Valuing the Goodness of the Earth

As Chrysostom, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas reflect on the creation story, they value all types of creatures, living and non-living, intrinsically for their unique goodness and instrumentally for the sustenance they provide to others. But they value most highly their complex interrelation in the physical world.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Meditation

For God brought things into existence in order to communicate his goodness to creatures and to represent his goodness through them. And since his goodness cannot be adequately represented by any one creature, he produced many diverse creatures. Hence, the universe as a whole participates in and represents God’s goodness in a more perfect way than any single creature does.

*Thomas Aquinas* (1225-1274)

Reflection

If we put God at the center of our thinking about the environment, how would we value the whole earth—both its species and abiotic (the non-living factors like air regimes, land masses, and waters) that together form its ecosystems? Jame Schaefer finds three clues in the sermons and writings of some great theologians as they reflected on the creation story in Genesis 1.

*Creatures are valuable intrinsically and instrumentally.* Augustine sees that God created from nothing a universe of “good things, both great and small, celestial and terrestrial, spiritual, and corporeal.” Each one is good in itself and (often) good for the sustenance it provides to others. Even bodies limited by age or disease are good as long as they exist, he says, for existence is good. Rejecting an anthropocentric view, Chrysostom notes all creatures are good, regardless of how they benefit or harm us. To think otherwise is ungrateful to God.

Building on these views, Aquinas depicts each type of creature “as perfect in some way that God implanted in them. Each is endowed by God with an innate way of existing, and, if living, an innate way of acting.” Schaefer writes. They “are also valuable to one another for their sustenance and flourishing; they are altogether essential and therefore valuable to the world’s functioning as intended by God.”

*The interrelation of the world’s systems, living and nonliving, is a greater good.* Reflecting on Genesis 1:31, Augustine notes the creatures form an interrelating whole that has a “wonderful order and beauty” to bring about “the peace of the universe.” According to Aquinas, “God created living and non-living entities in relation to one another to achieve their common good—the internal sustainability of the world,” Schaefer observes. “God instilled in each creature a natural inclination toward the good of the whole so each is inclined according to its nature—intellectually, sensitively, or naturally—to the common good of all. Their common good is the internal sustainability of the world,...while their ultimate
good is God.”

- **We should embrace God’s valuation of the world.** For Augustine, “what God sees as wondrously good, humans should also see as wondrously good; they should move beyond their greed and value natural beings intrinsically for themselves and their place in the orderly scheme of creation,” Schaefer reports. We are smart, but limited in our perspective, he reasoned; only God sees the big picture of the physical world. Chrysostom warns us against the “arrogant folly” of doing otherwise, telling us to “shun...like a lunatic” anyone who does not endorse God’s view of the world’s goodness.

Aquinas highlights the restrictions on the “natural dominion” God gives humans over the world, while maintaining God’s “absolute dominion” over everything. Thus, Aquinas believes we should love the world in two ways. “One way is loving other living and inanimate creations as goods that should be conserved for God’s honor and glory,” Schaefer explains; “the natural world has a sacramental quality insofar as the invisible God can be experienced and some aspects of God’s character can be known through the visible, especially God’s goodness, power, and wisdom. Another way of loving Earth with its diverse creatures is by loving them for their usefulness to humans as goods they need in temporal life while aiming for eternal happiness with God.”

**Study Questions**

1. Why are we tempted to devalue some living and nonliving elements of the created order? What’s wrong with this, according to Chrysostom, Augustine, and Aquinas?

2. Schaefer asks, “If one way of orienting ourselves to God is by valuing Earth intrinsically and instrumentally, how should faith-filled people act toward other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere of Earth?” Do you agree with her answers?

3. Discuss Schaefer’s view that we should recognize “other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere...as having sacramental qualities through which God’s presence can be experienced and some aspects of God’s character that can be discerned.”

4. Which of the three clues to valuing the goodness of the Earth are salient in the hymn “This Is My Father’s World”?

**Departing Hymn:** “This Is My Father’s World” (vv. 1 and 2)

This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears
all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.
This is my Father’s world: I rest me in the thought
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas—his hand the wonders wrought.

This is our Father’s world: O let us not forget
That though the wrong is great and strong, God is the ruler yet.
He trusts us with his world, to keep it clean and fair—
all earth and trees, all skies and seas, all creatures everywhere.

