

GOD'S ECONOMY – THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE BEAUTY OF GOD IN THE LIGHT OF THE CURRENT GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS*

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Abstract

In this article I intend to show the inner connection between the beauty of the creation and the identity of the infinite and trinitarian God. In my opinion this connection makes it meaningful to reflect on the entire work of God and offers, moreover, I hope, a coherent relation between my thesis and the first main Conference theme: "Where on earth is God? Theological reflection on the identity of the triune God in the light of the current global environmental crisis".

Key Words: Beauty; Creation; Incarnation; Gregory of Nazianzen; Recapitulation

The Beauty of God's Ecstatic Love

Let me start with a quotation from David Bentley Hart's fascinating book: *The Beauty of the Infinite. The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*:

The infinite is beautiful because God is Trinity; and because all being belongs to God's infinity, a Christian ontology appears and properly belongs within a theological aesthetics.¹

What's at stake here? I will answer by referring to some perspectives from Jeremy S Begbie's concept of beauty,² as it is a relevant interpretation of Hart's programmatic formulation, and at the same time a good entrance to my own reflections that follows. The deity "celebrated in Christian faith" is, according to Begbie:

not an undifferentiated monad or blank 'Absence', but a triunity of inexhaustible love and life, active and present to the world as triune and never more intensively than in the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If then, we are to speak of God as primordially beautiful – however, we may want to qualify this – then strenuous care must be taken to ensure it is *this* God of whom we speak.³

With this orientation to the triune God in mind, we have to affirm that the beauty of God – especially apparent in the economy of salvation – is the ultimate measure of *all* beauty in the universe, created by God. Creation's beauty is thus not something beyond the sensual or behind the particular matter.

* Proposal first submitted at the Conference on Christian Faith and the Earth.

¹ David B Hart, 2003. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 211.

² See Jeremy S Begbie: 'Created Beauty', in *The Beauty of God. Theology and the Arts* (2007), DJ Treier, M Husbands, R Lundin (eds.), Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, pp. 9-44.

³ Begbie, 2007:21.

Robert W Jenson affirms in his *Systematic Theology. The Triune God*, that the Spirit's task was *inter alia* to liberate the Father from himself so that he became 'fatherly', i.e. so that he truly and genuinely appeared as Father *vis-à-vis* his creation.⁴ Similarly, we can say that the Spirit liberates the creation, the Father's work, so that it appears to the human in its autonomy as *created*: "The beauty of a coral reef is its endless variegation, play of colour, patterned relations; its beautiful forms are the forms of its *matter*."⁵ Only the Spirit can liberate the creation so that it shines in its creatureliness, so that it shines forth from within itself as the work of art that it is, just as it proceeded from the Creator's hand at the beginning. Here, the theology of creation maintains that the Spirit liberates created things to form new colours and forms in a continuous, evolving reproductivity, and in this way, creation appears as something that renews itself. The Danish writer Eric A Nielsen describes this mystery as follows:

The creation narrative is the story of how something that is always on the point of death nevertheless reappears, by a daily repeated miracle. The real effect of the creation narrative is that it makes us see the world from the perspective of the beginning, see objects and living things cleansed of all that is inessential, see the real meaning in their forms, see the special manner in which they make their way into life, the anemone in its way, the camel in its, and the children in their many different ways. This longing to see the world afresh and cleansed seems to run through all creative perception.⁶

In what follows I shall say something more about the creation's ability to renew itself by analyzing some aspects of Wolfhart Pannenberg's ecological doctrine of creation.

The Ecological Doctrine of Creation

The understanding of life which Pannenberg proposes, is fundamentally important for the understanding of his *ecological doctrine of creation*, and it is also important for the understanding of his concept of *beauty*. He affirms that the phenomenon of life cannot be understood on the basis of secular sciences alone, since the phenomenon of life is not merely 'nature.' The biblical reality of life also includes knowledge which sheds light on biology. According to modern biology, living organisms are open systems, not closed. All organisms nourish themselves on what lies around them, from the simplest biological organisms to the higher species including the human being; within one particular area of surroundings, the organisms live by transcending themselves. This process also contains a drive towards the future, a drive towards a state which comes after the self-transcending transformation.⁷ This is true of every action which contains an element of creation, of self-nourishment, of regeneration and reproduction. In this way, the dynamic, ecstatic process demands that the organisms live *in* and *of* their surroundings, and this means that the activity in a living cell or in an organism is *conditioned* by something: in order to realize its life, so that every living being depends on having a relationship to a reality greater than itself. Everything that is alive makes use of its surroundings as a means toward its own self-realization and to the renewal of life.

