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Introduction: Creation as Grace of Radical Dependence

Philip J. Rossi

Marquette University, philip.rossi@marquette.edu

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At the outset of the third millennium, the Earth faces challenges that seriously endanger the complex balance that sustains the richly interrelated diversity of all its forms of life. This planetary crisis gives urgency to a re-examination of the ancient profession—common to the three traditions that claim the heritage of Abraham’s faith—that God is the gracious Creator of all that is. The 2009 annual meeting of the College Theology Society at the University of Notre Dame provided an opportunity for such a renewed investigation, thematically focused under the heading of “God, Grace and Creation,” conducted from the varied perspectives and voices that shape the multilayered conversation of contemporary theology. The essays selected for this volume explore key issues that need to be addressed in order to render this ancient profession of faith in God the Creator intelligible for a world in which believer and non-believer may find themselves often torn between awe and terror at what humanity, as agent of its cultures of modernity, has wrought upon itself and its environing world. Even as each may appropriately stand in awe before the exponentially expanding horizons that human understanding has opened upon the dynamisms of the microcosmic and macrocosmic order of the universe, they may also be rightly struck by terror at the increasing vulnerability of the interdependent web of life in the face of the destructive consequences of the human practices that have inflicted deep wounds upon the planet.

In the context of this tensive stance before the cosmos in which humanity enacts the unfolding drama of its history, the contribu-
tors to this volume focus on different aspects of how Christian communities, in their thinking and their practice, are challenged to articulate a renewed understanding of the God they confess to be both the creating Source of this universe abundant in its dynamisms of energy and life and the Lord of the history that enmeshes our human species.

Ilia Delio’s opening essay frames that challenge in terms of the dynamic complexities in which contemporary science locates the processes from which the genuinely new and novel emerges. These processes render problematic the kind of causal language in which theologians have traditionally articulated God’s creative activity; they require a new way for discerning God at work in nature’s bringing forth the new. Drawing upon the mystical theologies of Bonaventure and Eckhart, Delio proposes an understanding of God who is “dynamic, relational, communal, and transcendent in love.” As “the eternally new of all that is becoming,” God’s causality functions from the horizon of the future, a future in which Jesus, as “forever the openness of created reality to God,” stands as “the symbol of creation’s future in God.”

Delio’s proposal to discern God in creation’s future arises in response to the horizons of emergence within which contemporary science views the ordering of the universe. Timothy Patrick O’Malley and Paul T. Corrigan probe two other contexts within which questions about possibilities for discerning God in creation arise. Common to both explorations is the importance they each give to practice and discipline as preconditions for such discernment: though God’s presence in and to creation goes “all the way down,” this does not of itself make that presence transparent to creatures such as we are. O’Malley argues that, in its efforts to employ a sacramental principle for recognizing the presence of God in the workings of nature, ecological theology has yet to develop an adequate hermeneutic to account for how such recognition comes about. Using Augustine’s sacramental hermeneutics, in which “sacramentality is the proper epistemology of the person of faith,” as his frame of reference, O’Malley contends that seeing creation as a sacrament of God is “a learned capacity of the human person made and then recreated in the imago dei.” Central to such learning are practices of prayer, charity, and justice that
are the locus in which a community forms its members to “treat the created world as disclosive of God.”

Spiritual practice is also central to Paul T. Corrigan’s account of the poetry of Mary Oliver as an expression of the dynamics of discerning of God in and through creation. Focusing on Thirst (2006), Corrigan sees in these poems the expression of a tension between the love for the works of God—“the natural world Oliver has loved so long”—and love for “God alone beyond all of the things of God” that parallels the creative tension between the apophatic and the kataphatic traditions of Christian spiritual practice. He finds in Oliver’s artistry the operation of “a generative spiritual practice” that can serve as a “model for a contemporary ecological spirituality,” within which one can hope to be formed as “a more sanctified, patient, kind, and joyful self, a self better able to serve the earth and those on the earth and better able to serve God.”

Benjamin Peters and Todd R. Hanneken round off discussion of discerning God in and through creation through lenses provided, respectively, by history and scripture. Peters argues that the work of John Hugo, known principally from his association with Dorothy Day, offers “a remarkably cogent and broadly significant theological vision, one that strove to retrieve a proper relationship of nature and grace.” Peters argues that there are significant affinities between Hugo’s account of the relation between nature and grace, and that articulated by Henri de Lubac, in that they both “reject the dualist two-tiered account of nature and the supernatural, and instead propose that grace is the fulfillment of an intrinsic dynamism in created human nature.” Peters suggests that Hugo’s account is of particular value for discussion of these still controverted issues in that its denial of the two-tiered account does not also carry with it a blurring of the distinction between the natural and the supernatural.

Todd R. Hanneken then brings the perspectives of biblical scholarship to bear upon questions of discerning God in creation. His essay examines the functioning of the image of “new creation” in both canonical and non-canonical texts from the post-exilic period. He argues that the varied images found in these texts “reflect fundamental views of the goodness of the present
creation, the status quo” and that such an optic includes “the particular institutions of the world order” in its understanding of creation. Most notable among these institutions are “first, the temple and priesthood; second, the covenant and law; and third, the boundaries that define God’s people.” Hanneken retrieves a perspective that understands the “heavenly creator [to be one] who wills a world of perfect justice and goodness.” Fundamental to discerning God in and through creation is attention to the ways in which the institutional and social order recognizes the graced intent of its origin.

