

From Nature to Creation

*A Christian Vision for Understanding
and Loving Our World*

Norman Wirzba

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For Bruce Ellis Benson,
John D. Caputo,
Adriaan Peperzak,
and Merold Westphal

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Series Preface

Current discussions in the church—from emergent “postmodern” congregations to mainline “missional” congregations—are increasingly grappling with philosophical and theoretical questions related to postmodernity. In fact, it could be argued that developments in postmodern theory (especially questions of “post-foundationalist” epistemologies) have contributed to the breakdown of former barriers between evangelical, mainline, and Catholic faith communities. Postliberalism—a related “effect” of postmodernism—has engendered a new, confessional ecumenism wherein we find nondenominational evangelical congregations, mainline Protestant churches, and Catholic parishes all wrestling with the challenges of postmodernism and drawing on the culture of postmodernity as an opportunity for rethinking the shape of our churches.

This context presents an exciting opportunity for contemporary philosophy and critical theory to “hit the ground,” so to speak, by allowing high-level work in postmodern theory to serve the church’s practice—including all the kinds of congregations and communions noted above. The goal of this series is to bring together high-profile theorists in continental philosophy and contemporary theology to write for a broad, nonspecialist audience interested in the impact of postmodern theory on the faith and practice of the church. Each book in the series will, from different angles and with different questions, undertake to answer questions

such as, What does postmodern theory have to say about the shape of the church? How should concrete, in-the-pew and on-the-ground religious practices be impacted by postmodernism? What should the church look like in postmodernity? What has Paris to do with Jerusalem?

The series is ecumenical not only with respect to its ecclesial destinations but also with respect to the facets of continental philosophy and theory that are represented. A wide variety of theoretical commitments will be included, ranging from deconstruction to Radical Orthodoxy, including voices from Badiou to Žižek and the usual suspects in between (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Rorty, and others). Insofar as postmodernism occasions a retrieval of ancient sources, these contemporary sources will be brought into dialogue with Augustine, Irenaeus, Aquinas, and other resources. Drawing on the wisdom of established scholars in the field, the series will provide accessible introductions to postmodern thought with the specific aim of exploring its impact on ecclesial practice. The books are offered, one might say, as French lessons for the church.

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I also thank the staff at the Louisville Institute for awarding me a 2014 Sabbatical Grant for Researchers, and the Association of Theological Schools and the Henry Luce Foundation for naming me a 2014–2015 Henry Luce III Fellow. The Colossian Forum has also given this work a welcome scholarly forum in which the ideas of this book could be heard and honed. The combined generous financial support of these institutions has been an encouragement, and has given me the needed time to bring this project to completion. Special thanks go to my dean, Richard Hays, for granting me the leave time to focus and write.

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I have dedicated this book to four friends and mentors—Merold Westphal, Adriaan Peperzak, Jack Caputo, and Bruce Ellis Benson—who have been with me from the beginning as I have navigated the terrain of continental philosophy and Christian thought. It has been a joy to share this journey with such gifted and generous human beings.

Introduction

For too long too many Christians have thought that the point of faith is to prepare people to enter a heavenly realm “somewhere beyond the blue.” The story goes something like this: Life here is hard, often painful, and sometimes miserable and brutalizing. Though we may experience various pleasures, we must never forget that they are ephemeral, and sometimes a temptation to focus on the wrong place. It is best to endure what we can, and put our hope in the day when we are finally freed from the trials, tragedies, and temptations of this world.

This way of characterizing Christian life is a theological disaster. Why? Because it rejects and violates the good and beautiful world that God made, the world that is the object of God’s daily concern and delight. God’s abiding covenant of faithfulness is with all people and with “every living creature of all flesh” (Gen. 9:15). God does not abandon this world or seek an escape from it. As the psalmist (104) sees it, God is continually present to it, blessing each creature into the goodness and beauty that it uniquely is. What God most wants is for us to learn to live more responsibly and more charitably wherever we are. The point of faith is not to help us escape this life. It is, rather, to lead us more deeply into the movements of love that nurture and heal and celebrate the gifts of God.

From Scripture’s beginning to its end we find God as the one who constantly desires to live intimately with us here on earth. God is not aloof, disinterested, or far removed from this world. In Genesis we first discover God with knees and hands in the dirt,

breathing into soil the breath of life that creates you and me, along with all the plants and animals and birds. God is a Gardener who loves soil and delights in fertility. In Deuteronomy we find God delivering the Israelites into a promised land that is never without God's attending care: "The eyes of the LORD your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (11:12). The land itself—the hills and valleys, the fields and vineyards, the streams and animals, and the villages and homes—is good. This is why the prophet Amos envisions God's restoration of life as people being securely "planted" by God in the land that has been given to them, able to enjoy the food and drink and conviviality it provides. It is why the prophet Isaiah speaks of the re-creation of Jerusalem by God as a place of joy and delight.

In the New Testament God's commitment to be "with us" and to fully share in the life of this world becomes most intimate in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus does not ever dismiss or disparage bodies, even though they can clearly be the source of suffering and pain. Instead he heals and feeds and exorcises and touches the bodies of others so that they can each live into the fullness of their potential. Through the body of Jesus, God is actively reconciling all things in heaven and all things on earth, inviting them to share in the divine life that God is (Col. 1:15–20). God does not abandon creatures to themselves. God sends the Holy Spirit "upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17) as a sign of the coming of the great day of the Lord in which all who call upon God's name will be saved. And then, in an astounding concluding scene, rather than people *ascending* to heaven to enjoy life with God forever, God *descends* to earth to live with us in a world that has been healed and made new. John recalls a voice saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them" (Rev. 21:3). Imagine the look of surprise on the faces of Christians who have departed earth to be with God, only to discover that they are moving in the wrong direction. God is coming here!

What sort of world will God find? Will God find among people followers who, like generous and kind hosts, are proud to make God welcome in a home that has been carefully tended and prepared for a joyful life together?

The wide scope of planet Earth's degradation and destruction suggests that many people, Christians included, do not believe this world matters much. Though it may have been created long ago as a "garden of delight," which is what Eden literally means, it has long lost many of its paradisiacal qualities. Who wants to dwell in a toxic swamp, a dead zone, or an asphalt strip mall? As a result, we do not find much of this world to be a home or a garden worth cherishing or inviting God to dwell in.

How did this come to be? What sorts of capacities do we need to develop so that this world and this life can be seen in a way similar to how God sees it: as good and beautiful, and as worthy of being cherished and celebrated?

