
HOLY SPIRIT, IMAGINATION AND THE QUEST FOR BEAUTY: TOWARDS A TRINITARIAN GRAND NARRATIVE

Peter Barrett

School of Religion/Philosophy/Classics

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

Human beings have long raised questions about the origin, nature, meaning and, more recently, the destiny of our multi-levelled universe. These lie at the heart of a new-style natural theology that is emerging from contemporary science-and-theology discourse – a project that proceeds from the assumption that the universe is created and sustained by an omnipotent and all-loving God. On the scientific side this involves twenty-first century accounts of cosmic, biological and human evolution, and on the theological side we may look to the patristic view of Son and Holy Spirit as ‘the two hands of God in creation’ – a phrase that can be elaborated in terms of Niels Henrik Gregersen’s proposal of the ‘deep incarnation’ of the Logos of God and John Vernon Taylor’s description of the Spirit as the ‘Go-Between God’. Here we discuss the Spirit as ever at work to beautify and perfect the creation and, in particular, to inspire creative and moral imagination in human minds. These ideas can be expressed in the form of a widely embracing grand narrative of the universe which could help inspire and facilitate the engagement of theologians and Christian communities with interfaith, ecological and nation-building issues.

Key Words: Holy Spirit; Imagination; Beauty; Natural Theology; Grand Narrative

Introduction

Some years ago the noted Czech statesman-intellectual, Václav Havel, expressed regret that the ancient consensus no longer holds. “I have become increasingly convinced,” he wrote, “that the crisis of the much-needed global responsibility is in principle due to the fact that we have lost the certainty that the universe ... has a definite meaning and follows a definite purpose” (Haught 2000:123). Can this sense of loss be at least ameliorated by combining the insights of the sciences with those of well-winnowed Christian tradition to produce a plausible, optimistic, non-dominating and widely embracing account of the universe? This is our main concern in this essay, despite the fact that such teleological talk is problematic for many contemporary theologians.

In seeking to understand the nature, meaning and purpose of our existence in this life-bearing world of beauty and joy on one hand and horrendous evil and distress on the other, humankind has long sought to develop explanations through the medium of narrative

(Gärdenfors 2008), not least through the creation myths of ancient traditions.¹ These have emerged through the exercise of human powers of creative imagination and intuition in particular historical contexts. Furthermore, this capacity of the human mind to express and understand things in symbolic ways is itself a remarkable outcome of the multi-levelled unfolding of the universe.

It is widely held by scientists that the emergence and development of *Homo sapiens* has occurred seamlessly within cosmic and biological evolutionary processes, and the phenomenon of human personhood in all its neurological and cognitive complexity provides common ground for scientific and theological inquiry. “What is man that Thou art mindful of him?” asked the psalmist and what, indeed, is the nature of human *being* and its place in the entire scheme of things? And what is it about cosmic development that has made such psychosomatic life possible? Over the past century scientists have come to understand that our existence is the culmination of a long process. It has taken billions of years of stellar burning to produce the chemical elements contained in even, say, a colony of ants – and if that mere result had been the divine purpose in creation, it would surely have required the same vastness of operation, given the laws of physics as we know them.

Our multi-faceted experience of being human may, however, suggest a far greater cosmic purpose: the creation of beings who can respond deeply to sacrificial divine love, or at least to that shown by fellow beings. Cosmologist George Ellis (1994:1-14), for example, has proposed the following foundational idea for a broadened ‘cosmology’ that embraces ‘the good,’ which he regards as more ontologically fundamental than the physical:

There is a transcendent God who is creator and sustainer of the universe, whose purpose in creation is to make possible high-level loving and sacrificial action by freely acting self-conscious individuals.

Ellis’ science-and-theology approach can be classed as ‘new-style natural theology’ in that he takes the existence of God as his starting point – not as the inductively argued endpoint that is looked for in traditional natural theology. But although he sees the sacrificial life of Christ as the epitome of kenosis and draws from William Temple’s *Readings in St John’s Gospel* the idea of divine action as “power in complete subordination to love,”² his theism is essentially *philosophically* based.

Here we aim, instead, to outline a *theologically* based theism – indeed, a fully Trinitarian approach “to reincarnate natural theology in all its Christological and pneumatological glory,” as Sarah Coakley put it in describing the aim of her recent Gifford Lectures.³ Such a ‘new-style natural theology’⁴ will have as its central task the forming of a widely embracing account of the nature, meaning and destiny of the universe, as viewed from the combined perspectives of modern science and Christian theology – thus providing

¹ It is widely accepted that creation stories cast in mythic form should not be mistaken for anything like a modern historical or scientific account, but may well be pointing to profound religious truth (Edwards 1999:8).

² William Temple, 1968:xxxii.

³ Sarah Coakley, 2012.

