholly unusable or unneeded category. He instead re-imagines redemption as having necessarily cosmic dimensions, and re-defines salvation as the awakening of creativity and passion rather than a cleansing from original sin.\textsuperscript{95} He envisions redemption as simply a component of the ongoing process of creation, which is a process that necessarily involves “labor pains” from which we must continually seek healing.\textsuperscript{96} Thus, his creation-centered approach to redemption requires a denial of the fear of all forms of suffering and loss, including death itself, since death is simply another necessary aspect of the


\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 93, 122.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 145.

\textsuperscript{95} Fox, \textit{The Coming of the Cosmic Christ}, 152; Fox, \textit{Original Blessing}, 241.

\textsuperscript{96} Fox, \textit{Original Blessing}, 243.
creative process.\textsuperscript{97} Here Fox again incorporates the metaphor of creation out of nothingness as a parallel to the re-creation or redemption we experience by embracing loss and darkness as part of the process.\textsuperscript{98} By his own admission, Fox’s eschatology is more concerned with becoming realized in the present than it is with exploring unrealized or futurized possibilities.\textsuperscript{99} While he acknowledges the role played by unrealized eschatology at least in speaking to the sin and suffering that continues to take place in the present world, for Fox a creation-centered eschatology turns its focus to the value of the present and does not withhold that vision of ultimate healing until some time in the distant future: “Now is the time.”\textsuperscript{100} Much like his understanding of the Cosmic Christ, heaven is a concept which can be thought of as already present in the here-and-now, capable of breaking in at any moment.\textsuperscript{101} As beings birthed out of the creative process and endowed with our own creative capabilities, we humans play an instrumental role in ushering in this eschatological reality, equally responsible for the healing of the world as co-creators with God.\textsuperscript{102} Thus, the truth of the unrealized or not-yet born Cosmic Christ is simply the reality of the ongoing need for Christ to be continually re-born in us as instruments of his justice and compassion.\textsuperscript{103} Fox’s anthropological vision is therefore an

\begin{footnotesize}
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\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 86.
\item Ibid., 150.
\item Ibid., 105.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid., 251.
\item Fox, \textit{The Coming of the Cosmic Christ}, 136-7.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
incredibly positive one, assigning to humanity the very role of redemption that more traditional forms of Christian eschatology tend to reserve for divine action alone.

Thomas Berry

Coming from the perspective of both a priest and a cultural historian, the work of Thomas Berry is less exclusively theological in nature, and more concerned with developing a universally functional cosmology based on the common creation story. Speaking as an heir of the Christian tradition himself, however, he addresses plenty of spiritual themes, including the over-emphasis on the redemption experience at the expense of appreciation for the creation process.\(^{104}\) He therefore criticizes the traditional stewardship model of human responsibility for creation, because of way it neglects our inherent relation and equality with the rest of creation.\(^{105}\) He argues that the historical mission of humanity is not to domesticate or control the planet, because wildness and creative spontaneity actually serve as the deepest realities undergirding all existence.\(^{106}\) Instead we must learn to actually participate in and learn from the wildness of creation, and respect the creative process at work in the cosmos constantly bringing forth greater and more miraculous forms of complexity and beauty.\(^{107}\) Another theological theme which Berry explores is the notion of divine immanence, highlighting the fact that all forms of life ought to be understood as “modes of divine presence.”\(^{108}\) He notes that the over-emphasis on verbal sources of divine inspiration such as the Bible has overlooked the presence of divine revelation in nature.

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\(^{104}\) Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 81.


\(^{107}\) Ibid., 51.

\(^{108}\) Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 11.
when in fact the physical world is the most immediate “sacred reality.” He also suggests that it will be important to move beyond the notion of divine presence in the world, to the integrity of the earth in and of itself. Thus the world, while serving as an instrument of divine revelation, is not merely this alone, but can be embraced for the intrinsic value of its own created nature. He sees it as a primary anthropological function to tune oneself to the inner celebration of life at the heart of the cosmos, for it is humanity in particular which has been endowed with a special sense of self-consciousness that makes such celebration a heightened possibility. Such celebration can be represented in religious ritual and in the formation of a new mythic vision for the world, as we join the unified community of the natural world in what Berry calls the “great liturgy of the universe.”

While building in part off of Christian theological themes, Berry’s primary goal is to develop a new mythic vision, or religious orientation, based on the recognition of the evolutionary process as inherently spiritual as well as physical. Contemporary advances in science lead Berry to conclude that the new common narrative being offered from the scientific perspective, itself replete with awe and wonder, will come to replace more primal stories of creation that have sustained human religion thus far. What Berry proposes is not the introduction of a new religion per se, but instead a “mystique of the land” that in some sense

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110 Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 81.


113 Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 87.

114 Ibid., 15.
transcends religion and inspires presence and reconciliation with the earth in all contexts.\textsuperscript{115} With this re-enchantment of the earth and of the spiritual dimension of the universe at work from the very beginning, Berry sees a revitalization of biblical truths rather than a dismissal of them.\textsuperscript{116} Thus when learning of the complex creative processes of the world, we can recognize them as principles which demonstrate the manner in which God the Creator chose to bring the universe into existence, as an open-ended system created with the capacity for its own self-actualization.\textsuperscript{117}

A consistent critique of traditional forms of Christian eschatology, as well as their historical effects on Western society, can be found throughout Berry’s works. He notes that the obsession with spiritual fulfillment in the great beyond has led to profound dissatisfaction and even resentment toward all things pertaining to the present earthly context.\textsuperscript{118} The transcendent vision begun by John’s Revelation has unfortunately fostered within the Western psyche a kind of superiority complex, the sense that this present world is insufficient and that we deserve a better one.\textsuperscript{119} Indeed, the promise of the millennium of peace offered by Christian apocalypticism developed certain expectations for the perfection of society which, when ultimately disappointed by the lack of a divine intervention, became the task of human progress.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[115] Ibid., 33. Here Berry compares this new “mystique of the land” with its predecessor, the “industrial mystique,” which up until the post-modern era had been the primary mythic vision at work in the modern world. Because the industrial mystique has historically transcended particular religious orientations, what is needed now is an equally all-encompassing vision to take its place.
\item[117] Berry, \textit{The Christian Future}, 64; Berry, “Christianity’s Role in the Earth Project,” 132.
\item[118] Berry, \textit{The Christian Future}, 40; Berry, \textit{The Dream of the Earth}, 102.
\item[119] Berry, \textit{The Dream of the Earth}, 205.
\end{footnotes}
instead.\textsuperscript{120} Hope for ultimate salvation was abandoned but what remained was the radical dissatisfaction with the present state of the world.\textsuperscript{121} While the literal sense of millennial fulfillment degraded, the myth of progress rose to take its place, along with the rise of the Enlightenment, democratic government, capitalism, and industrialism.\textsuperscript{122} Berry notes that the effects of the scientific revolution in particular began to develop the sense that we as humans possessed the ability to understand and control natural processes, thus removing the need for divine intervention in our understanding of progressing beyond the limitations of the human condition.\textsuperscript{123} Ironically enough, these lingering millennial expectations applied to the Western experiment have in fact led to the degradation of the planet and the ecological crisis as we understand it today.\textsuperscript{124}

Thus what Berry proposes is that our present task is to turn our attention to the development of the Ecological age, or Ecozoic Era, which is how Berry envisions the next logical phase of history following the Cenozoic era.\textsuperscript{125} Such a vision entails a modification of the understanding of “progress,” now extended to the entire earth community, of which humans finally come to see themselves simply as participating members.\textsuperscript{126} Utilizing certain utopian elements of Marxist classless society, capitalism, and even John’s Apocalypse, Berry constructs an image of the end, or at least of the final age, as the common destiny of humanity and the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 115.  \\
\textsuperscript{121} Berry, \textit{The Great Work}, 103.  \\
\textsuperscript{122} Berry, \textit{The Dream of the Earth}, 29.  \\
\textsuperscript{123} Berry, \textit{The Great Work}, 103.  \\
\textsuperscript{124} Berry, \textit{The Dream of the Earth}, 29.  \\
\textsuperscript{125} Berry, \textit{The Great Work}, 8.  \\
\textsuperscript{126} Berry, \textit{The Dream of the Earth}, 82. 
\end{footnotesize}
world, the responsibility for which Berry calls the “Great Work” of contemporary society. Berry even applies this calling to Christianity itself, arguing that the Church could and ought to play an instrumental role in the development of this new age of peace by providing a fresh interpretation of the creation story and re-defining religion as primarily an experience of celebration of the world as the meeting place between the human and the divine. While he does not explicitly state his views on the possibility of life after death, he does note a connection between the symbolic truth of the cross and the necessity of death and sacrifice at work in natural processes, implying an appreciation and a contentment with the notion of death that seems to be in harmony with the ecofeminist perspective. Also in similarity with the ecofeminist sources we have already addressed, Berry offers some rather ambiguous words of hope and comfort that are difficult to reconcile with the rest of his work. He describes it as “difficult” to believe that the purposes of creation could ever break down or that God will ultimately abandon his creation, yet he does not leave clear room in his own utopic vision for divine-human partnership. What Berry therefore seems to offer is a highly modified version of eschatology that is not only a “realized” form because of its emphasis on the opportunity for fulfillment to begin now, it is also highly dependent on human responsibility and thus difficult to accept as a trustworthy or reliable promise.

129 Ibid., 90.
Preliminary Conclusions

Despite some of its diversions from traditional Christian emphases, creation theology is an indispensable resource for the development of a well-rounded eco-eschatology because of its uniquely positive perspective of the natural world. It seeks to turn the typical narrative of the fall on its head and instead uplift creation as ultimately and inherently good, making space for genuine love and appreciation of the concept of created-ness. Like ecofeminism, it is highly concerned with centralizing the intrinsic value of the created world, but it takes this recognition one step further with its emphasis on celebration being the most important spiritual discipline. Here the issue of caring for creation and other creatures both human and non-human alike goes beyond simple obedience and embraces the affective side of our devotion. When one is freed to love and enjoy the creation in all its diverse and wondrous abundance, ethical responsibility is understood to follow naturally as a result. Another important resource offered by creation spirituality is its critique of the fall/redemption narrative for holding primacy in Christian tradition for so long. While this narrative ought not be abandoned entirely, what writers like Fox and Berry rightly point out is the way in which the narrative of creation has been overlooked and under-appreciated. Even in their attempts to incorporate the earth into an ultimate vision of healing and reconciliation, however, Fox and Berry fall short in the development of a holistic eschatology. One reason for this is the lack of attention paid to the need or role of redemption in the attempt to centralize joy and celebration. While these writers do not ignore the reality of suffering and pain in the world, their solution seems to be to embrace these aspects as necessary realities of the creative process.\textsuperscript{131} Their utopic visions also seem to place a heavy emphasis on

\textsuperscript{131} McFague is critical of creation spirituality for this reason, claiming that Berry and others “lack a sense of the awful oppression that is part and parcel of the awesome mystery and splendor.” (See McFague, The Body of God, 71). While I disagree insofar as I sense that Berry is in fact very much aware of the reality of oppression and suffering, what I think is lacking is a cosmic vision that incorporates the ultimate overcoming of all these forms of
human responsibility, and thus McFague in her critique of creation theology concludes that they must be taken simply as that, utopias, which provide only prescriptive rather than descriptive versions of reality.\footnote{McFague, The Body of God, 72.} What is perhaps most problematic is the way in which these utopic visions, with their emphasis on human action and responsibility, seem to undercut the very critique against the modern myth of progress developed as their foundation. In other words, after drawing attention to the dangers which have played out as a result of the Western world taking the millennial vision into its own hands, the solution being offered is simply one more version of this human-dependent vision of progress. The highly positive view of the physical creation, humanity included, and the critique of modern progress are thus two aspects of creation theology that remain in tension and must be better reconciled in the development of an ecologically positive eschatology.

**Process Theology**

Charles Hartshorne

Charles Hartshorne is known for the early development of process theology out of its more philosophical foundations offered by Alfred North Whitehead. This school of thought can be characterized by its relation to evolutionary theory and its critique of classical theism insofar as it has historically emphasized the non-temporal, unchanging, and unaffected nature of God. In contrast, process theology takes as its foundation the notion that God can both affect and be affected by temporal and physical processes, and thus the doctrine of God which has been developed by process thinkers and represented well by Hartshorne himself begins with a harsh suffering in the world. Ironically, as we have already seen, it seems that such a vision is also lacking in McFague’s work as well.
critique against the notion of divine omnipotence. He argues that this doctrine has been built upon a faulty understanding of power, which emphasizes control rather creativity and love.\textsuperscript{133} For God to determine everything that happens in the world in the way that traditional doctrines of divine power have conceived would leave no possibility for genuine novelty, growth and beauty as we know it.\textsuperscript{134} For Hartshorne, the only conceivably worthwhile project for creation would instead be one which entailed the creation of other active agents endowed with their own creative capacities for influence and becoming. The priority for creation is here understood as the ever-increasing divine enjoyment of the beauty of the world.\textsuperscript{135} A certain risk therefore becomes inevitable, the risk of limiting divine power and control, in order for the creation of a genuinely valuable world to become a reality.\textsuperscript{136} This reveals not a weakness on God’s part, but instead a necessary aspect of the creative process itself. The notion of divine omnipotence is therefore an “absurd ideal” that cannot be reconciled with the reality of the world in which we find ourselves.\textsuperscript{137} Instead what we find, in keeping with evolutionary biology and the narrative of the Big Bang, is that God is the ultimate creator behind the pervasive creativity at work in every creature and every cosmic event, making creativity itself a universal reality.\textsuperscript{138} Thus the kind of creator that God is and all that this necessarily entails plays a foundational role throughout the entire system of process thought.


\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 10.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{138} Charles Hartshorne, \textit{A Natural Theology for Our Time} (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1967), 26.
One of Hartshorne’s unique contributions to process cosmology is that of his mind-body analogy for God and the world.\textsuperscript{139} Here Hartshorne’s language anticipates the later work of Sallie McFague, for he also describes the cosmos in terms of being the “body of God.”\textsuperscript{140} He finds it helpful to describe God as the “World Soul,” the inclusive principle responsible for the integrity and continuity of the world.\textsuperscript{141} This vision of divine immanence combined with the notion of an open universe created toward freedom allows Hartshorne to describe God’s immediate presence to and love for all creatures without the intrusion of divine control. With Hartshorne’s notion of God as inclusive cosmic Whole comes also his own critique of creation \textit{ex nihilo}. He is critical both of the traditional idea that God created the world from nothing, as well as the idea of some kind of preexistent matter, instead suggesting that what is of primary importance in the creation narrative is that the creation of the world is a voluntary divine act, and that God \textit{observes} rather than \textit{ensures} that this creation is good.\textsuperscript{142} What this means is that somehow the divine creativity possesses the ability to create agents in the world which are self-active and able to respond to divine initiation from their very beginning; thus the world is the result of a co-creative process between God and the world itself.\textsuperscript{143} Hartshorne is careful, however, to maintain a distinction between the creativity of the world and the divine creativity which he deems superior.\textsuperscript{144} While created beings are necessarily contingent and bound by preceding circumstances and conditions

\textsuperscript{139} Hartshorne, \textit{Omnipotence}, 56.


\textsuperscript{141} Hartshorne, \textit{Omnipotence}, 59.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 74-5.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 82.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 118.
at least to a certain extent, there is no preceding phase for God which God himself has not also created and therefore influenced. Following from this is Hartshorne’s interesting notion that while God does in some sense need or require the world, what this really means is that God requires a world of some sort but not necessarily the particular world that exists as we know it today. Thus while each individual creature can be understood as contingent, the idea of no creation ever having existed at all is simply nonsensical in light of the fact that God is essentially “creator, incapable of not creating.”

Hartshorne finds the traditional doctrine of heaven and hell to be highly problematic because of the way in which it has set up a system of rewards and punishments for moral behavior which ought to instead be practiced out of genuine desire. He argues that genuine love modeled after the love of Christ cannot be motivated by the promise of reward in heaven, because this love is its own reward. He describes the human desire for immortality as a “typical human egotism,” and finds no necessary evil in the concept of finitude which simply functions as the definitive limit that makes concrete particularity possible. In contrast to the somewhat limited and individualistic obsession with personal immortality, Hartshorne offers a

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146 Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology*, 65.


