THEOLOGICAL Studies

Celebrating The 1700th Anniversary of Nicaea

Celebrating Nicaea: The Idea of Creation in the Early Church and Its Relevance for a Recent Ecumenical Initiative Toward a Feast of Creation

Theological Studies
2025, Vol. 86(3) 478–498

DOI: 10.1177/00405639251354873
journals.sagepub.com/home/tsj


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Abstract
This article argues that the idea of creation provided the early church with an integrative framework by which to contemplate nature. Rather than being understood merely as backdrop to the spiritual life, nature was taken as the site in which the drama of the divine economy was revealed. A retrieval of this stance could have value for the contemporary church. This will be explored with reference to a recent ecumenical initiative for a "Feast of Creation" across worldwide communions.

Keywords
Creation, Nicaea, early church, Feast of Creation, nature, Christology, contemplation of nature, ecumenism

Introduction

Reflecting upon and developing an understanding of creation was an important task for the early church as it sought to define its identity and mission in the world. Over time, a doctrine of creation emerged that would become increasingly normative for the

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universal church. From a later vantage point, this process is most clearly detectable at moments of public controversy and debate, including the first ecumenical council at Nicaea.

However, recent scholarship has begun to suggest a more holistic and integrative account of what the "idea" of creation signified in the early church.[1] Here, it is proposed that Christian reflection on creation in both the ante- and post-Nicene period was in fact wide-ranging and assimilative and that it resulted in a variety of practical applications for ecclesial communities and individual believers beyond that which is shown in public and conciliar situations alone.[2] The idea of creation held by the early church meant that the church viewed nature and the natural world as imbued with a kind of sacred significance because it was the site in which the story of salvation and cosmic redemption itself was playing out. As a result, Christians were able to encounter the natural world not merely as backdrop to an otherwise self-contained and ultimately transcendentalizing vision of the spiritual life but rather to view that same spiritual life through the focusing and synthesizing lens supplied by nature (creation) itself. This in turn had implications for the early church's understanding of its situation vis-à-vis the world. Rather than seeing itself exclusively as being in an embattled or agonistic relation to the pagan world, the idea of creation allowed the early church to conceive of a more integrative vision in which nature (as arena in which the purposes of God were played out) could serve as bridge or point of connection between church and world.[3] It was in this wider sense that the idea of creation became "a fundamental factor in the development of Christian distinctiveness" at this time.[4]

We have two aims in this article. First, in the light of this recent scholarship, we will argue that the early church held to a notion of the "contemplation of nature" (*theōria physikē*) that was subtly indexed to a larger, theological story of creation, redemption in Christ, and final eschatological renewal. This story was expressed in worship, in

1. The word "idea" is here intended as a neutral placeholder term to bypass potentially complex connotations associated with terminologies of "doctrine," "dogma," and even "theology," some of which may be indexed to polemical or even adversarial positions within contemporary theology. For the challenge of using these terms in relation to patristic theology, see Alister McGrath, *The Nature of Christian Doctrine: Its Origins, Development and Function* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 3ff. What we mean by the idea of creation held by the early church will be progressively described in what follows.
2. A key source here is Paul E. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Other titles will be indicated in the argument that follows.
3. For a careful evaluation of the distinctiveness of early Christian thought in relation to prevailing pagan worldviews, particularly in its understanding of God, creation, and human nature, see Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (Yale University Press, 2005).
4. Frances Young, "*Creatio Ex Nihilo*: A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44, no. 2 (May 1991): 140, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0036930600039089.

liturgy, and in catechetical teaching. We will argue that such an understanding of creation was continuous across ante- and post-Nicene contexts, albeit it was altered in subtle ways by the post-Constantinian era of accommodation. Second, we will relate this to our present time. We will argue that our contemporary condition is one that has to some extent lost the mode of contemplative engagement with the natural world that characterized the early church, in favor of more instrumentalizing and technocratic approaches.[5] The Christian idea of creation, as celebrated within the early church, has the resources to critique this situation and even to offer an alternative. We will explore this by means of some theological, philosophical, and liturgical work that has recently taken place around an ecumenical initiative toward establishing a "Feast of Creation" across worldwide church communions, including the Roman Catholic church. We will argue that this activity is orientated around a notion of the contemplation of nature that has certain analogies with the story told by the early church. It also presses toward a model of ecclesial unity that goes beyond recent efforts in ecumenism, especially in the movement known as "receptive ecumenism," which focus on mutual learning from other traditions.[6] As such, we will conclude by suggesting that the Feast of Creation initiative represents a hopeful and potentially instructive moment for the Christian church and for wider society in this Nicene anniversary year.

The Idea of Creation in the Early Church

A creation narrative was bequeathed to the early church from both its Jewish and (in complex ways) from its Greco-Roman contexts. Understanding and assimilating the properly Christian significance of that narrative was clearly an important task for the church as it sought to articulate its emerging identity and mission in the world.[7]

And yet recent scholarship has suggested that Christian reflection on creation in the ante- and post-Nicene period was in fact even more wide-ranging than has been previously supposed. In the first part of our article, aspects of this scholarship will be appreciatively presented and analyzed. The intention here is by no means to redescribe this situation in full. Rather, we will seek to draw out some observations that can be carried forward to our own time.

5. For the concept of the "technocratic" paradigm in recent Catholic social teaching, particularly in relation to *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*, see William O'Neill, "Re-enchanting the World: Pope Francis's Critique of the 'Technocratic Paradigm' in *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*," *Theological Studies* 82, no. 2 (June 2024): 240–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639241241474.
6. Paul D. Murray, Gregory A. Ryan, and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning: Walking the Way to a Church Re-formed* (Oxford University Press, 2022).
7. See Judith M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 63ff.; Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation Out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (T&T Clark, 2004).