⁴ The noted systematic theologian, John Macquarrie, employed this phrase, explaining that the new version would be “*descriptive* instead of *deductive*, simply bringing into the light the basic situation in which faith is rooted, so that we can then see what its claims are” – and it would be “*existential* rather than *rationalistic* since there is a broader understanding that arises out of the whole range of our existence in the world.” (1977:43-58). Also see Barrett 2005:495-509.

a unified 'binocular view' of the world. It will also be concerned to express the underlying epistemological presuppositions.⁵

For such a creation narrative we adopt an organising idea that is similar to Ellis's – one that can be explored as part of the patristic notion of Son and Holy Spirit as the two hands of God:⁶

The purpose of God in creation is to enable freely acting, self-aware individuals, in concert with God and one another, to strive for *το καλον*, the good-beautiful-just right.⁷

Such a starting point can be elaborated, for example, in terms of Niels Henrik Gregersen's proposal of the 'deep incarnation' of the Logos of God⁸ and John Vernon Taylor's account of the Spirit as 'The Go-Between God'⁹ who is "ever at work in nature, in history and in human living." The latter activity raises the question of the nexus and manner of divine action in a material world characterised by the regularities ('laws') of nature's processes.

In the next section we indicate one way of approaching this key nexus question. We then outline the concept of deep incarnation and discuss in some detail the question of the Spirit's activity in the world. In Sections (3) and (4) we address two Spirit-related topics: first, imagination and inspiration in the exercise of human thought and creativity and, second, the 'aesthetic imperative' that arises in interfaith, ecological and nation-building issues.

Aspects of Divine Action in Nature and Human Thought

Since the late 1980s much of the discourse in science-and-theology has focused on the question of *if* and *how* divine action takes place in a world that is no longer seen as a vast mechanism but rather as a super-system of complex physical systems which are characterised by flexibility and openness to novelty. How may we conceive of divine communication taking place in such a world while operating within the grain of nature's causal networks – that is, without going against the laws of nature, assumed to be divinely instituted and sustained? Given that within the physical realm the transmission of information requires an expenditure of energy, would not even a whisper by the Holy Spirit violate the 'conservation of energy' law?

A plausible answer is offered by John Polkinghorne (1998:62-63) in terms of the idea that there exists a class of energy-less information (outside the realm of contemporary

⁵ Given the general postmodern aversion to meta-narratives, we may note the concern of Ronald Michener to present the Christian gospel as a non-dominating meta-narrative that is open to new insights and other traditions, and therefore open to re-formulation in order to include new truths – an approach that "readily acknowledges the limits of human reason, while not giving in to a complete scepticism." (Michener, 2008:229).

⁶ Irenaeus (second century CE) spoke thus of Son and Spirit, and for Irenaeus and Basil of Caesarea (fourth century CE) the Spirit is the beautifier and perfecter of the creation (Sherry 2002:4-5,79).

⁷ This richly textured term appears in its adjectival form in the Greek version of the Genesis 1 refrain, "God saw that it was *καλα*". Its meaning is discussed in G Kittel & G Friedrich, 1985:402-405 and in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar on theological aesthetics, 1982:201 (vol. 4).

⁸ Niels Henrik Gregersen (2001:192-207) coined the term 'deep incarnation' to emphasise that the Son, the eternal Logos, does not merely assume the body of a particular human person, but also reaches into the depths of the material world in a fragile body susceptible to decay and death, that is, into the very tissue of biological existence, thus conjoining the world of suffering creatures and setting 'kenosis' as an organising principle or pattern for the entire creation. He has also written a chapter on 'deep incarnation' in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (2013).

⁹ The title of his 1972 award winning book, which is sub-titled *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*.

physics, therefore hypothetical), that could cause a brain to change from one state to another state of the same energy. The Spirit could then provide inspiration, quietly and anonymously, by means of such information. This metaphysical notion of energy-less ‘active information’ may be regarded as a case of ‘inference to the best explanation’, given the deeply entrenched notion of the integrity and consistency of the laws of nature.

Ultimately, however, the most basic question remains: What or who, precisely, is the source or author of this unfolding universe?¹⁰

In addressing the subject of divine creation, many philosophers and theologians speak of God as the primary cause, the source and ground of it all, who creates it *ex nihilo* and keeps it in existence, with properties and conditions that allow it to develop in all its variety and fruitful complexity. Theologians, and perhaps some philosophers, go further and describe it as created by an eternally loving Creator for reasons that include the emergence of beings that are not merely robots but can act morally and respond freely to the divine love. Going further still, Christian theologians may explore the idea of the ‘kenosis of God’ – held as a central characteristic of the self-giving nature of the very being of God as Trinity and thence as a mark of the created order.¹¹

Theologians may also wish to invest in an account of the Holy Spirit’s unceasing life-giving activity in both nature and humankind – a richer and much wider role for the Spirit than is usually assumed in Christian thought. In his book *The Shape of Pneumatology*, John McIntyre (1997:27-28) refers to the desire of some theologians to deal with the work of the Spirit in the secular sphere, “outside the four walls of the Church and freed from the apron-strings of the Church’s sacred theology – in fact, wherever truth, beauty, goodness, justice, mercy and love are to be found.”

