

THE ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GOD-LANGUAGE

DENIS EDWARDS

[Against the tendency to reduce trinitarian language only to Father-Son categories, an ecological theology requires the retrieval of the tradition that understands the Trinity in categories of Wisdom and Logos. These concepts have always been linked to creation theology and are open to ecological theology. New Testament hymns, several Church Fathers, and Wolfhart Pannenberg provide resources for such a theology. Pannenberg's theology of the Word as the divine principle of creaturely self-distinction can be understood in light of Bonaventure's concept of divine Wisdom as self-expressive for a contemporary theology of creation.]

IN THE YEARS leading up to the jubilee year 2000, the Roman Catholic Church has focused attention on each of the trinitarian persons. The concentration on "the Father" in 1999, the third of these years, has been an opportunity to celebrate the divine mercy but also the occasion of some tensions and misgiving in the life of the Church.

Feminist theologians have argued that the exclusive use of male language for God, particularly the Father-Son language of trinitarian theology, functions to maintain patriarchal culture in church and society, and that, because it tends to be understood literally, it diminishes and limits our view of God, creating an idol in male form. Elizabeth Johnson makes this kind of analysis and offers an important response to it by retrieving the classical understanding of the limits of our God language. She points to three fundamental strategies: stress on the divine incomprehensibility, the understanding of the limits of our analogies in all speech about God, and the use of many names in speech about God. Then she goes on to re-envision trinitarian theology in wisdom language, as Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia.¹

DENIS EDWARDS is senior lecturer at the Catholic Theological College in the ecumenical consortium of the Adelaide College of Divinity, Flinders University, Australia. He received his S.T.D. degree from the Catholic University of America. His recent publications include *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (Paulist, 1999) and *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Orbis, 1995). His work in progress includes articles on the Holy Spirit in creation.

¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 104–20, 124–87.

The idea of many names for God has not been entirely absent from recent official Catholic teaching about God. In 1978, Pope John Paul I said, "God is our father; even more God is our mother. God does not want to hurt us, but only to do good for us, all of us. If children are ill, they have additional claim to be loved by their mother. And we too, if by chance we are sick with badness and are on the wrong track, have yet another claim to be loved by the Lord."² Ten years later, John Paul II pointed to the anthropomorphism of biblical language for God, and to the importance of recognizing the limits of our analogies when we speak of God in male or female terms. Then he went on to direct attention to the ways in which the Scriptures speak of God in motherly images (Isaiah 49:14–15; 66:13; Psalm 131:2–3) and to texts that describe God as carrying us within the womb, giving birth to us and nourishing and comforting us (Isaiah 42:14; 46:3–4). He argues that all generating among creatures finds its primary model in the generating which in God is beyond male and female and is entirely divine and spiritual. This means that "every element of human generation which is proper to man, and every element which is proper to woman, namely human 'fatherhood' and 'motherhood,' bears within itself a likeness to, or analogy with the divine 'generating' and that 'fatherhood' which in God is 'totally different,' that is *completely* spiritual and divine in essence."³ In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we find this same approach. In the small print of the section on the Father, we are told that addressing God as "Father" indicates two main things: God as *origin* of all that is, and God's *tender care* for all God's children. We are told that God's parental care can also be expressed in the image of motherhood, and that God completely transcends all human fatherhood and motherhood, but is the origin and standard of both.⁴

I consider these kinds of theological clarifications to be extremely im-

² John Paul I, *Osservatore Romano*, English edition (21 September 1978) 2.

³ See the apostolic letter of John Paul II, "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women [= *Mulieris Dignitatem*]" (Washington: USCC, 1988) no. 8. This document seems to espouse a dual anthropology, tends to see women in terms of "motherhood-virginity," and repeats the restriction of ordination to males. It has had a critical reception in Christian feminist circles. In my view, the letter makes important contributions in its teaching on God and in its clarification of the subjection text in Ephesians 5:22–23, which it understands as historically and culturally conditioned, and in need of interpretation in light of the teaching and practice of mutual relations that comes from Christ (no. 24).