In the early church, the idea of creation was an element in important theological and metaphysical controversies.[8] This included debates about the divine attributes, about the definition of the Son and then the Spirit as coequal and coeternal with the Father, and even about the possibility of "a sort of analogue of createdness within the divine life itself" that might help to explain the revelation of God as trinitarian.[9] Indeed, we can say that the idea of creation operated as a consistent (albeit not always explicitly foregrounded) element in the patristic and conciliar working out of controversies around Christology, soteriology, and the Trinity throughout the period of the early church.[10]

Symbols or creeds from this period speak less of the fact of creation itself and more of the One who creates, who is described as *pantokrátora* and *poiētēn ouranoú kai tēs oratón te pánton kai aorátōn* (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed), or in the Latin tradition *omnipotens* (Apostle's Creed, or later *dominus omnium* in Augustine).[11] In the context of the Arian controversy, the idea of creation became an element of theological contestation for obvious reasons: For the orthodox party, a distinction was required between the idea of the creation of the universe in time, on the one hand, and the idea of the eternal generation of the Son, on the other. In the Nicene statement, any claim to the temporal or material generation of the Son, such as would be made by those who said "there was a time when he was not" or "that he was made out of what did not exist," was anathematized. The Nicene statement about God as creator can therefore be seen as scaffolding for the overall polemical intention of the creed, which was to undermine

8. For a general overview, see Paul O'Callaghan, *God's Gift of the Universe: An Introduction to Creation Theology* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2022). For a survey of early Christian categories for interpreting the first chapter of Genesis, but with broader applicability to the early church's understanding of creation, see Nathan J. Chambers, *Reconsidering Creation Ex Nihilo in Genesis 1* (Eisenbrauns, 2020). For an important study of the early church's idea of creation, then related to debates in twentieth-century theology, see Georges Florovsky, "Creation and Createdness," in *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky*, ed. Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (Bloomsbury, 2019), 33–64, https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567659491.
9. Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (Bloomsbury, 2018), 221.
10. We might identify two key phases in the early church period in which the articulation and defense of the idea of creation came to the fore. The first was in relation to challenges perceived as emanating from Gnosticism and Marcionism in the second century and beyond (as subsequently addressed by Christian writers such as Irenaeus, Theophilus of Antioch, Aristides, and Tatian). The second was in relation to challenges perceived as emanating from the Arian idea of the Son as mere *ktisma, poiēma*, or *heteroousios* in the fourth century and the corresponding Nicene *homoousios* formulation. Of course, both challenges can be seen as deriving from a certain definition of Platonic metaphysics that might be considered "overly-stringent" in its formal dualistic commitment, for which see O'Callaghan, *God's Gift of the Universe*, 135.
11. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), I: 9, 7. For a general survey of Augustine's understanding of divine (creative) power, see Gerald Bonner, *Freedom and Necessity: St. Augustine's Teaching on Divine Power and Human Freedom* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

the various subordinationist theologies that had been offered since the time of Origen and that were now perceived as being promoted by the Arians. Thus, as Basil Studer has suggested, the Nicene definition advances the idea of God as creator, and perhaps even some implied notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, as a means of "giving an unambiguous answer to the question still left open in Origen's cosmology, governed as it was by the problem of the One and the Many: that is, whether the Logos was to be placed on the side of creation or of the Creator."[12] David Bentley Hart also argues that this reference was used by the pro-Nicene fathers as part of a larger defense of Christian metaphysics, because the idea of God as creator was understood as being in some way foundational to right belief about the Son.[13] Here, then, the assertion of God as creator of all things is assumed to be not merely noncontradictory with the assertion of a divine (eternally begotten) Son but actually to be the guarantor of that very assertion.

Public and conciliar theology of this sort is certainly important in any consideration of how the idea of creation operated in the early church. However, as Paul M. Blowers's work in particular has shown, the idea of creation was taken up and assimilated even more widely than that in the early church period.[14] In fact, creation served as a motif or organizing principle around which individual Christians and local ecclesial communities were able to ritualize and "perform" their faith in the world.[15] In what follows, we will consider how this was expressed in teaching and catechesis, in liturgy, and in apologetics in the first three centuries of church history, before considering how this may have been subtly altered in the particular situation of the post-Nicene church in the fourth century and beyond.

First, this wide-ranging and assimilative vision of creation can be seen in the teaching and catechesis of the early church. This identified the providential hand of God as operative not only in the original creative act (as told in Genesis) but also in the works of nature that surround us today. In Theophilus of Antioch's *To Autolycus* (written ca. 180 CE), for example, creation is understood as a revelatory act ("that the living God might be known by His works").[16] But the world that then came into being and continues today is also taken as revelatory of God, insofar as it is upheld by him moment to moment ("so we must perceive that God is the governor of the whole universe, though He be not visible to the eyes of the flesh, since He is incomprehensible").[17] And finally,

12. Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (T&T Clark International, 2004), 103.
13. David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Eerdmans, 2017), 147. We might also think of the opening of Athanasius's treatise on the Incarnation: "We will begin, then, with the creation of the world and with God its Maker, for the first fact that you just grasp is this: the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning." See Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), I: 1.
14. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*.
15. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 315.
16. Robert M. Grant, trans., *Theophilus of Antioch: Ad Autolycum* (Clarendon Press), II: 10.
17. Grant, *Theophilus of Antioch*, I: 5.

this story of revelation is completed by the idea of the renewal and restoration of creation that will take place at the end of time. Theophilus describes this end time using a panoply of images taken from the natural world ("for consider, if you please, the dying of seasons, and days, and nights, how these also die and rise again. And what? Is there not a resurrection going on of seeds and fruits, and this, too, for the use of men?").[18] Theophilus thus presents salvation as a cosmic story, structured with a beginning (God's original creative action), a middle (God's providential sustenance of the world and revelation of his being through the things and processes of nature), and an end (the final restoration of the material world). This was not merely about using nature as a supply of case studies for moral or allegorical instruction (although examples of such a use do abound in early Christian sources, notably the *Physiologus*, presumably taking their inspiration from nothing less than the parables of Christ).[19] Rather, the idea of creation is used here as a narratival scaffolding to illustrate the meaning of the Christian life, the unfolding *oikonomia* of the world and its various interlocking elements, and the hope of final reconciliation with the creator.