149 Ibid., 99.

150 Charles Hartshorne, John Kennedy, and Piotr Gutowski, "Charles Hartshorne on Metaphilosophy, Person and Immortality, and Other Issues," *Personal Reflections on Process Thought* 19, no. 4 (1990): 271. This argument is based on Hartshorne’s understanding that created beings are simply fragments of the cosmic whole, and as such cannot logically be granted temporally or spatially infinite futures. It is only the whole, the divine World Soul, which can be understood as infinite in this way. See Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 36.
developed version of Whitehead’s notion of objective immortality, wherein every passing event (and thus every subject) is permanently retained in the divine life.\textsuperscript{151} His reasoning is that a life cannot be said to truly end in death, for once something has been created it cannot then be de-created or wiped from the memory of God or the world; instead what ends in death is simply the possibility for further actualization of the life beyond how it has already been actualized, and thus it is this perfect memory of past actualization that is maintained in God.\textsuperscript{152} This is based on process philosophy which teaches that all of life is a system of passing events which are birthed out of the influence of past events coupled with the introduction of novelty provided by the lure of divine possibility. Thus death simply serves as the cut-off point for one’s ability to contribute either good or ill to the divine life, for each event and each subject will be divinely remembered in their historical entirety. The hopeful aspect of Hartshorne’s vision of immortality is that it provides a source of ultimate worth and value to each individual life as well as the life of the cosmos as a whole; even while both are sure to perish, they maintain a future in the mind of God. What Hartshorne denies is any clear sense of subjective immortality, for he rejects the possibility of additional states of awareness after the occurrence of death, as well as any immortality or renewal of the physical cosmos.\textsuperscript{153} Hartshorne ultimately rejects eschatology as a meaningful theological category; that being said, even in his rejection of it, he may be said to construct a version of realized eschatology by re-imagining the themes of heaven and hell as moral

\textsuperscript{151} Hartshorne, \textit{Omnipotence}, 34.


\textsuperscript{153} Hartshorne, \textit{Omnipotence}, 121. While Hartshorne is one of process theology’s most foundational thinkers, his views on subjective immortality in particular do not represent a definitive stance on the matter from within the process community. One recent example of the attempt to construct a meaningful doctrine of subjective immortality utilizing the process philosophy of Whitehead is the work of Marjorie Suchocki, to whom we will turn later as a resource for developing a more well-rounded eschatological paradigm.
imperatives for the present. He sees the choice between heaven and hell not as a choice regarding eternity, but instead one regarding the here-and-now; one either reaps the heavenly benefits of a life lived in love or the hellish effects of a selfish life empty of love.\footnote{154} This places a heightened importance on present human action and responsibility, since our only chance to love God and others is given a finite limit, and every decision we make will affect and be remembered by God for eternity.\footnote{155}

Catherine Keller

In recent years, Catherine Keller has continued the work of process thought, focusing much of her attention on theological cosmology and eschatology in particular. Like Hartshorne and in keeping with the process tradition, Keller rejects the traditional definition of divine omnipotence, and the decision to do so is inherently linked with her understanding of the event of creation. Along with Hartshorne she denies the equivalence of power with control, and argues instead that the creative power at the heart of the universe must instead be understood as the “energy of influence.”\footnote{156} According to Keller, it is in fact the divine choice not to control which makes the creation of the world possible, for in the act of creating God ensures that the process of creation will continue by allowing for the existence of self-organizing systems, collaborators with God who become partly responsible for the way the world turns out.\footnote{157} In her doctrine of creation, Keller also develops a clear rejection of \textit{creatio ex nihilo}, but unlike Hartshorne she

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{154} Hartshorne, \textit{Time, Death and Eternal Life}, 103.
  \item \footnote{156} Catherine Keller, \textit{On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 80.
  \item \footnote{157} Ibid., 62, 89.
\end{itemize}
embraces the metaphor of creation out of primeval chaos as a rich resource for re-imagining
divine creativity. She points out that, along with the fact that the *ex nihilo* doctrine finds no basis
in the original text of Genesis, it has perpetuated a negative view of embodiment and physicality
due to its vision of divine power forming creation out of a total void.\(^{158}\) She therefore rejects the
reductionistic image of a “preprocessed” creation constructed out of the void and offers instead a
doctrine of *creatio ex profundis*, creation out of the profundity of the chaotic matrix of the
deep.\(^{159}\) Here the *tehom*, or the waters of the deep, represent pure indeterminate potentiality,
neither good nor evil but simply containing the capacity for either to be actualized in any given
moment.\(^{160}\) On its own, the chaos is simply ambivalent, incapable of creating by itself without
divine involvement and influence.\(^{161}\) What it represents, however, is the interactivity at the heart
of the process of creation, which combines divine effort with the creative capacities of the
material world in its ongoing process of becoming.\(^{162}\)

Thus Keller utilizes a panentheistic paradigm of the God-world relationship in order to
establish the radical incarnational presence of God in the physical world, wherein the universe
seen rightly as the body of God provides the foundation for understanding God as ubiquitously
present in all creatures.\(^{163}\) The interactive process between God and the world is more
specifically addressed in Keller’s description of the dipolarity of God, or the doctrine of the two

\(^{158}\) Ibid., 47, 52.

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 48.


\(^{161}\) Ibid., 180-1.


\(^{163}\) Ibid., 64.
divine natures. An idea first developed by Whitehead himself, the primordial nature of God is understood as the eternal divine aspect which offers the “initial aim” or “lure” of possibility to becoming creation.\footnote{Ibid., 99.} The consequent nature, or what Keller calls the “responsive love” of God, is that aspect which responds to and incorporates the actions of free agents in the world in order to continue to offer new initial aims.\footnote{Ibid., 99.} Keller understands the two natures to be inseparably linked, comparing them to the more widely recognized theological categories of creation and salvation.\footnote{Ibid., 108.} Keller thus refrains from dismissing the category of redemption altogether but does work to establish the category of creation as equally important, and perhaps even more foundational.

The theological and societal implications of eschatological and apocalyptic thought are one of Keller’s primary areas of interest. In *Apocalypse Now and Then*, she devotes herself to a critical re-reading of the text of John’s Revelation and the historical tracing of its effects on western society. Throughout this work, as well as others, Keller offers a harsh critique of apocalypticism, which she defines as a category of thought beginning with the late development of Hebrew eschatology.\footnote{Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 21.} Distinct from the more active position of eschatology in general, which characteristically offers prophetic resistance in the face of injustice in the world, apocalyptic thought has become synonymous with an other-worldly mentality that places ultimate salvation in the future with the total destruction of creation as a necessary preliminary
The dualistic understanding of the material versus the spiritual was later reinforced through the temporal dualism between the fallen nature of the past and present versus the perfect image of the future. Keller notes that this apathetic position toward the present state of the world has thus led to the wasteful habits of modern civilization and the ecological crisis itself, suggesting the alarming possibility that eschatology might turn out to be the cause of the literal end of the world. Here the lingering effects of the doctrine of *ex nihilo* continue to have influence, wherein the end of history itself is understood to be sealed as a closed unity in light of its closed beginning. Keller attempts to show that such a reading of the Apocalypse is a reductionistic one that ignores certain nuances in the text of Revelation. She points out that while the text does include descriptions of impending violence and destruction, these are not prescriptions that justify violent or apathetic action, and ought not be taken as literal predictions in any case. Unfortunately even with the dawn of secularization, the apocalyptic sense of cosmic purpose continued until it was translated into the myth of progress introduced by the modern world. Thus Keller finds herself in concert with Thomas Berry when she notes the implicit development of an apocalypse pattern wherein the vision of millennialism became

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172 Ibid., 48.

173 Ibid., 54-5.

174 Ibid., 116-7.
hidden in the political agenda of the West.\textsuperscript{175} This pattern continues to be re-born even within progressive politics and movements such as feminism, which take on the millennial vision and incorporate it into a human agenda.\textsuperscript{176}

After having demonstrated the negative effects of literalist apocalypticism, as well as how the apocalyptic narrative continues to be of influence even within movements that attempt to be anti-apocalyptic, Keller proposes the alternative of “counter-apocalypse.”\textsuperscript{177} With this approach, Keller seeks a third way that would reject the literal interpretation of the end without rejecting the spirit of apocalyptic inspiration altogether.\textsuperscript{178} She recognizes positive aspects even within the more harmful side of apocalyptic thought, which at least manages to “transform the object of fear into the site of hope” by interpreting current crises as signs of the end.\textsuperscript{179} The problem lies in the tendency to locate the presence of salvation in the distant future, and therefore the eschatological model that Keller offers seeks instead to locate the promise of the kingdom of God in the here-and-now of the present moment.\textsuperscript{180} She chooses to interpret the eschatological narratives of the New Testament as metaphors warning us of the consequences, this-worldly consequences, of prioritizing individual profit and comfort over against the needs of the whole community of which we are a part.\textsuperscript{181} Therefore Keller, much like Ruether, Primavesi, Ruether, Primavesi, Ruether, Primavesi.

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{177} Keller, \textit{On the Mystery}, 167.
\textsuperscript{178} Keller, \textit{Apocalypse Now and Then}, 19.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{181} Keller, \textit{On the Mystery}, 146. Keller describes the concepts of “heaven” and “hell” used in these biblical narratives as simple representations of what life in this world will look like for us based on our actions, harkening back to the similar insight provided by Charles Hartshorne in his own eschatological critiques.
and Hartshorne, dismisses the hope for a deathless new creation and embraces finitude as the limiting force that frames existence in the first place.\textsuperscript{182} She even rejects the need for the promise of the end of evil, which she sees intrinsically wrapped up within the same matrix of potentiality that makes good, and therefore meaningful, life possible.\textsuperscript{183} Keller thus ultimately rejects the concept of the \textit{eschaton} as a literal time to come in the future, but she also rejects the possibility for the fullness of the vision to be fully actualized in the present, thus arguing that hers is an “ideal that \textit{resists} every realized eschatology.”\textsuperscript{184} And yet, it is difficult to categorize it as anything other than a realized form of eschatology because of the way it locates the potentiality of the kingdom in the present moment.\textsuperscript{185} By nuancing this notion of “the end,” however, Keller does provide a powerful motivation for responsible social action, demonstrating that the open nature of the future leaves the ultimate results up to free agents in the world.\textsuperscript{186} She utilizes pneumatological language to describe the presence of the divine Spirit in the world even in the midst of crisis, but she warns that this presence will never come in the form of intervention; it will refuse to “clean up our mess.”\textsuperscript{187} In this way Keller constructs what she considers to be an “ecologically sound eschatology,” by providing a hopeful vision of healing and renewal that at

\textsuperscript{182} Keller, \textit{Apocalypse Now and Then}, 133.


\textsuperscript{184} Keller, \textit{On the Mystery}, 153.

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 154.

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 165.

the same time motivates planetary care.\textsuperscript{188} She sees no need for the concept of the new creation, however, since what demands our attention now is “this Earth, this sky, this water to renew.”\textsuperscript{189}

Preliminary Conclusions

Process thought is a complex genre of theology uniquely attuned to the spiritual implications of evolutionary theory and the primacy of creativity as a theological category. For this reason, it can provide a wealth of insight for the task of constructing an ecologically sensitive eschatology. Its compatibility with science is evident in its acknowledgement of the inherent creativity at work in self-organizing systems that make up the world, understanding cosmic history as a series of new occasions being birthed out of and therefore in some sense limited by previously existing occasions. Therefore it, along with ecofeminism, offers a needed critique of the \textit{ex nihilo} doctrine and with it also a critique of divine omnipotence as understood by classical theism. It rejects the notion of unilateral divine action and instead suggests the co-creative partnership between God and the world in the ongoing project of creation. Finally, by emphasizing the eschatological imperative for righteous living in the present, it provides a strong foundation for environmental responsibility. Certain process interpretations of the \textit{eschaton}, however, particularly those of Hartshorne and Keller we have just examined, suggest a rather muddled understanding of the role of divine action in the event of redemption and confuse the need for eschatology as a theological category. Keller in particular continues to utilize eschatological language and is careful not to dismiss the apocalyptic genre as altogether useless, and yet it is difficult not to interpret her idealistic vision as a bit of a false hope or cosmic delusion. For Keller, the \textit{eschaton} is a coming time that inspires present action but never actually


\textsuperscript{189} Keller, “Women Against Wasting the World,” 263.
comes, always remaining ever out of reach and never living up to what it promotes itself to be. Here it seems that what we are left with is an ethical system inspired by unrealizable ideals and not an actual eschatology, for it maintains no genuine promise or futurized component but simply amounts to a moral mandate. To use eschatological or apocalyptic language in this way, or the concepts of heaven and hell as Hartshorne does, therefore seems out of place and can easily become misleading. Hartshorne and Keller’s views are not exhaustive representations of the process community’s position on this matter, however. Later we will address the work of other process thinkers who have worked to incorporate more of a futurized element into their eschatologies.

**Conclusion**

We have thus examined the theological work of seven thinkers who can be characterized as being both ecologically sensitive as well as critical of traditional forms of eschatology. In some cases, the role of an eschatological vision is almost entirely rejected, while in others it is salvaged but heavily modified. What these various writers have in common is the desire to turn attention to the present moment and our social responsibility, and thus in many cases what is offered is a realized form of eschatology that locates the biblical themes of ultimate redemption and peace in the temporal realm, within the reach and influence of human agents. Along with this nuanced eschatology, these various perspectives offer essential components of a well-rounded theology of creation and thus of eschatology as a theology of the new creation. These components include the following: 1) compatibility with contemporary science, 2) a critique of the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo, 3) a motivating imperative for ecological responsibility, and 4) the recognition of the intrinsic value of creation that allows for the celebration of created-ness. These elements must be maintained in the construction of a useful eschatology for our time.
These perspectives have fallen short, however, first by failing to reconcile human action with divine involvement in the world, as well as divine immanence with divine transcendence. They also do not necessarily address the problem of despair or apathy in the face of social or environmental crises. While they rightfully address the influence of escapist apocalypticism in attitudes of complacency toward the current state of the earth, they do not also consider that the embrace of death and even evil in many of their paradigms, as natural states of existence that cannot be totally overcome, to be equally demoralizing. What is needed is a responsible eschatological paradigm which addresses the dangers of escapism but maintains hope for genuine promise and purpose for the world. But first we will address the concept of futurized eschatology and its unfortunate tendency to confuse the need for ecological responsibility.
CHAPTER TWO:
REDEEMING CREATION IN FUTURIZED ESCHATOLOGY

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we examined the works of several prominent theologians who prioritize the doctrine of creation and ecological responsibility, and noted the various ways that such an approach tends to complicate the possibility for eschatological hope. At best, these thinkers leave only enough room for a realized form of eschatology that locates such hope in the present moment. In this chapter, we will examine various approaches that prioritize instead a futurized element of eschatological hope, and note the ways in which these then in turn complicate the integrity of creation and the need for ecological responsibility. While the position represented by those in the first chapter tends to highlight the doctrine of creation ultimately at the expense of a comprehensive understanding of redemption, those in this second chapter tend to highlight redemption at the expense of maintaining the foundational value of creation. Whereas much of the ecologically sensitive works we examined in the last chapter can be characterized as a reaction against the Christian church’s failure to uphold ecological responsibility, those in this chapter represent a reaction against the rising myth of modern progress, seeking to re-emphasize humanity’s shortcomings and need for divine intervention.

The most damaging of these movements has been the escapist approach promoted by the doctrine of dispensationalism. While the biblical and theological legitimacy of this movement is becoming increasingly disregarded at the academic level, its lingering effects continue to influence American spiritual practice and social engagement. In more recent years, evangelicals have begun to push back against their dispensationalist heritage and develop more ecologically sensitive theologies. Erich Sauer, Francis Schaeffer, and Old Testament scholar J. Richard
Middleton all represent a stewardship approach which emphasizes the pivotal role humanity is to play in caring for creation as well as preparing it for eschatological consummation. Within Pentecostalism, a similar movement has recently begun, represented by A. J. Swoboda and Steven Studebaker, which emphasizes creation care as a part of eschatological mission. Finally, the heavily influential work of Jürgen Moltmann has highlighted the importance of the eschatological vision for providing a model for creation care. These thinkers represent a development towards an increasing harmonization between eschatology and ecology, but ultimately tend to fall short in terms of meeting the same level of love and celebration of creation found within the first chapter. Thus, within this chapter, my goal will be to 1) establish key facets of each of these movements that demonstrate invaluable insight into the theological importance of eschatological redemption and therefore must be maintained for the ultimate task of formulating a well-rounded eco-eschatology, and 2) demonstrate how these eschatologically sensitive perspectives tend to emphasize the instrumental role of creation in the process of redemption, rather than its intrinsic value, and thus remain incomplete for eco-eschatology on their own.