The origin of creation in the gracious freedom of God—“avowing that the origin of the universe is free means, of course, that it is an utterly gratuitous act of God, a grace”—is the focus of David B. Burrell’s essay. Burrell reminds us that Aquinas’s articulation of creation in terms of God’s free communication of esse was an accomplishment issuing from an engagement with Jewish and Muslim thinkers. They, like Aquinas, saw the importance of properly affirming, over against the “formidable philosophical alternatives . . . [of] seamless emanation from the One,” their belief that the God of Abraham, whose heritage claims them all, is a God revealed as acting freely in creating, a creating that may most fittingly be understood as “God’s consenting to the universe coming forth from God.” Referencing the Vatican statement Dominus Iesus, Burrell underscores the continuing importance for interreligious engagement to be marked by both “ethical humility and intellectual humility” in order for proclamation to be “enriched by witness” far more fully and consistently than it has been in the past.

Jane E. Linahan also emphasizes the graciousness of God’s action in her account of the cost exacted by the self-emptying of activity of the life-giving Spirit in creation. Echoing Burrell’s point that creation is neither necessary nor “essential to God’s being,” she offers a relational interpretation of the “radical divine generosity” of God’s action that centers on the kenotic self-emptying from which creation “is gifted with its own, radically other, existence.” In “empowering creaturely freedom and holding open the space for its exercise,” however, the Spirit “pays the price of seeing its own work countered by the very freedom that it empowers.” Even
so, Linahan argues, “the kenotic generosity of such love really outstrips all our assessments of ‘cost’” because the Spirit “values profoundly the creation it has gifted with a life of its own.”

Denis Edwards provides an overview of a “renewed theology of divine action” that is informed by a sense for the dynamics of divine self-bestowal within the work of the Triune God in and through creation. His articulation of seven characteristics of divine action, drawn from reflection upon both the Christ-event and “the empirical reality of the universe we observe around us, which is the fruit of divine creative action,” takes “divine action with regard to creation and grace [to be] intrinsically particular.” Edwards sees God’s actions working through natural processes (in more traditional terms, through “secondary causes”), including randomness and chance, in ways that enable “the evolutionary emergence of creatures” and “the flourishing of creaturely autonomy.” He further examines three contexts—the providential guidance of creation, grace at work in the life of human persons, and the history of salvation—in which he argues that it is appropriate to speak of “special divine acts.” Edwards’s essay makes a promising start toward the goal he has for his renewed theology of divine action: an account of “God working creatively and redemptively in and through the natural world to bring it to healing and wholeness.”

The essays by Aurelie A. Hagstrom and Brad J. Kallenberg offer considerations on divine action that issue from different theological contexts and that are presented in significantly contrasting theological styles. Hagstrom begins her discussion from a dogmatic locus—the bodily Assumption of the Virgin Mary—from which she then draws a number of implications for ecological theology. After setting forth the ways in which the truths of creation, redemption, and eschatology are implicated in and exemplified by this Marian dogma—“through her Assumption, Mary, Mother of God, becomes the mother of the new creation in the eschatological springtime of Easter”—Hagstrom suggests that the Assumption can serve as the basis for a “green Mariology,” that is “concerned with the relationship between God and creation, and the human responsibilities of stewardship that follow from that.” She attaches particular importance to ways in which such a green Mariology
could help overcome some of the dualisms that eco-feminism has seen as embedded in the attitudes and practices that bring in their wake both human oppression and environmental depredation: “The dogma of a female body, virginal and maternal, being glorified and welcomed into the hospitality of God in heaven, is a powerful symbol of the basic goodness of material creation and the dignity of the human person.”

In contrast, Kallenberg works from a perspective influenced by the insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein on the workings of language to deal with human efforts to speak properly about how God acts, especially in those circumstances that raise the question of why God does not “do something” about evil. Kallenberg proposes that the distinction between “dimensionless similarity”—a model that mistakenly presumes “that God’s ‘doing something’ is similar to humans ‘doing something’”—and “dynamical similarity”—a model, learned experientially, that respects the proper difference between divine and human action—may be of significant help for thinking about the problem of evil. At the very least “the usefulness of ‘dynamical similarity’ in discussions of evil is to trumpet a resounding ‘No!’ to the temptation to compare divine agency to human agency in merely semantic [i.e., dimensionless] terms.” Positively, it provides a way to place Aquinas’s understanding of the analogy of proportionality—which similarly functions to respect the radical difference between the divine and the human—in a potentially useful conversation with the conceptual tools of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion.