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 239. In the catechetical text issued in preparation for the Holy Year 2000, it is stated that "Father" is "not a name invented by human beings to designate somehow, by way of analogy with human begetting, the ineffable, creative mystery in the background of the universe," but rather the term "Father" is "God's self-revelation, in view of which the universe has been created" (*God, the Father of Mercy* [New York: Crossroad, 1998] 19). Obviously, if the term "Father" is "divine self-revelation," then this revelation occurs in and through human language and by way of analogy with human begetting. Al-

portant. It must be recognized, however, that simply owning the analogical way that Father-Son language functions, while continuing to use exclusively male language, does not resolve the problem. As Elaine Wainwright has pointed out recently, male images for God still evoke maleness Sunday after Sunday in Christian churches. The problem goes on. The divine mystery is reduced, and women are kept in the margins. She sees that an important part of the answer is to be found in using "a myriad of images and metaphors in relation to divinity in order that our language might reflect the profound mystery of transcendence and be the vehicle which opens into this mystery." She sees the biblical, liturgical and theological tradition as "rich with these images both gendered and non-gendered."⁵

In agreeing with this line of thought, I want to emphasize that we need alternative language alongside Father-Son, not only for the pressing reasons already put forward by feminist scholars, but also so that nonhuman creation can be understood in its proper relation to the trinitarian God. I believe that both the language of Father-Son and that of Mother-Child have an important place in Christian theology and in the Christian approach to God. They lead to a rich theology and spirituality for human beings who can see themselves as Spirit-filled daughters and sons, family of the risen Christ, adopted children of a God who embraces us with a parent's love (Romans 8:14–18). This kind of anthropological theology is both liberating and fruitful, but if it is not balanced by other approaches it runs the danger of an unhealthy anthropocentrism.

In this article I point to an alternative theological tradition that exists alongside the Father-Son language, one which can offer an important foundation for a trinitarian theology of creation, and therefore for a trinitarian ecological theology.⁶ In this context, as in many others, the concerns of feminist theology and ecological theology tend to overlap.

JESUS CHRIST AS IMAGE, REFLECTION, WORD, AND WISDOM

When some contemporary theologians make exclusive claims for Father-Son language, they ignore the Wisdom language that has always been present in the tradition, and they forget its importance in linking not just

though this name has a special place because of its connection with Jesus' own usage, and its venerable tradition in trinitarian confession, it is not the only name of God that can be said to be revealed. In fact, the text makes clear that there are many biblical names for God, giving attention to texts which image God as Mother (49–51), and also mentioning symbols for God taken from the nonhuman world of creation (51).

⁵ Elaine Wainwright, "An Approach to Celebrating the Year of God the Father: A Response," in *Liturgy News* (March 1999) 11.

⁶ Here I focus on the role of the Word of God in creation and do not address the all-important issue of the role of the Spirit in creation.

human beings but all creatures in the dynamism of trinitarian life.⁷ In the ancient book of Proverbs, we find Wisdom, who is the first-created, describing herself as a partner with God in the work of creation (Proverbs 8:22–31); then we are told that she has made her home among us, prepares a great feast for us, and invites the simple to come to her table (9:1–6). Here two great themes are interconnected: Wisdom's role in the vastness of cosmic creation, and Wisdom's simple and homely presence among human beings. These interconnected themes are found in a developed way in Sirach, where Wisdom who makes her home among us is identified with Torah (Sirach 24:3–23). In the Wisdom of Solomon we find both an exalted view of Wisdom's role in creation and a more mysterious, personal theology of Wisdom's presence to human beings:

For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.
For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.
Although she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God and prophets;
for God loves nothing so much as the person
who lives with wisdom (Wisdom 7:25–28).

In this text Wisdom is understood as the divine presence, working in continuous creation throughout the universe. So we find the author saying of Wisdom that “while remaining in herself, she renews all things” (7:27), and “she reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other and orders all things well” (8:1). She is the “mother” of all good things (7:12), the “fashioner” of all things (7:22), “renews” all things (7:27) and “orders all

⁷ I am thinking, for example, of Robert Jenson's claim that “a Christian is someone who, when the identity of God is important, names him ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’ Those who do not or will not belong to some other community” (*Systematic Theology 1: The Triune God* [Oxford: Oxford University, 1997] 46). I do not dispute the importance of the traditional baptismal formula, but it seems arbitrary to claim that this formula constitutes a “personal proper name” (46). Of course, we do use names for God, but is the modern human concept of a proper name helpful when talking about God? I have a related problem with Pannenberg's claim that on the lips of Jesus “Father” became “a proper name for God” (*Systematic Theology 1* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991] 262). I do not dispute the importance of Father as an image for God and as a form of address to God in the life of Jesus, but there is not the slightest evidence that it is an exclusive image or form of address, and it seems unreasonably anachronistic to say it became a proper name for God.

things well" (8:1). David Winston interprets Wisdom in this book as "the Divine Mind immanent within the universe and guiding and controlling all its dynamic operations." Wisdom represents "the entire range of natural science, in addition to the arts, rhetoric and philosophy." She is "synonymous with Divine Providence." She is the "direct bearer of revelation."⁸ Sophia, the Wisdom Woman, is the one in whom God creates the universe. She sustains all things. She is God's companion in creation, relating to all God's creatures and taking delight in them. Sophia is the reflection of the eternal light, the mirror of the working of God and the image of divine goodness.