**Dispensationalism**

**Historical Development**

While dispensationalism as a comprehensive system of thought is itself less than 200 years old, its roots can be found in the much older doctrine of millennialism, or belief in the 1,000 year millennial reign of Christ as a key piece of eschatological redemption.\(^\text{190}\) Throughout its history, Christianity has shifted from viewing the millennium as continuous with history and

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set to take place before Christ’s return, or viewing the millennium as a discontinuous future event set to take place after Christ’s return; in other words, the shift from post-millennialism to pre-millennialism. Augustine was highly influential in promoting the belief that the millennium was essentially the age of the church, and thus had already been set in motion after Christ’s ascension and Pentecost.\footnote{Ibid., 291-2.} With Christianity’s transition into the modern era, this postmillennialism began to be interpreted as a missiological agenda to transform society into its perfected form in anticipation of Christ’s return at the end of the thousand-year period.\footnote{Ibid., 296-7.} Thus, the church as well as the rest of the secularized world began to emphasize human progress as the ultimate achievement, with devastating consequences involving the subjugation of other people groups and newly discovered lands. It is as a reaction against this modernized Christian millennialism that fundamentalist apocalypticism was born.\footnote{The same point is made by Jürgen Moltmann. See Jürgen Moltmann, The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 186.} By transitioning the millennial empire to a future event instituted by Christ alone, this apocalypticism functioned as a critique of growing confidence in human progress, as well as a comfort in the face of present suffering and brokenness in the world which could not be reconciled with the millennial vision of peace.\footnote{Ibid., 157.}

Dispensationalism began with the writings of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), who divided history into seven distinct epochs or “dispensations” with their own distinctive characteristics for God’s interaction with the world.\footnote{Middleton, A New Heaven and a New Earth, 300. Much of Darby’s system is based upon just three verses near the end of Daniel 9. See Barbara R. Rossing, The Rapture Exposed (New York City, NY: Basic Books, 2004), 25.} Darby’s work rose to prominence through
the influential preaching of D. L. Moody, who utilized Darby’s theology of the rapture in particular as an evangelistic tactic. Rapture theology is often seen as one of the most ecologically concerning aspects of dispensationalism because of the way it emphasizes the need to be saved out of the world instead of the possibility of saving or improving the world. Equally problematic, however, is the way in which dispensationalism envisions the eschaton as either a totally immaterial version of heaven, or a replacement of earth given after the total annihilation of the first one. Dispensationalism became further integrated into American evangelicalism with the publication and growing popularity of the Scofield Reference Bible starting in 1909, wherein dispensationalist teachings were placed alongside the biblical text itself and thus accepted as authoritative. A popular representative of the doctrine from the later twentieth century is Hal Lindsey, whose classic The Late Great Planet Earth has sold millions of copies since its publication in 1970. In this work, Lindsey masterfully addresses the universality of human anxiety concerning the future, and seeks to provide reassurance in the form of prophetic inevitability concerning God’s ultimate salvation for the Church. Here Lindsey utilizes common fears about the state of the world in order to garner interest for his theology; he offers various negative and violent world events as examples of Christ’s imminent return, thus transforming them into reasons for hope instead of causes for concern or engagement.

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196 Truesdale, “Last Things First,” 118.
198 Middleton, A New Heaven and a New Earth, 301.
199 Rossing, The Rapture Exposed, 23.
201 Ibid., 138.
exuberantly claiming that we ought to “be living like persons who don’t expect to be around much longer,” he effectively dismisses any possible motivation for sustained social action in the present world. This is especially true of the concern for ecological sustainability, given his confident teaching about the destruction of the current world in fire before the totally new creation is introduced from scratch.

The popularity of dispensationalist teaching continues today through the Left Behind novels and films first developed by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, and the influence of megachurch pastor John Hagee, who argues that the “endtimes” began on September 11, 2001 in order to garner heightened anticipation for Christ’s return. Many if not most American evangelicals today hold to some form of dispensationalism, especially the notion of the rapture, despite being unaware of all that it entails and the context in which it was developed. When prepped for standing ready for the return of Christ at any moment, it becomes illogical for evangelicals to dedicate themselves to the kind of long-term engagement needed in order to address the environmental crisis. As a result, much of evangelicalism remains culpable for ecological irresponsibility because of the way in which its eschatological vision fails to incorporate any continuity between this world and the next, and the way in which creation seems

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202 Ibid., 145.

203 Ibid., 179.

204 Rossing, The Rapture Exposed, 15.

205 While a more recent movement still in development, known as “progressive dispensationalism,” has been attempting to construct a more positive integration of creation into eschatological culmination, it is still the older forms of dispensationalism that continue to influence much of present evangelical theology and practice. See Truesdale, “Last Things First,” 116-7.

206 Ibid.
to play merely an instrumental role in what is largely an anthropocentric narrative of salvation.\textsuperscript{207} Instead, the declining health of the planet simply becomes another encouraging sign of the times, witnessing to the soon-coming King and institution of the millennial age of peace.

Preliminary Conclusions

Rather than dismiss dispensationalism immediately because of its questionable hermeneutic and damaging effects upon society, the maintained popularity of the doctrine merits some attention both to its appeal to such a large percentage of the American populace, as well as to its potentially positive and redeemable aspects. Some scholars argue that the almost scientific nature of the dispensationalist system has played a role in its ongoing popularity, establishing what many consider to be a reliable mapping of historical data based on straight-forward, literalistic interpretations of the Bible.\textsuperscript{208} Also noteworthy is the way in which the system feeds off of the natural human desire to know and understand the future, and diminishes fear by offering a position of total security even in the face of worldwide annihilation.\textsuperscript{209} By correlating specific world events to biblical prophecy, it provides a way of connecting Christian scripture to the real world and defends the notion that the God of the Bible is still relevant and working to bring about redemption. Christianity has found different ways throughout its history to cope with what appears to be the consistently delayed return of Christ; while the marriage with modern secularization and societal progress represents one outcome, dispensationalism represents another. Thus what lies at the center of the American fascination with dispensationalism has

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{209} Rossing, \textit{The Rapture Exposed}, 93.
perhaps less to do with the intentional desire to flee the natural world and watch it burn, and more to do with a concern for the trustworthiness of God’s promises. While much of modern society was beginning to give up on such promises, dispensationalism offered a way to interpret the world through tangible signs that made divine promises real and present once again. The positive side to this, and something that ought to be considered in the task of constructing a relevant eco-eschatology for our time, is the refusal to affirm a blind optimism in human achievement and the admission that human effort alone cannot save or preserve our world forever.210 It also provides a genuine hope for ultimate eschatological fulfillment, although this hope appears to be largely anthropocentric, at least in terms of what is saved or preserved out of this present world. The most concerning and damaging element of dispensationalism, however, is the way in which it encourages apathy or even celebration as a normative response to instances of violence on our planet, whether that be among one another or against the rest of the natural world. Creation functions only as the matrix in which the drama of ultimate redemption takes place, rather than upholding some sort of value in and of itself worthy of being preserved and redeemed. A successful eco-eschatology must balance the dispensationalist concern for ultimate redemption that transcends human progress with a motivation for ecological responsibility that isn’t compromised by its teachings about the “end.”

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Evangelical Developments

Erich Sauer

As the ecological crisis became more widely taught and accepted, a major response began to develop within the evangelical church, particularly during the 60’s and 70’s. Erich Sauer, a mid-20th century German theologian known for his influence on evangelical theology, was one of the first to respond and incorporate ecological concerns into his work. While Sauer himself was a dispensationalist, his work represents an early shift towards a more positive attempt at integrating creation into a cosmic scheme of redemption. He continued, however, to hold to belief in the rapture and in a thousand-year millennium that would eventually come to an epic and violent end when God would establish the consummation of the kingdom. In keeping with his dispensationalist roots, Sauer is highly critical of the belief in human progress. And yet, humanity plays a pivotal role in his understanding of the eventual salvation and perfection of the cosmos. In his most ecologically sensitive work, The King of the Earth, Sauer highlights the unique role of humanity as the “crown of creation,” endowed with the image of God and the mission of God to spread and perfect the divine kingdom on the earth. In order to make sense of the presence of death and destruction throughout evolutionary history before the arrival of the human species, Sauer surmises that the kingdom of evil must have already been present and at work in the world since the beginning. Thus he views the human mission as a “re-conquest of

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213 Erich Sauer, The King of the Earth: The Nobility of Man according to the Bible and Science (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 72.

214 Sauer, From Eternity to Eternity, 17.
the earth for God,” in order to liberate it from bondage to the evil one.\textsuperscript{215} Sauer bases this mission of cosmic redemption and kingship off of the commands in Genesis to “have dominion” and “subdue” the earth and all its creatures.\textsuperscript{216} While Sauer is supportive of an interpretation of this vocation as a license for universal control over the natural world, he understands it more as a call to responsibility than as a license for abuse.\textsuperscript{217} In fact, since this royal calling corresponds to God’s own authority over the earth and hinges upon relationship with that ultimate authority, Sauer notes that the failure of Adam in the Garden to remain obedient to God results in the damaging of human lordship over the rest of creation.\textsuperscript{218} The human tendency towards tyranny over the natural world is therefore a result of its broken relationship with creation; at the same time Sauer guards against a materialistic approach towards creation and instead emphasizes humanity’s unique ability to look beyond the earthly world to find the spiritual truths it reveals.\textsuperscript{219} Ultimately in light of humanity’s failure to fulfill its vocational calling, the final redemption of the world awaits the return of Christ, the eternal King of the earth.\textsuperscript{220} In this narrative of redemption, the earth simply serves as a “stage,” albeit an important one, wherein the nobility of humanity is first lost and then later regained until the final consummation and transfiguration of all things.\textsuperscript{221}

\textsuperscript{215} Sauer, \textit{The King of the Earth}, 73.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 80. See Gen. 1:26-28.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., 81-3.
\textsuperscript{219} Sauer \textit{The King of the Earth}, 84, 91.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 192.
Within Sauer’s eschatological system, the restoration of the natural world, at least until the return of Christ, rests entirely on the failure or success of humanity’s own development and stewardship.\textsuperscript{222} In this way Sauer attempts to develop theological motivation for ecological responsibility in the present. At the same time, however, he remains committed to a futurized eschatology that emphasizes God’s unilateral action in the end to clean up what humanity has muddled. There is, therefore, some tension in Sauer’s thought regarding human responsibility to the earth and cosmological continuity in the \textit{eschaton}. On the one hand, Sauer uplifts the earth as a highly significant piece in God’s plan for creation and redemption.\textsuperscript{223} He is highly critical of immaterial visions of the afterlife and negative teachings about the physical body, and argues strongly that the body and all the rest of the material world must have some eternal future because God would “not abandon the works of His hands.”\textsuperscript{224} He thus suggests some sort of continuity between this world and the next, as in the relation of an introduction to the main event, and proclaims that the earth will eventually be transfigured in order to become the very dwelling place of God.\textsuperscript{225} On the other hand, Sauer often uses quite negative language in his descriptions of creation in comparison to God and the heavenly realm, emphasizing God as the ultimate goal in the narrative of salvation and the earth as merely a “preliminary step” towards glorification.\textsuperscript{226} The purpose of creation here is simply to glorify God and reveal the deeper reality of the spiritual world.\textsuperscript{227} He also describes the ultimate institution of God’s eternal

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., 93.

\textsuperscript{223} Sauer, \textit{From Eternity to Eternity}, 19.

\textsuperscript{224} Sauer, \textit{The Triumph of the Crucified}, 106.

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 178-80.

\textsuperscript{226} Sauer, \textit{The King of the Earth}, 192.

\textsuperscript{227} Sauer, \textit{The Dawn of World Redemption}, 23.
kingdom in heavily violent terms wherein the old heaven and earth are totally eradicated and destroyed, arguing that the new creation will not be an earthly kingdom but a “heavenly creation” which can only be ushered in through the annihilation of the first. Thus Sauer often shifts between describing total annihilation of the old world and using more positive language about transformation and preservation, sometimes even within the same page or same paragraph. What this perhaps reveals is the ongoing struggle to balance his dispensationalist heritage with a more respectful and responsible approach to the natural world. Despite its apparent contradictions and ambiguities, Sauer’s work stands as an important initial movement towards a deeper integration between conservative eschatology and ecological awareness.

Francis Schaeffer

Francis Schaeffer is known as one of the most influential evangelical thinkers and writers of the late twentieth century. His voice represents another important response to the ecological crisis, especially in his book *Pollution and the Death of Man*, which explores what humanity’s attitude ought to be towards ecological sustainability in light of Christian theological teaching. Despite his turn to ecological awareness, Schaeffer holds to a more traditional system of eschatological thought. Himself a pre-millennialist, Schaeffer affirms the thousand-year reign of Christ before eternal consummation, and speaks casually of one day going to heaven, although he doesn’t describe in detail what these events will entail. He often refers to the second

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229 Ibid., 179. For example, here Sauer describes God burning with fire all the material elements of creation, but then explains that God will “build the stones of the old structure into the new one according to a new plan.” It seems that, while Sauer is interested in highlighting continuity between this world and the next, he finds himself bound by more literalistic interpretations of biblical apocalyptic texts that prevent him from making a clear position on this in his work.

230 Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 36, 64.
coming of Christ as a time of judgment that will involve some level of destruction.\textsuperscript{231} He draws attention to the fact that, in spite of all the positive aspects of the created world, it can also become a source of danger and suffering, thus highlighting the need for cosmological redemption.\textsuperscript{232} Schaeffer’s ultimate point when it comes to eschatology, however, is that “history is going somewhere,” and that this final \textit{telos} of creation will in some sense correspond to the initial state of peace in the original creation.\textsuperscript{233} Thus in Schaeffer’s narrative of salvation, there is a clear beginning and a clear ending, although, just as in Sauer, humanity’s role in the process stands out with utmost importance.\textsuperscript{234}

He notes that the creation of humanity is elevated as a unique event in comparison to the other events of creation, since the human creature is gifted with the ability to relate to God in a way that no other being can enjoy.\textsuperscript{235} The call to dominion over the earth corresponds to this creation in the image of God, a responsibility for which only humanity is qualified.\textsuperscript{236} For Schaeffer, this dominion entails both care for the earth and all its creatures as well as responsible use of all the earth’s assets, which is why he highlights obedience as the key to faithfully fulfilling such a role that could be corrupted in various different ways without the help of divine guidance.\textsuperscript{237} Along with Sauer, Schaeffer notes the broken relationship between humanity and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{231} Ibid., 140.
\item \textsuperscript{232} Francis A. Schaeffer, \textit{Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology} (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1970), 31.
\item \textsuperscript{233} Schaeffer, \textit{Genesis in Space and Time}, 29, 64.
\item \textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 64
\item \textsuperscript{235} Ibid., 47.
\item \textsuperscript{236} Ibid., 48.
\item \textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 50, 70.
\end{itemize}
creation as a result of the fall, and therefore argues that part of our task in restoring the natural world today will involve a re-definition of the concept of dominion.\textsuperscript{238} He therefore develops a modified theology of stewardship, wherein humanity understands its right to dominion not as entitlement but rather as being entrusted with the care of something that is not our own and ultimately will have to be returned.\textsuperscript{239} In this way Schaeffer attempts to safeguard the traditional notion of the uniqueness of humanity in contrast to the natural world while at the same time offering a vision for the human-nature relationship that is not destructive but life-giving and responsible to God’s ultimate plan for the world.\textsuperscript{240}

Schaeffer utilizes an eschatological imperative as a motivation for creation care by uplifting the vision of total cosmological redemption in the future as a model for how we ought to treat the natural world now.\textsuperscript{241} Here he attempts to highlight eschatology as a resource rather than a complication in the development of an eco-theological ethic. He also clearly involves the entirety of the physical cosmos in his vision of eschatological redemption.\textsuperscript{242} Another concern for Schaeffer which corresponds nicely with the work of many eco-theologians is the need to establish intrinsic value for creation. Interestingly, he utilizes the concept of \textit{creatio ex nihilo} in order to do this. First Schaeffer establishes the utter contingency of creation by explaining that all things in creation totally depend upon God’s willing them into existence.\textsuperscript{243} Then, because of

\textsuperscript{238} Schaeffer, \textit{Pollution and the Death of Man}, 69.

\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 70.

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 82.

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 69.