Liturgy and sacraments also played a role in keeping the panorama of such a divine economy constantly before the eyes of the faithful. Early eucharistic prayers linked praise for God's original creative act with thanksgiving for the work of Christ in redeeming the created world from sin, while simultaneously looking forward to its eschatological restoration.[20] A similar logic seems to underlie developments around liturgy and the seasons. In the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr (likely 155–57 CE), the use of Sunday as a day for Christian common assembly is explained on account of the fact that "it is the first day, on which God changed darkness and matter and made the world, and Jesus Christ our saviour rose from the dead on the same day," speaking in one kind of the day of creation and of the day of resurrection.[21] This stems from a deep understanding of the material world as a vehicle for elaborating God's purposes: After all, as Justin states, Christians have been taught "that, being good, He [God] crafted all things in the beginning from unformed matter *for the sake of* human beings."[22]

The idea of creation as described above was also an element within early church apologetics. Certainly, there could be a defensive or differentiating dimension to this, as Christians sought to argue for a particular understanding of the origin of the cosmos against contemporary pagan natural philosophies. But more broadly, it can be argued that the idea of creation offered the early church a resource for dialogue and

18. Grant, *Theophilus of Antioch*, I: 13.
19. Caroline Macé and Jost Gippert, eds., *The Multilingual Physiologus: Studies in the Oldest Greek Recension and Its Translations* (Brepols, 2021).
20. For an older study of how early liturgical practices reflected the cosmic scope of salvation history, especially eschatological, see Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (Epworth Press, 1971), 104–10. For more general patristic materials on eschatology, including in relation to liturgy, see Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Hendricksen, 2003).
21. Denis Minns and Paul Parvis, eds., *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies—Oxford Early Christian Texts* (Oxford University Press, 2009), X: 2, 99.
22. Minns and Parvis, *Justin*, LXVII: 8, 261, our emphasis.

connection with the wider world. For example, in their exegesis of Genesis 1–2 and other scriptural texts about creation, patristic writers such as Theophilus of Antioch, Hippolytus of Rome, and Methodius of Olympus, as well as Clement and Origen, showed themselves aware of Greek and Hellenistic Jewish philosophical cosmogonies and cosmologies and thus of the potential offered by the specifically Christian creation narrative to engage in dialogue with them.[23] In the early church, "contemplating the world was not, as in some modern apologetics, a deciphering of 'flat' proofs of a Creator";[24] rather, it entailed seeing the cosmos as a stage on which the progressive drama of God's sovereign intention for his people was being enacted. This notion—that the idea of creation contributed to a somewhat open and integrative Christian identity in relation to the culture around it—aligns with other recent scholarship arguing that the self-definition of the early church was on the basis of the promotion of positive actions of belief, rather than mere withdrawal from the world.[25]

In these domains, we see how the idea of creation was productively integrated into the theological, ecclesial, liturgical, and rhetorical life of the ante-Nicene church, informing in important ways its sense of identity and mission to the world. Doctrinal definitions should be understood within this wider context of narratival, confessional, and doxological discourse.

Out of this idea of creation emerged a distinctively Christian mode of contemplation of nature (*theōria physikē*). This contemplation was not mere observation of the natural world from a detached vantage point (a posture that we will later identify as characteristic of a more modern mode of engagement with nature). Rather, by analogy with the reading of sacred Scripture (*theōria graphikē*), this Christian mode of contemplation of nature combined attentiveness to the particular (individual living beings but also inanimate objects) with awareness of the overarching and unfolding divine drama of creation in which these things were located.

Within the Alexandrine tradition of Clement and Origen, for example, there is a subtle understanding of nature as a site for the unfolding of the divine economy. In both writers, *theōria physikē* was understood as a middle stage of the spiritual life, bridging ethical practice or moral purification (*ēthikē*), on the one hand, and the higher goal of direct contemplation and knowledge of God himself (*theologikē*), on the other. In book IV of *On First Principles*, Origen describes the ascent of the soul from the visible world to "knowledge of things invisible and divine," suggesting that nature provides an arena in which a true understanding of divine providence might be discerned:

23. Some have even claimed the Christian reflection on its own creation narrative might be considered as tapping into a deeper seam of natural philosophical inquiry into the world's origins and causal structure, one that can be considered as stretching back to the pre-Socratics, for which, see David Sedley, *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity: The Sather Classical Lectures* (University of California Press, 2008).
24. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 324.
25. See Paul Treblinco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

> For the skilful plan of the providential ruler is not so evident in matters upon the earth as it is with the sun and moon and stars, and not so clear in matters regarding human events as it is with the souls and bodies of animals, where the purpose and reason of the impulses and the mental images and the nature of animals, and the structure of their bodies, are accurately discovered by those who attend to such things.[26]

The ascent of the soul has reference to and indeed incorporates the material things of the created world. For Clement, although the "science of nature" (*physiologia*) is taken as preliminary to the "science of theology" (*theologikē*), the presence of the *Logos* in each implies that both economies tell the same truth despite their different languages. Here, the task of "reading" nature therefore is closely related to the possibility of "reading" the purposes of God as displayed in the natural world:

> The science of nature (*physiologia*), then, or rather observation, as contained in the gnostic tradition according to the rule of the truth, depends on the discussion concerning cosmogony, ascending thence to the department of theology. Whence, then, we shall begin our account of what is handed down, with the creation as related by the prophets.[27]

For Clement and Origen, contemplation of nature is more than simply pious observation or wonderment: It fits into an overall scheme of formative discipline by which the Christian believer can attain to the highest form of spiritual insight.

How did this idea of creation evolve into the fourth century and beyond? The intention of this article is not to suggest a break between the ante- and post-Nicene idea of creation. In the Latin tradition, we find a similar portrayal of the created world as a grand theater of divine rhetoric and revelation, one that Christians are constantly encouraged to "read" in order to discern the language of the creator. In the *Sermons*, for example, Augustine says:

> Some, in order to find God, will read a book. Well, as a matter of fact, there is a great big book, the book of created nature. Look carefully at it top and bottom, observe it, read it. God did not make letters of ink for you to recognize him in; he set before your eyes all these things he has made. Why look for a louder voice?[28]

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26. John Behr, ed. and trans., *Origen: On First Principles—Volume II* (Oxford University Press), 479.
27. Clement, *Stromateis*, IV: 1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. II (Hendrickson, 1994), 862. See also Judith L. Kovacs, "Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher According to Clement of Alexandria," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 3–25, https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2001.0012; Carl Vennerstrom, "'To Those Who Have Ears to Hear': Clement of Alexandria on the Parables of Jesus," *Open Theology* 7 (August 2021): 354–67, https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0168.
28. Edmund Hill, trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the Twenty-First Century*, vol. III. 3, *Sermons (51–94) on the New Testament* (New City Press, 1991), Sermon LXVIII: 6, 225–26.

