TOWARD A COSMIC ICONOGRAPHY: RECLAIMING THE IMAGES OF THE FECUNDITY OF GOD AND THE LAND OF PROMISE FOR AN ALIENATED WORLD

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Alienation from the natural world, in which we live and move and have our being, is fast becoming a hallmark of contemporary technological culture in the West. The public's vision of planet earth's future has increasingly been shrouded by the prospect of an unimagineab1e doom, either the sudden, mass extinction of all the living creatures on this planet by some nuclear winter, or a more gradual, perhaps more tortuous kind of extinction of living things, due to the cumulative impact of the environmental disruptions wrought by human greed, lust for power, or ignorance.

Reflective souls have also been troubled by larger prospects of cosmic doom, much further away in time, yet not for that reason less distressing for the questioning mind. Some physicists and others have postulated that, according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the entire physical cosmos itself is destined for an ignominious "heat death." This is surely an existentially disquieting thought.for those who entertain it and ponder it seriously.

A world threatened with cosmic doom is a world that fosters alienation from the cosmic order. One cannot existentially embrace a natural environment which is here today, but which may mean poison or death tomorrow. Herein lie the roots of the characteristic existential alienation from nature which can be observed in various contexts in our advanced techological societies in the West.

This culture of alienation from nature spills over, as a matter of course, into the life of Western churches. Once alienated from the material world in which we live and move and have our being, it is not easy for us to participate wholeheartedly and serenely in the sacramental life of the Church. For, the sacraments essentially consist of this — now — alien stuff, matter. This means that the general existential alienation from the material world characteristic of our technological societies in the West, is often, by default, also a profound, if largely hidden, spiritual alienation, at least in the minds and hearts of many Christians.

Another sign of the same kind of spiritual alienation from the material world is the eclipse of biblical eschatology in the minds and hearts of many Christians today. The Gospel of the coming New Heavens and New Earth, it appears, is rarely preached in our churches. Which is understandable. For, what meaning can the biblical hope for a renewed cosmos in the Age to Come have for us, if we are otherwise convinced that the material world has no future worth considering?

As a result of this spiritual alienation from the material order, the faithful increasingly have taken refuge in the piety of individual inferiority and subjectivity.

The sophisticated are tempted to find solace in the "eternal now" of some kind of eclectic mysticism: an inward journey that tends to detach them from the world of nature at large, from the sacraments, from any more-than-incidental interaction with brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ, or, at times, from tangible commitments to material justice for others in the mundane world.

More simple souls are tempted to take refuge in the individual inferiority of some kind of "second baptism," whether it be the inner ecstacy of the glossal alial a experience or the narcicistic reveries of self-induced self-esteem.

Once it has been gratified, this kind of quest for intense, inner, individual experience, whether it is sophisticated or simplistic, tends, in turn, to reeinforce the alienation from the larger material networks of ecological and social relationships which drove these believers away from the external world into the sanctuary of their inferiority in the first place.

Faced with this situation of existential and spiritual alienation from nature in our society at large and in our churches in particular, a small but vocal minority of theologians in the West has, for more than two decades, been calling for a new theological approach to our material environment: an approach that is commensurate with the universal scope of the existential and spiritual crisis in which many find themselves mired today, when they contemplate the material world around them.[l] But the voice of that minority, persistly audible as it has been, seems nevertheless to have fallen on many deaf ears. The theology of nature has remained a kind of theological sideshow in the North American milieu, to this very day. During the last twenty-five years, most Christian theologians in the West have been preoccupied with other issues.

Hence the celebration of the 1200th anniversary of the Vllth Ecumenical Council happily gives us a fresh opportunity: to return to the challenge of projecting a new theology of the material world. For, in affirming the importance of the icons, it would appear, that Council also, in effect, affirmed the value of the whole material cosmos.