\textsuperscript{242} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{243} Schaeffer, \textit{Genesis in Space and Time}, 25.
his concerns regarding the influence of pantheistic thinking, he dismisses even a panentheistic
description of the God-world relationship, insisting that created beings cannot be an extension of
God’s being but must instead have existence in themselves, and that this is what gives them
intrinsic value. Thus all things are essentially equal in origin, since all things were equally
created out of nothing. Unfortunately Schaeffer does not also explore the various negative
connotations that are often attached to the doctrine of *ex nihilo* which might complicate the very
foundation for intrinsic value that he is trying to establish. Furthermore, his success at
establishing intrinsic value for creation can perhaps be questioned in light of the fact that he
ultimately concludes that things have value “not in themselves autonomously” but rather simply
in light of the fact that they have been created by God. He therefore calls humanity to
ecological responsibility on the basis of love for God, who happens to be the Creator of the
natural world. If we love God, we ought to take care of what that God has made.
Unfortunately, this has potential to cause confusion regarding humanity’s motivation regarding
our love and care for creation – are we to love creation only because God has made it, or are we
also to love creation for what it is and what it becomes? While God’s role as Creator certainly
ought to play a role in establishing a theological rationale for intrinsic value, it seems in light of
the insights we examined in the first chapter that this must also be balanced with an appreciation

244 Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, 47.

245 Ibid., 48.

246 We examined some of these negative effects in the previous chapter, especially in our analysis of
ecofeminist theology. As Ruether and McFague often point out, an *ex nihilo* interpretation of creation can lead to a
deistic understanding of the God-world relationship and a misunderstanding of the truly open-ended process of
creation.

247 Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, 54.

248 Ibid., 57.
and even celebration of what creation is as *creation*, something distinct from its origin, truly alive and autonomous in its own journey of becoming.

J. Richard Middleton

While the previous two figures represent initial responses from within the evangelical community shortly after the arrival of environmentalism on the public scene, J. R. Middleton exemplifies a contemporary example of this approach. While Middleton operates primarily from the perspective of Old Testament scholarship, his argument concerning ecological responsibility in light of eschatology is characterized by a similar focus on a theology of human stewardship. Middleton’s examination of biblical eschatology begins with exploring the holistic nature of salvation as it is introduced in the Old Testament. Here Middleton notes that the aim of salvation in this context is not primarily spiritual but physical, involving YHWH’s response to the people’s tangible situations of need. This then leads him to develop an eschatological paradigm which incorporates physical redemption on a scale that goes from individual healing all the way to the healing of the cosmos as a whole. In order to substantiate this claim, he also highlights the centrality of remnant theology, beginning in the Old Testament and continuing on in the New Testament. What Middleton marks as a persistent biblical theme based on instances like the scattering at Babel, the flood, and the Babylonian exile is that divine judgment always comes for the sake of redemption rather than utter destruction, and therefore consistently preserves a remnant for just this purpose. By applying this principle to New Testament passages concerning the return of Christ, Middleton concludes that references to divine judgment


250 Ibid., 125.
of the earth in this context must be understood as ultimately positive, detailing the total transformation and healing of the cosmos rather than its eradication.251 The new creation therefore ought to be perceived not as a replacement of the old but as a transformation of it, just as we understand the resurrected body to be in some sense continuous with the original.252 Middleton also highlights the importance of Revelation 21-22 in establishing the earth as God’s ultimate dwelling place, in keeping with the apocalyptic pattern of preparation in heaven followed by fulfillment on earth.253 Here he insists that the biblical text decisively demonstrates that the heavenly realm is to be ultimately transported down and instituted on earth, rather than vice-versa.254 Middleton therefore expresses more explicitly than the previous evangelical figures how the source of the coming kingdom may be in the heavenly realm, but its destination lies on the transformed earth.

In keeping with the evangelical position, however, Middleton defends a strong emphasis on the vocational calling of humankind in playing a role in this narrative of redemption. His position is based on what he calls a “functional” or “missional” interpretation of the *imago Dei* introduced in Genesis 1:26-28.255 Here Middleton identifies an “unquestionable connection” between the image of God and the reference to human rule over the earth, arguing that the syntax of the passage suggests that this task is not merely the result but is actually the primary purpose

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251 Ibid., 109.

252 Ibid., 163, 206.

253 Ibid., 164, 212.

254 Ibid., 219. A critical passage often utilized to argue against this point and in support of the rapture is 1Thessalonians 4:15-16. Middleton’s interpretation is not supportive of any sort of disembodied heaven; instead he explains how this passage is most likely a reference to the practice of running out from the city to greet a coming dignitary and usher them *back* into the city (224).

of this image.\textsuperscript{256} He supports his position with historical parallels wherein ancient Near Eastern kings would function as the image of a god, ruling as representatives of the divine.\textsuperscript{257} Thus the Genesis text establishes humanity sharing in God’s royal power over the earth, functioning as God’s representatives in the world and modeling their rule after God’s own.\textsuperscript{258} Because of the noticeable lack of violence and emphasis on loving care for creation modeled by God in the opening verses of the creation narrative, Middleton argues that human stewardship of the earth must be based on this same kind of loving authority.\textsuperscript{259} He concludes that responsible fulfillment of this calling is the distinctive way in which humanity was created to glorify God, and that an integral piece of this process involves not just ecological sustainability but also the development of human culture and civilization.\textsuperscript{260}

In light of this centrality of human stewardship, Middleton understands the restoration of human cultural life and authority over the earth to be integral to eschatological redemption.\textsuperscript{261} Because of the way in which human dominion has been tarnished by the fall and abused through systems of oppression, a major piece of this redemption will involve a renewal of the initial \textit{imago Dei} calling to power, wherein humanity’s continuous development of the earth will be practiced without the hindrance of sin.\textsuperscript{262} Thus the original vision of human love and care for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{256} Ibid., 50-3.
\item \textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 121.
\item \textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 88.
\item \textsuperscript{259} Ibid., 295.
\item \textsuperscript{260} Middleton, \textit{A New Heaven and a New Earth}, 41-3.
\item \textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 71.
\item \textsuperscript{262} Ibid., 70.
\end{itemize}
creation based upon the very love of the Creator will finally be realized. Yet, Middleton’s
treatment of eschatology is not reserved to a futurized period of consummation at the end of
history alone. Middleton explores the ways in which eschatological expectation influences
human behavior in the present, going so far as to say that “ethics is lived eschatology.”263 This
leads him to be critical of escapist visions of the eschaton, and to emphasize the pervasive reality
of “eternal life” beginning in the life of the present.264 Furthermore, by understanding the cosmic
scope of eschatological redemption and viewing the renewed earth as the ultimate resting place
for eternal life with God, human responsibility to creation today becomes a preparation of
creation for this final consummation. Like Schaeffer, Middleton therefore utilizes eschatology as
a motivation for ecological responsibility, but adds to the discussion a valuable development of
the biblical grounds for incorporating the earth more positively into the narrative of redemption.

Preliminary Conclusions

What these three writers represent is the tendency within evangelical scholarship to
respond to the ecological crisis with an emphasis on human stewardship in order to encourage
more responsible treatment of the planet. What they have also demonstrated is the way in which
such a focus intersects with and is influenced by a strongly futurized eschatology. What this
often entails is a purposeful vision of humanity’s responsibility to the earth with important
eschatological ramifications. This provides a meaningful matrix in which to view our present
action and engagement with the world, viewing it as part of a grander narrative that is cosmic in
scope and ultimately assured by divine fulfillment. At the same time, by placing stewardship as
the key between ecological responsibility and eschatological consummation, this approach runs

263 Ibid., 24.

264 Ibid., 246.
the danger of remaining somewhat anthropocentric. While all of creation is granted a place in the final redemption, the focus of the narrative remains on human salvation and development. The natural world thus becomes relegated to the more instrumental role of a becoming a sort of project that humanity is entrusted with in order to fulfill its own destiny. But what of the destiny of other beings in creation, as well as their own development and flourishing? Stewardship remains the most popular image in evangelical discussions of this sort, but it has come into heavy criticism in recent years due to its complicated heritage and connotations.\footnote{265} While the original introduction of the term in the seventeenth century was intended as positive emphasis on human obligation to the earth, it was also based upon the assumption that human involvement necessarily involved an improvement over the natural world.\footnote{266} Thus evangelical Paul Santmire, as well as most contemporary eco-theologians, have chosen to reject the term because of the way it precludes genuine wonder and respect for the integrity of creation.\footnote{267} Environmental research challenges the perspective of writers like Sauer and Schaeffer by establishing that certain, if not most, regions of the world have been made worse, not better, as a result of human development. Thus what is needed is a modified approach to anthropological responsibility that explores the needs of specific bioregions and all their inhabitants, rather than a trusting affirmation in the centrality of human needs and goals.


\footnote{266} Ibid., 101.

Pentecostal Developments

A.J. Swoboda

Along with the growing response to the environmental crisis that has been developing within evangelicalism, the Pentecostal community has recently begun developing its own contribution. As a movement beginning largely in America during the early twentieth century, Pentecostalism has been heavily influenced by American dispensationalism and fundamentalism since its beginning. As scholars like Gerald T. Sheppard have pointed out, however, dispensationalism was not foundational to the original Pentecostal vision of the *eschaton*.268 While the outpouring of the Spirit that began the Pentecostal movement was understood as a sign of the “last days,” this was largely viewed as a positive indication of the imminence of Christ’s return, rather than as a warning of impending destruction.269 Unfortunately, Pentecostals have historically tended to appropriate much of the otherworldliness and pessimism of American dispensationalism, excluding the possibility for more of an ecological focus in their work and practice.270 Noting the somewhat dangerous implications of this eschatological zeal, Pentecostal scholar A. J. Swoboda has recently begun developing a more positive integration between ecology and eschatology from a heavily pneumatological perspective.271 In order to accomplish this, Swoboda introduces what he terms a “Spirit-ecology,” wherein the presence of the Spirit


269 Ibid., 9


both in creation as well as in eschatological mission provides a bridge between present creation care and eschatological expectation, as well as between realized and futurized eschatology.  

Swoboda’s “ecopneumatology” centers in on four central themes from within Pentecostal theology: Spirit baptism, the Spirit of the charismatic community, the holistic Spirit, and the Spirit of eschatological mission. A large piece of his argument is his utilization of the Spirit baptism metaphor, which he extends to all of creation in light of the creational Spirit found in Old Testament narratives, present not just in human beings but in all created life. This vision of Spirit-baptized creation provides a foundation for viewing all of creation as filled with sacred divine presence, as well as for recognizing humanity’s connection to the rest of creation by means of the same indwelling Spirit. This sense of unity with creation thus becomes a motivation for relying on pneumatological empowerment in order to connect with and care for the rest of creation. Swoboda also uplifts the image of the holistic Spirit in order to emphasize that the presence of Spirit involves an actual engagement with the physical world of matter, leading to real physical results such as bodily healing. His emphasis on the Spirit of the charismatic community serves to highlight the way in which the Spirit works towards reconciliation beyond division in order to build a community of the Spirit. When applied to an

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272 Ibid., 233.
273 Ibid., 17, 151.
275 Swoboda, Tongues and Trees, 200-1.
276 Ibid., 200
277 Ibid., 220.
278 Ibid., 206.
environmental perspective, this involves reconciliation between humanity and the natural world, and the charismatic community becomes more holistically understood as extended to the entire creation. Swoboda also points to the pneumatologically inspired charismatic gift of stewarding creation, envisioning social and ecological care as instances of Spirit-inspired action. Thus proper worship of God in the Spirit entails a re-orientation to the Creator and all that the Creator has made, inspiring us to live within proper creational limits.

Building in particular off of his vision of Spirit-baptized creation, Swoboda introduces a “Pentecostal theology of eschatological ecological mission.” He argues that the conceptualization of all creation as Spirit-baptized leads to a heightened eschatological expectation for the culmination of God’s creation. Thus proper care and stewardship of the earth in the present becomes an eschatological mission that anticipates God’s ultimate healing and restoration. Swoboda highlights the function of Spirit baptism as exemplified in Acts 2 as characteristically eschatological, involving the empowerment of God’s people for acts that witness to the coming age. He then applies this to ecological stewardship, showing how caring for the earth is a function of the Spirit-baptized life because of the way it testifies to God’s

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279 Ibid., 212; Swoboda, “Eco-Glossolalia,” 103.

280 A. J. Swoboda, “Posterity or Prosperity? Critiquing and Refiguring Prosperity Theologies in an Ecological Age.” Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies 37, no. 3 (September 2015): 395, 407. Here Swoboda also blames much of Pentecostalism’s failure to respond more critically to ecological issues on the influence of prosperity gospel teachings in America, encouraging a perspective on the world that views it as an endless supply of resources.

281 Swoboda, Tongues and Trees, 225.


283 Ibid.

284 Swoboda, Tongues and Trees, 225.
coming kingdom of *shalom*. Here ecological responsibility as preparation for the *eschaton* intersects with some of evangelical scholarship, but with the added emphasis on the Spirit as the living presence in both human believers and the natural world forming the bond between the two in order to make such preparation a reality. The Spirit also functions as the link between the events of creation and redemption, for it is the same creator Spirit present at the beginning who works to make all things new. Swoboda remains faithful to a futurized interpretation of the *eschaton*, but emphasizes our task of preparing the world for this event rather than awaiting its destruction. His theology therefore suggests a level of continuity between this world and the next, and while he doesn’t say this explicitly, perhaps he understands the role of the Spirit present in creation as that which makes such preservation possible.

**Steven Studebaker**

Steven Studebaker, another contemporary Pentecostal scholar who addresses ecological themes in his work, notes along with Swoboda the regrettable other-worldly orientation that has developed within Pentecostalism. He highlights the fact that the message of redemption in Scripture is not reserved for human benefit but is instead cosmic in scope, and therefore develops a pneumatological argument for how the cosmos comes to be included in eschatological

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286 Ibid.

287 Ibid., 105.

288 Ibid., 229.

redemption.

Foundational to his argument is the notion that the entelechy, or driving force, of the Spirit is not just Christ (as others like David Coffey have suggested) nor the mutual love between the Father and the Son, but rather the completion of the whole Trinitarian fellowship.

This same orientation of the Spirit is then applied to the creation, so that it becomes the goal of the Spirit to actualize the divine fellowship within creation itself, so that it can participate in that fellowship as well. This ultimate telos of creation driven by the Spirit is eschatological in nature, involving the ultimate redemption of all things. All living things therefore possess this intrinsic entelechy of the Spirit towards their own eschatological fulfillment.

In order to support a continuous relationship between creation and redemption, Studebaker re-examines the traditional dichotomy between common and special grace. He notes that the tendency to separate these two concepts and even to prioritize one over the other often leads to a failure to take ecological concerns seriously. Earthly and embodied activities are often relegated to the category of common grace and thus can be considered distractions from more spiritual matters empowered by special grace, such as evangelism. Studebaker argues, however, that such a tendency comes as a result of incorrectly separating the two orders of grace,

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290 Ibid., 255.


292 Ibid., 257-8.


294 Studebaker, “Creation Care,” 257.

295 Studebaker, *From Pentecost to the Triune God*, 258.


297 Studebaker, *From Pentecost to the Triune God*, 251.
when in reality there is only one. He therefore proposes a “unified theology of grace” made possible through an emphasis on the Spirit as agent both of common and special grace, and therefore agent of both creation and redemption. Creation and redemption, and special and common grace, are thus inherently linked through the one economic order of the Spirit – the redemption of creation. In light of the Spirit’s orientation toward fulfilling the divine fellowship in creation, “the Spirit’s work always has a redemptive orientation.” In this way Studebaker, in a similar manner as Swoboda, prioritizes pneumatology in order to emphasize the continuity of divine involvement in creation and redemption. The same Spirit responsible for creation works to lead it to its completion in the very fullness of the triune life.

Studebaker also utilizes a vision of the eschatological Spirit in order to develop a theology of creation care, showing how the Spirit of both creation and redemption enables believers to participate in the ultimate renewal of creation in the here-and-now. By the Spirit, this participation in eschatological life provides the motivation for becoming stewards of healing and restoration for the earth. Thus Studebaker along with evangelical scholarship highlights the centrality of God’s calling upon humanity to be stewards of creation.

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299 Ibid., 950.

300 Ibid., 947. See also Steven M. Studebaker, “Soteriology: A Story of the Spirit,” in Third Article Theology: A Pneumatological Dogmatics, ed. Myk Habets (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 235. By interpreting the narrative of Genesis 1 as a redemptive narrative wherein God salvages the world out of a dark abyss of doom and destruction, he views even the initial creation as a soteriological event. He thus uplifts redemption as the more primary of the two categories.