⁴ Robert Jenson, 1997. *Systematic Theology. The Triune God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Vol 1:157-161.

⁵ Begbi, 2007:25.

⁶ Eric A Nielsen, 2005. *Skrevet af Helligånden – poetisk bibellæsning* (written by The Holy Spirit – Poetic Reading of the Bible), København, pp. 32-33.

⁷ This is to be understood in the sense that the drive towards the future is built into the process of change itself, i.e. in the process towards accomplishing change.

Pannenberg's 'move' here is to collate the natural phenomena of life with the Bible's description of the reality of life: the fact that every living being is dependent on an external reality in order to be able to transcend itself corresponds to the fact that according to the Bible, life on earth comes into existence and is sustained by God's ability to breathe life into it, i.e. by means of the 'movement' which God himself is, the movement which is his 'breath,' his Spirit. Pannenberg's argumentation here must be seen in connection with his holistic understanding of reality as a totality. Just as every phenomenon of life is dependent on its surroundings, so in turn the surroundings are determined by their own surroundings which transcend them, until it becomes clear that the entire process of reality is created by the Spirit's energy and lives from this energy.

We can now say that this is *the ecological perspective* in Pannenberg's thinking. It is clear that this perspective contains an attempt to overcome the dualism between spirit and matter, spirit and nature. Like Teilhard de Chardin, Pannenberg links spirit and energy so closely that energy can be understood as the self-manifestation of the Spirit. Just as the Spirit participates in nature and creates nature, so for its part nature is an expression of the Spirit, without being identical to the Spirit. Accordingly, the Spirit in Pannenberg's conception is the fundamental category of nature, the real subject of nature. This seems to allow him to overcome the mechanical understanding of nature where God ends up by becoming functionless.

One final point: Pannenberg reinforces his holistic presentation of all that exists by pointing to the field theory of modern physics, where the totality has priority over the individual parts. This allows him to claim that God – and no-one else – is the power which creates the unity of all that exists, and to conceive of God as the one who creates the whole of reality and brings it to perfection. Similarly, it allows him to affirm that the Spirit cannot be divided, in the sense that he would be related to two mutually unconnected spheres of reality, the creation and the consummation (eschatology). What is involved here is in fact a concretization of *Spiritus Creator* which says: If the Spirit does not create life, then the creation is nothing.

The Incarnation and the Way of God's Being

However, the *incarnation* too is supremely important for the ecological perspective, for the following reason. When the earth renews itself, when new forms and colours come into existence, this reflects God's way of being, which the incarnation shows to be *newness* and *freedom*. If the creation truly reflects God, this means that just as God freely created something new in the incarnation, there also exists a freedom for new creation *in the creation itself*. God has not enclosed the creation in a plan which was wholly determined in advance. Rather, God has designed the world in such a way that it unfolds, because he has given it freedom and space to do so. The world is set free for self-renewal and self-organization. Accordingly, there is no competition between the creator and his creation, but rather a harmony. The Danish theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen has pointed out that in the creation narrative God does not speak in the imperative, but in the jussive form. In other words, God creates by giving permission: "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth!" (Gen 1:11).⁸ In keeping with the grammar in the narrative, we can say in

⁸ Niels H Gregersen, 2005. "Skabelse og selvorganisering – et teologisk tankeeksperiment," (Creation and self-organisation – a theological intellectual experiment), *Kirke og Kultur*: 119:539-552.

