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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

DEEP DEIFICATION:  
SOTERIOLOGY FOR A WORLD IN ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, IL

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation pursues the question, what does salvation mean for a world in an ecological crisis that threatens displacement, disaster, and death for much of life on Earth? I will constructively address this problem at the intersection of contemporary ecofeminist theology and Patristic soteriologies of *theosis*, or deification. I examine ecofeminist soteriologies, drawing on the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, and Sallie McFague in particular, and deification soteriologies, focusing on Maximus the Confessor and his interpreters. Each of these trajectories, I argue, offers fruitful possibilities for a reconstruction of soteriology but each also raises some problems. In bringing these two traditions into conversation, I will suggest directions for a constructive theology of salvation that speaks to the ecological problems of our time.

This study centers soteriology—doctrine about Christ’s saving work, and from what and for what we are saved—because the looming question of climate change is fundamentally one of saving: can biodiversity, the livability of our planet, the human community, be saved? Will those in power act in time to prevent the worst of what might happen? How do communities of faith contribute, or fail to contribute, to the effort to mitigate climate change and its effects? The ecological crisis raises issues of preservation, conservation, healing, and repair: issues, in short, of salvation. “Salvation” is itself a metaphor, one that brings to mind healing, but other metaphors have been influential in the history of Christian theologies of salvation: victory in battle, freedom from bondage, release from a guilty verdict. The construal of the problem affects

the construal of the solution, and the Christian vision of what Christ's work means for humanity—and for the world.

Why, then, choose ecofeminist theologies and deification soteriology as conversation partners for this study? The answer is twofold. First, both of these traditions of thought emphasize the continuity and relationship between human beings and the rest of creation, a continuity found but sometimes ignored in Biblical and theological tradition as well as in contemporary science. This recognition of continuity is a necessary precondition for a theology that can speak to environmental crisis. Second, they both move beyond debates over atonement theories to offer a broader vision of salvation. While not neglecting the classic question of *how* Christ saves us, their focus is more on the result or goal toward which this salvation points, and on what healing and wholeness look like in a redeemed world. Despite the affinities between these two streams of soteriology, and despite the fact that ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague explicitly speaks of salvation as deification, little work has been done at this time to place these two into direct conversation—either to examine the specific details of the doctrine of deification from an ecofeminist perspective or to read ecofeminist soteriologies, and in particular McFague's treatment of deification, in view of particular Eastern Christian writings on deification.

Chapter One specifies the contours of the ecological crisis, examining the stakes for humanity and the rest of life on the planet. After a brief review of the causes and consequences of global climate change, including loss of biodiversity and human impacts such as displacement and increased poverty, I place this crisis in theological context. Since the middle of the twentieth century, and especially following ecological critiques of Christianity, many strands of ecotheology have arisen in response to the effects human beings have had on our environment.

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which I outline briefly in the chapter, serves as a contemporary and powerful example of a Christian response to the ecological crisis. I then narrow my focus to the question of soteriology, or doctrine of salvation: what does it mean to be saved, and how do the dynamics of salvation play out for human and non-human creation? In opening this question, I introduce the critiques that arose in the twentieth century of traditional doctrines of atonement, particularly the satisfaction, moral influence, and Christus Victor models as classically outlined by Gustav Aulén. I summarize what each of these models might have to say about the ecological crisis and some of the inadequacies each exhibits. Finally, I suggest partners for dialogue in the next chapters: ecofeminist theology and Maximus the Confessor's theology of deification, each of which takes steps towards overcoming these inadequacies and, in my view, offering a conception of salvation that is more fruitful for our time and situation.

Chapter Two explores the contributions of ecofeminist theology to soteriology. I first introduce ecofeminism, making use of the work of philosophers Karen Warren and Val Plumwood. I make the case for an ecofeminist approach over against any ecological approach that neglects gender, race, and class analyses because a narrower focus misses the larger dynamics at play: the structures of domination and oppression that result not only in reckless exploitation of the earth's resources but also in sexism, racism, and classism. I examine ecofeminist criticisms of ecological theologies that lack attention to gendered oppression, including critiques of "deep ecology" and of certain aspects of *Laudato Si'*. My focus then turns to ecofeminist soteriology specifically, with examinations of the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, and Sallie McFague. With Ruether, I note the history of hierarchical dualism's impact on Christian soteriologies, and Ruether's counterbalancing emphasis on salvation as harmonious living with the earth and its creatures. From Johnson, I take up the