In this book I suggest that Christians can start by developing an *imagination* for the world as created, sustained, and daily loved by God. I stress the development of an imaginative capacity because it has become evident that more knowledge or information about the earth is not, by itself, going to be of sufficient help. Never before have we had as much scientific data and technological sophistication as we have now. But as long as what we know comes to us through the lenses of money, control, and convenience—which is exactly what happens when science becomes beholden to the interests and the funding of industry and business—knowledge will not be enough. The degradation and the destruction will simply continue.

My complaint is not with science as such or with the discoveries it has made and will continue to make. It is with the diminishment of our capacities to have humility before and sympathy for the things we desire to know. What the exploitation and the engineering of our world clearly show is a basic contempt and a fundamental ingratitude for the gifts that are in it. If people are going to learn to receive the world *as a gift*, and then learn to nurture and share it, they are also going to need to appreciate and affirm it as a miracle that is itself an expression of divine love. Put simply, as desirable as it may be to have information about the world, what we most need are capacities that will help us love the world.

My call to develop an imaginative capacity is not an invitation to fantasy or wishful thinking. It is, rather, an admission that we need to be honest about the limits and the shortsightedness of so much of our instrumentalized, utilitarian seeing, and that

we need to develop the sympathetic capacity that encourages us to see things in their particularity, their wholeness, and their (often hidden) potential. Imagination is thus a call to greater honesty because our first and forever fundamental task is to become more attentive to and patient before the world in all its detail and interconnectedness—a task rendered extremely difficult, if not impossible, by the contrasting desire to use the world for self-glorifying ends.

In a penetrating defense of the sanctity of the world, Wendell Berry has observed that

the human necessity is not just to know, but also to cherish and protect the things that are known, and to know the things that can only be known by cherishing. If we are to protect the world's multitude of places and creatures, then we must know them, not just conceptually but imaginatively as well. They must be pictured in the mind and in memory; they must be known with affection, "by heart," so that in seeing or remembering them the heart may be said to "sing," to make music peculiar to its recognition of each particular place or creature that it knows well. . . . To know imaginatively is to know intimately, particularly, precisely, gratefully, reverently, and with affection.¹

To know imaginatively is to try to see the world with the love by which God sees and sustains the world. Appropriately trained by this love, we may yet learn to contribute to the healing and the beautification of the world, and so witness to God's desire to be with us, God's desire to have each creature share in heaven's earthly life.

The stress has to be on love because it is only God's love that creates the world, just as it is the discipline of love that enables us to move more deeply into the world so as to know it truly. John's first letter put the matter bluntly: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). The Christian task is to learn, by patterning our lives on Jesus, to participate in the ways of divine love—shared intimacy being the most profound sign of genuine understanding—and thereby discover fellowship with God and with the world. From a Christian point

1. Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 137–38.

of view, we cannot properly know or live in the world if we do not share in the divine love that brings it into being and that sustains and leads it into its perfection.

In the chapters that follow I argue that major trends within modern and postmodern culture—utilitarian and instrumental thinking, the encouragement of an idolatrous temperament, the insularity of urban and suburban forms of life, the development of anonymous and community-destroying economic forms, and a pervasive, even methodological, ingratitude—undermine the possibility of this love. Not surprisingly, this time is characterized by the felt absence of God and the systematic degradation of the world. The two phenomena are inextricably linked.

If we are to change course, we need to pursue the art of love and practice its disciplines. For Christians this happens by being disciplined into the ways of Jesus's life, ways that nurture, heal, reconcile, and celebrate the gifts of God. Being "in Christ," people are made new into the creatures God has always desired them to be (2 Cor. 5:17). Discipleship makes possible an iconic way of perceiving the world, a form of perception in which others are received and engaged as material expressions of God's love. Encountered as the blessing of God that it is, each creature becomes an occasion for gratitude and an invitation to cherish and delight in a world that is wonderfully made.

1

On Not Knowing Where or Who We Are

If there is no God, then nature is not a creation, lovingly crafted and endowed with purpose and value by its Creator. It can only be a cosmic accident, dead matter contingently propelled by blind force, ordered by efficient causality. In such a context, a moral subject, living his life in terms of value and purpose, would indeed be an anomaly, precariously rising above it in a moment of Promethean defiance only to sink again into the absurdity from which he rose. If God were dead, so would nature be—and humans could be no more than embattled strangers, doomed to defeat, as we have largely convinced ourselves we in fact are.

Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*

Friedrich Nietzsche's famous declaration of the "death of God" has never simply been about the murder and burial of a divine being. It has also been about the "death of a world" and, alongside

that, the death of a whole field of meaning and human responsibility. If God the *Creator* is dead, then so too is the world, understood as *God's creation*. When the world ceases to signify as God's creation, humanity's place within it, indeed the very idea of the human being *as creature*, undergoes profound transformation.

As Nietzsche described it in his aphorism "The Madman," the definitive sign of the death of God is God's absence from the world. The murderers of God, the ones Nietzsche identifies as normal people simply going about their day-to-day business, did not don some special armor and then scale some heavenly height to attack God. They didn't have to. For God to die and be consigned to a tomb—or the graveyard next to the church—all they needed to do was live as if God were irrelevant, or as if God did not matter for the way they built communities, ran economies, practiced politics, and fueled their ambitions. In other words, for God to die, all that is necessary is for people to imagine and implement a world in which God is an unwelcome, unnecessary, or unimaginable hypothesis. They only need to install themselves as godlike beings who bring whatever order and significance the world might be claimed to have. Consider it death by apathy, or arrogance, or boredom.

The murder of God is no simple thing. When God disappears, the whole world and human involvement with it changes. If at one time Christians may have thought life and material things had their meaning and significance in God (because the Triune God was believed to be their creator, sustainer, and ultimate fulfillment), to live in a modern or postmodern world means that things are . . . well, we are not exactly sure. Are we and the things of this world genuinely valuable or meaningful if merely moments within a cosmic accident or perhaps pawns in a random game? Does anything have abiding significance? Does it even matter what we do? Weighed down by the misery and cruelty of so much "life," we may well side with Shakespeare's Macbeth and judge that "life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / that struts and frets his hour upon the stage / and then is heard no more: it is a tale / told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / signifying nothing" (5.5). Nietzsche's madman does not mince words about the gravity of our predicament:

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?¹

How does a person move when totally lost, or when the markers that direct us to home, or to the good and the true, are gone? Does it even make sense to talk about a good home or a worthwhile destination?