Likewise, Patrick Sherry (2002:79) points to the comparative neglect of this wider role, especially in the more recent theology of the West where treatments of the Spirit’s activity have tended to be restricted to ecclesiology and the spiritual life. He quotes the claim of the Benedictine writer, Kilian McDonnell, that if one loses sight of the relationship of the Spirit to creation and cosmos, it is then difficult to relate him to nature, and to moral, cultural, and political life – the Spirit becomes “too sacralised, too tied to holy objects and events”. An appropriately broadened pneumatology would surely enhance the engagement of theologians in society’s major questions – and, if combined with well developed epistemological understanding, could make for constructive tertiary-level discussion of key anthropological issues.¹²

Here we concentrate on the universal role of the Holy Spirit as approached through the writings of the late Anglican bishop, John Vernon Taylor (1914–2001), whom many regard as one of the most creative and imaginative Christian leaders and thinkers of the latter half of the twentieth century, “combining the gifts of prophet and poet to communicate a fresh

¹⁰ Keith Ward’s *The Big Questions in Science & Religion* does not list this, although he deals with it extensively elsewhere, but it is surely the most fundamental question in science-and-religion discussion.

¹¹ The idea of divine kenosis has been problematic for feminist theologians, as implying passivity in the face of oppression. Nevertheless, as discussed below, it holds a key place in the newly developing systematic theology of Gifford Lecturer Sarah Coakley and, of course, in Gregersen’s treatment of deep incarnation.

¹² In the September 2011 issue of *ESSSAT-News* (from the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology), editor Lluís Oviedo points to a particular topic that cries out for such engagement, namely, the reductionist approach to human personhood that is prevalent in contemporary neuroscience and evolutionary psychology (“you’re nothing but a pack of neurons!”). He regrets the absence of theologians from what he calls “this new culture war.”

spiritual vision.”¹³ He frequently made the point that the great gift of the Spirit to human beings is that of perception, enabling them to see below the surface of things (1972:18,19) – an understanding that is greatly needed in the Christian church at large. “The whole of our uneasy debate about the meaning of the word ‘God’ for modern man cries out, I believe, for a recovery of a significant doctrine of the Holy Spirit” (Taylor 1972:5).¹⁴

As a writer, Taylor is perhaps best known for his award-winning book *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (1972). He explained some years later that the choice of title came from an experience of being held by the beauty of an evening landscape. He began to ask himself:

What was the source of this current of communication that makes a landscape or a person or an idea act upon me in this way? Who effects the introduction between me and that which is there, turning it into a presence towards which I surrender myself? As soon as the question took that form the answer fell into place. So *this* is what is meant by the Holy Spirit! This is the essential nature of his power. This is why he is the universal Spirit of God, leaving no individual and no culture without his witness and challenge (1986:3).

He goes on to describe the Spirit as “the unceasing animator and communicator, the inexhaustible source of insight, awareness, recognition and response ... the Creator Spirit who has always been quietly, anonymously at work within every human life, awakening all that is truly human in us, all that is most real” (1986:10,11) – thereby challenging people of all cultures and religions, we may add, to be co-creators of *το καλον*.

Furthermore, in a chapter headed ‘God saw that it was good’, Taylor places this animating and communicating work of the Spirit in the overall divine scheme of loving, self-giving *creatio continua* that wills and delights in the existence of the universe and its development of increasing complexity – “in unbroken continuity from the elementary particles to the emergence of life, consciousness and the capacity for spiritual response” (1992:180,183). And if the triune God is eternally limitless self-giving love it follows, for Taylor, that God had to create a universe because it is in the very nature of God to do so, seeking some ‘other’ on which that love may be lavished. But, given the necessity of flexibility in the processes of nature if human free-will is to emerge, there is an unavoidable cost involved. As Taylor (1992:196) puts it:

there will be accidents and casualties by the million every step of the way. Yet with all the risks, its agonies and tragedies, there is no other conceivable environment in which responsive self-giving love, to say nothing of courage, compassion or self-sacrifice, could have evolved.

Here, Christian theologians speak of the ‘letting go’ and ‘letting be’ which they recognise as a mark of the creation – a ‘kenosis of God’ that is costly to an extent that is hardly imaginable. As WH Vanstone puts it, the phrase ‘kenosis of God’ contains something of the limitlessness, the vulnerability and the precariousness of authentic love. He argues that such graciousness does not hold back any reserves of power or wisdom or love – all is poured

¹³ Simon Barrington-Ward in an obituary notice, *The Independent*, UK, 7 February 2001.