The contiguity of the book of nature and the book of Scripture in Augustine's thought is further shown by his use of the trope "firmament of authority" (*firmamentum auctoritatis*), which is understood equally as "divine Scripture," the material covering of our bodies, and the celestial heavens above us.[29] For Augustine, just as was the case in an earlier context, nature is understood as a site in which the providential and sovereign works of God can be discerned.

Having emphasized continuity, two observations can be ventured about how this approach became slightly differentiated in the fourth century and beyond. First, the idea of creation that had earlier characterized the church was accelerated by the historical situation of the peace of Constantine. As has been frequently suggested, this novel accommodation enabled the church to think in new ways (social, political, economic, and cultural) about its situatedness in and commitment to the surrounding world.[30] Resourced by its previous (and ongoing) reflection about the idea of creation, the church at this time was increasingly able to move away from a model of contestation *against* the surrounding pagan world, toward a model where participation *in* and constructive transformation *of* the world might be considered possible. The Council of Nicaea and the accommodation offered by the peace of Constantine in the fourth century can be taken as representative moments in this broader panorama.[31] In the second part of the article, we will attempt to show if and where our contemporary moment might have parallels.

A second observation about the post-Nicene context is that the situation of accommodation in which the church now found itself induced a new awareness of the potential risks or dangers of *theōria physikē*, as well as its potential value. This meant that the idea of creation began to include evaluative criteria for a properly ethical encounter with the natural world. As Blowers shows, this development was frequently contrasted with the idea of mere "curiosity" about nature. Although curiosity was a disposition that could be considered virtuous since it could in theory

29. Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII: 16, 282.

30. Amongst a rich bibliography, see Peter Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (InterVarsity Press, 2010); Johannes Roldanus, *The Church in the Age of Constantine: The Theological Challenges* (Brill, 2006); Harold A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). For an overview of the literature, see Rugare Rukuni and Erna Oliver, "Nicaea as Political Orthodoxy: Imperial Christianity Versus Episcopal Polities," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 75, no. 4 (Autumn 2019), https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5313.

31. This is in line with some contemporary reevaluations of the function and outworking of the Council of Nicaea itself. By contrast with an older tradition that viewed it as a politically inaugurated event aiming at securing Constantine's newly acquired rule, recent scholarship has sought instead to emphasize elements of the Nicene settlement as being in self-conscious continuity with previous lines of theological tradition considered "catholic," for which, see Richard Lim, *Public Disputation, Power, and Social Order in Late Antiquity* (University of California Press, 2018), or even as assimilating or "ingesting" previous tradition, even where these later came to be seen as heterodox or heretical, for which, see Mark Edwards, *Catholicity and Heresy in the Early Church* (Routledge, 2009).

motivate investigation of the creator's handiwork, leading to worship, it was now also considered possible to deviate into a flat or instrumentalizing interest in nature for its own sake. Post-Nicene writers such as Athanasius and Augustine accused pagan philosophers of precisely such a lapse, treating nature as something to be understood and manipulated, rather than revered as creation, the site of the drama of the divine economy. Athanasius, in *Against the Heathen*, contends that while some philosophers worshipped the universe and its parts, they failed to recognize that nature itself points to God as its Creator: "Men had turned away from the contemplation of God, and were sunk as it were in an abyss with their eyes cast down, and they were seeking God in creation and sensible things."[32] For Augustine, curiosity (*curiositas*) was considered a counterfeit form of contemplation: grasping, restless, and prideful in its approach to the natural world and crucially lacking synthetic understanding of its higher purpose. Thus, when admonishing his Manichaean opponent Faustus, Augustine writes:

> Had you begun with looking on the book of nature as the production of the Creator of all, and had you believed that your own finite understanding might be at fault wherever anything seemed to be amiss, instead of venturing to find fault with the works of God, you would not have been led into these impious follies and blasphemous fancies.[33]

Idle curiosity is here taken as the counter side to a properly pious contemplation of nature, which would lead the Christian to a greater understanding of the divine economy as a whole.

Relating the Early Church's Idea of Creation to Our Present Moment

Via this survey, we can see that the idea of creation in the early church should be considered not only in terms of formal processes toward the articulation of doctrine or as an item that became relevant only in moments of public controversy or creedal polemic. Rather, creation operated as a focusing and synthesizing lens through which the entire Christian life could be encountered, lived out, and taught.

It is this larger vision of creation that we now wish to examine in relation to our own time. To do so, we are not proposing an exercise in historical theology or a survey of the development of doctrine per se.[34] Rather, we will describe a recent ecumenical initiative

32. Robert W. Thompson, ed. and trans., *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Clarendon Press, 1971). II: 15, 171.
33. Augustine, *Confessions*, V: 9, 76. For further discussion on "curiosity" and its historical relationship with "wonder," see Celia E. Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom: Conversations in Science, Spirituality and Theology* (DLT, 2006), 2–5.
34. For recent studies of the development of the idea of creation and *creatio ex nihilo* in modern theology, especially those that refer to patristic debates, see May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*; Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny and Empowerment* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004); Janet Soskice, ed., *Creation "Ex Nihilo" and Modern Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); and Gary Anderson and Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, eds., *Creation ex nihilo: Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).

toward establishing a "Feast of Creation" across all worldwide churches. Although (at the time of writing) this initiative is still in process, with various intra- and interdenominational procedures only recently established and underway, we will argue that the initiative is a site where a vision of creation analogous to the one described above is being (re-)enacted. By presenting the two in parallel, as encouraged by the symbolic moment of the Nicene anniversary, we propose that the idea of creation can operate in a constructive way in contemporary theology, liturgy, and ecclesial practice.