It would be silly, of course, to think that Nietzsche's proclamation somehow brought about God's death. Nietzsche is simply observing—clearly with personal approval—the slow asphyxiation of God that is the result of changes in practical and theoretical life that would come to dominate modern and postmodern existence: scientific reductionism, the autonomous self, instrumental reasoning, unencumbered individualism, technophilia, and the dis-embedding of communities from life-giving habitats (to name a few). Nietzsche did not kill God. We, insofar as we are participants in certain strands of the project called modernity, did. But to proclaim the death of God does not mean that we have learned to see or appreciate the implications of what we are doing. This is why Nietzsche says the madman smashed his lantern to the ground, saying, “This deed [the murder of God] is still more distant from them than the distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves.”²

It is cool to say God has been ditched—that way you can at least separate yourself from a sordid history of God's followers—but how many people are fully prepared to ditch nonarbitrary meaning too? This is why many are unable to give up the religious veneer of lasting values or universal reason or some other God-surrogate. Terry Eagleton puts it well when he observes,

As long as God's shoes have been filled by Reason, art, culture, *Geist*, imagination, the nation, humanity, the state, the people,

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.

2. *Ibid.*, 182 (emphasis original).

society, morality, or some other such specious surrogate, the Supreme Being is not quite dead. He may be mortally sick, but he has delegated his affairs to one envoy or another, part of whose task is to convince men and women that there is no cause for alarm, that business will be conducted as usual despite the absence of the proprietor, and that the acting director is perfectly capable of handling all inquiries.³

The flip side of this scenario is that the continued visible presence of church buildings does not guarantee the presence of God. Nor does it assure us that the people inside them will live in a God-glorifying manner. The forces of modern culture and economy can be so dominant in the daily spheres of life—in the ways we shop, eat, run businesses, vote at elections, teach our young, and seek employment—that people can attend worship on holy days and be practical atheists for the rest. People can profess a verbal piety and claim they seek a taste of God, all the while consuming a steady diet of self-glorifying cakes. Put another way, just as proclaimed atheists may find it hard to ditch the bad faith and hypocrisy at work in the modern substitutes for God that provide consolation, so too proclaimed believers may not appreciate the hypocrisy of a misplaced faith that has not learned to seriously scrutinize the idols of modernity that have taken God's place.

Complete follow-through on the death of God is a package deal that includes the death of the world and the death of humanity at the same time. What you have to give up is the idea that meaning or value can be located or secured by God, the world, or a human subject. Have we arrived at this point? Some would say that we have, in the advanced stages of consumer capitalism, because in this context people are basically passive, occupying a provisional, endlessly changeable identity (or style)

3. Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 151. As Eagleton sees it, Nietzsche understood that genuine atheism is much more difficult than simply avoiding a church: "What Nietzsche recognizes is that you can get rid of God only if you also do away with innate meaning. The Almighty can survive tragedy, but not absurdity. As long as there appears to be some immanent sense to things, one can always inquire after the source from which it springs" (155). This is why he wonders if Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (a mini-creator of values) is not a perpetuation of the deity, though in a rather desperate, and perhaps pathetic, form.

that is subject to the fickle and feckless forces of this or that marketing campaign. Consumer capitalism, in other words, would be the practical realization of a genuine, postmodern atheism because it marks the time in which the world and human life are shorn of all depth and significance.⁴

On Becoming Lost

To know *how to live* presupposes that we know *who we are* and *where we are*. For example, to be dressed in an athletic uniform and in a gym means that I am going to play a game of some sort. What I am to do follows from where I understand myself to be located (an athletic facility) and who I perceive myself to be (an athlete). But what if it is impossible for me to know that the place I am in *is* a gym and that I *am* an athlete, which places and calls me into a particular kind of role? This is the situation the madman is describing: when the earth became unchained from the sun—that is, when the world lost its inspiration and orientation in God the Creator—then the markers or signs that identify the world (as creation) and us (as creatures called to particular affections and responsibilities) disappeared also. Without God as Creator it simply makes no sense to think of the world as a place of divinely cherished gifts or as a divine theater in which creatures are loved by God and we are invited to play a contributing role in a drama that seeks the full flourishing of all. We become, as Macbeth suspected, “poor players” who have lost the sense to know that something of eternal significance is going on. Given sufficient darkness, it is but a matter of time before we feel ourselves to be moving through an infinite, but empty, nothing. Given enough time in the darkness, people inevitably lose awareness of their own destructiveness. They lose the sense of what has been lost, or that anything could be lost at all.

4. “Given its pragmatic, utilitarian bent, capitalism, especially in its post-industrial incarnation, is an intrinsically faithless social order. Too much belief is neither necessary nor desirable for its operations. Beliefs are potentially contentious affairs, which is good neither for business nor for political stability. They are also commercially superfluous. . . . As long as its citizens roll into work, pay their taxes and refrain from assaulting police officers, they can believe pretty much what they like” (ibid., 195).

In a celebrated address entitled “Without God,” Steven Weinberg, a Nobel Prize–winning physicist, said it is time for us to learn to live in a world that is dark and pointless. In making this suggestion Weinberg said he was not simply offering his opinion. The work of good inquiry and analysis requires that we come to this conclusion. The findings of modern science present us with a world that is without ultimate meaning and value. Weinberg admits that this is a “rather chilling” picture:

Not only do we not find any point to life laid out for us in nature, no objective basis for our moral principles, no correspondence between what we think is the moral law and laws of nature, of the sort imagined by philosophers from Anaximander and Plato to Emerson. We even learn that the emotions that we most treasure, our love for our wives and husbands and children, are made possible by chemical processes in our brains that are what they are as the result of natural selection acting on chance mutations over millions of years.⁵

If it is indeed the case that random, chance occurrences account for the universe and for the ways we might learn to love any of it, then it is also clear that any demonstration of affection, any effort to think our world a valuable home, is a random fluke. Love is finally silly because it is but the effluence of random chemical perturbations.

An accidental universe can have no abiding significance or worth. It can evoke little devotion or lasting commitment to care for it. Though we might individually claim that some things and we ourselves matter, it is hard to know why anyone else should take such a claim seriously if it has been generated by a randomly produced mind and chemically fickle heart. You can admire your world, but I’ll do with mine as I please! According to Weinberg, we will have finally become honest about the world and ourselves when we “get out of the habit of worshipping anything.”