general terms that God gives the earth the power to bring forth new creations, just as animals and human beings are blessed with the ability to reproduce themselves at a later point in the narrative (Gen 1:22, 28).⁹ Here, one might easily suspect that the simple, ancient narrative collides with the natural sciences' basic understanding of the world, but it is certainly not necessary to assume such a collision,¹⁰ since the natural sciences tells us that the processes in nature tend in the direction of ever more complex totalities which contain new, self-reproducing characteristics. Like Gregersen, however, I would want to ask what is implied for a Christian understanding of life by the belief that the world is self-organizing and self-creative. Does this mean that nature becomes strong and God becomes powerless? Or should we hold that God displays his creative power precisely when he *allows nature* itself (the jussive form!) to form new constellations, new characteristics such as life and consciousness? It is the latter alternative that corresponds to God's *way of being*, to God *qua* freedom and newness. God is the creator when he allows nature and the human being to be active participants. Since God is omnipresent on his created earth, creation takes place precisely where he is, i.e. *in* the work of creation. The creation takes place in a hidden manner under the activity of the creature – for God is not creator alongside the creature, but *in* the creature. This corresponds to the incarnation! The presence of the Lord in the body of Jesus, the true human being Jesus, is the *model* for the theology about the creator in the world. For just as the Son acts *through* the human being Jesus, so does the creator act *through* his creatures in the world and in nature. This is how the self-creative world is: God sets the world *free* when he creates it, and he creates it by setting it free! This is the *contingency* of the creation. Paradoxically, however, the contingency of the creation does not abolish its regularity, since God is also present in the world as the embodiment of its duration, its safety, and its stability. Ultimately, this is because it is *through* his identity as eternal and immutable that God creates what is new – just as it was *through* his identity that he *became* the human being Jesus. God became something *new* – the Son became Jesus – without ceasing to be what (who) he was. Here too, the incarnation supplies the model for our understanding! The incarnation explains both the freedom (the contingency) and the immutability. God is the same through all eternity, and this means that as Father and creator, he is faithful and reliable, and that he does not abandon nature to the arbitrary play of chance. Nature appears beautiful both through its surprises and through its regularity: in either case, it reflects God's beauty, which is an aspect of his way of being. The important thing is that the human's eyes be opened, so that he sees the beauty of the divinity in the work of creation. Since the creation, including humans, is subject to destruction, it is ultimately only the Spirit – redemption in Christ – that can make the senses free to experience. And this means that when Christ gives the human eyes to see with, they see the beauty both in that which takes one by surprise and in that which gives calm to the senses, viz. the abiding and the harmonious. In both instances the nature reflects the beauty of God which is an aspect of his essence. And, in both instances, it is the revelation in Christ that identifies the experiences as traces of God.

⁹ “More important is the interest in the variety of the forms of life and the concern to grasp them in their totality from the standpoint of the power of life to renew and expand by way of propagation. The modern view brings all these points together under the rubric of the self-organization of living things in their evolution. In this regard it touches on the thought in the story that the blessing of God gave to living things (at least to animals) the power of fruitfulness. The only point is that now the idea of the creative working of God through a vital creative force granted to living creatures themselves is so generalized that it embraces the actual bringing forth of living forms in all their variety”: Pannenberg, 1994. *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, p.130.

¹⁰ On this, see Pannenberg (1994), pp.115-136.

Gregory of Nazianzen on the Image of God

In accordance with the theology above we have to affirm that it's not only the apparently strong and perfect aspect of God and his creation that is beautiful and lovely.

In a sermon about love of the poor, the church father Gregory of Nazianzen maintains that it is when we serve those who suffer, the weak and the rejected, that God's image becomes particularly clear in us: when one imitates Christ, who is the true image of God, in this service, one contributes to the restoration both of the image of God in one's neighbour (if he/she has been injured or trampled upon) and of the image of God in one's own self.¹¹ And the service of the weak and the rejected makes it clear that the image of God in the human is not based on the external façade, the appearance, or the body. Christ suffered and died for the sufferers too, who bear the image of God even more clearly than those who are successful in life. Gregory takes the lepers as an example. They have defaced and deformed bodies which are broken down and wasting away – they certainly possess no external beauty. But does that make them less valuable as human beings? Are they any less God's creatures, just because they are ugly and repulsive to look at? The fact that God's true image, Christ, suffered and died means that the unpleasant aspect of service, that which disgusts us, reflects God in Christ (the image of God) more than anything else in this world.

According to Gregory, the beautiful and the lovely are present even in that which is despised, and in actions on behalf of those who are not externally strong and beautiful. This is why the beauty of God comes fully into view in love for those who bear heavy burdens, in patience and tolerance *vis-à-vis* those who are not very successful, just as God's beauty also comes into view in those to whom love and care are shown, whether or not they are externally beautiful. In this way, we must link God's beauty to his passionate dedication to his creatures, independently of external circumstances. This is because the qualities in God tell us who God is *internally*, just as God's glory is a 'shining forth' of God's being: this is what the poet expresses in Ps 50:2, "God radiates forth from Zion, the crown of beauty". This also sheds light on what the 'image of God' means. If the beautiful aspect of the human person is the fact that he bears the image of the beautiful God, it must follow that the actions of the human person cannot be achievements for one's own sake, but for the good of the Other. God's goodness trains the person who is created in his image to overlook his own interests and to learn to see himself in relation to what serves his neighbour in the larger context. This can entail acting even when one encounters resistance and desperation. The beautiful and the good in one's actions can be one's identification with that which is alien, that which one does not immediately find sympathetic. When one sees the abysses in human life, beauty consists in not turning away in contempt.