302 Ibid., 946.

303 Studebaker, From Pentecost to the Triune God, 244.

304 Ibid.
Studebaker perhaps offers a development of the evangelical model by presenting creation care not just as a *preparation for*, but an actual *participation in*, the holistic *shalom* of the eschaton as his foundation for ecological responsibility.\(^{305}\) Here the call to stewardship is not just a divine mandate requiring obedience but also an invitation to join the already ongoing work of the Spirit in God’s own mission for the cosmos.\(^{306}\) Thus Studebaker argues that the decision to join in the Spirit’s work in creation ought to be pursued as an avenue for Christian sanctification, since all spiritual formation requires that the “work of the Spirit in the lives of people meets the presence and work of the Spirit throughout creation.”\(^{307}\)

**Preliminary Conclusions**

While the themes which Pentecostalism explores in relation to ecological responsibility often intersect with those found within evangelical theologies of stewardship, these recent Pentecostal contributions represent some unique additions to the discussion, especially with their emphases on pneumatology and continuity between creation and redemption. The strong pneumatological foundation undergirding these arguments provides a way of understanding both humanity’s connection with the rest of the created world, in a way that almost mimics the attitude of kinship found in much of ecological theology, as well as a way of understanding how humanity’s uniqueness qualifies it for a certain level of responsibility for the rest of creation. This then allows for a proper focus on human responsibility to God’s mission for the world that

\(^{305}\) Studebaker, “The Spirit in Creation,” 954.

\(^{306}\) Ibid., 954; Amos Yong argues similarly that responsibility for creation involves a participation in the already ongoing redemptive work of the Spirit in creation, in anticipation of eschatological fullness. See Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 301.

is then balanced by an understanding of the presence of the Spirit as crucial to the success of that mission. The emphasis on the Spirit is also what allows for a strongly unified understanding of creation and redemption, making it possible to understand divine redemption as an act in service of creation, rather than as an altogether separate epoch in God’s plan for the world. What is unfortunate, however, is the way in which redemption seems to be emphasized over against creation in these paradigms as being the more primary category for understanding God’s economic mission in the world. As we have seen in the arguments of creation theologians such as Matthew Fox, the tendency to highlight redemption often leads to a misunderstanding concerning the intrinsic value of creation, making it difficult to genuinely love and appreciate creation for what it is now, before its ultimate redemption. Thus we will examine in the following the chapter the possibility of prioritizing creation over redemption, and of viewing redemption as an act of creation, rather than viewing creation as an act in service of redemption.

Jürgen Moltmann

Specific Contributions

Due to the breadth of his work on the subjects both of ecology and eschatology, Jürgen Moltmann’s unique contributions will be considered here in their own category, although many of his themes will once again intersect with those of the last two sections. In his comprehensive treatment of the history of eschatological theology in The Coming of God, Moltmann explores both the positive and negative aspects of apocalyptic eschatology. He notes that the foundational element of hope in the millennium as introduced by the text of John’s Revelation is the power to resist the unjust kingdoms of the world, as well as the power to anticipate a new kingdom of peace and flourishing.308 When this resistance to conformity is removed from the center of

308 Moltmann, The Coming of God, 152.
apocalyptic theology and escapism is introduced in its place, the true meaning of biblical apocalypticism is lost.\textsuperscript{309} Apocalypticism ought to instead provide the motivation for enacting justice in the world in anticipation of the promised coming kingdom of Christ. Moltmann is also critical of versions of historical millenarianism that emphasize continuity between this world and the next to the point of becoming dangerously optimistic concerning the possibilities of human progress.\textsuperscript{310} He argues, however, that without some form of eschatological millenarianism, both the motivation for resistance in the present as well as hope for consummation in the future are lost, thus demonstrating how the lack of eschatology can lead to despair just as easily as its more violent and pessimistic versions.\textsuperscript{311} He therefore remains convinced that apocalypticism is necessary because of the way in which it emphasizes the contingency of the present world and guards against blind optimism in human progress.\textsuperscript{312}

Moltmann argues for a heavily futurized interpretation of the \textit{eschaton}, allowing for a somewhat sharp distinction between the present world and the coming age. He accomplishes this in part through a heavy reliance upon the \textit{creatio ex nihilo} metaphor. In \textit{God in Creation}, he emphasizes the importance of the initial creation taking place without any preconditions or material limits in order to establish that the act of creation is based on the divine will to create, and that alone.\textsuperscript{313} Related to Moltmann’s understanding of creation out of nothing is his uniquely panentheistic description of the God-world relationship. According to Moltmann, the \textit{nihil}, or

\textsuperscript{309} Ibid., 153.
\textsuperscript{310} Ibid., 192.
\textsuperscript{311} Ibid., 201.
\textsuperscript{312} Ibid., 228, 234.
nothingness, out of which the creation is born is nothing other than the space opened up within God’s own self when God withdraws divine power and allows time and space for creation.\textsuperscript{314} Moltmann establishes that this is essentially a “God-forsaken space,” in order to maintain a clear distinction between the world and God.\textsuperscript{315} Thus Moltmann argues for an initial context for creation that is void of any preconditions or possible limitations upon God’s creative resolve, and this in turn becomes foundational for his understanding of eschatology as an alternative to historical consummation.\textsuperscript{316} The promised future of God, while correspondent to the initial creation as a further instantiation of the same divine creative activity, is ultimately incongruent with the historical continuum because it puts an end to time and history as we know it.\textsuperscript{317} Central to Moltmann’s utilization of \textit{ex nihilo} is therefore the need to establish the possibility for genuine novelty to be introduced into the world, novelty that cannot be restricted by the conditions or possibilities of the past and present.\textsuperscript{318} This leads him to conclude that the new creation cannot emerge organically out of the restoration of the old, but must come in judgment of the old, rendering it “obsolete” and bringing it to an end before the introduction of the new.\textsuperscript{319} The question of continuity for creation in the \textit{eschaton} is a difficult one to answer when reading Moltmann’s work, however, for elsewhere he argues more positively that the \textit{eschaton} “does not annihilate the old but gathers it up and creates it anew,” and that even eternal life “carries the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[]\textsuperscript{314} Ibid., 87.
\item[]\textsuperscript{315} Ibid.
\item[]\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., 79.
\item[]\textsuperscript{319} Moltmann, \textit{The Coming of God}, 27. See also Moltmann, \textit{The Future of Creation}, 164.
\end{enumerate}
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He attempts to strike a healthy balance between overly realized and overly futurized eschatologies by arguing for a Christological foundation that embraces the suffering of the present world but looks beyond it to the ultimate consummation of the world in God accomplished through the redemptive work of Christ. By placing Christ at the center of his eschatology, he makes space for the unredeemed aspects of the world without denying the value of the world altogether. And yet, Moltmann still tends to prioritize the future over the present, arguing that the future is the most dominant mode of God’s being in history.

While some of Moltmann’s eschatological arguments might challenge an ecological perspective, much of his work celebrates the value of creation and the importance of becoming more responsible for it. His panentheism allows for an understanding of divine omnipresence that acknowledges the presence of God’s Spirit in all things, and therefore shows how reverence for the natural world might be congruent with reverence for God. He also works to incorporate creation into his eschatological vision, proposing that Christian eschatology must be “broadened out into cosmic eschatology.” He argues not only for the resurrection of the human body, but of the whole physical world, in light of the understanding that “human beings and the earth belong together,” and that one could not be redeemed without the other. The ultimate promise

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320 Ibid., 29.
322 Ibid., 75.
323 Ibid., 27.
326 Ibid., 104.
and destiny of creation is to become the dwelling place of God, such that a mutual indwelling takes place between God and the world, which at the same time maintains the integrity of both. 327 Thus the present creation holds value for the way in which it anticipates this ultimate fulfillment and glorification of God. 328 In order to shift away from eschatology that is simply a return to the primordial state of creation, Moltmann therefore suggests an “eschatological understanding of creation” that understands the purpose of creation from the beginning as conditioned by this eschatological directive for consummation. 329 He then uplifts the sabbath as crown of creation as an earthly sign and foretaste of this eternal telos for the world, an eternal rest in the presence of God. 330

Despite his critiques of overly realized eschatology for not clearly distinguishing between the present and the eschatological moment, Moltmann is of course known for his assertion that “Christianity is eschatology,” and that a hope-filled vision of the future ought to have critical significance for the way in which one lives in the present. 331 He therefore argues against the eschatological perspective that one’s present life is merely a preparation for eternal life, and states instead that eschatology is a “rebirth” that begins in one’s present life and equips one to do the work of God now for the world that God loves. 332 In this way, Moltmann’s modestly realized eschatology serves as the foundation for his creation care ethic, wherein the vision of God’s

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327 Ibid., 307.
328 Ibid., 323.
330 Moltmann, God in Creation, 276.
331 Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 16.
332 Moltmann, The Coming of God, 337.
future kingdom of *shalom* becomes an inspiration that shifts our expectations and motivates us to begin seeking change in the present world.\(^{333}\) Rather than becoming a means of escapism, here the hope of the eschatological future stimulates action because of the way it provides ultimate meaning and purpose to present human experience. Along with evangelicalism, Moltmann also assumes an understanding of stewardship as the unique responsibility of human beings endowed with the ability to intercede before God on behalf of the creation.\(^{334}\)

**Preliminary Conclusions**

Moltmann offers helpful critiques of both overly realized forms of eschatology which essentially become dissolved into the agenda of Western progress, as well as overly apocalyptic forms of eschatology which lead to a sense of doom and despair. His attempted balance between realized and futurized eschatology therefore represents a major contribution that in many ways succeeds where others fail. By distinguishing the actual “eschatological moment” from its present temporal anticipation, Moltmann provides a helpful clarification on the nature of the *eschaton*’s effects upon the present.\(^{335}\) He also demonstrates how futurized hope need not necessitate a state of apathy over the present affairs of the earth, as many eco-theologians argue, but instead might serve as a motivating force providing the needed stamina to engage in social and ecological responsibility. This sense of duty, however, has the potential to run cold in light of the confusion over continuity that is also present throughout Moltmann’s work. It ultimately


remains unclear what sort of role Moltmann envisions for the processes of creation, including our conservation efforts, in the final eschatological consummation. One perceives a tension in his thought between his desire to uphold a neat distinction between initial creation and eschatological fulfillment, as well as between God and the world, and the desire to incorporate the fullness of the created world into a vision of cosmic redemption. In the end, it is hard to locate within Moltmann’s work a clear motivation for creation care, other than the fact that such action anticipates the peace and harmony that characterizes eschatological fulfillment. It remains unclear whether any specific actions are somehow preserved and incorporated into this fulfillment. Thus, as we have seen in evangelical as well as Pentecostal theology, the emphasis on eschatology almost backfires by relegating creation back to the instrumental role of preparing humanity for the eschaton, therefore complicating the initial move towards intrinsic value.

Conclusion

We thus examined escapist eschatology as well as recent major developments on traditional eschatology that have sought a successful integration with ecological themes while at the same time safeguarding a futurized hope in final consummation. By maintaining futurized eschatology, these perspectives offer a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose for the world that is lacking in much of popular eco-theology. They also provide a more pointed critique of the myth of human progress by asserting that eschatological fulfillment will be dependent upon divine will alone, while it remains impossible to achieve on our own in the present. Thus the valuable components for a balanced eco-eschatology that these movements have to offer include the following: 1) a critique of human progress, 2) genuine hope in ultimate cosmic fulfillment,

and 3) in most cases, a motivating imperative for ecological responsibility based on
eschatological vision. Pentecostal theology in particular also adds a helpful pneumatological
emphasis and a foundation for continuity between creation and redemption. At the same time,
what all of these perspectives struggle with is an over-emphasis on redemption that results in
confusion concerning the intrinsic value of creation. In dispensationalism as well as evangelical
theology, the heavily anthropocentric focus of the salvation narrative results at best in an
instrumental role for creation. Even in the developments offered by Pentecostalism and the work
of Jürgen Moltmann, this difficulty is not entirely overcome. Creation serves largely as the
context for Christian sanctification and the site of God’s redemptive mission, leaving the focus
of our perspective towards creation on what it is lacking, rather than the beauty and value that it
already possesses. This ultimately challenges the relevancy of such an approach for establishing
a motivating imperative for ecological responsibility for our time, because the enormity of the
problem we now face requires not just a call to responsibility but a fundamental attitude shift
toward love and commitment. These visions of ultimate cosmic redemption therefore must be
balanced with the genuine appreciation for and celebration of creation that is found in the works
of those examined in the previous chapter. It is this integration between love for creation and
hope in the eschaton that I will seek to develop in the following chapter.
CHAPTER THREE:
GOD AS CREATOR IN ECO-ESCHATOLOGY

Introduction

We have so far examined the various ways in which the concerns of ecological theology and of traditional eschatology tend to come into conflict. Within much of the most prominent examples of ecologically sensitive theology, eschatology is often overlooked as a periphery concern or dismissed as an inviable theological option altogether. One the other hand, traditional eschatological teaching tends to challenge ecological action and love for the present world. The impasse created by the polarizing effect of these two perspectives is one that must be overcome, however, in order to develop an effective Christian response to the impending ecological crisis. Tradition requires a respectful adherence to the foundational teachings of hope that were birthed out of the vision of the kingdom of God instituted by Christ on earth; responsibility to the moral vision of that very kingdom requires an active responsibility for the peace and flourishing of all its inter-related and inter-dependent members, human and nonhuman alike. Thus, what is needed is an ecological eschatology that successfully weaves together the concerns of ecological sustainability in the present with a vision of eschatological hope in the future. Towards this end, in this chapter I will attempt to construct such a theology through the development of one guiding, foundational principle: a theology of God as Creator.

In view of the fact that redemption and the role of God as Redeemer have long been emphasized throughout Christian history to the detriment of a stronger understanding of God’s role in creation, it is fitting now to begin balancing the scale by demonstrating how divine creativity and divine redemption work together in a unified manner. Introducing God as
primarily Creator, rather than Redeemer, will provide a way of viewing redemption and glorification as primarily creative divine actions, rather than viewing creation as ultimately in service of redemption and glorification. Eschatology and the ongoing need for redemption in the world must not be dismissed in light of ecological concerns, but only if divine creation is made primary will those concerns be safeguarded even as they are integrated into a robust eschatological hope. If God is understood first and foremost as Creator, then everything that God is and everything that God does in interaction with the world is essentially creative. This then links the events of creation, redemption, and glorification together in the most intimate way possible as three instantiations of the same, unitive divine action. I will begin by demonstrating how the continuity of divine action in the economic missions of creation and redemption can be supported with scripture and with a robust pneumatology highlighting the role of the Spirit both in creation and in the life of Jesus Christ. The interconnectedness demonstrated between creation and redemption through the dynamic work of the Spirit will then enable an eschatological vision that is both present and future-looking, both appreciative and critical of the present state of the created world. An eco-eschatology will thus be presented as founded on the role of God as Creator from the “beginning” to the “end.”

**Laying the Foundation: Introducing God as Creator**

In order to begin, it must first be demonstrated how creation can and ought to be made more theologically fundamental than redemption. This requires a detailed definition of creation, and particularly a careful consideration of what it means for God to create. As we have seen, much of recent ecological theology has attempted, appropriately, to uplift the role of God in creation as an area of sustained focus. The grounds for doing so, however, need not be restricted by the current need for ecological attention and the damage done by fall-redemption paradigms,
but can be substantiated theologically as well. An emphasis on the creating role of God can be found within the theology of Jürgen Moltmann, which describes the creative activity of God as the free and eternal resolve of God’s will, wherein God is entirely Godself.\textsuperscript{337} Eastern Orthodox theology also teaches the primacy of creation as that which must be presupposed before salvation and deification.\textsuperscript{338} Another example noted by many theologians, including Sallie McFague and Elizabeth Johnson, is the doctrine of continuous creation, which understands the continued presence of God working to preserve creation as well as to provide it with new opportunities for growth and expansion.\textsuperscript{339} Here the role of God as Creator is not relegated to one initial primordial moment “in the beginning,” but rather the creative innovation undertaken in the opening chapters of Genesis is understood as the start of an ongoing process.\textsuperscript{340} Such an understanding is supported by process theology as well, which views creative becoming as the essence of reality itself, birthed out of the initial creativity of God and continuously instantiated by the more limited creative actions of agents in the world.\textsuperscript{341} Since God is at work in the world constantly providing its members with initial aims for the maximization of future creativity, God remains Creator at every moment as the ground of further creative possibility. Here God is understood to be essentially and necessarily creative due to God’s nature as a social and loving being; however, this necessity is internal rather than external, arising out of the identity of God.