The Feast of Creation initiative was initiated in March 2024 when a large conference was held at the Cittadella Laudato Si' in Assisi.[35] Its aim was to discuss the future of Creation Day, as the first day of September had come to be known in recent decades (also known in the Orthodox[36] and Roman Catholic traditions, and for the World Council of Churches, as the World Day of Prayer for Creation). During that event, consensus began to emerge among participants about the prospect of this day to be upgraded instead to a liturgical feast or festival across the Western denominations sharing a common calendar, inspired by the day's ancient symbolism and by its existing liturgical importance in the Eastern Orthodox Church.[37]

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35. The Feast of Creation initiative has been co-organized by the Laudato Si' Research Institute (based at Campion Hall, University of Oxford), with the project led by LSRI Ecclesial Affiliate Tomás Insua, in close collaboration with the World Council of Churches and with world ecumenical communions including the Anglican Communion, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, and the World Methodist Council, with this group enlarging over time. The Roman Catholic Church was present at this first event in March 2024 via Vatican delegates and a sizable group of Catholic participants (including several continental bishops' conferences and the local Bishop of Assisi as host); a subsequent conference was held in December 2024 to enable intra-Catholic theological, philosophical, and liturgical debate on the same topic. The Orthodox Church was present through delegated representatives as an accompanier, given the feast's historical roots in the Orthodox liturgical calendar. For a summary of the March 2024 event, see Seminar Report, "A Liturgical Opportunity; An Ecumenical Kairos. An Emerging Consensus to Enhance the 'Feast of Creation' and Honour the Creator, March 2024," https://drive.google.com/file/d/10rBHfy0GlJwvcyqxoS8kLmFhpqzyoQyW/view.
36. Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I declared September 1 as a World Day of Prayer for Creation in 1989. This is the beginning of the liturgical year for the Orthodox, also celebrated as the Feast of Indiction, the beginning of Christ's public ministry. Pope Francis named September 1st as a World Day of Prayer for Creation in 2015, the same year that *Laudato Si'* was published. See Francis, "The Establishment of the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation" (August 6, 2015), www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/cura-creato/documents/papa-francesco_20150806_lettera-giornata-cura-creato.html.
37. Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, "The Day of Protection of the Environment written on 01 September 1989," www.orth-transfiguration.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Lecture_HAH-1989-Patr.-Dimitrios-on-Day-of-Prayer-for-Envir.pdf; Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Letter to the Organizers and Participants of the Seminar 'The Feast of Creation' and the Mystery of Creation: Ecumenism, Theology, Liturgy, and Signs of the Times in Dialogue, written on 15 March 2024," https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aJRs3Hmf5pS86Vk9EyvmnbjABzFeJCzs/view. Coauthor Timothy Howles was present as a convener of this meeting; coauthor Celia Deane-Drummond presented a keynote lecture via video.

In December of that same year, the prospect of a Feast of Creation within Catholic churches was discussed at a second meeting in Assisi with a group of Roman Catholic liturgists, theologians, and representatives from various Dicasteries, with some ecumenical guests invited from the Anglican communion and other denominations.[38] At this event, a consensus was reached that the Feast should be more than simply a recapitulation of what regularly takes place through the liturgical year in celebrating the mystery of creation. Rather, its liturgical importance should be stressed through a dedicated solemnity ideally held on a Sunday and the christological and Pascal dimensions of the mystery of creation given special emphasis. This event included what Ignatian spirituality names as "discernment in the Spirit," leading to a consensus that a distinct feast would be crucial within the liturgical calendar, with the majority supporting it as a solemnity, a feast of the highest rank.[39] Historically, for example, feasts such as Corpus Christi remind the faithful of the importance of the Body of Christ, even though that is also understood as being celebrated in every eucharistic liturgy, as well as in Easter liturgies. The emergence within the process of a broader christological emphasis is reflected in the title of the final report: "The Feast of the Mystery of Creation in Christ."[40]

A third event, an international ecumenical conference on an even larger scale to the previous year, was held on May 9–11, 2025, also in Assisi. Coauthor Celia Deane-Drummond attended and presented a paper at this meeting;[41] although no formal conference documents are available at the time of submission of this article, preliminary reflections on it can be reported here. Entitled "Creation Day and the Nicaea Centenary: Crystallizing the Ecumenical Dream of the New Liturgical Feast," this event widened the depth of ecumenical participation still further, representing fourteen out of fifteen

38. See Seminar Report, "The Feast of the Mystery of Creation in Christ: A Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Exploration from the Roman Catholic Perspective, December 2024," https://drive.google.com/file/d/17pxJ9PPTJe1ukYS73xvEYYNUGu0Djz26/view.

39. An anonymous poll taken at the conference (see Seminar Report, "The Feast of the Mystery of Creation in Christ," 35), showed 92 percent supportive of the day becoming a liturgical feast, with 66 percent supporting the idea that the feast should become a solemnity, 11 percent a universal feast on a Sunday, and 13 percent an optional feast. Theological, historical, and pastoral concerns, following the threefold methodology proposed by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, validated that legitimate progress is warranted. Paul VI, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), §23, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

40. See Seminar Report, "The Feast of the Mystery of Creation in Christ." Another criticism raised at the December conference was whether such an upgrade of the World Day of Prayer for Creation would mean other world days of prayer would be upgraded to feasts, thus setting a precedent for multiplication. It is important to note that the Feast of Creation is the only item within the Nicene Creed that does not have a Feast associated with it, thus having dogmatic weight that should immediately rule out any such concerns.

41. Coauthor Timothy Howles was present online, a facility that also opened access for contributors on a global scale, with significant representation from the Global South.

church communions.[42] Ecumenical Patriarchate Bartholomew I wrote a letter to endorse the feast and nominated formal representatives for both the May 2025 conference and for the subsequent working group.[43] Heinrich Bedford Strohm, moderator of the World Council of Churches central committee, in an opening speech entitled "An Ecumenical Dream for the Third Millenium," commented that this event was crucially important for ecumenism and that we were "making history" on account of the number of church communions present. In terms of approach, this meeting pushed beyond previous ecumenical efforts that draw on a framework that has become known as "receptive ecumenism."[44] The recent history of ecumenism has gone through various phases toward attaining an underlying methodology of consensus building. Early conversations attempted to reach organic unity between the different Christian traditions, but the issue of authority was habitually left unresolved.[45] Moving beyond material unity for its own sake, receptive ecumenism tries to welcome, through openness to the movement of the Spirit, self-critical learning by being open to other traditions. This moves the acquisition of knowledge away from a superstructure built on certain foundations to knowledge as a "complex, flexible, context specific web."[46] However,