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"The icon points to the value of the material creation," one interpreter of Orthodox traditions has written. "With the incarnation of the Logos [celebrated by the icons], not only [the human creature] but the entire creation shares in the event of re-creation. The new Adam [Jesus Christ] is in no tension with the material creation; He sees matter not as an expression or a trap of evil, but as an act of divine love and providence, and as an instrument of doing good."[2] In this spirit, John of Damascus wrote, in answering the iconoclasts: "I will not cease from reverencing matter, for it was through matter that my salvation came to pass."[3]

In contrast, the iconoclasts of the eighth century, whom the Vllth Ecumenical Council condemned, apparently presupposed a certain alienation from the material world. Their sometimes ruthless attacks on the icons might even have been inspired, in some measure, by a kind of Gnostic anti-cosmic dualism.[4]

It is interesting to note, however, that the classical icons themselves, viewed together over a period of centuries, do not seem to focus much explicit attention on the whole material world, as such. The principal types of icons, it would appear, are these, in order of importance: Christ icons, icons of the Holy Trinity, icons of the Mother of God, icons of saints, icons of angels, and so-called "scenic icons," the latter depicting mainly narratives about Old Testament peronalities.[5] Where are the galaxies and the planets, the sun and the moon, the rivers and the mountains, the trees and the fields, the creeping things and the flying things, of Genesis 1 and Psalm 104, in the witness of these icons? In addition to Christ, the Trinity, the angels, and the saints, why are the remaining creatures of the God's good creation characteristically absent from the representations of these icons, as subjects in their own right?

Could it be that the riches of Orthodox iconography are limited? Could it be, for all their powerful affirmations of the universal meanings of the Incarnation, and the particular significance of the embodied lives of the saints, that classical Orthodox icons have little or nothing to say to us directly about the mysteries and the glories of God that are mirrored in the stars or the earth or in the play of the great whales? Is the tradition of Orthodox iconography as rich a resource for the affirmation of the whole material world as some of its advocates c 1 aim that it is?

I do not propose to try to answer that kind of question here. Hut I do want to suggest a possible way to discern an answer indirectly, by way of illustration, as I consider some critical issues given in the traditions of Western theological reflection about nature.

Interpreters of the Western theological tradition will surely have to admit that, whatever we may wish to say finally about classical Orthodox iconography, only a few Western

theologians have understood the galaxies and the stars, the sun and the moon, the rivers and the mountains, the trees and the fields, the creeping things and the flying things, as creatures with their own dignity and their own integrity, and their own revelatory vocation, within the greater scheme of things.[6]

Why is that the case? How can we, in turn, project a more explicitly inclusive cosmic theology?

If we can answer these questions, then perhaps we will be in a position to imagine what a truly cosmi'c iconography might look like, at least within the developiing traditions of Western theological reflection and liturgical praxis.

In this paper, I will explore some images of the material world in classical Western theology and suggest how two of them, the images of Divine Fecundity and the Promised Land, might be incorporated more substantively into our theological reflection in the West today, in order to undergird the kind of theological approach to nature that our epoch, and the church of these times, would seem to require. Perhaps as a result of this kind of exploration, we will also be able to envision what a rebirth — or would it be a new birth? — of a cosmic iconography in the West might look like.

Whether this immanent criticism of Western traditions, with regard to the theology of nature, also will have corresponding implications for those who are addressing the same issues from an Orthodox perspective, I shall leave to students of those traditions to determine -- although I am willing to entertain the thought that a similar kind of immanent criticism of Orthodox traditions might also be helpful for the development of a truly ecumencial theology of nature in our time.

I.

When I refer to images of Divine Fecundity and of the Promised Land, I should note, I am employing the word image to refer to the subjective mental moment that precedes the externalized expression, as that expression is given shape, either in the medium of the word or in the medium of the "icon." Further, I am assuming that some images function in a kind of coordinating way for the mind (elsewhere I refer to these coordinating images as "root metaphors").[7]

Surveying Western traditions of reflection about the material world, from the earliest biblical times, through the encounter with Greek thought, and on, through the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the modern period, I believe that it is possible to identify three coordinating images that a variety of Christian thinkers have presupposed as they have pondered the theological meaning of the material world:

The image of ascent
The image of fecundity
The image of the promised land

The first and second images, ascent and fecundity, are closely related to what I have also called the primoridal experience of the overwhelming mountain, an experience common to many cultures and well-attested in the West.

From the first perspective, ascent , the meaning of life with God is construed hierarchically in terms of an upward moving journey of the mind or the spirit from lower levels of reality, which are material, toward increasingly spiritual levels of reality, toward contemplation of the ethereal, immaterial One, which hovers, like the sun at midday, at the apex of the mountain. When this image is dominant in any system of thought the material world -- which, in the imagination, is the lower levels of the mountain — tends to be devaluated, neutralized, or even treated as something evil.