The attitudes, practices, and skills for living in a graced creation are the concern for the essays in the final section. Matthew Philipp Whelan and Sharon K. Perkins each explore resources for an appropriate theological understanding of humanity’s relation to the earth as the source of the nourishment that sustains life. The resources to which Whelan first turns are the writings of Wendell Berry, where a trenchant critique of industrial agriculture is based upon a deep theological sense of the land as gift. Whelan argues that “Berry’s understanding of agriculture as the good use of an immeasurable gift helps us envision what it might mean to order agriculture in relation to the Eucharist.” Drawing upon a variety of ancient and contemporary sources, from Irenaeus to Peter
Maurin to Monika Hellwig, Whelan then seeks to articulate, first, "the theological conviction that the way the land produces grain and grape, along with the way that human hands make bread and wine from them, are intrinsic to the Eucharist" and second, its "corollary ... that the way we relate to the land, its fruits, and those involved in its economy is intrinsic to the offering of thanksgiving to God in return for these gifts."

Perkins finds the resources for her discussion in the practices connected with the observance of Rogation Days among immigrant rural communities in the United States. She finds them to be "an important liturgical expression of trust in God's protective providence and a communal agrarian spirituality among American Catholics who were entirely dependent upon the fruits of the land they settled and cultivated." She notes how the encouragement of these practices in work of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference helped various communities form a link between liturgical life and practice with a concern for justice. Perkins also looks at the theological underpinnings of recent efforts to revive the practice of Rogation Days and concludes "that certain vital Rogation Day elements—such as the public praying of the Litany of the Saints—can potentially cultivate a truly communal prayer that transcends space and time and opens the possibility for an extension of that community across cultures."

Nancy M. Rourke looks to virtue ethics as a resource for significantly strengthening Catholic thinking on environmental ethics, which has generally taken its cues from principles of Catholic social teaching and thus has focused primarily on questions of justice. She argues that the attentiveness that the virtue of prudence requires for its proper practice is particularly well suited for shaping an environmental ethics attuned to the giftedness of creation. She sees prudence encouraging an "unshakable mindfulness that we are inhabitants of the ecosystems to which we belong, and within which we are embedded." Placing environmental concerns within the framework of virtue ethics also creates space for learning from role models how best to embody environmental attentiveness, such as "a practiced 'sense of place,'" that respects the giftedness of the earth with joy and gratitude. Echoing a theme from other essays, Rourke stresses the importance of developing a relational
theological anthropology that will heighten “our attentiveness to how we live as neighbors and participants of networks of mutually interdependent forms of life.”

The two final essays, by Gretchen M. Baumgardt and John Thiede, place a sense for the giftedness of creation within the context of the practices shaped by human institutional and political life. Baumgardt draws attention to the connection between environmental degradation and systemic violence against women. Drawing upon ecofeminist analyses of this connection, she proposes that the political theology of J. B. Metz offers a way to engage the issues in terms of what she terms “a mystical-political eco-spirituality.” Key to such spirituality is a “liberating praxis that remembers the narratives of those who have suffered and who continue to suffer and stands in solidarity with victims by challenging systems and institutions that seek to dominate women and nature.”

John Thiede’s essay then provides a fitting conclusion to this section’s treatment of the practices of living in a graced creation by holding up Dorothy Stang as an exemplar of graced living in a graced creation. His essay poses the question of whether it is appropriate to use the language of martyrdom for those who suffer violent death “for the good of creation.” He offers as a test case Dorothy Stang, murdered for her advocacy on behalf of the poor who are being dispossessed by the clearing of their land in the Brazilian rain forest for logging and ranching. Thiede, appealing to arguments offered by Karl Rahner and Jon Sobrino for an expansion of traditional criteria for martyrdom, judges her worthy of the martyr’s title, since she “died a violent death because of her compassion for the poor and concern for God’s creation.”

Each essay in this volume displays its own portion of the rich reflection with which Christian theology continues to probe the Creation that draws us into the mystery of its origin in God. They exemplify the conviction George Steiner has so eloquently expressed: “all theology could be defined as an endeavor to grasp, to offer thanks for, the gratuitous miracle of creation.” Creation, apprehended as Steiner’s “gratuitous miracle,” gifted both in its entirety, unique and singular, and in all its particularity, displays the enacted graciousness of God to which fitting responses take form as wonder, thanks, and praise. It is my hope that these essays
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do some small measure of justice to the wonder and praise before Creation that should constantly accompany the work of theology and the life of the theologian.

The planning and production of this volume has involved the work, cooperation, and support of many people. It is not possible to list them all by name, but I hope that acknowledgment of those who have done much to help me keep this project on track will signal my appreciation to all. The first word of thanks goes to Anne Clifford, who inspired the theme for the 2009 annual meeting of the College Society—and thus for this annual volume—by reminding the Society’s officers and board of directors that it had been a while since we had chosen God as a convention theme. I am grateful to the officers and the board of directors for entrusting to me the editing of the convention volume, with its concomitant responsibility of helping to select the plenary speakers, David Burrell, Ilia Delio, and Denis Edwards, each of whom presented talks that stimulated lively discussion. J. Matthew Ashley of the University of Notre Dame did splendid work as the local coordinator. The section conveners, through their attentive work in reviewing proposals and organizing the topic sessions, made it possible for the Society’s members to engage one another in enlivening intellectual exchange throughout the course of the meeting.

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Notes

1George Steiner, Grammars of Creation (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 2001), 128.