¹⁴ Other notable, more recent accounts of the work of the Spirit are given in Smith & Yong 2010, Yong 2011 and Welker 2012. The first and second aim at opening the world of the sciences, especially biology, to the students of Pentecostal theology, and seek to build a constructive relationship between the “two globalisations of Pentecostalism and Science”. The latter fifteen-author work is spread over a broad canvas and emphasises the notion of ‘new creation’ in the present tense (as mentioned, for example, in 2Cor 5:17).

into the creating and sustaining of the world and the bearing of all consequences (1977:57-60).

As one of the two hands of God in creation, the Spirit's universal role can be summed up abstractly as inspiring *το καλον* (the good-beautiful-just right) – and perhaps, at an even more fundamental level, instituting and sustaining the laws of physical process (of physics, chemistry and biology) on which the creative functioning of everything in the universe depends. If the Word provides the pattern or information on which nature's structures and life-forms are built – given that the physical universe comprises not only mass and energy but also information (see Gregersen 2010:104-105) – it is the life-giving Spirit, we may assume, who energises it all towards the fullness of being of each part. Furthermore, if God's love is to be expressed and communicated at the level of the inter-personal (between God and humankind), this clearly has to wait for the process of human evolution to reach the epistemic stage at which the capacity for language, symbolic understanding and, hence, culture have developed. This, of course, is the stage at which the Word became flesh,¹⁵ with all the finitude this entailed (footnote 6), embracing the human faculty of imagination with its capacity to be deeply inspired.

Imagination and Divine Inspiration

It seems that the phenomenon of inspiration (towards the great traditional triad of truth, beauty and goodness) is focused largely on the human faculties of imagination and intuition – perhaps the two main cognitive capacities in the exercise of creativity and in the search to grasp the meaning of things – with reason, perception and emotion in attendance, so to speak. High-level inspiration must surely rank among the most profound of human experiences, often associated with intense excitement and even a keen sense of beauty.

The place of imagination in the make-up of the human mind is represented below in Table 1. This lists successively emerging physical components and the subsequent array of co-evolved mental capacities underlying the evolution of *Homo sapiens*. It is assumed that the ongoing operation of evolutionary processes leads to a seamless creation of the mental in nature's life-forms as neural systems reach high levels of complexity and organisational capacity, thus allowing the development of consciousness and, in due course, the full range of mental operation.¹⁶

¹⁵ Jeremy Law (2007) refers to this human-ward move as a matter of both the Word becoming flesh and flesh becoming the Word. He asks: "Was it not also necessary for flesh to become (capable of) words; that is, for there to have emerged a creature capable of language, reason, symbolic thought and a relationship beyond the immediately demonstrable world? Is not the enabling ground of the incarnation the evolution of the embodied mind of *Homo sapiens*?"

¹⁶ Such development is well described in Mithen's *The Prehistory of the Mind* (1996).

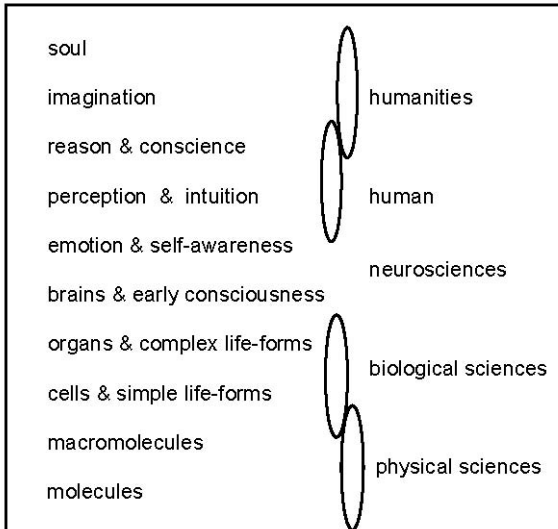


Table 1: *Physical systems and mental capacities in the evolutionary creation of humankind*

Here the *soul* is regarded as the ‘real me’ within a person’s psychosomatic existence,¹⁷ the inner being at the heart of one’s complex web of inter-personal relationships – and *imagination* is viewed as the high-level integrating power of the whole mind as it brings together ideas through the interplay of reason, perception, intuition and emotion.

The capacity for imagination is surely what most sharply distinguishes human beings from their fellow primates. It comes into play over a wide range of human endeavour – in scientific and religious quests to know and understand, in scientific and artistic creativity, and in the development of moral vision. It is extremely versatile, whether probing a theological precept, scientific problem, literary metaphor or moral dilemma, or functioning in the more passive mode of openness to a leap of insight. And, given the indeterminacy of the brain as a highly complex physical system,¹⁸ it surely lies beyond the reach of Artificial Intelligence – particularly in the task of creating a work of art or formulating a grand narrative of the creation.