From the second perspective, fecundity , the meaning of life with God is construed in terms of a downward itinerary of the mind or the spirit from the apex or creative center of reality to encompass all levels of reality, as if one were standing at the top of a mountain and surveying all the many different kinds of creatures, at various levels, all around that mountain down into the several valleys that circle the mountain. When this image is dominant in any system of thought the material world tends to be affirmed, even celebrated, for its goodness.

Since these two coordinating images, ascent and fecundity, both are derived from a single experiential matrix, the primoridal encounter with the overwhelming mountain, they often appear together in reflection about the material world. This is evident in classical metaphysical speculations about the Great Chain of Being. From one perspective, according to this conceptuality, the whole of reality is seen as having the goal of returning, in some measure, to unity with the immaterial One -- "the Good" — in transcendent luminosity. From the other perspective, the whole of reality is seen as a grand and multifaceted overflowing of Goodness, embracing and encompassing all things.

But as Arthur Lovejoy pointed out in his seminal study The Great Chain of Being,[8] that grand metaphysical conceptuality represents the internalization of a great metalogical contradiction: here two "gods" struggle with each other, so to speak, the first the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover, the Good, which has nothing of significance to do with the material world, the second the Platonic Divine Goodness, which, so to speak, loves to overflow into and embrace the whole material order. The struggle of those two "gods," within the same conceptual framework also bequeathed a metaphysical ambiguity with regard to the material world. If the Good were dominant, then nature would be

devaluated. If Overflowing Goodness were dominant, then nature would be strongly affirmed as good.

When Christian theology took shape in the world of Greek thought, fatefully, it also took over that great metalogical contradiction that had been internatized in that grand metaphysical conceptuality, the Great Chain of Being.

There is also a third coordinating image that Western theological traditions presuppose, which appears to be a singular product of Hebraic experience -- although this is not to say that the images of ascent or fecundity are not to be encountered in biblical traditions. This appears to be perhaps the most important contribution of the Hebraic mind to the processes of thinking about the material order in Western theology: this is the image of the promised land.

Hebrew identity was rooted in the Land of Promise, as Walter Brueggeman has shown.(9] This image developed in different ways, during the history of biblical Israel. Ultimately, the concrete valency of the image, which was first linked chiefly to the historical, geographicl region of Canaan, was expanded and projected, in apocalyptic thinking, to encompass a vision of total cosmic renewal. The promised land flowing with milk and honey thus became a promised new cosmos, a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells, where God will be all in all. In systems of thought where the image of the promised land is dominant, the material oder tends to be affirmed, even celebrated, as a matter of course. It is surely not treated as something to be abrogated, since that would be to abrogate the people's identity.

Then a further comment about this image of the promised land or the new heavens and new earth: at least from the time of the David, when Israel came to feel at home with an extensive creation-theology of its own (dependent, as it was at some points, on Canannite understandings of the created world), the images of the promised land and the Divine fecundity tended to coalesce. The hope of the promised land or the new heavens and the new earth easily became a kind of fecundity-hope: a land flowing with milk and honey, wine on the lees, a feast of fat things. The images of the promised land and the Divine fecundity, in other words, easily became a rich, multivalent single image, as early as the time of the United Monarchy in Ancient Israel .

II.

Now I would like to illustrate some characteristic ways that these images, ascent, fecundity, and promised land, have shaped Western theological reflection about the material world.[10]

Elsewhere I have argued that Origen, the first Christian

systematic theologian, approached matter primarily in terms of the image of ascent . His was a highly spiritualized, even quasi-dualistic theology, akin in some ways to Gnosticism. For Origen the goal of human life was to ascend to union with the immaterial One, far above and beyond the material order of creation. Correspondingly, Origen had a rather negative, not to say dualistic, estimate of the material world, including the human body. That is the legacy of the image of ascent, when it alone is dominant in theological reflection about nature.

Another early Christian thinker, Ireneaus , shaped his reflection about the material world quite differently from Origen's, I also have argued, primarily by invoking the image of the promised land. In so doing, Irenaeus readily drew on the eschatological and apocalyptic imagery of Paul's letters and also on the intense eschatological consciousness of the early Church more generally. Irenaeus has sometimes been criticized for his so-called "naive biblicism," it being alleged that he simply reproduces an apocalyptic biblical eschatology literally, being content to repristenate the images of a new heavens and a new earth that he found in II Peter and the Book of Revelation. Be that as it may, it seems clear that the dominating image in his thought, in this respect, is the promised land, albeit in an apocalyptic form.