Three of the New Testament texts that directly connect Jesus Christ to the work of creation show evidence of standing in this Wisdom tradition. In Hebrews we find Jesus understood as "the reflection (*apaugasma*) of God's glory and the exact imprint (*charakter*) of God's very being." As such, he is the one "through whom" the universe is created (Hebrews 1:2), and "he sustains all things by his powerful word" (1:3). This echoes the language of the Book of Wisdom, where Wisdom is the reflection (*apaugasma*) and the image (*eikon*) of God's goodness (Wisdom 7:26). The concept of Christ as the image of the invisible God is taken up in the hymn to Christ in Colossians 1:15–20. Here Jesus Christ is presented as the "image (*eikon*) of God", the firstborn, the one "in", "through" and "for" whom all things were created, the one "in whom" all things hold together, and the one "through" whom God will reconcile all things. Again the risen Christ is understood in wisdom terms as the *eikon* of God, and this *eikon* is both the pattern on which all things are created and the agent through which they are created. In the Prologue of John's Gospel we find another great hymn to Christ, again linking Christ to the whole of creation: "all things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:3). Here the language shifts from *eikon* to *logos*. The structure of the Prologue follows the structure of the wisdom hymns which celebrate Wisdom as God's companion in creation who now makes her home among us. Like Wisdom, the Word was with God in creation and now pitches a tent among us. As Raymond Brown has demonstrated, there are close parallels in the Wisdom literature not only for the structure of the Logos hymn, but also for almost every detail of the Prologue's description of the Word.⁹

This kind of Wisdom Christology was the bridge to the theology of incarnation, but it was also always the bridge to a creation Christology. In

⁸ David Winston, "Solomon, Wisdom of," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 122.

⁹ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966) 523.

the Christological work of theologians like Origen, Wisdom/Word of God language was used freely alongside Father-Son language, and this Wisdom/Word language was always associated with a creation theology. In his *On First Principles*, written before he left Alexandria for Caesarea in 231, Origen's christological vision is outlined in wisdom categories. So, for example, he writes of the eternity of the second person of the Trinity:

Wisdom, therefore, must be believed to have been begotten beyond the limits of any beginning that we can speak of or understand. And because in this very subsistence of wisdom there was implicit every capacity and form of the creation that was to be, both of those things that exist in a primary sense and of those which happen in consequence of them, the whole being fashioned and arranged beforehand by the power of foreknowledge, wisdom, speaking through Solomon in regard to these very created things that had been as it were outlined and prefigured in herself, says that she was created as a "beginning of the ways" of God, which means that she contains within herself both the beginnings and causes and species of the whole creation.¹⁰

Origen sees every creature as contained in some way in Eternal Wisdom. In Sophia, as the eternal self-expression of God, every possible form of creation is already implicitly prefigured and outlined. Plato's concept of the world of the "ideas" (in which the observable world is understood as an imperfect reflection of eternal "forms" or "ideas") has been transformed and is now located in divine Wisdom. Origen argued that the title of Divine Wisdom encapsulated all other titles for Jesus: "Whatever then we have said of the wisdom of God will also fitly apply to and be understood of him in his other titles as the Son of God, the life, the word, the truth, the way and the resurrection."¹¹ Later in his book, Origen ponders the mystery of the Incarnation:

But of all the marvelous and splendid things about him there is one that utterly transcends the limit of human wonder and is beyond the capacity of our weak mortal intelligence to think of or understand, namely, how this mighty power of the divine majesty, the very word of the Father, and the very wisdom of God, in which were created "all things visible and invisible," can be believed to have existed within the compass of that man who appeared in Judaea; yes, and how the wisdom of God can have entered into a woman's womb and been born as a little child and uttered noises like those of crying children; and further, how it was that he was troubled, as we are told, in the hour of death, as he himself confesses when he says, "My soul is sorrowful even to death"; and how at the last he was led to that death which is considered by men to be the most shameful of all—even though on the third day he rose again.¹²

¹⁰ Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.2.2. I have used the translation of G. W. Butterworth, *Origen: On First Principles* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 16.