Weinberg’s account is one in which disaffection and, practically speaking, destruction finally rule. Though he is proud

5. Steven Weinberg, “Without God,” *New York Review of Books*, September 25, 2008, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/sep/25/without-god/>.

of science's ability to determine and describe mathematically how the world works (but even here he is cautious, noting that "we will never get to the bottom of things, because whatever theory unifies all observed particles and forces, we will never know why it is that that theory describes the real world and not some other theory"), our situation is fundamentally one of disorientation. Whichever way we might orient ourselves is but the reflection of a groundless theory that is the product of a brain functioning in an accidental way. Or, more cynically and practically, the way we live is a feature of how much and what kind of power we happen to have at our disposal. In this world of pointless struggle it is impossible to distinguish destruction or devotion because the requirement of fidelity to and responsibility for things has been undermined.

In the wake of the death of God no existing thing expresses or is the bearer of meaning that is internal or intrinsic to itself. Whatever significance things are claimed to have is surface and ephemeral, the reflection of a temporary meaning we, for whatever reason, have given them. This is why it makes little sense to describe the human task as fidelity to or care for the goodness of things. Something is claimed to be valuable only because I or a marketer or some influential thought-leader says so. Each person's appearance in the world and every particular place people find themselves in are nothing more than a fluke. One person's enhancement of the world can just as well be another's diminishment, a result which, from the point of view of advanced capitalism, is a wonderful place to be because it celebrates the unceasing, unfettered buying and selling and wasting of everything. And so we live "on a knife-edge, between wishful thinking on the one hand and, on the other, despair."⁶

Weinberg's sojourn along a knife's edge is little different from Nietzsche's straying through an infinite nothing. When honestly pursued, both paths leave us *and* the world lifeless and cold. How could they not, since for both thinkers this world and our life are a dark accident? But when life is characterized this way, it is all but inevitable that human action in the world, especially in its more desperate moments, will become dark and

6. Ibid.

destructive too: we take our cues on how to live from where and who we think ourselves to be.

Nietzsche's plea for the affirmation of life notwithstanding, the last several centuries are a depressing witness to the degrading and violent effects of a dark and futile life: fresh water has been poisoned and wasted by industrial and agricultural production; soils have been eroded and pumped full of evermore toxic pesticides and fossil-fuel-derived fertilizers; whole mountains and underground shale deposits have been detonated to gain cheaper and more efficient access to their coal seams and natural gas; forests have been cleared for their lumber and to make room for industrial production of various commodities; glaciers and icepacks are melting and oceans have been rising and becoming more acidic as a result of accumulating greenhouse gases in the atmosphere; plant and animal species are going extinct at alarming rates; whole communities of creatures are being displaced and degraded to make room for various "development" projects; whole groups and races of people have been relegated to the status of cheap, expendable, replaceable, migrant labor, or they are deemed to be an inconvenient presence that must simply be expunged; and everything is for sale. The devastation of today's world and the degradation of many of its communities are, perhaps, a contemporary instance of the ground "crying out" (Gen. 4:10) in witness to the sins of wayward human hearts.

To be wayward means that we don't know where we are or who we are. The effect of our confusion is a world that is slowly but systematically being murdered as we casually, or sometimes desperately, search for paths of happiness. In ways that Nietzsche could not have foreseen, the world is in fact plunging into a kind of exhausted, dead nothingness. The "death of God," the "death of creation," and the "death of the creature" go hand in hand. In their shared death we find the demise of a good and beautiful world, and a good and beautiful human life.

Moving into Modernity

Modernity can be described in multiple ways. In this book I will describe it as the time of the eclipse of creation. What I

mean by this eclipse is that the world and the variety of things within it ceased to signify as members within a divine drama of creation, salvation, and consummation. In this new world, humans cease to be creatures of God made to share in the divine delight in the goodness and beauty of things. Instead, all things are reducible to amoral, material elements that can be manipulated to suit a variety of purposes chosen by us. Even human bodies, as the eighteenth-century French philosopher and physician Julien Offray de La Mettrie argued, are little more than self-maintaining machines of varying complexity: “The human body is a machine *which winds its own springs*.”⁷ Rather than being fertile soil warmed and animated by divine breath (Gen. 2), human beings (along with all other creatures) are here reduced to mundane matter in motion.

La Mettrie’s position, though perhaps startling to many of his contemporaries, has become fairly commonplace today. Consider the diagnosis of contemporary medicine given by the physician and philosopher Jeffrey Bishop. In his book *The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying*, he describes how the metaphysical and epistemological frameworks of modern medicine presuppose a dead body that has no purpose other than to go on in its functioning as long as possible:

Medicine’s metaphysical stance, then, is a metaphysics of material and efficient causation, concerned with the empirical realm of matter, effects, and the rational working out of their causes for the purposes of finding ways to control the material of bodies. . . . For Western medicine, and perhaps for scientific and technological thinking, the important problem . . . is how

7. Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, <http://bactra.org/LaMettrie/Machine/> (emphasis added). La Mettrie insists that the human soul is an effect of a material body exercising one of its many capacities:

But since all the faculties of the soul depend to such a degree on the proper organization of the brain and of the whole body, that apparently they are but this organization itself, the soul is clearly an enlightened machine. . . .

The soul is therefore but an empty word, of which no one has any idea, and which an enlightened man should only use to signify the part in us that thinks. Given the least principle of motion, animated bodies will have all that is necessary for moving, feeling, thinking, repenting, or in a word for conducting themselves in the physical realm, and in the moral realm which depends upon it.

to manipulate the body or psyche in order to get the effects we desire. Bodies have no purpose or meaning in themselves, except insofar as we direct those bodies according to our desires.⁸

A root problem with modern medicine, according to Bishop's assessment, is that people have lost the ability to perceive, appreciate, and cherish human bodies as alive and as embedded within a bewildering array of life-nurturing and life-inspiring relationships. It is much easier to deal with a dead body because as dead it does not call into question the truth claims we make about it. Mirroring Plato's flight from (and disparagement of) the flux of material, embodied life, and his desire to escape into the permanence of invisible and eternal forms, today's doctors are being trained to bracket and ignore the messiness of the lives of patients who eat, work, and live in families and communities because these "external factors" unnecessarily complicate the neat analysis of individual bodies described as physiological machines. The questions "What is a body for?" and "How do we know if a life is well lived?" and "How is health a feature of an entire living community?" are rarely given the attention they deserve. The question that dominates is, "What (mechanical or pharmaceutical) technologies can we devise to maximally extend physiological functioning?"