This allows Irenaeus to project a rich theology of the material world, which shows a deep appreciation for natural processes, such as the birth experience or the cycles of the seasons, as well as a strong, incarnational, sacramental theology. For Irenaeus, so to speak, salvation is of this earth and on this earth, now and in the Age to Come. This emphasis on the soteriological significance of the earth also gives Irenaeus a firm theological base from which to launch theological polemics against the Gnostics.

I have attempted to show elsewhere, in addition, how Augustine starts his own spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage from a position that is very close to Origen's, with a theology of the material world that is radically dependent on the image of ascent. This is his Manichean or Gnostic phase.

I have argued, further, that in his mature thought Augustine shifts the emphasis in his thinking from ascent to fecundity, from seeking the immaterial Good to seeking the overflowing Divine Goodness. As he makes that shift in coordinating images, moreover, he appears to synthesize the fecundity image with the eschatological image of the new heavens and the new earth, that is, the promised land of apocalyptic hopes. This he does in a most imaginative and creative way, building on the synthesis that was already given in Hebraic theology.

Augustine's mature vision of the material order, then, is this: overflowing Divine Goodness, embracing all material things, from the beginning to the ending of the created order,

moving toward a final, transcendent consummation of that Divine Fecundity in the new heavens and the new earth, when God will be all in all, which for him is the eschatological future of the whole creation.

With this vision of the material order as the receptacle and the mirror of Divine Goodness at every level, Augustine also projected an ethic of contemplation toward nature. For him, nature has its own integrity and its own dignity from God and therefore deserves to be respected, even venerated, surely not dominated or ruthlessly exploited. Augustine could have said, with G. M. Hopkins, that the whole earth is charged with the glory of God. Or, in language that he did not readily employ, but which expresses his meaning: for him the whole cosmos is an icon of Divine Grace.

One more comment now, and then this hasty journey into the inner imaginative processes of the Western theological mind will be complete, for the purposes of this paper. Through a circuitous course of historical developments which we cannot consider here, modern Protestant theology, by a strange kind of irony — for all its criticism of the "acute Hellenization" of classical Christian thought -- ended up, in large measure, squarely in the camp of Origen, with regard to its approach to nature. Without any apparent awareness of the fact, modern Protestant theologians often approached the theology of nature with assumptions radically shaped by the image of ascent .

The deity that Immanuel Kant's thought bequeathed to modern Protestant theology was a totally transcendent deity that had nothing to do with the material order. Kant removed God from nature. Gone were the great themes of overflowing Divine Goodness and the hopes of a new heavens and a new earth, in which and through which God would be all in all, that had been so congenial for Augustine. Instead, the image of the Good returned, the image of the immaterial, ineffable One — and, with that, a new mechanical view of nature, which was a radically desacralized view of nature that had strong negative, even dualistic, Gnostic overtones. Concomitantly, Kant's thought, and much modern Protestant thought in his train, also sanctioned an ethic of domination over nature, which stands in the sharpest contrast to the much more contemplative view of Augustine.

It appears, in retrospect, that in this respect the challenge before us theologically in our time is, on the one hand, to eschew as much as possible any constructive theological dependency on the image of ascent -- in particular, to reject the theologies of both Origen and Kant, and their followers, insofar as these theologies are dependent on the image of ascent -- and, on the other hand, to seek to reclaim the images of Divine Fecundity and the Promised Land, especially as we encounter them united creatively in the mature thought of Augustine. This appears to be the path to follow to discover a new and vital theology of the material world that affirms the value of nature

and teaches respect for, even wonder before, all the creatures of nature.

III.

To this end, I want to suggest some guidelines for a new theology of nature, which will be shaped by the images of Divine Fecundity and the Promised Land. These guidelines can be limited to three here, for the purposes of illustrating a concrete theological direction, rather than outlining a whole theological program.

First, regarding our thought about God. It will do us no good, when all has been said and done, as we seek to construe the value and the integrity of the material order in the greater scheme of things, to hold on to an unreconstructed Origenistic or Kantian idea of God as the ineffable, immaterial One. For, at some point or another, the weight of that idea of God, understood as "the Good," will cancel out, so to speak, whatever else we might want to say affirmatively about nature.

We are in a good position, however, given the revival of trinitarian thinking in our time, by Juergen Moltmann and others. Trinitarian thinking about God offers us rich possibilities for allowing the images of Divine Fecundity and the Promised Land to shape our thought about God.