Table 1 also shows a broad-brush lay-out of the associated groups of academic disciplines, among which there is considerable variation in style of inquiry. This ranges from the application of mathematics in the physical sciences to the use of metaphor and symbol in literature and the arts. What is common to these disparate areas of inquiry is the search to know, understand and express the way things are, using epistemic tools appropriate to the nature of the object of inquiry. The humanities, we may add, deal largely with the products of creative imagination but, in concert with the other cognitive capacities, imagination also plays an active role throughout the disciplinary range, wherever there is a search for insight

¹⁷ This counters the common dualist belief in an immortal soul that can exist independently of the body. See Polkinghorne 2004:160-163 for an understanding of the Christian hope of the resurrection of the *whole* person, as a psychosomatic entity that is kept in the mind of God for that eschatological moment.

¹⁸ This is discussed in Section (3) of Barrett 2010.

or a task of quality assessment. It is, indeed, a *sine qua non* for all high-level epistemic activity. Furthermore, its versatile, integrating role takes it well beyond the sphere of the academic.

For example, in her notable work, *Imagination*, Mary Warnock refers to this cognitive attribute as at work in our everyday perception of the world, and in our thoughts about what is absent. She remarks that it also enables us to see the world as significant, the impetus coming from the emotions as much as from the reason, from the heart as much as from the head. And it is imagination, she adds, that enables both the work of the creative artist and the appreciation of such work.¹⁹

As for its theological aspect, how significant is human imagination, we may ask, within the notion of *imago Dei*? Although it is reason that is perhaps most commonly regarded as of the essence of the concept, Colin Gunton points instead to the more general human property of personhood: “To be a person is to be made in the image of God: that is the heart of the matter” – and we are in that image, he writes, “when we find our reality in what we give and receive from others in human community.”²⁰

More important for our present discussion, however, is the idea put forward by George MacDonald in his 1867 essay, *The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture*. “The imagination of man,” he claimed, “is made in the image of the imagination of God.”²¹ He considered creative imagination to be an attribute fully worthy to be placed on any list of God’s attributes and he located the *imago Dei* concept not in our rationality or moral character but in our imagination. This idea finds support in John Baillie’s comment, “I have long been of the opinion that the part played by the imagination in the soul’s dealings with God ... has never been given a proper place in Christian theology, which has been too much ruled by intellectualist preconceptions” – and one reason for its neglect, explains McIntyre, is that the three Hebrew words for imagination in the Old Testament and the three Greek words similarly used in the New Testament are pejorative, “uniformly implying that imagination is unacceptable to God in all its machinations” (McIntyre, 1987:1,5).

Since imagination clearly plays a central role in all creative and artistic activity, MacDonald’s claim complements our foundational proposal about the *co-creation* of *το καλον* in all its multi-levelled expression – a divine-human project that may be viewed as the culmination of the great saga of divine creation, itself an immense dynamic work of art.

What actually happens in the exercising of imagination is not always easy to pinpoint. It seems reasonable to suppose, however, that this cognitive faculty does not operate on a blank mental slate but relies heavily on what scientist-philosopher Michael Polanyi called ‘tacit knowledge’ – an epistemic concept that is strangely neglected by philosophers of science (Polkinghorne 1989:175) and underplayed in science-and-theology. Tacit knowledge is the unconsciously held store of wisdom and understanding that resides in any scientific, cultural or religious tradition and is learnt through apprenticeship therein – in the corporate thinking, discussing and working together. It acts as the ‘spectacles behind the

¹⁹ Warnock 1976:196.

²⁰ Gunton 1991:116,117. Also, David Tracy (1981) offers a major discussion of the human capacity to imagine aspects of the being and character of God by analogy with aspects of human personhood.

²¹ MacDonald’s essay later formed the first chapter of a collection of his works, *A Book of Ords* (1907). McIntyre discusses it in 1987:13-15, stating that it helped him formulate his ideas on the place of imagination in religion and theology.

eyes' through which the knower sees and engages imaginatively with that which is to be known and apprehended.

Often apprehension occurs not by deductive or inductive reasoning, but by a leap of an imagination that has been sympathetically attuned to the subject matter – an intuitive leap from the random observation of data or clues to the hypothesis of a pattern (Monti 2003:18), or to artistic insight in the realm of metaphor and symbol. Furthermore, in the assessment of a work of art, such an intuitive leap represents the apprehension of meaning through the observed interplay of its elements as a whole. Polkinghorne (1994:38) remarks that understanding in art and literature comes from the power of the whole, through intuitive grasp rather than detailed argument – and intuitive grasp, he adds, requires the exercise of imagination informed by tacit knowledge.