For medicine proper, a *telos* is replaced with a terminus, and the corpse is always anticipated. At the end of life, if the only thing keeping the body alive is the prior decision to intervene in a failing mechanism, there is no longer any sense of the integrity of the living body. Medicine gave birth to the life-at-all-costs mentality, if only by machines that administer fluid and nutrition or keep blood oxygenated and circulating.⁹

The modern transformation of the conception of humanity reflected in La Mettrie, and then fully realized in today's medicine, assumes that people are creators of worlds of their own imagining. No material body possesses sacred worth or sanctity. Every material body, even the human body, is susceptible to manipulation.

8. Jeffrey P. Bishop, *The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 20–21.

9. *Ibid.*, 279–80.

Renaissance philosophers like Marsilio Ficino argued that human freedom had become godlike. Given the inventiveness of human beings and their development of technological power and skill, it was their destiny to take hold of and refashion the world. Though ancient Greek and Roman thinkers were often anthropocentric in their understanding of humanity's place in the world, placing humans highest among all creatures, modern thinkers took the new step of lifting human beings out of creation altogether so as to rule over it in ways they saw fit. "[Man] will not be satisfied with the empire of this world, if, having conquered this one, he learns that there remains another world which he has not yet subjugated. . . . Thus man wishes no superior and no equal and will not permit anything to be left out and excluded from his rule. This status belongs to God alone. Therefore he seeks a divine condition."¹⁰ By seeking this divine condition, people, in effect, refused their creaturely condition and instead assumed the role of a god. Rather than being priests or servants of creation charged with respecting, receiving, and offering the world to God and to each other, human beings increasingly came to see themselves as engineers and technicians left to invent and preside over what would soon become a disintegrating world.

To be sure, numerous scientists and philosophers of modernity continued to invoke the name of God, but the god they referred to bears little resemblance to the Creator as proclaimed in Psalm 104, who sends forth the creative spirit/breath that daily renews the face of the ground, or the Triune God who is intimately and constantly present to the world as its sustaining, beautifying, and perfecting end. The god of deism is a divine being that jump-started the universe long ago and then left it to run according to its own "natural" laws. This god could not possibly be the God of Scripture, because it is a mostly absent god, making only brief appearances in the form of "supernatural" miracles. A deist god, along with the mechanical world that is its inevitable correlate, could not possibly inspire or support a genuinely creaturely life.

Modernity ushered in a new world because it gave us a new picture and narration by which to conceive it, a picture that

10. Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology* 14.4, quoted in Richard Bauckham, "Dominion Interpreted—A Historical Account," in *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 46.

would be of revolutionary significance for the ways people understand themselves and their place.¹¹ Nowhere is this more apparent than in today's industrial agriculture.

Just as human bodies have come to be understood as corpses to be fixed and manipulated, so too have land, plants, animals, and agricultural workers come to be seen as objects of control. By being reduced to a container for nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorous (the main fertilizers used in agriculture), soil has ceased to be a complex living thing that, by absorbing death, is the wellspring of the earth's fertility and life. Plants, meanwhile, are little more than stems and structures to be genetically manipulated so that crop yields can maximally increase or pharmaceuticals be produced. And animals, they too have been reduced to meat- or dairy-producing machines. As such they can be genetically engineered to grow bigger and faster (a financial success) even if such growth has the effect of eventual physiological collapse (a biological catastrophe).¹² Agricultural workers, in instances barely distinguishable from slaves, are often little more than muscle power purchased at the lowest price possible, all so that consumers can have food at the cheapest price possible. In this system, even food ceases to be a living, complex thing. It is but a more or less complex pile of nutrients that ought to be able to be engineered to give the fuel we need with the least possible amount of hassle.¹³

11. In her classic study *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper, 1980), Carolyn Merchant says, "Because nature was now viewed as a system of dead, inert particles moved by external, rather than inherent forces, the mechanical framework itself could legitimate the manipulation of nature" (193). Merchant shows how a picture of the world (as mechanism) goes hand in hand with a picture of humans primed to behave in certain sorts of ways (as wielders of power over it). A world conceived as a telos-free machine is the perfect context for people to exercise whatever power they can find in whatever way they choose. Merchant continues: "As a conceptual framework, the mechanical order had associated with it a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism" (ibid.). We could add, a framework of values fully compatible with the aims of colonialism and the possession of lands and human slaves.

12. This is why today's meat production could not endure without the aid of numerous steroids, growth hormones, antibiotics, and other pharmaceuticals. Under today's growth regimen, most of these animals could not survive much past the time when they attain slaughter weight.

13. In "The End of Food" (*New Yorker*, May 12, 2014), Lizzie Widdicombe describes the efforts of Rob Rhinehart to develop Soylent, a liquid concoction

Industrial agriculture presupposes a metaphysics and an epistemology—a philosophical narration—of the world as one vast, manipulable corpse. As Wes Jackson, founder of the Land Institute, once said to me, much of today’s agricultural practice is like the ICU in hospitals: the soil is hammered to death by poisons, only to be kept alive by various technological and pharmaceutical life-support systems. What Bishop says of the dream of medicine applies equally well to the dream of an ever-higher-yielding agriculture:

People become caught in the dream that medicine can sustain mechanical life indefinitely. A metaphysics of efficient causation and an epistemology of stasis always result in a kind of violence, for one merely has to exert a greater force over the dying body in order to keep its matter in motion. The cold ground of medicinal knowledge—the dead body—and the cold efficiency of the body as a machine return with a vengeance in the lives of patients sustained on the machines of the ICU. The automatic function of the machine resists death.¹⁴

The Grammar of a Christian World

We need to appreciate that how the world is named and narrated—whether as creation or as a corpse—is of the greatest theoretical and practical importance because *the way we name and narrate the world determines how we are going to live within it*. In other words, how we characterize what things “are,” what philosophers call the “being” or ontology of things, also determines what we are going to do with them.

For example, if I hold before you a plant of some sort and then proceed to name it a “flower,” this will evoke in you a whole series of associations, feelings, and expectations. You will likely want to behold it or come close enough to appreciate its fragrant presence. You may even want to protect it because you want to admire its beauty for as long as possible. But if I name this same plant a “weed,” a very different set of responses

that assembles the essential nutrients human bodies need to keep moving. Food and farming are both perceived by Rhinehart to be daily burdens that we need to learn to engineer our way out of.