\textsuperscript{337} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 83.

\textsuperscript{338} Dumitru Staniloae, \textit{The Experience of God}, Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, vol. 2. The World: Creation and Deification (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005), 1, 8.


\textsuperscript{340} This concept is supported by biblical scholarship as well. See Terence Fretheim, \textit{God and the World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation} (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 7-9.

\textsuperscript{341} Hartshorne, \textit{Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes}, 8.
rather than outside restriction.\(^{342}\) Thus if God is necessarily creative, this entails the necessary existence of a world, although not this particular world per se. Therefore, creation is both contingent in the sense of being utterly dependent upon God for its existence, and guaranteed in the sense that it is a necessary expression of the divine nature.\(^{343}\)

When considering creativity as essential to the character of God, the question of the temporal nature of our created universe adds a bit of a complication. If there was a clear beginning to our universe, as proponents of the Big Bang theory suggest, and God is (was and always will be) Creator, what was God doing “before” our world was created? To argue that God is essentially Creator seems to suggest that God must always be creating, and thus that God must have created countless other worlds before our own. Some such as Grace Jantzen and Thomas Jay Oord support this very argument, surmising that if God is eternally creative, then such creativity would have to “express itself eternally.”\(^{344}\) Jantzen supports such a view by making a connection to the eternal generation of the Son, which along with creation can be understood as a “relationship of ontological dependence but not temporal sequence.”\(^{345}\) Others such as Paul Helm deny that eternal creation is a necessary conclusion from the eternity of God, since the very notion of temporality is itself a created concept, coming into being only along with


Helm therefore develops the notion of “two standpoints,” wherein from the standpoint of the world the universe (or some universe) appears to be co-eternal with God, but from the standpoint of the Creator, creation is a whole, made “not in time, but with time.”

It follows that the eternal nature of God need not be applied to the process of creation even as the essential creativity of God is affirmed; the existence of other previous or future worlds is neither confirmed nor denied by such a claim.

Rather than focusing on the puzzle of eternal creation, an argument for God as Creator ought to rest instead upon a robustly pneumatological understanding of the divine economy. The Spirit functions as the member of the Trinity that most clearly demonstrates the continuity of the divine actions in creation, redemption, and glorification. First, the Spirit is often associated with the gift of life breathed into all creation, implicated in the presence over the watery depths of chaos and in the creation of humankind in the opening chapters of Genesis (Gen. 1:2, 2:7). Second, the Spirit functions as the driving force of continuous creation, present throughout the cosmos to bring about both the creative and the redemptive purposes of God. Pentecostal theology, as we have seen, affirms this tight connection between creation and redemption by means of the role of the Spirit. Clark Pinnock also utilizes pneumatology in order to demonstrate how God is active both in creation and in new creation, and further that creative actions must come before redemptive actions can follow, since God’s initial role as Creator becomes the

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347 Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 33.

qualifier for God’s ability to intervene salvifically in the future. Third, the nature of the Spirit can become the grounds for defending the notion that God is essentially creative even in and from God’s own eternity. Moltmann names “fellowship” as the “eternal, essential nature of the Spirit.” Denis Edwards also argues that the Spirit serves to represent the ecstatic nature of God, who out of the excess of divine love is poured out to embrace and include the “other.” While creation cannot be seen as a necessity placed upon God because of some sort of divine lack or need for fellowship, the fundamental orientation outward through the fellowship that is the Holy Spirit reveals God as primarily and essentially creative. If the Spirit is the necessary drive outward towards further creation and fellowship, and the Spirit is God, then God in God’s self must be understood as no less driven by the creative enterprise. This is not a denial of the completeness of the inner Trinitarian life, but rather the assertion that the immanent Trinity in its very completeness necessarily overflows with a superabundance of love that seeks creative possibility for further relationship. The foundational creativity of God is supported by a wide variety of Christian traditions and theologians as well as by the interactive role of the Spirit attested to by the witness of Scripture and tradition, and therefore will become the guiding maxim of the rest of this project. Later we will examine how divine action in the events of redemption and glorification might be understood as essentially creative, but first attention must be turned to the initial moment of creation “in the beginning.”

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Re-interpreting Creation: The Work of Divine Love

*Ex Nihilo: Nothing or Something?*

If divine creativity is to become foundational for our understanding of redemption and glorification, then it becomes imperative to first determine *what kind* of Creator God is, and the conclusion ought to correspond in some way to the creation narrative found in Genesis and taught throughout Christian history. We have previously examined how the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation “out of nothing,” has recently been critiqued by eco-theologians who are concerned with its implications of dualism and divine supremacy. And yet the doctrine finds its roots in early Christian history and remains the primary illustration for the uniqueness of divine creation in Christian theology. The doctrine, with its flaws as well as its benefits, therefore deserves some attention. In an in-depth study of the development of the doctrine of *ex nihilo*, Gerhard May demonstrates how speculations within Gnosticism concerning the origin of matter served to instigate a parallel fascination within the early church.\(^{352}\) While up until the second half of the second century the pre-existence of matter was affirmed by many philosophically educated Christians under the influence of Middle Platonism, after this a variety of factors led to the formulation of a strict doctrine of creation out of nothing in order to assert that matter itself was created by God.\(^{353}\) One of these factors, in direct conflict with Platonism, was the need to establish the freedom and contingency of creation.\(^{354}\) Along with the rejection of the eternity of matter in Plato came the need to combat the Gnostic understanding of matter as inherently


\(^{353}\) Ibid., 147-8.

\(^{354}\) Ibid., 5.
May argues that the development of *ex nihilo* came about in part as a reaction against the teachings of Marcion, who drew such a heavy distinction between the God of creation and the God of redemption that he interpreted redemption as a liberation from the lowly and imperfect created world, and rejected the God of creation as inferior to the God of redemption. Thus the theological move towards creation being a free and unmediated divine decision was in part a means of safeguarding the goodness of creation. Interestingly enough, even as *creatio ex nihilo* can be seen as a reaction against certain gnostic teachings, May points out that the first theologian to speak clearly of a creation out of nothing was actually Basilides the Gnostic. The doctrine was later solidified into Christian theology, starting with the almost simultaneous innovations of Tatian, the first to argue that matter was produced by God, and Theophilus of Antioch, the first to use the terminology “out of nothing.” The doctrine would then reach permanence through the influence of Irenaeus, who continued to emphasize the unconditional nature of divine creation.

In light of the specific reasons for its development, certain beneficial aspects of the doctrine of *ex nihilo* ought to be acknowledged and somehow preserved in a responsible doctrine.

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356 May, Creatio Ex Nihilo, 53-7. It is striking how this temptation to separate the God of redemption from the God of creation continues even today, albeit in perhaps more subtle ways.


358 May, Creatio Ex Nihilo, 76; The teachings of Basilides apparently differed in part from those of other gnostics, for he emphasized more strongly the transcendence and superiority of God, thus leading him to see creation as necessarily powered by nothing other than the divine will. The limitation of pre-existent material with which God would have to work would be unacceptable within this paradigm. See p. 73.

359 Ibid., 150, 156.

360 Ibid., 168.
of creation. Some have argued that the doctrine bears a striking resemblance to the scientific theory of the Big Bang.\textsuperscript{361} The doctrine also effectively serves to safeguard the self-sufficiency of God, the contingency of creation, and a clear distinction between God and the world that makes it clear that God was \textit{active} in creation in a way that emanationist theories cannot.\textsuperscript{362} Thus, creation in this paradigm can be understood as purposeful and intentional, existing purely because of divine desire rather than out of some necessity such as God’s self-expression.\textsuperscript{363} In this way the voluntary and contingent nature of creation actually proves its value and importance to God.\textsuperscript{364} \textit{Ex nihilo} also demonstrates how creation allows for the possibility of a genuine “other” to exist and contribute to the ongoing creative process in cooperation with God.\textsuperscript{365} There are eschatological implications of the doctrine as well, because of the way in which it emphasizes God’s ability to intervene and enact the divine will without being bound by any existing preconditions.\textsuperscript{366} Thus Moltmann concludes that the reality of the new creation hinges on creation out of nothing in the beginning.\textsuperscript{367} Moltmann also helpfully points out that if there were some realm or pre-existent matter outside of and co-eternal with God, this would discount

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\textsuperscript{362} Clayton, “Creation \textit{Ex Nihilo},” 18, 21-2.


\textsuperscript{364} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{365} Ibid., 63-4.

\textsuperscript{366} Staniloe, \textit{The Experience of God}, 7.

\textsuperscript{367} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 79.
\end{flushright}
divine omnipresence, and therefore concludes that the very space opened up within Godself for creation must initially be a kind of nihil.\textsuperscript{368}

Despite these various positive aspects of the doctrine, it has also been pointed out that, in many ways, it comes into conflict with contemporary science. While \textit{ex nihilo} is sometimes compared to the Big Bang theory, this is a bit inappropriate because, according to quantum physics, even the “empty” vacuum that existed before the Big Bang took place is not exactly \textit{nothing}, but rather a quantum field filled with potential.\textsuperscript{369} In fact, when it comes to quantum physics, there really is no such thing as “nothing.”\textsuperscript{370} \textit{Creatio ex nihilo} can also be critiqued for the way in which it clashes with evolutionary theory, by denying a strong sense of self-determination to creation and challenging the view that existing forms of life have developed over time from earlier, less complicated forms.\textsuperscript{371} The doctrine has also been dismissed by some theologians such as Thomas Oord and Catherine Keller on the grounds that it remains unsupported by scripture, at least when it comes to the Genesis account of initial creation.\textsuperscript{372} There is also the problem of evil, which Oord views as an area of heavy concern for proponents of \textit{ex nihilo} because of the way in which it implies that God maintains the ability to unilaterally act within creation at any time and yet for whatever reason chooses not to, even in situations of

\textsuperscript{368} Ibid., 87.


\textsuperscript{370} Trelstad, “The Fecundity of Nothing,” 42.


\textsuperscript{372} Oord, “God Always Creates,” 109.
profound suffering.\textsuperscript{373} There are also eschatological concerns that raise questions about the continuity of the present world and the world to come.\textsuperscript{374} Finally, there is the charge that creation here seems to takes place within a “void” outside of God, which seems to be at odds with a pneumatological reading of creation which views the Spirit as present within creation from the very beginning.\textsuperscript{375} Even while remaining distinct as the force empowering the creation in its process of becoming, it seems important to maintain the active divine presence at every moment and in every space of creation, thus dismissing the possibility of creation taking place in a literal void, out on its own, even in its initial stages.\textsuperscript{376}

Conceiving the World: The Womb of the Spirit

For the task of constructing an ecologically sensitive doctrine of initial creation, it is important to be mindful of the various critiques of \textit{creatio ex nihilo}, while at the same time safeguarding the beneficial aspects that lie at the heart of its original formation. Solutions have been offered that simply dismiss \textit{ex nihilo} altogether, such as Keller’s \textit{creatio ex profundis} or McFague’s description of the world as the body of God, but these fall short by either placing too heavy a limitation on God’s creative ability, or verging on conflating the world and God such that they become almost indistinguishable. Thus, while the concept of pure “nothing” is in many ways problematic as well as difficult to conceive, other more foundational aspects of the doctrine

\textsuperscript{373} Ibid., 112.


\textsuperscript{375} Keller, “‘NothingSomething’ On My Mind,” 37.

\textsuperscript{376} See Amos Yong, \textit{The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 156. He notes how in the text of Genesis the Spirit is understood to be both transcendent over the watery chaos as well as “implicated” within its potentiality.
must be maintained, such as the self-sufficiency of God and a clear distinction between God and the world. It must also be kept in mind that what *ex nihilo* represents is in many ways foundational for the goodness and intentionality of creation, and thus also the proclamation that divine *love* is the driving force of the entire process. For a nuanced perspective of *ex nihilo* in light of contemporary concerns, panentheism will therefore become a useful resource, because of the way in which it highlights the intimate presence of God in the creative process while at the same time maintaining a distinction between God and the world. Many ecologically minded theologians have already turned their attention this direction, one of the most notable examples being Moltmann’s concept of *zimzum*, developed in order to emphasize the otherness of creation. Panentheism functions as a reaction against the tendency towards pantheism, a perspective which complicates the autonomy and value of creation by conceiving it as a mere extension or expression of Godself. Because of this, it is more suited for an ecological doctrine of creation than the theory of the world as God’s body as proposed by McFague and others such as Grace Jantzen. It is therefore important, as Jay McDaniel argues in his ecological theology, to affirm *relational* rather than *emanationist* panentheism, in order to grant a “creative independence from God” to the natural world.

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378 See Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, 26, who was concerned about the implications of pantheistic thinking for ecological responsibility, arguing for *creatio ex nihilo* as a result.


While the metaphor of chaos or chaotic potentiality present in the initial stages of creation holds weight for the way it depicts creation as an ongoing, cooperative process, the affirmation of pre-existent matter must be rejected because of the way in which it challenges the unique eternity and omnipresence of God. But this then leads to a bit of a quandary: if creation cannot be conceived as being formed out of pure “nothing,” but it also cannot be conceived as being formed out of pre-existent matter, then what is it that can be said to source the creative enterprise? In keeping with a panentheistic approach, G. Michael Zbaraschuk offers the helpful perspective that creation instead ought to be understood as coming forth “out of God’s own being,” and that this insight is essentially equivalent to the idea of creation out of nothing – creation thus comes out of nothing but God.\(^{381}\) Thus along with Moltmann, a panentheistic doctrine of the world within God can be confirmed, but what must be rejected is the notion that the space opened up within God for the world is nothing more than empty nihil.\(^{382}\) The fact that the Spirit is active within the space of creation even from the very beginning means that it cannot be a space of pure emptiness, but must contain a sort of divine potentiality. This space for creation therefore could be more helpfully compared to the teeming potentiality of the waters of chaos; not a God-forsakenness, but an openness that seeks fulfillment both from divine and created agents.

While many difficulties can be overcome with panentheistic constructions, the doctrine of a world-within-God can tend to remain conceptually difficult, and it can easily lead to a slip back

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\(^{381}\) G. Michael Zbaraschuk, “Creatio Ex Deo: Incarnation, Spirituality, Creation,” in Theologies of Creation: Creatio Ex Nihilo and Its New Rivals, ed. Thomas Jay Oord (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2015), 79-80; Ian McFarland, a proponent of creatio ex nihilo, argues something similar, stating that “in God even that which has not yet been created is not nothing, since it is held from eternity in the divine Word.” See Ian A. McFarland, From Nothing: A Theology of Creation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 91.

\(^{382}\) Moltmann, God in Creation, 87.
into more pantheistic conceptions, such as can be seen in the work of Sallie McFague. What must also be introduced, therefore, is a visual tool capable of communicating the truths to which both *ex nihilo* and panentheism point, one capable of evoking an affective response to the inter-connected nature of all created reality and the way it expresses the love and majesty of the Creator. Such a metaphor can be provided in the image of God as Mother and the world within the womb of God. In this way, the created world can be understood as, in a certain sense, expressive of God, while at the same time not God’s *self*-expression, for it remains an independent entity. McFague herself considers such a procreative model, but ultimately rejects it in favor of her notion of the world as God’s body. The metaphor can be supported, however, by the terminology often utilized in panentheistic descriptions, including Moltmann’s insistence that God as Creator becomes “the God who can be inhabited.” Matthew Fox, drawing inspiration from the resources of mystical theology, also describes the ongoing divine creative process as God giving “birth.”