Maltbie D. Babcock (1858-1901), alt.; v. 2 rev. Mary Babcock Crawford (1972)

**Tune:** TERRA BEATA

The Book of the Word: 
Reading God’s Creation

The natural world is not simply a resource, or a garden entrusted to our care, but above all a revelation of the ways and will of God. How might we recover a robust yet nuanced understanding of nature as truly a book of God’s words, with several levels of meaning?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:15-17

Meditation: “Judge Not according to the Appearance”

Lord, purge our eyes to see
within the seed a tree,
within the glowing egg a bird,
within the shroud a butterfly:
till taught by such, we see
beyond all creatures, thee,
and hearken for thy tender word,
and hear it, ’Fear not: it is I.’

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894)

Reflection

“The image of ‘the book of creation’ has been remarkably enduring in the Christian world,” Elizabeth Theokritoff notes. “But that very fact easily masks some major changes in the understanding of what sort of book it is, how we are to read it, and what we may properly expect to learn from it.” Gradually we have come to see Scripture and nature as very separate books—the latter being written in a “language of mathematics” accessible only to the scientifically trained among us and (in some people’s view) telling us nothing about its author, God.

To help us recover a properly complex understanding of nature as a book of God’s words, Theokritoff explores the insights of Maximus the Confessor (580-662), a preeminent theologian of creation.

› Creation and Scripture are distinct books in which God does one thing: inscribe the Word that draws us to love him. Maximus spoke of the “triple embodiment” of the divine Word. “The Word embodied in Jesus has also ‘hidden himself for us in the ‘words’ of existent things, so as to be spelled out by each visible thing as by letters,’ and been ‘embodied’ for our sake in the letters and syllables of Scripture,” Theokritoff explains.

› We must avoid flat “literalism” when reading each book. “The letter kills, if we love it for its own sake,” she writes; “the beauty of created things can easily rob us of appropriate reverence if it is not looked at to the glory of its Creator.” How can we get beyond “words” to their meaning? Based on John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16-17, Maximus says Christ the Creator-Logos implanted in each created thing a word (logos) that is the divine presence that makes it unique and draws it to God. “The notoriously untranslatable term logos is not only a ‘thought’ or ‘word,’ however; it is also rationality, meaning,” Theokritoff notes. “What we should
today call the ‘information’ contained in a living organism often comes remarkably close to the concept of the logos that makes a thing itself.” Entities are inter-connected into a language through their particular “words.”

- The words in creation are addressed to us. They not only enable us to discover how other creatures function, they provide “words of [spiritual] knowledge” and “manners of virtue.” To read creation this way requires ascetic preparation to acquire inner peace where our perception is not distorted by gluttony, greed, lust, and other “passions.” Theokritoff notes, “with nature as with Scripture, we do not wait to be perfectly prepared before we ever start to read; the effort to read with understanding is itself part of our life-long ascetic struggle.”

To help us read the book of creation, Theokritoff commends four principles for reading Scripture: reading with obedience, understanding the Word through the Church, emphasizing the centrality of Christ, and receiving the Word as personal. Creation, as God’s book, instructs and judges us. “We should not feel that we are being naïve or primitive if we read the gathering environmental crisis in precisely this light: as a wake-up call from God, an indication that all is not well in humans’ relationship with our common Creator,” she concludes. Yet this “is a message of hope, for God’s warnings are always conditional: we need only turn to him to find ourselves on the path to restoration.”

Study Questions

1. Discuss the dangers of a “literal” reading of creation, and of mining creation for pleasing moral allegories. How does Maximus the Confessor’s approach avoid these dangers?

2. How, according to Elizabeth Theokritoff, do the principles for reading Scripture apply to reading the book of creation?

3. “The recognition of creation as charged with the words of God has the power radically to change our attitude toward everything we touch,” Theokritoff writes. “It calls us to an attitude less of stewardship than ‘studentship,’ humble receptiveness to what creation can teach.” Do you agree?

4. What elements of Maximus the Confessor’s way of reading the book of creation are commended in Christina Rossetti’s poem “Judge Not according to the Appearance”?

Departing Hymn: ‘How Marvelous God’s Greatness’ (vv. 1 and 4)

How marvelous God’s greatness, how glorious God’s might!
To this the world bears witness in wonders day and night.
In form of flower and snowflake, in morn’s resplendent birth,
in afterglow at even, in sky and sea and earth.

The starry hosts are singing through all the light-strewn sky
of God’s majestic temple and palace courts on high;
when in these outer chambers such glory gilds the night,
O, the transcendent brightness of God’s eternal light!

Vladimir Briem (1886), translated from Icelandic by Charles V. Pilcher (1879-1961), alt.
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