But I think we have to say the same *vis-à-vis* our planet, because we live on a wounded planet. It means: We have to draw a parallel here between the wounded planet and wounded humanity, partly because both the planet and the human endure the destruction of the fall and partly because we treat them foolishly through our destructive attitudes. The really sad part of this is, however, that God also suffers when he 'sees' how that which was good from the very beginning is misused. The reason is that the creation in its entirety, is not connected to the Creator in some merely external manner: God is present with his grace in all creative activities, because he loves the created and is intimately connected to it.

¹¹ See *On the Love of the Poor* (De pauperum amore), Oration 14. *Early Church Fathers* (2006), AB Caillau (ed.) London: Routledge, Or. 14 translated by BE Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, pp. 75-97.

Therefore, when the world, including the human person, is wounded, when it is exhausted and broken down, he suffers too.

What are we to say in this situation? Do we have a message to the fallen human person? I think we have. The church father, Gregory of Nyssa, accentuates that it is not sufficient merely to protect and to take care of the gifts from God, as far as the believer is also meant for striving to understand God. Through decisions and purification (*catharsis*) the believer is able to imitate Jesus' actions and the Trinity's activity, the divine motion that leads back to God and eternal life. Gregory puts this as follows:

If a man's heart has been purified from every creature and all unruly affections, he will see the Image of the Divine Nature in his own beauty '...' There is in you, human beings, a desire to contemplate the true good. But when you hear that the Divine Majesty is exalted above the heavens, that Its glory is inexpressible, Its beauty ineffable, and its Nature inaccessible, do not despair of ever beholding what you desire. It is indeed within your reach; you have within yourselves the standard by which to apprehend the Divine. For He who made you did at the same time endow your nature with this wonderful quality. For God imprinted on it the likeness of the glories of His own Nature, as if moulding the form of a carving into wax. But the evil that has been poured all around the nature bearing the Divine Image has rendered useless to you this wonderful thing, that lies hidden under vile coverings. If, therefore, you wash off by a good life the filth that has been stuck on your heart like plaster, the Divine Beauty will again shine forth in you '...' For the Godhead is purity, freedom from passion, and separation from all evil. If therefore these things be in you, God is indeed in you. Hence, if your thought is without any alloy of evil, free from passion, and alien from all stain, you are blessed because you are clear of sight. You are able to perceive what is invisible to those who are not purified, because you have been cleansed; the darkness caused by material entanglements has been removed from the eyes of your soul, and so you see the blessed vision radiant in the pure heaven of your heart. But what is this vision? It is purity, sanctity, simplicity, and other such luminous reflections of the Divine Nature, in which God is contemplated.¹²

Sotereology as Recapitulation – Irenaeus

Imitating the Divine Majesty as Gregory of Nyssa expounds it, is, I think, tantamount to participate in 'the glory of God'. Hans Urs von Balthasar shows in his extensive writing that participation in 'the glory of God' is also theological aesthetics.¹³ According to Balthasar it is, however, first at *recapitulation* that the beauty of the cosmos and of humankind becomes visible. So the beauty of creation reflects the beauty of that perfect artist who from the beginning ordered everything in the universe into a harmonious whole. A theological account of created beauty will, thus, return repeatedly to Jesus Christ as the one in whom creation has reached its eschatological goal. I will unfold this topic a little bit by using Irenaeus as my theological guide.

As a counterfoil to the Old Testament picture of Adam, Jesus is unique, and therefore the only one who can 'heal' the human person from the wound that was caused by the fall.¹⁴ This is why humans must be integrated into the process of healing which is

¹² *The Beatitudes* 6, in *St. Gregory of Nyssa. The Lord's Prayer*, Ancient Christian Writers, 18 (1954), translated and annotated by HC Graef, New York, NY/Ramsey, NJ: Newman Press, pp. 148-150.

¹³ HU von Balthasar, 1982. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark.