A start in this direction was already made by the thirteenth century Augustinian theologian, Bonaventure.(11] He internalizes the image of fecundity, within the Divine Life. Overflowing goodness, according to Bonaventure, happens in the communication between the Father and the Son in eternity, and this is an infinitely rich, unimagineab1e Divine Fecundity. This glorious innerdivine fecundity is also the principle of God's transcendence, for Bonaventure, since it is so immense, so infinite, as Bonaventure depicts it, compared to any experience of fecundity that is ours within the pale of this world.

Further, for Bonaventure, within the Trinity the Son has a kind of teleological vocation, akin to the position of the Promised Land or the New Heavens and the New Earth within the economy of creation. The Son is eternally called upon to be the object of the Divine Fecundity. The Son is the receiving agent of the overflowing goodness of the Father. The Son embodies, so to speak, everything the Father has to give Him, and therefore can be called the eternal image or mirror of the Father's fecundity. In all this, Bonaventure takes for granted the by-then-familiar idea, espoused by Augustine and many others, that the eternal Son, as the Word or Logos or Wisdom of God, is the Mind of God and, as such, is the eternal repository of all the Divine Ideas, which, in turn, are the eternal exemplars of every possible creature that God might choose to create.

When the Father does create the world, according to Bonaventure, He creates it through and in the Son, thus mirroring the eternal Divine fecundity in the manifold creatures of the finite world. The rich diversity of the created order, then, from the angels above to every creeping thing below, has a certain Divinely mandated necessity. All of the creatures of the finite order have their places not by chance, and not simply to serve the needs of the human creature, but because they participate in their eternal exemplars in the Mind of God, the eternal Son. Their raison d ' etre is not accidental or instrumental, but essential: once God has willed to communicate his infinite life to another, in the Son and through the Son, by that fact a world that mirrors the Divine Fecundity has been mandated by God.

Second, then, a guideline for developing our thought about the created world. It will do us no good, when all has been said and done, if we attempt to construct a rich theology of nature, and yet construe it, finally, anthropocentrically: as if the only reason why the created world was posited by God was to make it possible for God to have a history with the human creature. For in that way the image of ascent would reassert its influence.

If God's purpose in creating the world was to establish a stage on which He could interact with spiritual creatures and bring them to fulfilment, then that stage will finally have to be evaluated as having an inferior kind of goodness. It may even have to be evaluated as having little or no goodness in itself at all. This is the legacy of the image of ascent.

Thomas Aquinas, for one, follows this kind of theological logic consistently.I 12) Although he argues that God's Goodness overflows to the whole world, and not just to spiritual creatures, in the end Thomas holds that only spiritual creatures will be consummated eternally, not rocks and trees and animals. Which is to say that the famous Thomistic dictim that Grace does not destroy but perfects nature applies only to spiritual creatures, not to material creatures. For, in fact, according to Thomas' schema, Grace does destory material creatures.

This Thomistic schema, Ironically perhaps, has been near and dear to the hearts of many modern Protestant theologians, since the time of Kant. The created cosmos is a stage, in this perspective, a mere instrument, which can then be discarded, like an old shoe, once its time of service to spiritual creatures is over. Ethically, in turn, this approach to the world of nature means that nature is ripe for domination and exploitation, since the whole point of the material order, according to this view, is to serve the needs of the human creature.

Much better it is, therefore, for us to think of God as purposing at the very beginning to communicate his infinite life not just to spiritual creatures, but in keeping with the glories of His own internal fecundity communicated eternally to the Son,

to a whole universe of creatures, of different shapes and colors, throughout an immense evolutionary history, bringing all things -- not just spiritual creatures -- to their fulfilment in the Promised Land of the New Heavens and the New Earth, in which and through which He will be all in all, transfiguring every creature in Divine glory. In this way the integrity and the dignity of the creatures of nature can be, in some degree, guarded, in view of their independent theological value in the Divine economy. God wants to have a peach tree, in this perspective, not just to provide fruit for us humans to eat, but because God rejoices in communicating his life in this way to this creature and eventually will rejoice, once and for all, in a transfigured world in which the peach tree will have a place, in some manner.