¹¹ Ibid. 1.2.4 (Butterworth 17).

¹² Ibid. 2.6.2 (Butterworth 109).

Divine Wisdom, in whom the heavens and the earth are created, is now revealed in the cries of a newborn infant. God's companion in creation is revealed in the abandoned one on the cross.

Athanasius (c. 296–373) thought of Jesus as the Son of God, *homoousios* with the Father. But he also thought of him as eternal Word and as divine Wisdom. He sees the Word and Wisdom of God as the one who unites all of creation, the great seas, vegetation, and animals in a harmonious order. Everything that is has been made in and through the Word and exists only in and through the Word. He portrays Wisdom at work in creation as a musician bringing all together into a beautiful harmony:

Like a musician who has attuned his lyre, and by the artistic blending of low and high and medium tones produces a single melody, so the Wisdom of God, holding the universe as a lyre, adapting things heavenly to things earthly, and earthly things to heavenly, harmonizes them all, and leading them by his will, makes one world and one world-order in beauty and harmony.¹³

Athanasius considers Jesus Christ not only as Wisdom but also as Image and Expression of God.¹⁴ And Wisdom, who is the Image and Expression of God, leaves an impress and likeness on all creatures:

The Only-begotten, the absolute Wisdom of God is the creator and maker of all things. "In wisdom you made all things," scripture says; and again: "the earth is full of your creation." In order that what was made might not only be, but might be good, God willed that his own Wisdom should come down to the level of created thing and impress a sort of stamp and likeness of its image on all in common and on each individually, so that what was made would be seen to be wise, a work worthy of God.¹⁵

But, Athanasius explains, the world did not know God through the image of Wisdom that exists in all created things. So God sent Wisdom in the flesh that all might believe and be saved:

The Wisdom of God formerly revealed itself through its own image impressed on created reality (by reason of which it is said to be created) and through itself revealed its own Father. It is the same Wisdom of God which later, being the Word, became flesh, as John says, and after destroying death and saving our race revealed himself still more fully and through himself his Father.¹⁶

The Divine Wisdom and Word of God is the Image of the invisible God. This image of Wisdom is impressed on all creatures by the very reality of

¹³ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 42 (PG 25.84–85).

¹⁴ See Athanasius, *De Decretis* 27 (PG 25.465).

¹⁵ Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.78. For this quotation and the next I have used the translation found in the Office of Readings in *The Divine Office: The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite* (London: Collins, 1974) 1.526–27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 2.81.

divine creation. As Alvyn Pettersen points out, this understanding of divine Wisdom making an impress on all of creation “not only allows Athanasius to appreciate that God is ubiquitously present and to be seen through all,” but also “permits a sense of the world being ‘sacramental’.”¹⁷ God can be known through matter and through human history, and then be known beyond all comparison in the incarnation of Wisdom.

Maximus the Confessor (580–662) stood in this tradition when he spoke of the *logoi* that underlie the natural order. Everything in the order of creation was created through the Word of God, the Logos. In a sinful world we often do not see God’s meaning in the world of creatures. We are all too focused on ourselves. But it is not the natures of things, their *logoi*, that are distorted by the fall. It is the mode of operating (*tropos*) of creatures that is distorted. Andrew Louth explains: “In a fallen world, the *logoi* of everything natural remain inviolate, but natures may act in a way (or mode, *tropos*) that runs counter to the fundamental *logoi*.”¹⁸ This is why asceticism is necessary if we are to be able to practice a contemplation in which we can see the *logoi* of natural things. More fundamentally it explains why we need to see the Word made flesh in order to be able to freely contemplate the *logoi* of creatures. But for Maximus there is always a connection between the *logoi* of created beings and the eternal Word who has been made flesh.

IMAGE, WORD, AND WISDOM IN BONAVENTURE

This tradition which connects the divine Logos with creation finds magnificent articulation in the theology of Bonaventure (ca. 1217–1274). As a Franciscan theologian, Bonaventure gives expression to key insights of the early Franciscan movement which had their source in the religious experience of Francis himself, particularly the conviction of God’s overflowing goodness and the experience of creation as expressive of this divine goodness.¹⁹

With a strong focus on creation as divine self-expression, it is not surprising to find that Bonaventure needs to go beyond the language of Father-Son in his trinitarian theology. While he clearly values the title “Son” as bringing out the personal nature of the Father’s love, he points out that the title “Image” actually has a wider significance. On the one hand, “Im-

¹⁷ Alvyn Pettersen, *Athanasius* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995) 46.