In the area of scientific research Einstein, for example, referred to the formulation of his 'General Relativity' not as a logical deduction from data to hypothesis but rather as a case of 'free creation' – a non-logical, non-inferential movement of intuitive apprehension (Monti 2003:18). Again, in what was perhaps the more passive experience of literary inspiration, the nineteenth century English writer George Eliot found that in all that she considered her best writing there was a 'not-herself' which took possession of her, and she felt her own personality to be merely the instrument through which this spirit was acting. However, Eliot viewed her literary imagination not only as a conduit for a 'not-herself' but also as an active combining power which brings ideas together – indeed, as the whole mind working in a certain way, involving perception, feeling, and reasoning (Sherry 2002:104, 113). And through the exercise of such integrative power in the human quest to know and understand, we can now tell of a universe that not only appears to be superbly designed but is also remarkably intelligible to human minds, not least in terms of elegant mathematical description.

Such a scientifically informed account of the cosmos and its human element can be placed in a broad Trinitarian framework of understanding in which, as Sherry puts it, "one of God's purposes in inspiration is to diffuse his perfections in the world through the Holy Spirit, as an expression of his creative love, which leads him not only to make the world, but to impart to it something of his own qualities" (2002:102,121) – notably, we may add, the quality of beauty. And if this is the nature of the Spirit's ongoing work, in the natural world and in human minds, it adds weight to French philosopher Paul Claudel's trenchant phrase, "the tragedy of a starved imagination" (Sherry 2002:19,112).²²

A key aim of our Trinity based narrative would be to do justice to the roles of both Son and Holy Spirit – "the two hands of God," as mentioned in Section (1). This finds expression, for example, in Sarah Coakley's concern "to incarnate natural theology in all its Christological and pneumatological glory." Her recent Gifford Lectures focus on the Christological aspect and her pneumatological concern will no doubt find expression in the natural theology she is currently developing. The lectures were largely devoted to a philosophical critique and theological development of the mathematical modelling of altruistic 'super cooperation' in animal and human behaviour – a project of the noted biologist, Martin Nowak, with whom she enjoyed a fruitful collaboration during her career

²² In much of science-and-theology discourse a philosophically based theism is assumed. Here we adopt a Trinitarian approach as offering a more compelling grasp of issues of theodicy and ultimate meaning.

at Harvard University²³. In linking his findings to the ‘super-altruism’ of Christ and of the great saints of humankind, she adds complementary insight to Gregersen’s account of the kenosis of deep incarnation.

On the pneumatological side of the creation narrative we have introduced Taylor’s idea of the Go-Between God “who has always been quietly, anonymously at work within every human life, awakening all that is truly human in us, all that is most real” (1986:11) – drawing people of all cultures and religions, we may add, towards the vision and co-creation of *το καλον*. It seems that this pneumatological aspect of the creation story is an under-used and potentially fruitful source for theological reflection, alongside Scripture, church tradition, and human reason and experience. It opens up, in particular, an imperative for both church and human society at large to pursue beauty/*το καλον* at all levels of human life and to cherish the beauty and balance of nature’s dynamics.

Aesthetic Existence and the Aesthetic Imperative²⁴

The quest to create beauty in the structures and workings of society can seem not only hugely difficult and ambitious but perhaps naive and unrealistic. However, from a Christian perspective there are two things in its favour. First, an ever-working, ever-enticing, vision-giving Holy Spirit may indeed be at work throughout the world – inspiring men and women in all walks of life, culture and religion. Secondly, at this moment in history we are aware of the possibility that human conflict and/or global warming could reach catastrophic levels. Given the power of imagination to see both the seriousness of the way things are and the different way they could be, we can perhaps learn from aspects of what John Taylor called ‘the primal vision’²⁵ – that of the pre-moderns with their impressive technologies of community-living and at-oneness with nature.

Our key word ‘beauty’ ranges over a wide spectrum of associations beyond the merely superficial – from the elegance of a scientific theory, to harmony in nature or art, to the lively inner beauty of a human being – and even, perhaps, to the radiant ‘terrible beauty’²⁶ of the glory of God at one end or to the merely functional at the other.²⁷ Given its wealth of meaning, we use it here as a synonym for *το καλον*. We also make the key assumption that the qualities of kenosis and beauty at the heart of the cosmic drama are not simply constructs of the human mind but have their place within the broad sweep of multi-levelled reality, the totality of what exists.²⁸

²³ Coakley, 2012. By ‘super co-operation’ Nowak means altruism that is not exercised for the benefit of simply a creature’s kinship group (in the context of biological evolution), but rather for the benefit of the wider population. He sees it as an extra dimension of evolution, acting alongside the process of ‘natural selection’. (Nowak & Highfield, 2011).

²⁴ The term ‘aesthetic imperative’ can refer to the aim to present commercial products attractively. Here it operates at a deeper personal level, as the general human drive to experience/create/share beauty.