This already points to the third guideline I would like to mention, regarding the soteriological vocation of Jesus Christ . At this point I believe that the Western Church has much to learn from Irenaeus, and also later Orthodox thinkers. Irenaeus envisoned the soteriological vocation of Jesus Christ not just in terms of the Son's relationship to human sin, but also in terms of a universal, cosmic consummation. Christ was sent, Irenaeus held, to serve as the perfecter of the creation, as well as its redeemer. According to this way of thinking, the Incarnation would have happened, so to speak, whether or not Adam had sinned, since the Son was given a vocation oriented to the final fulfilment of the creation right from the start.

This guideline might be expressed graphically in this way. The soteriological vocation of the Son of God is not just to be the New Adam, restoring a fallen humanity to its intended history in the universal providence of God with the whole creation, but also a New Noah. From the very beginning of the creation, in other words, it was the Divine intention that the eternal Son, the image of the Father, should lead every creature, not just humans, into the ark of eternity, to partake in the eternal peace of the Sabbath Rest of the Father.

In this respect Western theology, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, has tended to be so fixated on the theology of human sin that it has been ill-equipped, often if not always, to accommodate the universal meanings given with biblical eschatology, as in Romans 8, where the whole creation is seen as waiting for the completion of human redemption so that all things might also find their fulfilment; or the. not-al together-different biblical images of the vocation of Jesus Christ, as that vocation is portrayed in Colossi ans: "all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together." (Col. l:16f.)

If we hold to the more narrowly construed and more familiar Western view that Christ became incarnate only in response to human sin, not only does that make it difficult for us to accommodate some of the universal christo1ogica1 meanings portrayed for us in the New Testament, it also means that the

Lordship of the Son, i_n whom all things are created, is not really fulfilled at the end. The magnitude of His glory, which comprehends all things at the very beginning, would be diminished at the very end, when He would be Lord only of the human creatures and not also all material creatures. Mu ch more fitting is it, then, for His glory to be enhanced at the very ending of the Divine Economy, as all the things which were originally created through Him also find their fulfilment in Him, as constituents of the Kingdom which He will one day hand over to the Father, so that God can then be all in all.

IV.

With such theological guidelines in place, regarding our thinking about God, creation, and Christ, as we seek to reclaim the images of Divine Fecundity and the Promised Land, then the more familiar, more conventional "environmental" questions regarding our ethical approach to nature, such as the meaning of our stewardship of the earth, can be dealt with in a way that will be informed and undergirded by a viable and affirmative theology of the material creation.

Heretofore the Church's attempt to project an "environmental ethic," both for the faithful and for the purposes of influencing public policy, has often foundered, for want of solid theological f oundations .

Further, with this kind of thinking about God, creation, and Christ presupposed, one can also imagine that Western churches might be able to call forth a rich iconography of the cosmos, which would supplement and enhance the rich iconography of the human and the Divine that appears to be one of the major contributions, of the Orthodox tradition to contempoary ecumenical theology.

For, the overflowing Goodness of God is not jealous. The fecundity of the Divine is not restricted to spiritual creatures alone. On the contrary, the whole creation can be seen, by those who have eyes to see, as a theatre of the Divine glory (Calvin), now, as well as in the Age to Come. That being the case, there is no reason why any iconographer must restrict his or her s ubj e c tmat ter to God, Christ, the saints, and the angels. There is every reason, indeed, why the whole multitude of natural creatures, from the galaxies and the primeval waters to the sparrows and the lilies of the field, should be depicted, prayerfully and with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: since every creature, rightly seen, reflects the Divine Glory, since every creature, rightly represented, can disclose the presence of God.

Actually, the beginnings of this kind of cosmic iconography are already in front of our interested, but sometimes unseeing eyes: in the lifework of the nineteenth century lay Protestant

preacher and inspired iconographer of the Word of God, Vincent van Gogh. For all the attention his work has received in post-World War II North America, especially recently in the form of two stunning exhibits at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, van Gogh's work has yet to be widely recognized for what it clearly is, when contemplated both in terms of his own life history and in terms of its patently biblical subject matter, a fecund theological iconography.

Poignantly drab paintings, such as "the Potato Eaters," communicate the pathos of the Divine suffering with a broken humanity, rooted in the depths of the good earth. Here nature is much more than a decoration, as it is in some of the classical icons. The earth has a reality and a healing power all of its own, even as the story of human toil and trouble is also portrayed. With the work of Van Gogh, we know more than ever before what Jesus meant when he said that the meek shall inherit the earth.