¹⁸ Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996) 58.

¹⁹ See Zachary Hayes, *Saint Bonaventure’s Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity: An Introduction and a Translation* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan University, 1979) 32–33. For insight into Bonaventure’s metaphysics of the self-diffusive good, see Ilia Delio, “Bonaventure’s Metaphysics of the Good,” *Theological Studies* 60 (1999) 228–46.

age" points to the second person as the perfect reflection and likeness of the first person. On the other hand, it points beyond the second person to the Spirit. As the Image of the first person, the second person is the coprinciple in the spiration of the Spirit.²⁰ Bonaventure is interested in language for the second person which not only clarifies the relation of Father-Son, but which points to the dynamic movement of trinitarian life that goes beyond the second person to the Spirit and then reaches out to embrace creation.

For this reason, Bonaventure finds the title "Word" wider in its range of meanings than "Son" or even "Image." In his *Commentary on the Sentences* Bonaventure contrasts "Word" with "Son" and "Image" by showing how "Word" brings out the relationship between the first and the second person and between the second person and all of creation. As the Word is the internal self-expression of the God's overflowing goodness, so creation is the external expression of the Word. As Zachary Hayes points out, Bonaventure goes further in his *Commentary on John*, showing how the image of the Word points to "not only the Son's relation to the Father but to the entire mystery of creation, revelation and incarnation." The Word is not only the self-utterance within the divine life, not only the utterance of this in God's free choice to create a universe; it is also in the humanity of Jesus "the fullest embodiment of that self-utterance within the created world."²¹

For Bonaventure, a key image for the first person is that of *fontalis plenitudo*, the Fountain Fullness. This Fountain Fullness is the fecund self-expressive Source from which everything else springs. Ewert Cousins summarizes Bonaventure's trinitarian relations: "Out of his boundless fecundity, the Father generates his Son, expressing himself in his perfect Image, his eternal Word." Then "this fecundity issues further in the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son and their mutual love, as the Gift in whom all good gifts are given."²² All creatures are created from this divine

²⁰ *Breviloquium*, 1, 3; *Commentary on the Sentences*, *I Sent.* d. 31, p. 2, a. 1, q. 2, resp.; *I Sent.* d. 3, p. 2, dub. 4; *I Sent.* d. 27, p. 2, dub. 2.

²¹ Zachary Hayes, *The Hidden Center: Spirituality and Speculative Christology in St. Bonaventure* (New York: Paulist, 1981) 58–59. See Bonaventure, *Comm. Jn.* c. 1., p. 1, q. 1.

²² Ewert Cousins, "Introduction," in Ewert Cousins, trans. and intro., *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God: The Tree of Life; The Life of St. Francis* (New York: Paulist, 1978) 24–25. Bonaventure understands the innascibility of the first person positively as the fullness of the source: "Innascibilitas dicit in Patre plenitudinem fontalitatis sive fontalem plenitudinem" (*I Sent.* d. 29, dub. 1). This *plenitudo fontalis* is related to Bonaventure's understanding of the first person as the "principlum": "Pater est principium totius deitatis" (ibid.). He states, "The more primary a thing is, so the more fecund it is, and the principle of others" (*I Sent.* d. 2, a. u., q. 2). Because the first person is innascible, then this person is the source

fecundity, not by necessity, but in freedom. Bonaventure's overarching vision is of all creatures flowing out from God and returning to God.

The Word is the link between the Trinity and creation. The archetypes or *rationes aeternae* of all creatures are found in the One who is Word and Image of the *fontalis plenitudo*. The Word of God is the eternal Exemplar for all things, the *ars aeterna* of God. God is simple and one, and there is no plurality in God. So, the divine ideas are not distinct from God, but are what God is as expressive truth. Although absolutely one, God is able to give expression in creation to a multiplicity of creatures as resemblances of the Exemplar.²³