²⁵ Taylor, 2002.

²⁶ A phrase from WB Yeats’ poem “Easter 1916”, quoted in Richard Harries, 1993:47.

²⁷ The noted American architect Frank Lloyd Wright once wrote: “I have learned that only the beautiful is practical. And conversely, anything that is truly practical, functional and useful is beautiful – whether it be a sunset or some man-made object. When we perceive a thing to be beautiful, it is because we instinctively recognise its ‘rightness’.” (*Grace Magazine*, Christchurch, Dorset, UK, 21 March 2004).

²⁸ See Ellis, 2002:1-27, for example, for a discussion of six distinct but deeply inter-connected natures or levels of existence, beginning with the physical realm of matter/energy.

In his magisterial work on theological aesthetics, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1982:201) describes the meaning of *το καλον* thus:

It is the right, the fitting, the good, that which is appropriate to a being, that in virtue of which it possesses its integrity, its health, its security; only insofar as it embraces all this, is *καλον* also, by way of confirmation and proof, the beautiful.

We shall take *το καλον*, then, to signify ‘the beautiful’ as that which is manifested at a high level of all round excellence. It represents a way in which to think of the beautifying and perfecting work of the Spirit in each person and community – and, indeed, in the entire unfolding cosmic ‘theo-drama’ (Von Balthasar’s term), which may be seen as an immense work of art.²⁹

What, then, is the place of beauty in the life and thought of the church, where its connection with the Spirit is seldom voiced? “At best,” remarks Sherry, “beauty has often been treated as a Cinderella, compared with the attention paid by theologians to her two sisters, truth and goodness, an attention manifested in theology’s predominant concern with doctrine and ethics, and resulting in the intellectualisation of religion in recent centuries” (2002:18).

Here we may note Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s hope for the church of his day to develop what Kierkegaard called ‘aesthetic existence.’ What would it mean, he wondered (during his 1943-1945 imprisonment in Berlin), if the church could again, as in the thirteenth century in particular, provide a broad area of freedom and creativity – one that relates art inclusively to the flowering of humanity’s inner being and deliberately seeks an aesthetic mode of living that gives space to the creating of friendship, formation (*bildung*), play, happiness?³⁰ Although his question was about the future renewal of the post-war church in Germany and the possibility of its recovering ‘aesthetic existence’ as a vital step along the path of Christian formation, the concept lends itself to the wider project of the church’s role of helping to develop the fullness of local community life.

For Bonhoeffer enthusiasts, both our South African scene and the wider global issues raise the question of what theological contribution he might have made had he lived in the post-war years and how, indeed, his final tantalising new-theology thoughts might yet be developed in our contemporary world. He was excited by his new thinking and urged that “we must move out again into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world, and risk saying controversial things if we are to get down to the serious problems of life.”³¹

In those months of intense creative thought, Bonhoeffer planned to write a book on a “non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts.” The aim, as his friend Eberhard Bethge explained, was “to grasp, and to declare, the contents of the Gospel in such a way that it (would) form a new synthesis with fresh metaphysics, which meant the language and ideas of our modern world.” He wanted to open up its relation to the whole reality of our world, aiming at “an interpretation which liberates, encourages, directs and renews responsibility for the realities of the world.”³² These are admirable aims for any contemporary theology –

²⁹ Barrett, 2004:15-31. In similar vein, John Haught elaborates AN Whitehead’s view that “the cosmos is a restless aim toward ever more intense configurations of beauty” (2000:126-132). A combination of theodicy and eschatology allows one to see the universe as an amazing, beloved and costly world-in-the-making, just right for its ultimate purpose.

³⁰ Bethge, 1971:193 and de Gruchy, 2001:147,151.

³¹ Bethge, (ed), 1971:378.

³² Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr*, 150.

certainly for our grand narrative with its aesthetic imperative towards interfaith and ecological issues and the quest for a uniting vision in the world at large.

Here in South Africa we have been given the Mandela/Tutu vision of a “caring, sharing, compassionate rainbow nation.” It may yet be a dream whose time has come. A leading South African commentator, Alister Sparks, sees this nation as the world’s main test case of how people of immensely diverse cultures and religions can live together creatively, describing it as “the social laboratory in which the practicality of multiracial and multi-cultural harmony is being tested.”³³ The state of the nation continues to involve the re-thinking of the outer *socio-politico-theological* issues of the 1986 Kairos Document – a re-thinking exercise that could, no doubt, be enhanced by placing it within a Trinitarian framework such as that of our grand narrative, thus firmly including the inner *cultural-religious* dimension of national life. Much would depend on how the vision is taken on board and exemplified in the life of local Christian communities and those of other religious traditions.