Shockingly honest, yet understated paintings, such as "the Crows," which van Gogh painted shortly before his own death, communicate the awesome mysteries of death and dying which permeate the whole cosmos, not just human life, while hinting at broader vistas of Divine promise for the whole creation. In this painting, we see the whole creation in travail, awaiting rebirth.

Overwhelmingly beautiful paintings, such as "the Starry Night" claim our hearts -- this one with its cypress trees telling the unavoidable story of cosmic fini tude -- no one, nothing.is immortal -- the transplanted Dutch village church structure proclaiming the Word of hope for all things -- and the transfigured heavens above announcing the abyss of finite being and the unfathomable mysteries of Divine providence, yet the gloriously congenial immanence of the God of love in all things. In this single painting we learn more about the heavens telling the glory of God than perhaps from any other revelatory experience.

Consummately bright, even gloriously hopeful paintings, such as "the Sower", which van Gogh produced at Arles, showing that architypical figure laboring faithfully in the gold luminescence of the rising sun, evoke visions of the Kingdom to come, when the seeds of the Kingdom, first sown in ignomy, will be raised from the dead to become the new heavens and the new earth in which rightesouness dwells, transfigured forever in the eternal light of the Son, coeternal with the Father and the Spirit. Here the faithful, when they are given eyes to see, can contemplate visually what before they only knew verbally, in the words of Revelation 21.

If only one of these paintings by van Gogh could be the altar icon in some North American parish church, rather than a "work of art" in some museum somewhere!

That might make the creation of a new, cosmic iconography — one which would have reclaimed the images of the Divine Fecundity and the Promised Land -- a revolutionary possibility in many parish churches. That might make it possible for the faithful to discover, as Paul Tillich was wont to observe, a new kind of healing power in the works of van Gogh. Placed in a church, those van Gogh paintings could easily be revealed to be icons, mediators of Divine Grace.

The experience of such cosmic icons, in turn, could offer a germinative spiritual field that could nourish the growth of a viable, new theology of nature, as a matter of inner theological necessity, as well as external existential urgency, in this day of cosmic alienation.

But perhaps such thoughts about a Van Gogh are utterly fanciful. If so, however, this fact remains. One of the most important theological challenges which the Vllth Ecumenical Council bequeaths to Western theologians today is -- to discover how to prepare the way for a new, cosmic iconography in our churches.

If all of us seek to respond to that challenge, perhaps the day will not be far off when Western congregations will be able to speak with their lips -- and <u>see</u> with their eyes! -- the vision that the seventh century Patriarch, Sophronius of Jerusalem, once expressed in his prayer for the Great Blessing of the Waters, at the Feast of Christ's Baptism:

> Great art thou, 0 Lord, and marvellous are thy works: no words suffice to sing the praise of thy wonders.... The sun sings thy praises; the moon glorifies thee; the stars supplicate before thee; the light obeys thee; the deeps are afraid at thy presence; the fountains are thy servants. Thou hast stretched out the heavens like a curtain; thou hast established the earth upon the waters; thou hast walled about the sea with sand. Thou has poured forth the air that living things may breathe.... So, by the elements, by the angels and by [human creatures], by things visible and invisible, may thy most holy Name be glorified, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now, and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen. [13]

Notes

1. Among the first expressions of these concerns was the address of Joseph Sittier to the World Council of Churches meeting in New Dehli in 1961, Called to Unity (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), See also my own early essay, "A New Theology of Nature?," Lutheran Quarterly, XV, 3 (August 1968), pp. 304ff.

2. Daniel J. Sahas, Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 8.

3. John of Damascus, On Icons i 16 (P.G. 94, 1245A); cited by Kallistos Ware, "The Value of the Material Creation," Sob ornos t , Series 6: no. 3: Summer 1971, p. 160.

4. Cf. the discussion of the "Paulicans," in Sahas, op. cit., p. 20.

5. See Ernst Benz, The Eastern Orthodox Church; Its Thought and Life, tr. Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1963), pp. 12-17.

6. See my study The Travail of Nature: the Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

7 . See ibid . , chap. II.

8. Arthur Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of An Idea (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936).

9. Walter Brueggemann, The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

10. For the following material, see my study, op. cit., chap. 3 (Irenaeus and Origen), chap. 4 (Augustine), chap. 7 (modern Protestantism).

11. Ibid., chap. 6.

12. Ibid., chap. 5.

13. Quoted by Ware, op. cit., pp. 160f.