Bonaventure very often uses the name "Wisdom" when describing the way that creatures reflect their Exemplar. He tells us, for example, that "every creature is of its very nature a likeness and resemblance to eternal Wisdom."²⁴ He writes that creatures are "nothing less than a kind of representation of the Wisdom of God, and a kind of sculpture."²⁵ In a wonderful passage, he reflects on light coming through a stained glass window as an image for the way Holy Wisdom is reflected in the variety of creatures: "As a ray of light entering though a window is colored in different ways according to the different colors of the various parts, so the divine ray shines forth in each and every creature in different ways and in different properties."²⁶ He tells us that it is in eternal Wisdom that we find the basis of the fecundity to "conceive, carry and bring to birth" the forms of all things in the universe. All these exemplary forms "are conceived from eternity in the uterus or womb of eternal Holy Wisdom."²⁷

For Bonaventure, then, the universe is a book which can be read, a book whose words reveal the Creator: "From this we may gather that the universe is like a book reflecting, representing and describing its Maker, the Trinity, at three different levels of expression: as a trace (*vestigium*), an image, and a likeness. The aspect of trace is found in every creature; the

of fecundity, and the Father. The fullness of the source cannot be communicated, so only the first person is *auctor* of the Holy Spirit. Aquinas does not agree with such positive content being given to innascibility (*Summa theologiae* 1, q. 32, a. 3; 1, q. 33, a. 4 ad 1).

²³ On this, see Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure* (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild, 1965) 127-146.

²⁴ "Omnis enim creatura ex natura est illius aeternae sapientiae quaedam effigies et similitudo" (*Itinerarium* 2.12).

²⁵ "Unde creatura non est nisi quoddam simulacrum sapientiae Dei, et quoddam sculptile" (*Hexaameron* 12).

²⁶ *Hexaameron* 13.14.

²⁷ "In sapientia aeterna est ratio fecunditatis ad concipiendum, producendum et pariendum quicquid est de universitate legum; omnes enim rationes exemplares concipiuntur ab aeterno in vulva aeternae sapientiae seu utero" (*Hexaameron* 20.5).

aspect of image, in the intellectual creatures or rational spirits; the aspect of likeness, only in those who are God-conformed."²⁸

In this life, the apprehension of God's self-communication in creation is veiled, distorted by sin and indirect, but it is real. In his view, if it were not for the distortion of sin, human beings would be able to read the book of creation and come to know holy Wisdom: "In the state of innocence, when the image had not yet been distorted but was conformed to God through grace, the book of creation sufficed to enable humanity to receive the light of divine Wisdom."²⁹ Because of sin, we are illiterates, with little appreciation of the book that lies open before us. We need the book of the Scriptures to read the book of the Universe. Not only the Scriptures, but also the grace of God, are necessary for fallen human beings to reach a full understanding of what lies before them. Nevertheless Bonaventure tells us that: "First Principle created this perceptible world as a means of self-revelation so that, like a mirror (*speculum*) or a footprint (*vestigium*), it might lead the human being to love and praise God the artisan."³⁰ In the light of this he challenges his readers to read creation as God's self-revelation:

Whoever, therefore, is not enlightened by such splendor of created things is blind; whoever is not awakened by such outcries is deaf; whoever does not praise God because of all these effects is dumb; whoever does not discover the First Principle after so many clear signs is a fool. Therefore, open your eyes, alert the ears of your spirit, open your lips, and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love and worship, glorify and honor your God lest the whole world rise up against you.³¹

Bonaventure's theology is very much a process theology. As Etienne Gilson has insisted, a key word in Bonaventure's understanding of the relations between the divine persons is that of expression.³² Bonaventure understands the eternal "generation" of the Word as the eternal expression of all things in the Word. The prime analogue here is not the human generation of a child, but the generation which is a self-expression, the

²⁸ *Breviloquium* 2.12. *The Works of Bonaventure 2: The Breviloquium*, trans. Jose de Vinck (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild, 1963) 104. What is this vestige of the Trinity that we find in all creatures? It is the reflection in a creature of the Trinity as efficient, exemplary, and final cause of the creature's inner structure. The first person of the Trinity is reflected as the Power that holds the creature in being (efficient causality). The second person is reflected as the Wisdom, or the Exemplar, by which it is created (exemplary causality). The third person is reflected as the Goodness that will bring the creature to its consummation (final causality).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Breviloquium* 2.11.2.

³¹ *The Soul's Journey into God* 1.15 (trans. Cousins 67–68).

³² See Gilson, *The Philosophy of Bonaventure* 134.

bringing forth of one who is Word and Image, the generation of the Exemplar in whom all things are created. The primacy he gives to the concept of the Fountain Fullness means that his theology of Trinity is dynamic and fruitful. Creation can be understood as the "free overflow of God's necessary, inner-divine fruitfulness."³³ This means that Bonaventure's trinitarian theology has profound ecological consequences. Every creature is an aspect of God's self-expression in the world. Every creature is a revelatory word written in the great Book of Creation.

