Christianity (6c) – Reformation Traditions (Lutheranism and Calvinism)

The two major Protestant Reformers of the 16th century, Martin Luther and John Calvin, inherited traditions of theological reflection about nature which were in large measure shaped by *a spirit-matter dualism*, the idea that the material world is in some fundamental way, in itself, an obstacle to the life of faith, something that the believer should aspire to rise above. At the highest levels of theological sophistication, this spirit-matter dualism had been given expression in terms of an ontology of the Great Chain (Hierarchy) of Being. This was the theological perspective: theologians and mystics and many other people of faith thought of the world as if they were situated in a valley, contemplating a towering mountain. The goal of the spiritual life, from this perspective, is to ascend from this material world, higher and higher spiritually, through various stages of material and spiritual being, to God at the top, who is pure spirit. According to this perspective, then, the question of loving nature and caring for nature would rarely, if at all, have to be taken seriously: because the whole purpose of human life would be understood to be ascending *above* nature (the world of the flesh) to be with God – and using or even abusing nature along the way.

In contrast, some pre-Reformation theologians and mystics eschewed that kind of spirit-matter dualism in favor of a more integrated vision of the world. Although they may have thought of the world in terms of a Great Chain of Being, they were variously captivated by the thought of the Divine Goodness – or the Divine Fecundity – *overflowing*, from the apex of the hierarchy to its lowest regions. They took for granted the idea that an 18th century Lutheran theologian, F. C. Oetinger, was to champion, that "corporeality is the end of the ways of God." Which is to say: the purpose (the "end" in this sense) of God and the presence of God are to be discerned and encountered *within* the material world, *not above or beyond it.* This was the perspective: not contemplating the world as if looking up at a towering mountain, but rather envisioning the world as if one were stationed at the peak of such a mountain looking out at the vistas of the slopes and valleys below and all around.

Luther and Calvin were surely very much aware of the theological traditions of the ontological

and hierarchical reflection about nature which they had inherited. But these traditions were not the primary intellectual context they self-consciously chose for their own theological reflection about the created world. The Reformers as a matter of course regarded their own theological work primarily as interpretation of the Scriptures. And there they found, and gave voice to, a rich theology of nature. As they interpreted the Bible afresh, moreover, they broke dramatically with the spirit-matter dualism they had inherited.

"In every part of the world, in heaven and on earth," Calvin writes, in a typical utterance, "[God] has written and as it were engraven the glory of his power, goodness, wisdom and eternity.... For the little singing birds sang of God, the animals acclaimed him, the elements feared and the mountains resounded with him, the river and springs threw glances toward him, the grasses and the flowers smiled." Calvin even suggests that when we contemplate the wonders of God in nature "we should not merely run them over cursorily, and, so to speak, with the fleeting glance, but we should ponder them at length, turn them over in our mind seriously and faithfully, and recollect them repeatedly." Luther had a similar view of the glories of God in the whole creation and of creation's marvels. "If you truly understood a grain of wheat," he once wrote, "you would die of wonder." In his Genesis commentary, Luther even imagined Adam and Eve, before the fall, enjoying a common table with the animals. In the same spirit, both Reformers thought theocentrically about human interactions with nature: God and His righteous will, they believed, set very real limits for the reaches of human pride and arrogance. The created world, the Reformers held, belonged first and foremost to the Creator. Yes, in keeping with the teaching of the Book of Genesis, the Reformers affirmed that humans were mandated by God to exercise dominion over the earth, but, for the Reformers, especially for Luther, that dominion was understood to be a restoration of Adam's and Eve's lives as caretakers or gardeners, "before the fall," not as a license for exploitation.

Further, both Reformers affirmed the immediacy of God in nature. For them, God was not detached from the world, far above in some spiritualized heaven. On the contrary, as Luther often said, God is "in, with, and under" the whole created world. For Luther, God is "with all creatures, flowing and pouring into them, filling all things." Indeed, God is so near, according to Luther, that if He were to withdraw His hand, the whole creation would collapse: "The sun would not long return to its position and shine in the heavens, no child would be born; no kernel,

no blade of grass, nothing at all would grow on earth or reproduce itself if God did not work forever and ever."

This view of nature as Divinely given and Divinely charged came to its completion, for the Reformers, in their teachings about "last things" (eschatology). Both theologians strongly emphasized the traditional Christian teaching about the resurrection of the body. Both also, Luther perhaps most vividly, projected a view of the end of the world as a cosmic consummation, the coming of the "new heavens and new earth" announced in biblical traditions. Nature itself, the Reformers believed, would be "saved" and consummated at the very end. Then, they believed, with the Apostle Paul, God would be "all in all." (I Corinthians 15:28)

In retrospect, Luther and Calvin can thus be seen to be champions of the idea of the overflowing goodness, the fecundity, of God. The Reformers rejected the theme that the way to find God is to rise above nature. For them, in this sense, "corporeality is the end of the ways of God." God is always to be encountered, when He is encountered, immanent in the material world.

Fatefully, however, the issues that preoccupied Luther and Calvin had to do not with God and nature, but much more so with God and human salvation. Their theologies, accordingly, took on a kind of anthropocentric character, by way of emphasis. "Justification by grace through faith alone" was the theological teaching that most occupied their attention. Furthermore, presupposing his own idea of the justified Christian's life of active sanctification, Calvin accented the responsibility of Christians to change the world for the better. In Calvin's thought, accordingly, the theme of human dominion over the earth tended to lose the contemplative character it had for earlier theologians who had celebrated the overflowing goodness of God and take on, instead, more active, interventionist meanings.