14. Bishop, *Anticipatory Corpse*, 97.

is likely to arise within you. Rather than wanting to behold and protect the plant, you will instead want to eradicate it because weeds connote an intrusive and unwelcome presence. Then again, imagine that I say the same plant is not a flower or a weed but really a “vegetable” in an early stage of development. Now you will want neither to behold nor to eradicate it because you know that with sufficient care this plant will grow into a tomato or pepper plant that yields succulent and nutritious fruit. Indeed, you may come to think of this plant as an indispensable member of your household economy because vegetables feed you and thus make your life possible and potentially a delectable experience.

This brief ontological exercise demonstrates that the naming and the narrating of our world is no trivial thing. To say that our world *is* “creation” rather than a “corpse,” a “material mechanism,” or a “natural resource” means that we need to see it and our involvement with it in a particular, God-honoring sort of way. It is not a material mechanism that runs according to its own laws. It is instead the material manifestation of God’s love operating within it. It is not a pointless exercise of motion, “full of sound and fury, / signifying nothing,” but a drama that witnesses to a divine, hospitable intention that invites our response and participation. Therefore, the practices and priorities of our economies, and the way we think about production and consumption, need to reflect this new appreciation of the world. To live in creation, in other words, means that we must understand ourselves as called to adopt particular kinds of expectations, affections, and responsibilities that are appropriate to a world so named. If the world isn’t a value-free, amoral mechanism, then we cannot do with it whatever we want. But if it is, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote, “charged with the grandeur of God,” then we had better learn to attend to “the dearest freshness deep down things,” and welcome the Holy Ghost, who broods over it “with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”¹⁵

Early Christian communities understood this. Their encounter with Jesus of Nazareth was quite literally a *world*-changing and a *life*-changing event. To truly meet Jesus means that things

15. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, selected and with an introduction by W. H. Gardner (New York: Penguin, 1953), 27.

are never simply things to do with however we please. They are, instead, creatures, each enfolded within the ministry of Jesus's life, each of them part of a divine drama that stretches from beginning to end and includes everything in between. And so they said a most astounding thing about Jesus and this world: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:15–17). Jesus is not only the Savior of the world. He is also its Creator. All things in heaven and on earth are created *in* and *through* him. They exist *for* him. That means that everything exists only because it has a place in the divine love Jesus made incarnate in his ministries. To see the world in a Christian manner we therefore need the optic that Jesus is and provides. Whatever we might think about the order or structure of the world must now be understood in terms of Jesus, because it is *in* him that all things "hold together." The same goes for the purpose, or end, of things: all things must ultimately be reconciled to God, and this can happen because of the peace that flows from the blood of Jesus's cross (1:20). If this is the case, then creatures can fully be themselves only as they witness and contribute to the loving life that he makes possible. For Christians the world *is* creation, and to know what creation means we have to look to Jesus and to the history of God's revelation, which finds its climax in him. If this is true, that means that when Christians look carefully at the world, when they peer beyond the surface of things, what they should see is Jesus and his love moving through everything.

To appreciate what is going on here we need to think of creation not as a teaching about the mechanics of how the world began. Considered this way, creation is primarily about origins. As developed in Scripture, however, creation describes the *character* of the world, why it is the way that it is, what its significance is, and what it is ultimately for. "Creation" names the ongoing reality of human beings, animals, plants, land, and weather, all connected to each other and bound to God as their source, inspiration, and end. As such, the teaching of creation provides a moral and spiritual map that enables us to

see the significance of things and then move faithfully through the world. When we confine creation to an originating event, we lose the sense of it as a dynamic place so cherished that God enters into covenant relationship with it (Gen. 9:8–17), so beautiful that God promises to renew it (Isa. 65:17–25), and so valuable that God takes up residence within it (John 1:14 and Rev. 21:1–4). Creation is not a vast lump of valueless matter. It is God's love made visible, fragrant, tactile, audible, and delectable. Because God's love is eternally hospitable and always fresh, creation will always have a place in God's life. Insofar as creatures are wounded and suffering, God is at work to prepare a place in which "mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev. 21:4).

This point cannot be emphasized enough. Owing to the long histories of dualism and gnosticism, many within Christianity cannot see how God's love of bodies and the material world is all-encompassing and eternal. The teaching of the incarnation notwithstanding—and the teaching of the resurrection of the body and the teaching of Jesus's bodily ascension into life with God the Father—many theologians believe bodies to be something that must finally be overcome and left behind. The result has been a disaster for Christian traditions, because it has so often led to a private faith and an abstract love that has little purpose beyond the transport of individual disembodied souls to a distant heaven. In the forgetting of creation as God's love made material, the whole of theological inquiry—what we think about God's character, the nature of the church, the extent and meaning of salvation, and the end toward which all life is moving—has become distorted. It has resulted in Christians who do not see the destruction of the created world as a problem!

Christian theologians of the early church regularly linked creation with salvation, and salvation with the embodied, practical ministries of Jesus. As Paul Blowers has recently shown in his magisterial study of early Christian thinking about these themes, "creation and redemption were seamlessly intertwined," with both being integral parts of a continuing divine project that reached its climax in the life of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ Every phase

16. Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12.

of Jesus's life—his birth and baptism, the performance of his miracles, his institution of the Eucharist, and his cross, resurrection, and ascension—had cosmic significance pointing to a new world.

Athanasius, the great fourth-century bishop from Alexandria, put it this way: “For it was fitting that while ‘through him’ all things came into being at the beginning, ‘in him’ all things should be set right (cf. John 1:3; Eph. 1:10). For at the beginning they came into being ‘through’ him; but afterwards, all having fallen, the Word was made flesh, and put it on, in order that ‘in him’ all should be set right.”¹⁷ For Athanasius the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is of decisive significance for the whole world, because in Jesus's fleshly body the sin-caused divide between Creator and creatures is healed. Though creatures, especially humans, had fallen away from the life God desires for them, God “became flesh” so that creatures could be shown the way into true life. The Creator became a human creature, took on a human body, so that the bodies of creation might be freed from death and made incorruptible. Athanasius insists there is no inconsistency between creation and salvation, because “the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning.”¹⁸ Creation, we might say, flows *from* Jesus at its beginning, flows *through* Jesus as it is healed, and flows *to* Jesus as it is fulfilled. Jesus is the pivot of the universe's movement and the key to its deep meaning and significance.

Because of Jesus, Christians came to see *where* they were and *who* they were in a new way. The world was God's creation, and they were creatures within it. But to be creatures meant that they now needed to *behave* in creaturely ways suitable to their new location and identity. Hostility of mind and the doing of evil deeds are no longer appropriate for a world that is on its way to

“If there is a prime pattern of mimesis in patristic interpretation of the biblical witness to Creator and creation, it is the consistent emulation of their virtually seamless integration of creation and salvation” (245).