TOWARD A CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY OF CREATION

Wolfhart Pannenberg is one of the few contemporary theologians who makes a serious attempt to ground a theology of creation in trinitarian theology. In the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, he seeks to show what is distinctive of both the Word and the Spirit in the one trinitarian act of creation. In his treatment of the role of the Logos in creation, Pannenberg begins from biblical Wisdom Christology. Then he discusses Origen's incorporation of the Platonic doctrine of the ideas, so that for Origen "the origins, ideas, and forms of all creatures are present in the hypostatic wisdom of God, the Son."³⁴ Pannenberg briefly outlines how Christ's mediatory role in creation is understood in the work of Maximus the Confessor, Augustine, and Aquinas, and then notes the difficulty with the notion of the divine ideas that has emerged through Ockam, Descartes, Leibniz, and other thinkers. He makes the judgment that because of these difficulties with the Platonic concept of the eternal ideas, "modern theology refrains from following this route in its interpretation of the mediatorialship of the Son in creation."³⁵ He also makes the point that the Platonic concept of the ideas fails to do justice to the biblical notion of the contingency and historicity of creation.

As an alternative to the tradition that locates the ideas for all things in the Logos, Pannenberg turns to Hegel. He finds that in Hegel the static notion of a world of ideas is replaced by the idea of a divine principle that generates the plurality and distinction of creatures. Hegel's thesis is that in the Trinity, "the Son is the principle of otherness, the starting point for the

³³ Zachary Hayes, "Incarnation and Creation in the Theology of St. Bonaventure," in *Studies Honoring Ignatius Charles Brady, Friar Minor*, ed. Romano Stephen Almagno and Conrad L. Harkins (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1976) 315.

³⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 25.

³⁵ Ibid. 27. Unfortunately Pannenberg makes no mention of Bonaventure in his treatment of this topic.

emergence of the finite as that which is absolutely other than deity."³⁶ For obvious reasons, Pannenberg distances himself from one aspect of Hegel's concept of creation, the idea that creation is necessary, so that a necessary self-development of the Absolute takes place in producing the world of the finite. Instead, Pannenberg situates his theology of creation within the mutuality of the trinitarian persons, where self-distinction occurs in profound unity, and where there is no necessity to create. Creation remains for him an act of divine freedom.

According to Pannenberg, the self-distinction in the Trinity takes its sharpest form in the eternal Son, or better, the Logos.³⁷ Furthermore, in the economy of salvation, this self-distinction is intensified as, in the Incarnation, "the Son moved out of the unity of the Godhead" to take up creaturely existence. As a human being, Jesus "recognized the one Father over against himself" in love and obedience. The event of Jesus of Nazareth shows that the eternal relation of the first and second persons must always have contained at least the possibility of the Word moving out of the divine life into existence as a creature. The existence of a creation and of all creatures, distinct from God, has its basis in the "free self-distinction of the Son from the Father." In the movement from an inner trinitarian distinction to the Incarnation, and therefore in the movement to the radical distinction and otherness of creaturely existence, there is a foundation and principle for all creaturely distinctiveness.³⁸

The Logos is not only the principle of self-distinction for all creatures but also the link with all such creatures. In the Incarnation, the Logos remains united in the Spirit with the Father, and so the Logos is not only the principle of the self-distinction of creatures but also the principle of their interrelation in the one order of creation. And through the Spirit, all creatures, in all their distinctiveness, are brought together into unity in Christ for participation in the divine life (Ephesians 1:10).

Where does this leave us in terms of a workable theology for today? First, I believe that Pannenberg offers an important insight with his idea of the Word as the eternal principle in God for the otherness, plurality, and distinction of creatures. I find particularly valuable the fact that his theology contains a suggestion of a way that a trinitarian theology of creation can be grounded in the economy—in the creaturely existence of Jesus. It is only because of Jesus of Nazareth, the finite human creature, who in his humanity is radically other than and distinct from the one he called Father, yet in the experience of the Spirit is radically obedient to and open to the

³⁶ Ibid. 28.

³⁷ Pannenberg uses a great deal of Father-Son language even though the logic of his argument depends upon the theology of Wisdom and Word.

³⁸ Ibid. 30–32.