42. See seminar program, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1U2Gcd2tOj8-wTnQMx-eeVP9WHT3iyfEcdmxXthAzd–U/edit?tab=t.0. The final Assisi conference included representation from the following church communions: Anglican Communion, Baptist World Alliance, Chaldean Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, Disciples of Christ, Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, Lutheran World Federation, Mennonite World Conference, Moravian Church, Pentecostal World Fellowship, Roman Catholic Church, Salvation Army, World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Evangelical Alliance, World Methodist Council, World Council of Churches. The papal interregnum falling at the time of the ecumenical conference organized in May 2025 impacted any formal representation from the relevant Roman Catholic Dicasteries.
43. Sent on April 4, 2025, and addressed to the Director of LSRI and the main co-organizers, the General Secretaries of the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Foundation, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the World Methodist Council, the letter states, "We are deeply encouraged to read of the shared commitment among the Western Christian traditions to adopt a unified liturgical expression in honour of the precious gift of God's creation. The intention to embrace such a celebration within your respective liturgical calendars marks a meaningful and hopeful step forward in our common witness and pastoral concern for the integrity of creation." Further, commemorative events marking the 1,700 anniversary of the first ecumenical council convened in Nicaea are, Bartholomew continues, "aimed at reaffirming the enduring relevance of the Church's conciliar tradition as a source of spiritual wisdom and ecclesial unity in responding to the multifaceted challenges of our time."
44. Paul D. Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Murray et al., *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning*.
45. William J. Abraham, "Method in Ecumenism," in *Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan (Oxford University Press, 2017), 630, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199600847.013.47.
46. Paul Murray, "Families of Receptive Theological Learning: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 4 (October 2013): 80, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12063.

within receptive ecumenism and other theories of ecumenism, there has so far been very little conversation about a shared concern for creation.[47] The Feast of Creation process also represents a shared learning, but crucially a basic form of material unity is also explicitly intended, even if it is anticipated that as the process continues there will be and indeed must be a variety of liturgical and even non-liturgical expressions to the actual form of the celebration, given the wide diversity of churches represented in the conversation.

In this latest meeting, a consensus was reached that the date of the celebration should match that already adopted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople for the World Day of Prayer for Creation, namely, September 1, with the option to move the Feast to the nearest Sunday. A steering group and a working group have been established. The latter, which met in Rome immediately after the Assisi meeting in May 2025, considered the title. It was concluded that for any shared statement the most appropriate title needed to recognize how different churches are likely to interpret the meaning of this liturgical celebration in their particular context. The working title that is intended to be fully inclusive of all communions is "The Feast of Creation, Celebrating the Creator God and Creation in Christ." The lack of representation from the Global South, including indigenous voices, was also a concern raised in the May 2025 meeting, and the intention is to include representation through a consultative process as the process continues to be worked out. Full agreement has not yet been reached on the implementation of the Feast, but many church communions have already decided to bring it into their liturgical calendar, given the significance associated with celebrating the 1,700-year anniversary of the ecumenical council of Nicaea in 2025. Within the Roman Catholic Church, the processes are more complex, but there is growing and widespread support for this Feast, particular among the churches of the Global South, representing hundreds of millions of Catholics.[48]

Crucial to the considerations of participants at all these events was that a liturgically instituted Feast of Creation would seek to commemorate the idea of God as creator, including the role of Christ. That is to say, its focus would not be on celebration of the natural world for its own sake. Instead, the focus would be to celebrate creation as

47. This is particularly surprising given the leadership role that the World Council of Churches has taken in initiatives around creation care, including, for example, the "Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation" (JPIC) initiative that began at the Vancouver Assembly in 1983. For a discussion of the significance of this event within an ecumenical context and the Roman Catholic church, see Joseph Selling, "The 'Conciliar Process' for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation: The European Experience," *Louvain Studies* 14 (1989): 346–64. The focus of the JPIC process in the World Council of Churches has, however, been on the shared practical concern for creation care across different church communions, rather than its deeper theological meaning.

48. At the time of writing three out of the five continental episcopal conferences (CELAM, FABC, SECAM) have endorsed the proposed new Feast, and national conferences are also pursuing a joint endorsement letter. So far, twenty-five conferences have already signed and many more are also expected to join soon. In addition, over a thousand Roman Catholic organizations have signed a letter of support.

a foundational mystery of the Christian faith. This distinction was conveyed by two Italian words that can be used for "creation". The first, *la creazione*, primarily denotes the divine creation of the cosmos, that is, the idea of God the creator and creation as theological mystery. The second, *il creato*, primarily denotes the result of that act of creation, that is, the natural world itself, here understood as "creation." This terminological distinction, which is not readily available in English, proved useful to indicate that it was a commitment first and foremost to *la creazione* that can be seen as guaranteeing the theological valency of the work. Further, a subtle shift has taken place in that the specific role of Christ in creation and an understanding of the Paschal mystery of Christ as both creator and redeemer became more significant in the second (December 2024) and third (May 2025) conferences, especially among Roman Catholic and Orthodox participants, though the emerging ecumenical consensus was broader than this, and some preferred a trinitarian or pneumatological emphasis.[49]

As we have seen, the early church's idea of creation was subtly inflected by the post-Constantinian situation, which gradually made a new accommodation to the pagan world possible. In the same way, the contemporary Feast of Creation initiative can be fruitfully addressed in the context of historical trends.

One obvious context to consider is the (relatively) recent rise in global awareness of the scale and urgency of the planetary ecological crisis we are facing. Scientific data on the severe harms being caused to our earth system by human-generated drivers of climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, pollution, and so on has continued to amass.[50] A call upon Christian people to heed the evidence of this accumulating data is made by *Laudato Si', Laudate Deum*, and many other recent ecumenical statements.[51]

However, it is important to note that in all ecumenical meetings this context was taken as occasional, not determinative. There was universal recognition among participants that liturgy should always point beyond and behind the exigencies of a particular global situation, even if these are indisputably described by scientific data. Climate activism can be taken as having partisan or political implications, and within religious contexts this could generate skepticism around celebration of the mystery of

49. It was also argued that the language of creation was preferable as a means to include others who share a common practical concern for creation care from a wider ecumenical perspective that includes other faiths or even the secular world.

50. See IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), "2023 Synthesis Report of the ICC Sixth Assessment Report," www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle.