The theological heirs of Luther and Calvin, especially in the 19th century and thereafter, took the Reformers' measured anthropocentrism as a given, but tended to abandon the Reformers' rich teaching about God and the natural world. As a result, Protestant theology after Luther and Calvin tended to become much more exclusively anthropocentric. There were many reasons for this marked shift of emphasis, not the least of them being the rise of Newtonian mechanistic

science and Darwinian evolutionary science, and the felt need by many post-Reformation theologians to root religious faith in the intangible human spirit or human subjectivity, so as to leave the objective world of nature, as it were, to the natural scientists, and also to protect faith from the attacks of some scientists and scientifically informed philosophers. This anthropocentric dynamic also made it easy – intended or not – for both theologians in particular and Protestants of every walk of life to be swept along by the dynamics of industrial society, which were publicly predicated on the exploitation of the earth for the sake of human progress.

It was a profound historical irony, then, that the Reformers' rejection of the theme that humans are called to rise above nature, a theme which they had inherited with the spirit-matter dualism of the Great Chain of Being ontology, was contradicted by many of their own theological heirs. "Humans rising above nature" was to become one of the central themes of 19th and early 20th century Protestant theology, above all through the influence of the 19th century theologian, Albrecht Ritschl. The theme was given new life in the middle of the 20th century by the Protestant New Testament scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, whose existentialist interpretation of Christianity presupposed a view of nature as a mechanistic, "objective" world, which, Bultmann believed, those who chose "authentic existence" should rise above. Even the great Karl Barth, said to be the Thomas Aquinas of the Protestant tradition, whose works dominated Protestant theological discussions in the middle of the 20th century, refused to develop a theology of nature and, along the way, almost by default, set forth ideas about nature in instrumental terms that posed no real challenge to the ideas of rising above nature espoused by thinkers like Ritschl and Bultmann.

This whole situation began to change in the second half of the 20th century. A number of theologians writing in the tradition of Luther and Calvin began to take issue with the whole direction that Protestant thought about nature had taken in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Paul Tillich reached deeply into what for him was the nature-mysticism of Martin Luther, in order to reaffirm nature as a theological theme in its own right and nature itself as having sacramental value. In a stirring address to the World Council of Churches meeting in New Delhi in 1961, Joseph Sittler called the attention of the churches of the world to the "cosmic redemption" theology of St. Paul and pleaded that the theology of Grace that was so critically important for the theologies of Luther and Calvin be extended to comprehend, and no longer exclude, the world of nature.

Presupposing such trends and drawing still more deeply on newly discerned ecological teachings of the Bible, Juergen Moltmann projected a grand theological schema of cosmic, as well as historical, redemption, predicated on a new and compelling appreciation for biblical eschatology. Moltmann developed a "theology of hope" that claimed liberation not just for humans, above all the poor and the oppressed, but also for all the creatures of nature. He also developed a new and deeper understanding of God's immanence in the whole created world – in nature, as well as in spirit – than many of his 19th and early 20th century theological forebears had done, reminiscent of the sensibilities for nature that the Reformers took for granted. In this sense, Moltmann's thought represents a decisive rejection of the hierarchical spirit-matter dualism that dominated much of the theology inherited by the Reformers and much of the theology espoused by the heirs of the Reformers in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Moltmann also went beyond the teaching of the Reformers, whose thought had been anthropocentric by emphasis. Moltmann developed a theology of "cosmic redemption" through Christ and a theology of the creative Spirit of God that integrated and extended the Reformers' rich apperceptions of nature, precisely in terms of a comprehensive, cosmic theology of Grace, a theological theme which, for the Reformers, had been mainly focused on issues relating to human salvation. Moltmann likewise transvalued post-Reformation teaching about human dominion over nature, which presupposed the theme of human mastery, even domination. Instead, Moltmann espoused a theology of the integrity and the rights of nature.

But Moltmann's was by no means the only Protestant voice to address the theology of nature positively and creatively, in the wake of the pioneering work of Tillich and Sittler. John Cobb, a thinker deeply influenced by the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, focused much of his innovative theological writings on the global environmental crisis, which by the end of the 20th century had been widely recognized by theologians as well as by scholars in other fields to be *the* challenge of the future. Protestant theologians such as H. Paul Santmire and James Nash also studied the historical and ethical dimensions of the crisis. In addition, a wide variety of Protestant Old and New Testament scholars began to explore the theology of creation espoused by biblical traditions in new and suggestive ways. Further, the critique of the hierarchical ontology of the Great Chain of Being imagery was voiced with increasing poignancy and power by feminist theologians like Sallie McFague. Building, in part, on the sacramental insights of

Luther, McFague, for one, argued that the whole creation is the "Body of God," that the love of nature is in fact, in this sense, the love of God. Global ecological and ethical concerns were addressed imaginatively, as well, by Larry Rasmussen, whose work reflected the growing interests in cultural diversity and religious pluralism that emerged in some strains of Protestant thought toward the end of the 20th century.

Along side of and integrated with their theologies, all these late 20th century thinkers also took for granted the same kind of passion for social justice that had been voiced most prominently by Moltmann. This ethical accent on nature represented a relatively new development in the unfolding of the Reformation tradition, whose concerns had hitherto focused mainly on issues pertaining to the human's status before God and, later, on the theoretical relationship between faith and the natural sciences.

This is not to say that all Protestant theologians in the second half of the 20th century were committed to the projection of new and imaginative theologies of nature, sensitive to the issues of justice for all creatures. Numerous Protestant thinkers in that era were preoccupied with other issues. Some, following Karl Barth, viewed any kind of interest in the theology of nature with suspicion. Still, in many thoroughgoing ways, by the beginning of the 21st century, the tradition of Luther and Calvin, which had begun with a rich theology of nature of its own, had been expanded and deepened. It had become a profoundly ecological tradition, shaped by concerns both for human liberation and for the liberation of the whole creation.

– H. Paul Santmire

For further reading:

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