17. Athanasius, *In illud: Omnia mihi tradita sunt*, *Patrologia graeca* 25:212C, trans. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, 4:88, quoted in slightly modified form in Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 225.

18. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. a religious of CSMV (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), 26 (§1).

being reconciled with God (Col. 1:21–22). Christians must live a life steadfast in the faith and confident in the hope promised by the gospel good news that has been proclaimed “to every creature under heaven” (1:23). Just as Jesus redefined the world, he was also re-creating humanity so that each person could live in a way that contributed to creation’s flourishing. As the apostle Paul put it succinctly in his second letter to the Corinthians, insofar as people are “in Christ” they are no longer themselves: they are a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), and part of a world in which the old is passing away and everything is becoming new.

To think this way about Jesus requires that we give up the notion that in Jesus God was mounting a massive rescue operation to save humanity (or, more specifically, human souls) from a damnable world. Such a view is fundamentally gnostic in its orientation, and represents a heresy the church has had to name and resist from the beginning. The second-century saint Irenaeus gave one of the earliest and still one of the most powerful refutations of this gnostic view by arguing that in Jesus Christ creation is “recapitulated.” Based on Ephesians 1:10, where Paul says that all things in heaven and on earth are “gather[ed] up” in Christ, “recapitulation” describes the far-reaching action of Jesus to enter fully into the life of humanity and all creation so as to heal and transform it from within. Jesus, in his fleshly body, (a) brings unity between Creator and creatures; (b) rectifies the disobedience, corruption, and alienation that keep us from God; (c) as the New Adam leads humans to their complete fulfillment and perfection in God; (d) inaugurates in his resurrection an utterly new life for the whole of creation; (e) reveals the life that God has wanted for the world from the beginning; and (f) shows us what it means to live as God intends. Put in its most general formulation, God became a human creature so that in Jesus God could show us how to better imagine and fully become creatures ourselves.

According to Irenaeus, Jesus can do all these things because he is the fulfillment of God’s eternal will, purpose, and plan. The summary of Blowers is helpful because it shows the wide effect of this way of thinking:

Christ, through his incarnation, cross, and resurrection, counters and overcomes the cosmic grip of sin and death; he reverses

the downward spiral of evil; he recovers creation from the weakness and vulnerability of corporeal nature. He liberates humanity from bondage to the “elemental spirits of the universe” (Col. 2:20; Gal. 4:3, 9). . . . Christ reconciles, pacifies, and unites all things in heaven and on earth (Eph. 1:10b; Col. 1:20), things naturally differentiated but subsequently polarized and alienated because of creaturely rebellion.¹⁹

To become a follower of Jesus was not to wait for the time when souls could be freed from bodies and plucked into an ethereal heaven. It was instead to see oneself as invited and inspired to join with Christ in the healing of the whole world. The reconciliation of all things in heaven and on earth that the Christ-hymn in Colossians describes happens through the blood of Christ’s cross, which means it happens through the self-offering life that Jesus demonstrated in his ministries of healing, feeding, exorcising, attending to, and touching others. Each time Christians eat in remembrance of Jesus, they are invited to receive him as nurture so that they in turn can become a source of nurture for the world.²⁰

Though it may seem strange to say, Christians live in a different world than non-Christians. To be sure, all people reside and depend on planet Earth, but we don’t all see the same things. We don’t see meaning and significance or imagine potential and loss, sorrow and hope, in the same ways. Christians do not live in “nature” or a “natural environment”—at least not as modernity came to describe them—and then do various Christian things. To think that were possible would be like showing up at a funeral in a basketball uniform ready to play ball. Christians live in a world that has been redefined and renewed by Jesus, which means that the *who*, *where*, and *how* of human life have been altered. If the place we live is creation, then it is time for us to be the kinds of creatures that live in a creaturely way. *Where* we are matters for *who* we think we are, and thus also for *how* we think it appropriate to act.

19. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 230–31. The summary of themes in the teaching of recapitulation is on 88–89. Irenaeus develops his position in *Against Heresies*.

20. I develop this theme in my chapter “Eucharistic Table Manners” in *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Despairing of the World

That so much of creation is being destroyed is a clear witness to the fact that Christians have often forfeited their creaturely identity. The indictment offered by Wendell Berry, though painful to read, is an honest assessment of a profound failure of Christian imagination:

The complicity of Christian priests, preachers, and missionaries in the cultural destruction and the economic exploitation of the primary peoples of the Western Hemisphere, as of traditional cultures around the world, is notorious. Throughout the five hundred years since Columbus's first landfall in the Bahamas, the evangelist has walked beside the conqueror and the merchant, too often blandly assuming that their causes were the same. Christian organizations, to this day, remain largely indifferent to the rape and plunder of the world and its traditional cultures. It is hardly too much to say that most Christian organizations are as happily indifferent to the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of industrial economics as are most industrial organizations. The certified Christian seems just as likely as anyone else to join the military-industrial conspiracy to murder creation.²¹

It is a contradiction to profess belief in God the Creator and then live in ways that degrade and destroy God's creation. That Christians have for so long endured this contradiction is a sign that they have failed to see themselves as creatures called to imagine the world in a distinctly Christian way. Put most generally, they have accepted an industrial and consumerist naming and narration of the world as a massive pile of "resources" waiting to be exploited by us.

In his book *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, Willie Jennings demonstrates that at modernity's birth European Christians did not simply steal land and people. Something much more profound was going on: namely, a redescription and renarration of what the world is and what it means to be human. Europeans installed themselves as a

21. Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002), 305–6.

compass on the world, a compass in which they acted as the “true north” upon which all else depended for its significance and worth. White bodies became the benchmark by which black and brown bodies were to be evaluated, and white ways of organizing society and work became the standard that legitimated the genocide of peoples and extermination of indigenous ways of life. European invaders did not look at these “new lands” and their peoples and see the love of Jesus at work in them. Instead they saw “a system of potentialities, a mass of undeveloped, underdeveloped, unused, underutilized, misunderstood, not fully understood potentialities. Everything—from peoples and their bodies to plants and animals, from the ground and the sky—was subject to change, subjects for change, subjected to change.”²²

The land discovered by these Europeans was not perceived as God’s creation and as a gift to be gratefully received and nurtured and shared. Instead it appeared as so much virgin territory and raw material waiting to be turned into a possession that could then be modified to enrich its holders. It did not dawn on these Christian missionaries that the land and its people might have integrity that deserved respect or even sanctity that called for appropriate regard. They could not see natives and African slaves as children of God nor whole continents as the material manifestations of God’s hospitable love, because to do so would have required them to be critical of the economic naming and narration of the world that legitimated European imperialism. Give a boy a hammer and the whole world becomes a nail. Teach a person to think that the point of life is to acquire, and everything becomes a commodity. Form a nation to expect unending expansion and economic growth, and every land becomes territory waiting to be exploited.