¹⁴ *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heretics), shortened here to AH, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1977), Grand Rapids, III:19,1.

embodied in Jesus' path from the incarnation via the cross to the resurrection. To be integrated into the process of healing means being brought back to the starting position *before* the fall. At the same time this integration means that one is introduced into the same *conflict* in which the human Jesus stood. Ireneus calls this process *recapitulation* (restoration).¹⁵ In mythical terminology, this recapitulation means that the child, who was handicapped in its natural growth and process of maturity because of the damage inflicted, begins to grow again. It is only through the natural growth and maturing that the child learns for example *to speak*. It is only then that the child begins to do things it has never done before. When the wound is healed, the child, when it grows up, becomes *something more than* it was before the damage occurred. At the same time, when the wound is healed, the child is *given back* the ability it had at birth.

Accordingly, the recapitulation is characterised by a *duality*. On the one hand, it means that the human person is brought back to the original creation; at the same time, on the other hand, it is a *perfecting* of the same creation.¹⁶ The secret behind the duality is that the re-establishing takes place through the life, death, and resurrection of the second Adam. The life that Jesus gives the human person through his death and resurrection is something *more than* the life Adam lost.¹⁷ Adam was condemned to death because he himself wanted to grow to eternal life on his own. Christ can never die, because he conquered death through his obedience unto death.¹⁸ It is in this sense that Christ (to use mythical language) is Adam in fully grown, healthy and undamaged form. Since salvation means receiving a share in *this* life, salvation means nothing other than becoming a true *human being*, and this in turn means doing away with the damage caused by Adam's fall. This 'more than' of which Irenaeus speaks here thus means being perfected in accordance with the image of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ Erich Osborn formulated it as follows: "The birth of Christ recapitulates the birth of Adam, to gather up humanity in physical form."²⁰

This is a very important point, because it means that receiving a share in eternal life, the life of the resurrection, does not mean receiving a *supernatural addition* to the life which is now lived, some vague Gnostic spiritual life. It means receiving a share in that life which makes possible *natural growth and maturing*, and this is possible only where the damage is healed and that which is alien to nature is removed. This makes its mythical expression

¹⁵ According to JND Kelly this is 'the grand theme' in the theology of the Church Fathers. "Running through almost all the patristic attempts to explain the redemption there is one grand theme which, we suggest, provides the clue to the fathers' understanding of the work of Christ. This is none other than the ancient idea of recapitulation which Irenaeus derived from St Paul, and which envisages Christ as the representative of the entire race. Just as all men were somehow present in Adam, so they are, or can be, present in the second Adam, the man from heaven. Just as they were involved in the former's sin, with all its appalling consequences, so they can participate in the latter's death and ultimate triumph over sin, the forces of evil and death itself. Because, very God as he is, he has identified himself with the human race, Christ has been able to act on its behalf and in its stead; and the victory he has obtained is the victory of all who belong to him. All the fathers, of whatever school, reproduce this motif." Kelly (1978), *Early Christian Doctrines*, New York, pp. 376-77.

¹⁶ Eric Osborn points out that recapitulation in Irenaeus's theology is a complex notion. He mentions a number of examples of what this concept can signify; to mention a few: 'correction', 'perfection of being', 'joy in truth', 'perfection of truth', and 'perfection of goodness'. Osborn (2001), *Irenaeus of Lyons*, Cambridge, pp. 97-116. Gustaf Wingren also emphasises recapitulation's many shades of meaning, see Wingren, 1983. *Människa och Kristen: En bok om Irenaeus*, Älvsjö, p. 56.

¹⁷ AH III:10,2, AH III, 16:6-7, AH III:18,7.

¹⁸ AH V:1,3.

¹⁹ AH III:19,1. Cf. 1 Kor 15:53.

²⁰ Osborn 2001:115. Osborn refers here to AH III:21,10.

through Jesus's life having passed through every stage of human life so he might become a pattern for us all.²¹ In this way Christ sums up and gathers all things into Himself. "He imparts perfection by joining the end to the beginning, linking man to God".²² That humankind could not have been made perfect from the beginning, as according to Irenaeus its basis in the reality that the created must be subjected to and subsequent to the Creator, and that the human, who in the beginning was but a child, was unable to receive the nourishment God could have given it.²³ Only when Christ had gathered all things into Himself was humankind able to take part in 'the glory of God'.²⁴