Along with resources within Christian tradition, the image of divine procreation is one that is also supported by a wealth of biblical sources. Some have pointed to the image of the Spirit hovering over the waters of chaos in Genesis 1 to be evocative of a mother bird covering her eggs with the life-giving warmth of her body. Also, throughout the Old Testament birth serves as a powerful metaphor for divine deliverance because of the way the state of barrenness

385 Fox, *Original Blessing*, 220.
was associated with utter despair and hopelessness in ancient Israelite culture.\footnote{Brueggemann, \textit{Isaiah 40-66}, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 256.} Closely related to this was the use of maternal imagery for descriptions of God’s “womb-love” for the people of Israel, exemplified by passages like Deuteronomy 32:18 which uses the emotional weight of rejecting “the God who gave you birth” to stir a response of repentance.\footnote{Margaret L. Hammer, \textit{Giving Birth: Reclaiming Biblical Metaphor for Pastoral Practice} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 46.} The use of womb and birth imagery can also be found in the prophets, especially within the book of Isaiah, as a common theme applied to the possibility of deliverance from exile.\footnote{Ibid., 47.} Most notable here are the examples of Isaiah 42:14, which describes God herself participating in the painful cries of labor, and Isaiah 66:7-14, which in eschatological fashion depicts a scene of abrupt and labor-less birth.\footnote{Examples of notable birth imagery throughout the book of Isaiah include the following: 26:16-18; 37:1-4; 42:14; 44:1-2, 24; 43:1; and 66:7-14. A movement can be discerned throughout the thematic shifts in each of these texts, wherein the initial fruitless labor of First Isaiah develops into fruitful labor in Second Isaiah by means of YHWH’s intervention, and then finally climaxes in the labor-less fruit of Third Isaiah, the ultimate eschatological promise of God in response to the problem of exile. For further resources on an eschatological reading of Isaiah 66:7-14, see Brueggemann, \textit{Isaiah 40-66}, 256; Claus Westermann, \textit{Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary} (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1969), 419; Paul D. Hanson, \textit{Isaiah 40-66}, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 248.} The use of birth imagery continues to hold resonance even in the New Testament, specifically with the image of labor pains as a visual representation of eschatological yearning and lament (Rom. 8:22-23; Gal. 4:19).\footnote{Ibid., 47.} Thus we can conclude in light of traditional, scriptural, and theological grounds that the notion of the world being formed within the very vibrancy of the

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\footnote{\textsuperscript{387} Brueggemann, \textit{Isaiah 40-66}, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 256.} \footnote{\textsuperscript{388} Margaret L. Hammer, \textit{Giving Birth: Reclaiming Biblical Metaphor for Pastoral Practice} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 46.} \footnote{\textsuperscript{389} Ibid., 47.} \footnote{\textsuperscript{390} Examples of notable birth imagery throughout the book of Isaiah include the following: 26:16-18; 37:1-4; 42:14; 44:1-2, 24; 43:1; and 66:7-14. A movement can be discerned throughout the thematic shifts in each of these texts, wherein the initial fruitless labor of First Isaiah develops into fruitful labor in Second Isaiah by means of YHWH’s intervention, and then finally climaxes in the labor-less fruit of Third Isaiah, the ultimate eschatological promise of God in response to the problem of exile. For further resources on an eschatological reading of Isaiah 66:7-14, see Brueggemann, \textit{Isaiah 40-66}, 256; Claus Westermann, \textit{Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary} (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1969), 419; Paul D. Hanson, \textit{Isaiah 40-66}, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 248.} \footnote{\textsuperscript{391} There is also the example of eschatological birth imagery in Revelation 12:2. While the woman giving birth here can be interpreted a multitude of ways, Catherine Keller opts to read the woman as a female image of the divine. See Keller, \textit{Apocalypse Now and Then}, 66.}
divine creativity, the womb of the creative Spirit of God, is not far-fetched but is instead one of the best ways to envision the God-world relationship.

Creative Love and Intrinsic Value: Celebrating Created-ness

The doctrine of panentheism, or more specifically the image of the divine womb, helps to demonstrate that divine love lies at the center of what it means for God to create. The location of the world within God denies the existence of co-eternal matter and shows how the creative enterprise is limited by nothing other than the divine will itself. At the same time, the openness towards the development of autonomous otherness displays how the desire for freedom and self-creativity are prioritized by that divine will. How is it that a genuine “other” can come from nothing but God? As soon as God creates, an independence for the created material exists, otherwise God would not really be creating. As soon as an “other” exists within God, therefore, what takes place within creation is no longer solely the will or responsibility of God. But it must be kept in mind that, since divine creativity is driven by authentic love, it is the very will of God that this be the case. At the same time, God does not just draw life out of an empty void or chaotic matrix, but instead by the power of the Spirit, who enters in so as to guide the creation on and out – a gentle, relational movement, requiring cooperation and freedom on the part of created agents. Jay McDaniel argues that much of natural theology tends to focus attention first on the nature of God’s creativity, moving on to determine the nature of divine love in response.\footnote{McDaniel, \textit{Of God and Pelicans}, 23.} Critical of this approach, he suggests divine love as the necessary beginning point for consideration, to which a theology of creation must acquiesce.\footnote{Ibid., 23.} At this point it will be helpful to point out, however, that McDaniel sets up a false dichotomy in this description. If God
as the first and primary Creator sets the parameters for what it means to truly create, then the fact that love lies at the heart of divine creation means that love is always definitive of genuine creation. In the words of Pope Francis, “creation is of the order of love.”\textsuperscript{394} Certainly free agents in the world possess the ability to use their own creative abilities in harmful, unloving ways, but this is arguably an instance of \textit{de}-creation, seeking to unravel and oppose the aims of God for the world. But pure creation, as modeled by the divine Creator, has to do with the mercy of “letting-be,” opening up further possibilities for life and growth in every moment. God could not be Creator if God was not loving, surely; but neither could God be loving if God was not Creator.

This understanding of divine creative love thus paves the way for a renewed understanding of intrinsic value for creation and the gift that is created-ness, for creating in love means creating autonomous beings distinct from the Creator but affirmed in value by the love of that Creator for them. In this way, as McDaniel points out, the independent agents of creation possess a value that is “independent of God’s ascription.”\textsuperscript{395} In keeping with the Genesis narrative, we must remember God \textit{sees}, not \textit{says}, that creation is good.\textsuperscript{396} The inspiration of creative love also drives the limitation of divine supremacy through the creation of free agents able to exercise their own influence in the world.\textsuperscript{397} Such an understanding of divine creativity is suitable because of its consonance with evolutionary theory, which requires for creation “the innate capacity to evolve by the operation of its own natural powers.”\textsuperscript{398} Here the agents of

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\textsuperscript{394} Pope Francis, \textit{Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home} (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015), 49.


\textsuperscript{396} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{397} Jantzen, \textit{God’s World, God’s Body}, 152.

\textsuperscript{398} Johnson, \textit{Ask the Beasts}, 155-6.
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creation become “cocreators” in their own process of becoming, thus safeguarding creation’s integrity. \(^{399}\) The trial-and-error process of evolutionary progress is here explained by the fact that the world “comes to what is new through exploring the possibilities offered in unpredictable events and random mutations.” \(^{400}\) The rather erratic nature of this process is not an instance of pure evil or meaninglessness, but is instead, as Elizabeth Johnson argues, an expression of “mature divine love.” \(^{401}\) The true nature of this love is the life-breath of the Spirit breathing into creation so that it might enjoy its own be-ing and created-ness. \(^{402}\) This created-ness is essentially good both because of its initial emergence out of divine creativity as well as its distinction from divinity. This essential goodness of creation becomes the foundation for ecological responsibility to the present world; creation is not only good in its final, glorified state, but also in its present state right now. A theologically responsible ethic for creation care therefore requires that the natural world be safeguarded against playing a merely instrumental role in the grander narrative of Christian formation or salvation. It assures that the needs of autonomous created individuals are respected simply for the sake of loving those individuals who have initially been breathed into existence by divine love itself.

Considering the centrality of love thus demonstrated in the act of divine creation, creation as a theological category ought to be defined as follows: the creative work of God upon and with the available elements of the “present,” for as soon as a created autonomy comes into existence, God is committed to cooperation with its own independence. God is the kind of Creator who


\(^{400}\) Edwards, *Breath of Life*, 34.

\(^{401}\) Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 159.

\(^{402}\) Lodahl, “*Creatio Ex Amore!*,” 103.
creates with what is available because God is the kind of Creator who creates out of love. In the “beginning,” God creates out of the love of God’s own richness of being. God continues to create out of the present elements of creation because of God’s love and respect for that creation. Questions concerning the possibility of eternal creation or creation out of “nothing” thus ought to be held cursory to the more foundational element of love in the divine creative process and the presence of the Spirit as basic to that process.

Re-framing Redemption: Introducing the Son as Redeeming Creator

If God is to be held primarily as Creator, it must next be demonstrated how, in light of our previously developed definition, God continues to be essentially creative in the acts of redemption and glorification. In the case of divine redemption, it must first be noted that the very need for redemption lies in the decision for the kind of world God has chosen to create out of love – a world left open and unfinished. Redemption becomes a necessary component of divine creation as the open-ended nature of reality allows for created agents to act in opposition to the divine aims for the world. While creation says there is always more to create, redemption says there is more to create in spite of the wrongs and de-creative actions that take place. It can therefore be demonstrated that the redeeming God is the God who creates, and that redemption is simply a component within the larger mission of creation. One way of supporting this view is a pneumatological reading of divine action, since, as we have already seen, the Spirit as source of both life and renewal of life provides a way of talking fluidly about how God is both Creator and Redeemer. Thus Moltmann asserts that the Spirit active in the life and mission of Jesus Christ must be identified as the same creative ruach at work in initial creation. Descriptions of the

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inherently “creative” work of both the Son and the Spirit in the world can be traced back to early Christian sources such as the Cappadocians. Elizabeth Johnson has also recently shown how certain motifs of scripture serve to further illustrate how, within both the Old and the New Testaments, the Creator God and the interventionary God of salvation were understood to be one and the same. She demonstrates how, particularly in the book of Isaiah, the Creator God is continually invoked for the purposes of salvation and deliverance because the creative power of YHWH served as the basis for trust and hope in continued redemption. Such texts show how knowledge of God as Creator must be made primary in contrast to knowledge of God as Redeemer, for the very hope of God’s redemption rests on divine creative capability. It is also noteworthy that throughout the Old Testament, a link between creation and redemption is illustrated through prophetic visions of restoration involving both humankind and the natural world. In light of this, redemption can be understood as a restoration of creation, rather than a release from it. In other words, redemption must be in service of creation, rather than creation being in service of redemption.

405 Paul M. Blowers, “Beauty, Tragedy and New Creation: Theology and Contemplation in Cappadocian Cosmology,” International Journal of Systematic Theology 18, no. 1 (January 2016): 24-5. Here Blowers argues that, from the perspective of the Cappadocians, every divine act could be understood as a reference back to God’s initial creativity, and thus there is no proper distinction to be made between divine creation and divine redemption.

406 Elizabeth A. Johnson, Creation and the Cross, 30.

407 Ibid., 48. Some passages worth mentioning here include Isaiah 44:24; 46:3-4; 49:7, 15; 49:26; and 40:28b-29. A similar motif can also be found in the text of Jeremiah 32:17-21, which references both the presence of God in creation and in the deliverance out of Egypt as grounds for trusting in the promise of salvation out of exile.

408 Pinnock, Flame of Love, 51.


It must be shown how the life and work of Jesus Christ specifically serves as an example of divine creative action in service of the wider purpose of creation itself. First, the event of the incarnation demonstrates how the salvific will of God cooperates with the creative matrix of which Jesus becomes a part. Johnson notes the important parallel between the description of Christ’s incarnation in John 1 and the opening chapter of Genesis, demonstrating how the author of John’s Gospel likely seeks to draw a connection to the story of initial creation.411 Denis Edwards likewise draws attention to the presence of the Spirit overshadowing Mary at her conception and anointing Jesus at his baptism, which would have been understood by the early Christian community as references to the Spirit of creation.412 The incarnation thus serves as a further instantiation of divine creativity, breathing forth redemptive possibility in cooperative love with the elements of present creation, including the consent of Mary as a co-agent, and the material elements that would come to shape the embodied life of Jesus Christ on earth. Furthermore, the concept of “deep incarnation” proposed by Niels Gregersen allows us to understand the incarnation of Christ as an act of solidarity not just with all humankind, but with the entirety of creation, since human beings exist as part of an “inter-connected whole.”413 Thus the incarnation is not only divinely creative, but also involves all of creation.

The life and teachings of Christ continue to demonstrate divine creativity, as Christ performs the work of God, not in or out of an empty void, but in and with the conditions of the environment and culture around him. The events of death and resurrection are components of the

411 Johnson, Creation and the Cross, 185.
412 Edwards, Breath of Life, 37.
divine creative mission as well, for in his death Christ represents the ultimate embrace and acceptance of the present state of the world, in all its ugliness and hopelessness, and determines to be the embodiment of God’s continued solidarity with the world even in its suffering. Thus, Christ’s death demonstrates the willingness of God to submit herself to the labor pains required of opening herself to otherness, a necessary result of creative love. Johnson applies the concept of deep incarnation to the resurrection of Christ as well, thus poetically concluding that “Christ is the firstborn of all the dead of Darwin’s tree of life.”[^414] The Spirit of life forms *new* life even out of death, but again not out of nothing, for no body is left in the tomb. Even in the resurrection, the first fruits of the glorified kingdom that is to come, God’s creative love remains consistent: Christ enjoys a new body, but still a physical, created body in some sense continuous with the old. In this way the Christ event shows how preservation of the good lies at the heart of the divine creative mission, even in its redemptive instantiation, for in the words of Whitehead, it is “a judgement of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved.”[^415] In keeping with our re-examined definition of creation as the creative work of God upon the available elements of the present, then, redemption can in turn be re-defined as *transformative* creation: the creative work of God upon the *corrupted* elements of creation, working to bring forth new and better possibilities.

**Re-imagining Glorification: Introducing the Spirit as Eschatological Creator**

After having established a basis for understanding divine redemption as essentially creative, in keeping with the basic definition of divine creation as fundamentally driven by love,


we are equipped finally for the task of constructing an ecologically suitable eschatology for today. This modified eco-eschatology will rest on a re-emphasis upon the preservative aspect of divine redemption examined in the previous section: it is of central importance that God never aims towards total annihilation in the act of salvation because God is more fundamentally a Creator, seeking further life and vitality for each and every aspect of creation. This divine motivation is determined by the supremacy of mercy over wrath, and life over death, as can be demonstrated by the Old Testament witness of remnant theology and the New Testament witness of the incarnation and bodily resurrection.

Rather than starting over, consistent themes running throughout the entire biblical narrative instead portray a God who intervenes but works in continuity with the old, in cooperation with whatever and whoever is available. Whether it be the ark of Noah, the remnant of Israelite exiles, or the resurrected body of Christ, God in every case seeks to preserve and deliver the goodness of God’s creation. This means that God is on the side of creation, and that God is Creator before and after God ever acts as Redeemer. If God is essentially creative, then such creativity “would have to express itself eternally,” meaning the eschaton cannot be the end of divine creativity, or even the beginning of the end.

Thus, it follows that in the act of eschatological glorification, God will remain motivated primarily by this creative intention, seeking not a destruction or annihilation of creation, but its completion and fulfillment. Eschatology therefore seeks to describe not a totally separate or distinct divine intervention, but another component of the one “loving, creative divine action.”

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416 Process thought has its own way of articulating divine eschatological preservation with the notion of objective immortality. Thus God “treasures all things in the divine ‘memory,’” although it often remains unclear in process descriptions of this preservation whether there can be any hope for an autonomous participation of created beings in this process. See John Haught, *The Promise of Nature*, 133.


418 Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 100.
therefore move towards a re-conception of the *eschaton* as *new creation*: the creative work of God upon the *incomplete* and *unfinished* elements of creation, ushered in by the same Spirit who has been creatively at work in the world since the “beginning.”

A pneumatological emphasis continues to drive this eco-eschatological perspective, for it is the Spirit as the source of newness and novelty who serves to initiate the process of glorification, but this is only the case because of the Spirit’s more foundational role of enacting and sustaining creation. The eschatological Spirit is the same Spirit who empowers the evolutionary process of autonomous life and who demonstrates solidarity with the suffering of the world through its presence with the crucified and risen Christ, and this then becomes the foundation for Christian hope: the One returning in judgment and redemption of the world is the same One who *created* it. This continuity must therefore be supported by an understanding of glorification as the culmination of the creative event, rather than its undoing. This requires that the destiny of both humankind and the rest of the natural world be understood as interwoven, wherein eschatological fulfillment entails not salvation *from* the world or even from its most negative aspects, but salvation *of* the world in all its entirety. This is neither a return to the primordial state of creation nor a complete remodel, because neither would be in keeping with the nature of God’s creativity. Because of the kind of Creator God is, God is now in some sense bound by the world that presently exists and must cooperate with that world in the process of bringing it to glorification. This means that regardless of whatever destruction or death might take place before the ultimate consummation, creation remains the driving motivation of eschatology, thus total annihilation of the physical world is ruled out, and the hope of some kind

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of physical resurrection is secured. Once God creates, God is bound to deliver that creation, whatever it may become while it is still forming within the womb, and whatever pain the delivery might cause God. Here the metaphor of divine birth therefore becomes significant once again, for it expresses the sense in which the events of conception and deliverance are intimately connected aspects of a unified creative process. To save is to create – even in the *eschaton*.