Jennings helps us see that the modern European Christian imagination was (and continues to be) diseased. It had become infected so that it could no longer engage the world and its peoples from within a framework of God’s love for it. Instead, people and land mattered only insofar as they could satisfy objectives that were thoroughly defined by the needs and desires

22. Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 43.

of white European (male) bodies. Because Europeans had established themselves in the position of a god designating value and significance, things could not appear as God's creation. Equally important, these same people could not allow themselves to be re-created by Christ so that they could meet and engage others in the nurturing and reconciling ways that his life and the work of the Holy Spirit make possible. And so rather than appearing to indigenous peoples—indeed, to their lands and animals—as witnesses to and agents of the “good news” proclaimed “to every creature under heaven” (Col. 1:23), these Christians represented a cultural and ecological catastrophe: instead of health, they brought disease; instead of fellowship, fragmentation; instead of peace, war; instead of joy, misery; instead of sharing, hoarding; and instead of life, death. At the core of these catastrophes we find “an abiding mutilation of a Christian vision of creation and our own creatureliness.”²³

It is tempting to think that we have moved beyond the colonial imagination that produced so much misery, degradation, and death. Contemporary fascination with what has come to be called “eco-apocalypse,” however, should lead us to think otherwise. In film and fiction we see portrayed a world that has gone into varying states of collapse. The causes of ecocatastrophe vary, ranging from nuclear winter to genetic mutation to climate change. Sometimes the cause remains unmentioned, suggesting that there are any number of plausible ways that our planet and the cultural worlds it supports can come to an end. Has genetic engineering gotten out of control or into the wrong hands, unleashing superpests, disease, and mutant organisms into our world? Has carbon accumulation in the atmosphere gotten so high that all the glaciers and ice fields have melted, resulting in massive coastal flooding? Has the planet gotten so hot that fires and water shortages have created mini war zones in which people fight for what's left? Or has the world simply been consumed to death so there is no available energy, no nutritious food, no clean water, no breathable air, and no safety? What is clear is that a growing number of people feel that human beings do not know how to live in ways that do not precipitate destruction and death. Our desires and plans

23. *Ibid.*, 293.

to make life comfortable for ourselves seem to have the reverse effect of compounding misery and doom.

Consider the highly acclaimed and much-read novel *The Road*, written by Cormac McCarthy. In the novel an unnamed catastrophe has struck the world, leaving it dark, colorless, and mostly barren of life. A man and his son travel this desolate landscape, holding on to each other for whatever comfort they can muster, looking to survive. McCarthy describes a world that has been rendered brutal, ugly, uninviting, and uninspiring, a world reduced to the following “absolute truth”: “The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. . . . The crushing black vacuum of the universe . . . Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.”²⁴ In a land “looted, ransacked, ravaged. Rifled of every crumb” (129), the man wonders what there is to do, and why there would be any reason for doing it.

The father awakens one morning. “He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone” (11). He rises and looks to the gray sky. “Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God” (11–12). It is hard to know if the man is talking to himself or to some hoped-for God. How can one ask for the God of life in the face of so much devastation? Why even try to survive if you’re “the walking dead in a horror film” (55)? An old man met on the road sees it fairly plainly: “Where men can’t live gods fare no better” (172).

But the man and his son continue, trying to make their way to the coast. What becomes clear is that it is the man’s love for his son that keeps him going and that gives him whatever glimmer of light he finds in the darkness. The child’s life, and the father’s need to protect and care for it, is the only thing that

24. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 130. Hereafter cited in text.

stands between the man and his own death. “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). One evening while the father watches his son stoke a fire, the father observes “God’s own firedrake. The sparks rushed upward and died in the starless dark. Not all dying words are true and this blessing is no less real for being shorn of its ground” (31). Darkness and desolation notwithstanding, we are left to wonder if it is a father’s love for his son, or perhaps a human being’s fidelity to any creature, that will make it possible for a word of blessing to be spoken.

McCarthy paints a world in which creation and its Creator are taken to be absent. At one point the man says, “There is no God and we are his prophets” (170). The world has become a more fragile place than anyone could have thought: “How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever” (89). Though the man and the boy move, a sense of fear and desperation accompanies them on their way. Violence, scarcity, and desolation meet them at every turn. What they hold on to are the few moments when gratitude (for some found food) and kindness (the son and the father for each other) protect them from envying the dead. Love, it seems, is all that can hold them back from total oblivion. But the love the father shows is itself a fragile and terrifying reality, causing him to be brutalizing to another starving man met on the road. Can this father’s love be trusted if it depends on a gun? Can the love of anyone survive in a desolate world? How do we know if the love we need to live is real or authentic?

McCarthy is no Christian apologist, and his novel *The Road* provides no easy answers to these questions. His work invites us to think carefully about the world we are in and to question the ways we have developed to name and narrate our place within it. Decades of war, the invention and application of millions of gallons of poison, the unparalleled extinction rate of plant and animal species, and the systemic degradation of all the world’s ecosystems indicate that humanity is engaging in the wholesale murder of every living thing. Are we not like the man standing out on a concrete causeway looking out onto a dead world? “Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous

counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence” (274).



In this book I suggest that Christians learn the art of creaturely life. By creatureliness I mean a human life that tries to be attuned to God as Creator and the world as God’s creation, a life inspired and directed by the true and complete human creature Jesus Christ. I do not claim that a creaturely life will be easy, partly because we live in a world so beset by degradation, but also because many Christians have yet to think deeply about what a naming of the world as creation means and entails. Forms of thinking and practice have seized the modern Western imagination (and many of the Christians within it) in such a way as to render the world inhospitable to the divine love that first created and daily refreshes it. Viewed fundamentally, Christians, by forgetting the teaching of creation, no longer know where or who they are.

People all around sense the disaffection and disorientation that dominate our world. But the restlessness and boredom, as well as the fretfulness and fatigue, that define so much post-modern culture are not the last word. For Christians there is the hope revealed in the creating Word who became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. “All things,” says the Gospel of John, “came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:3–5).