Father, that we can speak at all of the self-distinction in the inner life of the Trinity. In Pannenberg's theology, the distinctiveness of each creature is given in the self-distinction of the Eternal Word, who is precisely the Word who is eternally open to the otherness of creaturely existence as Jesus of Nazareth.

Second, I do not believe that Pannenberg's concept of otherness and self-distinction, important though it is, is sufficient. Of itself, it remains somewhat empty of content. It tells us of otherness and distinction, but not of likeness. In my view, it needs to receive content from Bonaventure's idea of creation as the divine self-expression of goodness. In Bonaventure's trinitarian theology, the one who is Source of all, the *fontalis plenitudo*, pours forth the fullness of divine goodness in the self-expression that constitutes the Image, Word, and Wisdom of God, and then, in the free act of creation, this goodness is poured forth in the whole diversity of creatures. This means that all creatures can be seen as expressions of divine Wisdom. Pannenberg is probably right in his view that the Platonic theory of ideas is no longer usable, although it is important to note that Bonaventure had already radically transformed this concept in thoroughly Christian terms.³⁹ In any case, I would not advocate reviving the theory of the eternal ideas. What I think precious is Bonaventure's idea of the fecund and self-expressive God being poured out eternally in the Word, and then, in God's free choice to create, "exploding" in a thousand forms in the world of creatures.⁴⁰ I would argue that this thought can be retrieved from Bonaventure, without the baggage of the existence of eternal ideas. And when Bonaventure's insight is combined with Pannenberg's, it can be said that the Wisdom of God is not simply the principle of self-distinction of creatures (Pannenberg) but also the principle of God's self-expression (Bonaventure), so that each creature expresses not only otherness and distinction but also something of the divine goodness and bounty.

Third, the issue of contingency must be addressed in any trinitarian theology of creation. I have mentioned above that Pannenberg points to the contingency and historicity of biblical faith as an argument against the traditional Platonic notion of the universal ideas. This issue of contingency

³⁹ Bonaventure transforms Platonism, first, by his insistence that the exemplar for the diversity of creatures is found in the unity and simplicity of God and, second, by his rejection of a Neoplatonic exemplarism which sees the universe as a hierarchically ordered chain of being. For Bonaventure, each creature has its exemplar in the Word and each is equally close to God; on this see Leonard J. Bowman, "The Cosmic Exemplarism of Bonaventure," *Journal of Religion* 55 (1975) 187.

⁴⁰ Leonard J. Bowman uses this image of explosion in "The Cosmic Exemplarism of Bonaventure" 183, he borrows it from Alexander Gerken, *La Théologie du Verbe: La relation entre l'Incarnation et la Création selon S. Bonaventure*, trans. Jacqueline Greal (Paris: Editions Franciscaines, 1970) 132.

is crucial today for a number of reasons. Big Bang cosmology, quantum physics, and evolutionary biology all point to contingency. Contemporary science understands the universe, life, and self-consciousness as emerging in a process in which randomness and unpredictability play a major role. Much of the discussion in the science-theology dialogue is precisely about the fact that contemporary science makes our world seem more and more radically contingent. Consequently, talk of creation unfolding according to a preconceived and predictable divine blueprint seem implausible. In a creation theology that takes this kind of contingency seriously, God can be understood as working purposefully in and through the chance and the lawfulness of nature, in and through all contingencies, adventurously and creatively bringing about what is new in a way that respects the potentialities built into matter itself. This means that a contemporary theology that sees all creatures as expressions of divine Wisdom will have to understand divine Wisdom as working in and through the randomness and contingency, as well as through the lawfulness, of physical processes.

I have been suggesting that a trinitarian theology of creation can take a point of departure in the eternal self-distinction in which the Eternal Source and Unoriginate Origin communicates everything in self-expressive love to Eternal Wisdom; this loving self-distinction always has the possibility of finding expression in the otherness of finite matter through an incarnation. The variety of creatures, with all their distinctiveness and abundance are then to be seen as reflections of Holy Wisdom, created in Jesus Christ, to be reconciled in the one who is Word and Wisdom. Every species, every ecosystem, the whole biosphere, each grain of sand, and each galaxy is the self-expression of the Eternal Art of divine Wisdom.

If such a theology of creation is to be retrieved, our language for God will be required to go beyond Father-Son categories and Mother-Child categories to include the possibilities opened up by the concepts Wisdom, Word, Image, and Reflection. It will be necessary to understand divine generativity not only by analogy with the human experience of begetting offspring, but also by analogy with the human experience of self-expression in the other and self-communication to the other.