There is also a sense in which the concept of “fulfillment” here becomes central, because of the way in which it describes the total eschatological infilling of the world with the presence of God. Process theologian Marjorie Suchocki posits such an eschatological vision as a participation in God, wherein every created entity enjoys a resurrection into the “Harmony of harmonies” that is the inner divine life.\(^421\) This “rebirth” into inclusive harmony involves a “dual consciousness” wherein the selfhood of the created entity remains intact even as it enters into complete union with God.\(^422\) Despite the value of Suchocki’s creative contribution to the process community with her development of a doctrine of subjective immortality, she appears to fall into the same trap as much of traditional futurized eschatology by suggesting that in the end, all things simply get absorbed back into the divine life, as if there were never any purpose for the outward movement of creation in the first place. Since to create is to love and to affect the existence of the “other,” it follows that creation ought to be allowed a stronger sense of autonomy and individuality in the event of glorification.

Rather than understanding eschatological fulfillment as an ascension “up” into the life of God, it would be more appropriate and more in keeping with biblical eschatology to conceive of

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God as being ushered “down” into the life of the world. Thus the “end of evil” does not simply entail a redemption that takes place “in God beyond all history,” but is rather the new birth of God’s creative presence in the world.⁴²³ Revelation 21-22 provides such an image through its depiction of the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven to take up residence on earth. Middleton draws attention to this section of scripture in order to demonstrate how, in the new kingdom, “God’s presence decisively shifts from heaven to earth.”⁴²⁴ For this reason also Barbara Rossing envisions a “Rapture in reverse,” for “it is God who is Raptured down to earth to take up residence and dwell with us.”⁴²⁵ Such a vision better encapsulates the integrity of creation and the merciful intentions of the Eschatological Creator in permitting the creative enterprise to go on with its own freedom and opportunity for contribution. It is also here that our womb metaphor retains its relevance, even as it gains an additional nuance. For while it remains true to the metaphor that, in eschatological consummation, God delivers the world unto maturation, it must also be the case that the world in some way retains its dependence upon God for its continued life. Thus, we must also speak in some sense of the world giving birth to the presence of God. This is in fact suggested by the text of Romans 8:22, for here it is not God who is depicted as groaning in labor pains, but creation, meaning that even as God gives birth to the world, the world is giving birth too, giving birth to the fullness of divine presence and healing. This final birth is anticipated by the conception and birth of Jesus in the womb of Mary, looking ahead to the universalization of incarnate divine love throughout the entire cosmos. Matthew Fox, however, draws attention to the fact that “there is a real sense in which the Cosmic Christ is

⁴²³ Suchocki, The End of Evil, 155.

⁴²⁴ Middleton, A New Heaven and a New Earth, 169.

⁴²⁵ Rossing, The Rapture Exposed, 147.
not born yet.” Thus we join with all creation and with God in the groaning process of labor, and as God prepares to give birth to the world, we in turn prepare to give birth to God in the world. This dual-birth illustrates how in the eschaton God is said to deliver the world and yet as such the world becomes the very dwelling place of God. In its glorified maturity, creation enjoys a co-inhabitation with God reminiscent of the perichoretic dance of the Trinity itself.

Motivating Ecological Responsibility: The Orientation of Creative Love

In our creatively re-imagined eco-eschatology, we have determined that God is always ever oriented toward the world in creative love, even in the “end.” Eco-eschatology therefore provides the foundation for an ecological ethic, through both its critique of the present unfulfilled state of the world and its model for correct interaction with the world. In this sense, the concept of realized eschatology remains relevant and essential for the task of connecting eschatological hope with social engagement in the present, but only a realized eschatology that is held in concert with a futurized eschatology that looks ahead to genuine divine fulfillment and guards against the myth of human progress. Genuine realized eschatology therefore looks with anticipation to the birth of God’s kingdom in the world in order to draw inspiration for present action. It recognizes that the present world, despite its inadequacies, stands as a “promise of ultimate meaning and beauty.” The possibilities for the world dreamt and enacted by the divine creativity are, after all, the very aims that empowered its creation in the first place, and in cooperation with these aims humanity can work in cooperation with the creative love of God.

426 Fox, The Coming of the Cosmic Christ, 136.

427 Such a perichoretic union is also envisioned by the eschatological vision of Moltmann. See Lee, Celebrating God’s Cosmic Perichoresis, 59.

428 Haught, The Promise of Nature, 8. Haught argues here that the eschatological promise within creation for ultimate fulfillment is what ought to ground our love for it and commitment to caring for it.
sense of continuity between the present state of the world and the consummation to come is therefore important for ecological responsibility, since as Miroslav Volf argues, such continuity provides creation itself with its own sort of independent participation in eschatological deliverance.\textsuperscript{429} Such cooperation necessarily entails acts of preservation and redemption in the present that are consonant with the redemptive agenda of God modeled by eschatological deliverance. Jay McDaniel surmises that, “if divine creation is to some extent dependent on creaturely response, so is divine redemption” and therefore concludes that human beings are called to function both as co-creators and co-redeemers with God.\textsuperscript{430} In some way, and in keeping with divine creative preservation, the effects of human creative and redemptive work are preserved and integrated into the new creation, although the exact nature in which this will take place is difficult to describe or imagine.

The co-creative and co-redemptive roles of humanity are established by the creative nature of God in breathing forth autonomous individuals in the world, equipped with their own capacities to contribute to the ongoing process of creation as a whole. While other created beings enjoy the same opportunity for creative contribution at varying levels, humanity stands as the most unique contributor due to its unique capabilities for speech, art, and conscious interaction with the world. Unlike any other known created species, the human is uniquely creative, bearing the same image of the Creator through the process of taking from the resources of the present world in order to develop something new. The open potentiality of the world God has created makes it possible for humans to actualize this potential in ways that can be either good or bad,


\textsuperscript{430} McDaniel, Of God and Pelicans, 45.
healing or destructive. But humans are gifted with the chance not only to build upon the good that is already present in the world, but to draw good in a redemptive fashion out of that which has been corrupted or damaged. Thus humanity’s ongoing functionality for innovation and progress are actually a reflection of a divinely initiated mission to continually bring good out of the present in partnership with the presence of the Creator Spirit. This is why the phrase “human progress” is insufficient terminology, and must be held in balance with the necessary role played by the guidance of perfect divine creativity. Our beginning as a created species was formed out of divine creative love, and thus any successful advances in human creativity require ongoing relationship to the initial Creator. The final glorified consummation represents a vision of a perfected cooperation of this kind between Creator and created co-creators, and therefore can be anticipated in the present through acts of creative love accomplished in communion with the Spirit of love in the world.

We must be careful, however, not to confuse the importance of eschatological continuity as a qualification for assigning value to the present created world; because of the nature of divine creativity, the value of creation must be intrinsic. Recall that in paradigms of creation care that emphasize eschatological responsibility or obedience, the autonomous identity and value of creation can often tend to get lost. We thus concluded that, while caring for creation can influence Christian formation, this cannot be the only reason for such action, or otherwise other anthropocentric concerns are likely to become distractions. While the call to obedience can be a starting point, it is unfortunately the case that this alone will likely not be enough to sustain the kind of committed action that is required considering the state of the ecological crisis today. Neither can eschatological promise be the sole reason for creation care, for we ultimately cannot be sure of the specifics of continuity in terms of what will be preserved and what will not, and
such an orientation would run the risk of fixating on the potential of created things rather than their current beauty and value. What must be uplifted as an alternative for motivating ecological responsibility is instead the model of divine creative love. Evangelical Stephen Williams argues along similar lines by asserting that eschatological hope fails as a motivating force for social responsibility because of questions concerning continuity, and thus that love must be uplifted as the proper basis for motivation instead.431 This argument is compelling because it secures the commitment to ecological responsibility regardless of the specificities of eschatological glorification. While from the perspective of God, it is important to surmise continuity in light of the driving aim for further creation, from the perspective of humanity, love for one’s neighbor, even one’s nonhuman neighbor, is the only motivating force powerful enough to sustain our devoted attention. Only love can drive us to find solidarity with the suffering elements of the natural world according to the pattern of Christ, making the necessary sacrifices so that the autonomy and value of other created beings might be preserved, respected, and allowed due space and time to flourish. Such an orientation also opens up the possibility for a genuine celebration and enjoyment of creation, as modeled by so much of ecological theology. Pope Francis, in his recent encyclical on climate change, likewise draws inspiration from St. Francis of Assisi for this very reason, since there is something about being united to the natural world by “the bonds of affection” that inspires a disposition of care for that world like nothing else can.432

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431 Stephen Williams, “The Partition of Love and Hope: Eschatology and Social Responsibility,” *Transformation*, no. 3 (1990): 25; Miroslav Volf takes issue with Williams’ argument, stating instead that love and hope are so intricately connected that it is incorrect to uplift one over the other. In light of our discussion about divine creativity as foundational to God’s economic identity, and love as foundational to that creativity, I however remain committed to the notion that love must precede even hope. See Volf, “On Loving with Hope,” 31.

A model for creation care based upon creative love requires that the needs of groaning creation be acknowledged and cared for as areas of relevant concern in and of themselves, rather than simply as deficiencies that impact human society. Practically this means instituting practices of sustainability that involve a certain level of sacrifice, especially among those who have become accustomed to the comfort of the certain lifestyle that contributes to the ongoing ecological catastrophe. Recycling, using less electricity, carpooling, and shopping local are examples of the kinds of sacrifices that are now required of a genuinely ecologically sensitive people. The challenge of reducing one’s own carbon footprint is necessitated, not simply by the projected long-term effects of the ecological crisis on human society, but more basically by a genuine love and responsibility to the otherness that constitutes the rest of the nonhuman creation. While human beings as part of the matrix of the entire created world possess their own intrinsic value and will have their own various needs in light of the effects of climate change, a broader vision of divinely inspired love for the whole created biosphere of life on earth is needed in order to develop balanced and reasonable goals for sustainability. The acknowledgement of intrinsic value present throughout all of creation can help to guard against the preferential option towards the wealthier, more “valuable” members of society (human or nonhuman) in the process of developing more ecologically sensitive policies, whether this be at the level of national politics or the local church community.

Eschatology can thus serve as a motivation for ecological responsibility only insofar as it reveals the heart of God for creation from the very “beginning” and up through the very “end.” If eco-eschatology proclaims that God is always oriented towards the world in creative love, then an ecological ethic modeled in response understands our role to be formed according to this same orientation. Creative responsibility matters because we were created for it, and it places us in
harmony with divine creative love. In this way, commitment to ecological sustainability becomes our own labor of love, requiring the painful sacrifice of making room within ourselves for the love of God which is oriented toward the fellowship and flourishing of otherness. Our role, however, is not to save or perfect the world, but simply to love it, as a response of both celebration and responsibility to the incredible, promising endeavor that is the divine creative mission. Through our embodied actions of love for creation, we participate in the very love of the Creator Spirit at work in the world to lead it to its ultimate salvation and purpose.
CONCLUSION

This project has sought to demonstrate how the impasse between traditional Christian eschatology and contemporary ecological concerns might be overcome through a theology of God as Creator. After a thorough engagement with prominent eco-theological resources, it was determined that a heightened emphasis on present social action can often lead to a dismissal of futurized eschatology. On the other side of the spectrum, efforts to remain true to traditional eschatological paradigms often lead to a more anthropocentric perspective that makes it difficult to maintain the intrinsic value of creation. While the weaknesses of these various paradigms have been noted, their strengths have also been addressed with the intention of being incorporated into a more holistic framework. It is my hope that a theology of divine creative love can include the best of both ecological theology and traditional eschatology. Here we will briefly review these strengths which were initially addressed in the conclusions of the first two chapters, and determine how a theology of God as Creator might adequately address them all.

1) **Compatibility with contemporary science:** In order to qualify as a meaningful response to the ecological crisis as it is described by the formulations of contemporary scientists, it is essential that an eco-eschatology for today finds harmonization with the basic tenets of contemporary science. This can be demonstrated by a theology of divine creative love in the way that such a theology correlates to the new cosmology. The love of God at the center of the creative process demonstrates how autonomy is built into the initial creation such that its own creative capabilities continue and multiply even after the divine initiation. Thus the inter-relatedness of all things proposed by the Gaia hypothesis and evolutionary theory is seen also in the divine imagination for creation which is inherently relational; since it
is the way of God to create by building off of what is already available, it follows that the rhythms of creation would reflect this same orientation in their own process of becoming.

2) *Nuanced understanding of ex nihilo:* While the doctrine of *ex nihilo* is not dismissed outright by a theology of God as Creator, it is re-imagined through the lens of divine womb imagery. Here God is understood to create out of the rich and unlimited love of God’s own being, while at the same time becoming immediately bound in some sense to the conditions and choices introduced into the creation by created agents. Creation is therefore envisioned not as a unilateral act of supremacy, but as an intimate, relational process.

3) *Recognition of the intrinsic value of creation:* Love as the defining characteristic of God’s creativity provides a foundation for the intrinsic value of creation, since it follows that love would require God to create genuinely free and autonomous beings. While being created by God affirms creation’s goodness, the otherness of creation as distinct from God affirms its goodness as well. Thus, it is not appropriate to scorn the physical world or even to withhold appreciation for its final glorified form, for divine creative love requires that we see the good in created-ness itself, present in the here and now. The ability to celebrate the gifts of creation and experience wonder in the natural world are practices which are safeguarded even in light of the unredeemed aspects of the world that still await redemption.

4) *Genuine hope in cosmic fulfillment:* Centralizing creation over redemption as the dominant theological lens does not require a diminishing of eschatology, but simply a re-imagination. Here eschatological glorification is understood as an inherently
creative act, in service of creation and a component of the unified creative mission of God in the world. This perspective does not dismiss a genuine hope in cosmic healing and fulfillment, as some ecological theologies tend to do, but instead requires such a hope through a firm stance on the ongoing commitment of God to the creative mission. If God remains necessarily oriented toward the world in creative love, it follows that God will be committed to the ultimate completion and perfection of that world.

5) *Critique of human progress*: The promotion of a genuine futurized eschatological hope provided by a theology of divine creative love allows for an honest critique of human progress to be held in place. While the responsibility and creative capabilities of humanity can be uplifted through a healthy understanding of the goodness of all creation, the foundational aspect of divine creativity as the key to all other instances of creation and redemption in the world requires that divine involvement be maintained in any genuine notion of “progress” or perfection. The *eschaton* is not an historical human achievement, but a divine completion of the creative mission requiring the fullness of divine life to be made present in the world. This kind of fulfillment requires the cooperation of human agents, but can never be accomplished through human agents alone.

6) *Motivation for ecological responsibility*: An eco-eschatology of God as Creator provides an imperative for ecological responsibility not through its insistence on eschatological continuity, although it does maintain this continuity, but through an emphasis on divine love for creation. The problem of despair and inaction is in part addressed by the element of futurized hope that the goodness of creation will be
somehow preserved and perfected. Ultimately, however, the kind of attention and love required of sustained ecological involvement requires the model of commitment demonstrated by the divine creative mission. The ongoing love and presence of God in the world working towards further creation and redemption becomes a model for present ecological responsibility, wherein human agents become co-creators in the divine mission. This is more than a simple call to responsibility because the very love of God for the autonomous creation — instituting intrinsic value for that creation — becomes the basis for our own love. Here we are invited not only to take care of creation but also to enjoy it.

On a more pragmatic level, what a theology of God as Creator might potentially provide is a common ground for people of varying theological and ecological emphases to meet and begin dialogue. As the state of ecological health continues to worsen, conversations across even substantial social and theological differences need to take place with greater frequency so that basic goals can be agreed upon and plans of action can be formulated. The theological starting point of God as Creator, as presented in this work, can offer the common ground of love for such collaborative efforts; both the love of God for creation and the love we ought to have for creation in response. The central concept of God as Creator could also be meaningfully applied to a systematic theology informed by ecological concerns, positively re-imagining all of the major theological categories through the lens of creative love. This project is only a contribution towards this larger goal, focusing its attention on the realm of eschatology. May it lead to further dialogue concerning how the present groanings of God for creation might be constructively joined to the very groanings of creation itself for the purpose of positive action in the here and now.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