It is clear from Irenaeus's theology of recapitulation that he views the drama of creation in the light of its eschatological perspective. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus demonstrate that even though the creativity and renewal of nature are continually under threat from death and corruption, the Creator has the power to fulfil His renewal of the created; that He, through this renewal, has the ability to bring the created to perfection. In Irenaeus, on the other hand, the story of creation is a divinely inspired tale of the scenario of salvation. Matthew C Steenberg's interpretation is that the protology and the eschatology in Irenaeus are complementary revelations: "Not only does the eschaton illumine events that occurred in the beginning, but those events similarly clarify the nature of the future kingdom, since both *teloi* are bound up in the Son".²⁵ According to Steenberg you can therefore read the story of salvation both ways; for it is a story of recapitulation where the beginning and the conclusion are united in the person of Christ, "through whom the creation of cosmos and of the child Adam eventually reach perfection in beholding the glory of the Father, Son and Spirit, becoming a perfect work of God".²⁶ To use Irenaeus's own formulation: "The glory of God is a living man".²⁷ In other words: The beauty of God is a man filled with life.

God's Purpose for the Created – to Live in Rapport with its own Destiny

By analysing Irenaeus's soteriological theology of creation I have wished to demonstrate Irenaeus's theology as a paradigm for a Christian attitude to the creation. The specific point in Irenaeus's presentation is that he considers the created in the light of its divine destiny, since the world is *God's* world. For this very reason it becomes a special challenge for the

²¹ Osborn 2001:116. See AH II:22,4, where Irenaeus says: "He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. So likewise He was an old man for old men, that He might be a perfect Master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them likewise."

²² Osborn 2001:116. See AH IV:20,4.

²³ AH IV:38,1. "But created things must be inferior to Him who created them, from the very fact of their later origin; for it is not possible for things recently created to have been uncreated. But man could not receive this perfection being as yet an infant".

²⁴ AH IV:38,1, AH IV:39,2. See also AH V:6,1: "And for this cause does the apostle, explaining himself, make it clear that the saved man is a complete man as well as a spiritual man; saying thus in the first Epistle to the Thessalonians, 'Now the God of peace sanctify you perfect (*perfectos*); and may your spirit, and soul, and body be preserved whole without complaint to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ'".

²⁵ See Matthew Steenberg (2008), *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption*, Leiden/Boston, p. 216.

²⁶ Steenberg (2008: 216). Steenberg refers here to AH IV:39,2.

²⁷ AH IV:20,7. On this, see also, William P Loewe (1984), "Myth and Counter-Myth: Irenaeus's Story of Salvation", in Jane Kopas (ed.), *Interpreting Tradition – The Art of Theological Reflection*, Chico, pp. 39-53.

Christian to cultivate the created world so that it is preserved, and to hedge around its creatures in accordance with God's plan and purpose. This means that in all situations, locally or globally, where ethical solutions are under discussion, room must be made for the truly general human obligation, and it means our mandate of stewardship cannot be debated apart from its soteriological perspective. The eyes of faith see that the world belongs to *God*, who neither slackens nor delimits the demand to preserve the earth and those that live in it. On the contrary, He *sharpens* the demands. This makes it possible to read Irenaeus's paradigm in alignment with the clear mandate in Gen 2:15 to "to work and take care of" the garden.

Does this then mean that the paradigm I have now described is made up of divine commands and decrees? Does Irenaeus think that the obligations of life push humans in a direction they would prefer not to go? In the light of Irenaeus's mythical language about Adam, who describes *both* humankind's divorce from their original objective and the second Adam's restoration, we see that the answer is 'No!' Employing mythical linguistic theology as a tool Irenaeus expresses that wherever people act in accordance with God's purpose for the created, they also act in accordance with *their selves*, their nature; – acting in conformity with the inborn precondition for human self-realisation. It would be an incorrect interpretation if one thought that Irenaeus's paradigm posits demand versus freedom. This is because in reality the mythical language cancels out the contradiction between demand and freedom. It lies within the premises that this incongruity is irrelevant, since within that accord with God's purpose, those demands are fulfilled through the healing – the liberation – of mankind. In this liberation – contemporarily expressed by the concept of *identity* – lies a self-determination that must not be confused with the concept *autonomy* in the way this term is applied in contexts such as moral philosophy.

In this way, one must consider that the free development of humankind happens not at cross-currents, but in line with the blooming of creation in its yearning for freedom and imperishability (Rom. 8:22). There is thus correspondence between humankind and creation with regard to freedom and creativity, reflecting the correspondence with regard to beauty and aesthetics. Is this what Fjodor Dostojevskij has in mind when he says that we – humankind – should let the beauty save the world?

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