The famous sculptor, Henry Moore, once remarked that there is no single distance at which a great work of art should be viewed since its beauty is to be seen at every distance – that is, on every scale.³⁴ This suggests an important challenge to the church. If it is to be an icon of the truth, goodness and beauty that are the incomparable marks of the divine nature, it will surely be most persuasive when on every scale and in every aspect of its life – from friendship to liturgy, from artistic expression to politics, from private prayer to new theology – it shows forth something of the beauty of human existence in all its poignancy and hope.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barrett, P 2004. “The Quest for a Uniting Vision in South Africa – A Question of Beauty?” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, No. 119.
- Barrett, P 2005. “The New Natural Theology – A Bridging and Integrating Mode of Inquiry”. *Scriptura* 2005:2.
- Barrett, P 2010. “John Polkinghorne’s contribution to a new-style arts-including natural theology”. *Religion & Theology*. Leiden: Brill, Vol 17, No 3-4.
- Bethge, E (ed.) 1971. (Enlarged revised edition of Bonhoeffer’s) *Letters and Papers from Prison*. London: SCM.
- Bethge, E 1975. *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr*. London: Collins.
- Chandrasekhar, S 1987. *Truth and Beauty: Aesthetic Motivations in Science*. University of Chicago Press.
- Coakley, S 2012. Gifford Lectures (unpublished) on “Sacrifice regained: Evolution, Co-operation and God.” University of Aberdeen.
- De Gruchy, J 2001. *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Edwards, D 1999. *The God of Evolution*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

³³ Alister Sparks, “South Africa a test case for integration in a shrinking world”, *The Mercury* (Durban), 13 March 2013.

³⁴ S Chandrasekhar, 1987.

- Ellis, GFR 1994. "God and the Universe: Kenosis as the Foundation of Being." In *CTNS Bulletin*, Berkeley: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, vol. 14, no. 2 (1994), 1-14.
- Ellis, GFR 2002. "Natures of existence (temporal & eternal)". In Ellis (ed.), *The Far Future Universe*. Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press.
- Gärdenfors, Peter 2008. "What happens when we understand?" Unpublished paper read at the 12th European Conference on Science and Theology, Sweden, May 2008. (192-207)
- Gregersen, NH 2001. "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World". In *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 40:3.
- Gregersen, NH 2010. "The Triune God and the Triad of Matter." In *Matter and Meaning: Is Matter Sacred or Profane?* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 103-118.
- Gregersen, NH (ed.) 2013. *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Gunton, CE 1991. *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Harries, R 1993. *Art and the Beauty of God*. London: Mowbray.
- Haught, J 2000. *God after Darwin*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Kittel, G & Friedrich, G 1985. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Law, Jeremy 2007. "A theological reflection on the evolution of the brain/mind in *Homo sapiens*." Unpublished paper read at the 2007 Science & Religion Forum (UK) conference, Canterbury (UK).
- Macquarrie, J 1977. *Principles of Theology*. London: SCM.
- McIntyre, J 1987. *Faith, Theology and Imagination*. Edinburgh: The Handsel Press.
- McIntyre, J 1997. *The Shape of Pneumatology*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Michener, R 2007. *Engaging Deconstructive Theology*. Aldershot (UK): Ashgate.
- Mithen, Stephen 1996. *The Prehistory of the Mind*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Monti, A 2003. *A Natural Theology of the Arts*. Aldershot (UK): Ashgate.
- Nowak, M & Highfield, R 2011. *SuperCooperators*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books
- Polkinghorne, J 1989. *Science and Providence*. London: SPCK.
- Polkinghorne, J 1994. *Science and Christian Belief*. London: SPCK.
- Polkinghorne, J 1998. *Belief in God in an Age of Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Polkinghorne, J 2004. *Science and the Trinity*. London: SPCK.
- Sherry, P 2002. *Spirit and Beauty*. London: SCM Press (2nd edition).
- Smith, J & Yong, A 2010. *Science and the Spirit: A Pentecostal Engagement with the Sciences*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Taylor, JV 1972. *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit & the Christian Mission*. London: SCM Press.
- Taylor, JV 1986. *A Matter of Life and Death*. London: SCM Press.
- Taylor, JV 1992. *The Christlike God*. London: SCM Press.
- Taylor, JV 2002. *The Primal Vision*. London: SCM Press (second edition).

-
- Temple, W 1968. *Readings in St John's Gospel*. London: Macmillan p xxxi.
- Tracy, D 1981. *The Analogical Imagination*. London: SCM. 3-46.
- Vanstone, WH 1977. *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
- Von Balthasar, HU 1982. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Vol 4. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Ward, K 2008. *The Big Questions in Science and Religion*. West Conshohocken (PA): Templeton Press.
- Warnock, M 1976. *Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Welker, M (ed.) 2012. *The Spirit in Creation and New Creation: Science and Theology in Western and Orthodox Realms*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans.
- Yong, A 2011. *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.