51. See Celia E. Deane-Drummond, "*Laudato Si'* and the Natural Sciences: An Assessment of Possibilities and Limits," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (June 2016): 392–415, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916635118. For representative ecumenical statements, see World Council of Churches, "Interfaith Statement on Climate Change, 21 September 2014," www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/interfaith-statement-on-climate-change; The International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue, "Stewards of Creation: A Hope-Filled Ecology—The Canterbury Statement, 2020," www.anglicancommunion.org/media/421995/icaotd_stewards-of-creation-hope-filled-ecology_nov2020.pdf.

creation.[52] The innovations proposed by the Feast of Creation initiative were not intended as a reflex reaction to concerns about reports around our contemporary ecological situation, however alarming these may have been to individual participants.

In light of this, a slightly deeper historical context can also be recognized. The Feast of Creation initiative understands itself as responding to a more general attitude toward nature and the natural world that can perhaps be identified as being coterminous with (Western) modernity itself. Here, we are using the term "modernity" as provided by Alfred North Whitehead, who defined modernity as an epistemological stance promoting the idea of a fundamental separation or "bifurcation" of human beings from nature.[53] In this sense, modernity can be identified with belief in the idea that humans can in some way extract themselves from their embedded situation in the world, viewing nature as something "out-there," related to themselves only extrinsically, and thus as a mere resource for extraction, monetization, and consumption. *Laudato Si'* identifies such a historical moment via its identification of the "technocratic paradigm" of the modern world.[54] As that encyclical claims, modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism:

> Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our "dominion" over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.[55]

Catholic social teaching has frequently recognized the need for an ethics that is not subservient to this paradigm. Instead, humans must understand their responsibilities as

52. For a broad survey of tensions inherent in religious environmentalism, including intradenominational, interdenominational, interreligious, and religious-societal conflicts, see Jens Köhrsen, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber, eds., *Religious Environmental Activism: Emerging Conflicts and Tensions in Earth Stewardship* (Routledge, 2023). For a theological reflection, see Catherine Pickstock, "Liturgy, Art and Politics," *Modern Theology* 16, no. 2 (April 2002): 159–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00120.
53. The classic formulation of this idea is found in Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature: The Tarner Lectures as Delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). For a survey and contemporary developments, see Didier Debaise, *Nature as Event: The Lure of the Possible*, trans. Michael Halewood (Duke University Press, 2017). In the background, we also point to the important work of Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), where, following modernity, religious belief becomes just one option among many others. Pope Francis brings back into focus an ecclesial alternative that is robust in its theological vision but open to the world in all its diversity.
54. Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), §99, http://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (hereafter cited as *LS*). For a fuller discussion of Pope Francis's analysis of the technocratic paradigm, see Celia E. Deane-Drummond, "Pope Francis' Integral Ecology Paradigm: An Exploration of Its Theological Foundations and Ethical Implications," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2023): 99–111, https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400231160383.
55. *LS*, §116.

deriving from a deep embeddedness in the created world, itself a site for the drama of the divine economy. In *Caritas in Veritate*, for example, Pope Benedict XVI offers a challenge to "a purely consumerist and utilitarian view of life":

> *Charity in truth* places man before the astonishing experience of gift. Gratuitousness is present in our lives in many different forms, which often go unrecognized because of a purely consumerist and utilitarian view of life. The human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendent dimension. Sometimes modern man is wrongly convinced that he is the sole author of himself, his life and society. This is a presumption that follows from being selfishly closed in upon himself, and it is a consequence—to express it in faith terms—of *original sin*.[56]

Laudato Si' also diagnoses modernity in these terms: "If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships."[57]

Many theorists have also attempted to correlate this thesis about modernity to our contemporary global situation, the idea being that modernity, if it is indeed characterized by this stance toward nature and the natural world, has licensed human behaviors that have led (directly or indirectly) to ecological harms.[58] This theoretical debate touches in important ways on theology. For example, it has often been argued that harmful modern attitudes to nature and the natural world have their roots in the Judeo-Christian religion, including in the Genesis creation narrative, which is accused of assigning to man the role of master over nature, having been granted "dominion" by God over its various forms of life.[59] More constructively, other theorists have sought to show how this modernity thesis cuts across and subverts an authentically Christian contemplation of nature (as related to the idea of creation described above). Joseph Ratzinger, for example, argues that "faith in creation" has been increasingly obscured and in some places suppressed by the "spirit of modernity," a process he suggests began with the pantheistic cosmology of Giordano Bruno in the sixteenth century, then

56. Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate* (June, 29, 2009), §34, original emphases, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.
57. *LS*, §119.
58. See, for example, Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (Harmony/Bell Tower, 1999); Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* (Fortress Press, 2008): 120ff.; and Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Polity, 2017).
59. This narrative is strongly associated with the work of American medieval historian Lynn White Jr., for which see Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–7, www.jstor.org/stable/1720120. For a retrospective on White's article, including responses to it in the years since its publication, see Elspeth Whitney, "Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' After Fifty Years," *History Compass* 13, no. 8 (August 2015): 396–410, https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12254.

progressing through various systems of thought to Marx and beyond.[60] In a francophone context, the work of Christophe Boureux, a Dominican theologian based in the priory of Sainte Marie de La Tourette, near Lyon, has plotted a similar genealogy, showing how the Christian doctrine of creation has been co-opted by the technocratic regime of modernity.[61] Similar arguments are made in the context of Latin American liberation theology,[62] as well as in the field of decolonial and comparative religious studies.[63]

The Feast of Creation initiative can be seen as an attempt to correct the (putative) co-option of the idea of creation within modernity, thus indicating a new pattern of accommodation between human and nonhuman beings toward a more harmonious planetary existence. To put it another way, it proposes a different mode of contemplation of nature (*theōria physikē*) to that which is predominant in the culture of modernity. *Laudato Si'* hints at something analogous, casting our eyes backwards and behind modernity to "the awe-filled contemplation of creation which we find in Saint Francis of Assisi"[64] and then to another Franciscan, Saint Bonaventure, who "teaches us that contemplation deepens the more we feel the working of God's grace within our hearts, and the better we learn to encounter God in creatures outside ourselves."[65] For Pope Francis, contemplation of creation is a different way of perceiving who we are in relation the natural world: "For the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice."[66] This is precisely the task that is identified by Norman Wirzba as belonging to public theology today: "We are in need of a new *theoria*, a new way of seeing the world that might better enable people to cherish the world and live more faithfully within it."[67] Wirzba calls upon theology to meet this challenge by revisiting the contemplation of nature that was elaborated in the early church: "Christian theologians from early on advocated a Christian *theōria physikē* or manner of seeing that enabled people to perceive the world as the place where God is intimately at work."[68] For Wirzba, in making such a retrieval, the contemporary church

60. Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Eerdmans, 1995), 82–92.
61. Christophe Boureux, *Dieu est aussi jardinier: La Création, une écologie accomplie* (Cerf, 2014).
62. See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *The Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor*, trans. Philip Berryman (Orbis, 1997).
63. See, for example, Randy S. Woodley, *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview: A Decolonized Approach to Christian Doctrine—Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology* (Baker Academic, 2022); Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2015).
64. *LS*, §125.
65. *LS*, §233.
66. *LS*, §85, citing John Paul II, *Catechesis* (January 26, 2000), 5.
67. Norman Wirzba, "Christian *theoria physike*: On Learning to See Creation," *Modern Theology* 32, no. 3 (April 2016): 217, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12239.
68. Wirzba, "Christian *theoria physike*," 218.

will be able to contest attitudes to nature that have become normative within contemporary (Western) culture. Wirzba refers to this as "idolatrous seeing."[69] Only via the replacement of such a *theōria physikē* with a more integrative idea of creation can we hope to address these global ecological harms at their root. In this article, we have shown that this idea can be resourced and even retrieved from some of the earliest strands of the Christian tradition.

Hence, the historical context of the contemporary Feast of Creation initiative, while not being determinative of its outcomes, is surely relevant. Just as the idea of creation that seems to have characterized the early church can be seen as emerging in dialogue with the surrounding culture of its time, especially in its fourth-century context, so this work seeks to be attentive to the "signs of the times" around it.[70] And just as the early church was attentive to the risk of a mere curiosity toward nature, a posture devoid of spiritual content that could lead the inquirer toward the greater story of the divine economy of the world, so the Feast of Creation initiative seeks to promulgate a mode of engagement with nature that is aware of its transcendental meaning and directionality, as framed by the theological idea of creation.

As a final point of comparison, we can draw parallels with the christological focus of the idea of creation in the Nicene period and in our contemporary church context. In our survey of the early church, we saw the value of creation as a foundation for right thinking about Christ, in the Nicene settlement and beyond.[71] By analogy, the Feast of Creation initiative promotes Christology as a foundation for right thinking about human responsibility toward and engagement with the natural world. This is a theme drawn out in *Laudato Si'*. In that text, Pope Francis calls us to understand Christ as the one through whom all things were created ("the destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ, present from the beginning").[72] But it also calls us to understand Christ as the end to which all things are moving ("the ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things").[73] Both christological dimensions are necessary to safeguard our understanding of the value and significance of nature

69. Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World* (Baker Academic, 2015), passim.
70. For the relevance of the idea of discerning "the signs of the times," see Seminar Report, "A Liturgical Opportunity: An Ecumenical Kairos." For a positive statement as to how Catholic ecological hermeneutics might also be indicating attentiveness to the signs of the times, see Jaime Tatay, "The Evolution of Catholic Ecological Hermeneutics," *Theological Studies* 85, no. 3 (2024): 370–99, https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639241263277. Tatay writes, "Over the past five decades, the Catholic Church has increasingly incorporated ecological themes into its theological and ethical framework, emphasizing the interconnectedness of creation and human responsibility," 396.
71. For a more detailed historical survey of the post-Nicene handling of this idea, see Mark S. Smith, *The Idea of Nicaea in the Early Church Councils, AD 431–451* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
72. *LS*, §99.
73. *LS*, §83.

and the natural world. Creation theology provides the structure within which this can take place, since (as we have seen) it incorporates nature and the natural world as the site in which this christological story is in part played out.

The christological basis of the Feast of Creation initiative is also bound up with the idea of sacramental action as an intrinsic element of the divine economy, one that can place human beings and the natural world in right relation to one another. On the one hand, the sacramental meaning we declare in the actions of liturgy is understood as a way of allowing created things to announce themselves before we try to make sense of them or determine their meaning for us. This would seem to warn Christian theology against leaning into a naively anthropocentric agenda, where nature is simply taken as backdrop or external décor to an intrinsically human drama. Instead, through liturgical actions, participants are reminded of our involvement in a drama that is (at least in part) mediated to us through things of nature that are independent of us. On the other hand, rather than generating a reductive vision of the human, these liturgical actions also remind us that there is a distinctively human agency vis-à-vis the natural world. After all, liturgy is at least in part about exercising that peculiar human vocation to make communicable sense through the projected schema of words and images, objects, and ritual actions. Liturgy thus enacts a particular kind of human creative imposition upon the world, one informed by the model of Christ himself as the "firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:16). As Rowan Williams put it in an address to delegates at the first ecumenical meeting:

> The foundational narrative of the Word Incarnate is the touchstone of the integrity and fruitfulness of cultural activity, providing the ground for interrogating and critiquing cultural practice (religious, artistic, economic and political) about its fidelity to the central acknowledgment that human agents and non-human alike share a dependence on God that is concretely mediated in dependence on each other.[74]

In all these ways, then, the christological dimension is presented as key to a right understanding not only of the God-world relation but also of how humans should see themselves vis-à-vis other created beings. This too has substantial echoes of the idea of creation that operated in the early church.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have explored how the wide-ranging and assimilative idea of creation that (as recent scholarship shows) was characteristic of the early church holds important lessons for the church of today. In particular, interesting comparisons and analogies can be gleaned for the contemporary ecumenical initiative toward a Feast of Creation to be celebrated by churches worldwide. At a historical moment where human attitudes to nature are often transactional and instrumentalized, resulting in the

74. Seminar Report, "A Liturgical Opportunity: An Ecumenical Kairos."

prevalence of technocratic governance approaches that risk doing more harm than good, a retrieval of an idea of creation as revealing the drama of divine economy is crucial for our time. For, as *Laudato Si'* puts it, "the word 'creation' has a broader meaning than 'nature,' for it has to do with God's loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance."[75]

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our colleague, Tomás Insua, Ecclesial Affiliate at the Laudato Si' Research Institute, for his leadership related to the conceptual and practical aspects of the Feast of Creation initiative, which has informed our thinking in preparing this article.

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75. *LS*, §76.