inclusion of nonhuman creation in any full notion of salvation, and her theology of accompaniment in which Christ experiences and shares in the groaning of all creation. I then explore McFague's central model or metaphor of the world as God's body and her suggestion that salvation be seen as deification. I raise some critiques of McFague's discussion of deification before moving on to elaborate on this theme more fully in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three introduces the doctrine of deification. I begin by placing deification within the context of Eastern Christian soteriology as God's intention for the fulness of human beings and creation, not merely as a remedy for the Fall. I present a brief biography of Maximus the Confessor, whose treatment of deification I focus on here, to situate him in historical and theological context as a pivotal figure in the histories of Eastern and Western Christian theologies. I next lay out the contours of his theology of deification as expressed in four key texts: *Ambigua* 7 and 41, *The Church's Mystagogy*, and *Commentary on the Our Father*. My analysis of *Amb. 7* shows that, counter to Origenist metaphysics, Maximus affirms the value of the physical created world and that his theological anthropology insists on the unity of persons as embodied spirits. *Amb. 7* also establishes Maximus' principle that God "wills always and in all things to accomplish the mystery of His embodiment."<sup>1</sup> Human beings are created to unite creation with God; to be deified. This process is outlined most thoroughly in *Amb. 41*, which describes human beings as a microcosm, a laboratory in which the divisions of being are united. Here we see Maximus' "Christocentric cosmology," in which the incarnation, life, and death of Jesus Christ disclose and make possible the destiny of humanity as uniter of the cosmos. The

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<sup>1</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Conostas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), *Amb. 7*, 1.1084D. All quotations from *Amb. 7* are from Conostas.



*Commentary on the Lord's Prayer* and the *Mystagogy*, in turn, recapitulate many of the themes Maximus continually raises in discussing deification, especially the centrality of the incarnation, unity in difference, and the importance of the spiritual life. I then turn to ecotheological interpretations and appropriations of the Confessor, emphasizing the cosmic scope and emphasis on kenosis of Maximus' theology as particularly relevant for ecotheology. Finally, I pose questions raised by an ecofeminist reading of Maximus: what is the role of embodiment—not in the abstract, but as particular beings who are born and die, who undergo change and decay?

The fourth chapter places ecofeminism and deification into more detailed dialogue on the points raised in chapters two and three, beginning to articulate an ecofeminist deification soteriology. In particular, I address a central tension that has arisen in my previous description of ecofeminist and deification soteriologies: the role of bodies in the body of God. Both McFague and Maximus use bodily metaphors and stress the importance of the created order. Yet, as I note in Chapter Three, the concrete particularity of bodies seems, in some discussions of Maximus, to have merely instrumental value as that which is to be transcended. The realities of bodily life as inherently fragile and mortal are to be transcended into incorruptibility and impassibility. I address this tension with ecofeminist theology in part by examining Maximus' disputed views on sexual difference and reproduction. Maximus' treatment of sexual difference and its elimination in the eschaton poses a tension for feminist interpretation: if we see Maximus as envisioning a transformation rather than an elimination of sexual difference, we may think that an essentialist reading of gender difference is key to deification. If, on the other hand, we interpret Maximus as saying that sexual difference is entirely eliminated, we run the risk of devaluing the particularity of embodiment, and, as in some of his writing, the association of that embodiment, particularly with regard to female sexuality, with corruption. I next turn to this issue of corruption, situating

the concept of incorruption as a central meaning of deification. I note that feminist, and particularly ecofeminist, theology has raised issues with corruption and death as central aspects of what it means to become like God. Rather, feminist theologians have imagined God as relational, even suffering—in contrast to the classical doctrine of divine *apatheia*. I ask, “what if compassion, rather than impassibility, were the central motif of our concept of deification?” I next introduce the notion of deep incarnation as coined by Niels Gregersen and especially as expanded by Elizabeth Johnson. I relate this back to Maximus’ conception of the one Logos revealed in the many *logoi* of beings. I suggest, finally, that correlative to deep incarnation there can be a notion of deep deification, which envisions the world as both already the body of God and as becoming the body of God through the gift of unity that God bestows in deep deification. Corresponding with Maximus’ three stages of being, well-being, and eternal well-being, or of genesis, kinesis, and stasis, the unity of created matter has yet to be fully concretely realized apart from its manifestation in Christ. This unity is shown not through nondifferentiation but through mutuality and interdependence.

Finally, the Conclusion extends this theology of deep deification, showing how it expands on yet differs from McFague’s treatment of deification. I return to the urgent problem of climate change and reflect on the difference it might make if Christians viewed salvation as deification, as a true understanding and enacting of our small yet unique place in the cosmos as the bond or workshop of creation.

## CHAPTER ONE

### SAVING THE WORLD: ECOLOGICAL AND SOTERIOLOGICAL CRISES

This chapter argues that the present ecological crisis raises significant challenges for Christian theologies of salvation. First, I will articulate the stakes of the crisis and the questions they raise for soteriology. I describe the relative inadequacies of classical atonement theories for a world in ecological crisis. I take up liberationist and particularly feminist criticisms of atonement theory. I argue that after the criticisms of classical atonement theory, there has been a dearth of soteriologies to take its place. Finally, the chapter briefly introduces the two trajectories to be outlined in the following chapters: ecofeminism and the retrieval of deification soteriology, especially the work of Maximus the Confessor.

#### **Ecological Crisis**

Global climate change and related aspects of the anthropogenic ecological crisis raise so many pressing problems that it would be impossible to discuss all of them here. Instead, I will briefly summarize the problem of climate change and draw out two facets that raise particular soteriological questions—that is, questions about the meaning, purpose, and scope of salvation—for our time. The first of these is massive species loss, and the second is the human impact caused directly or indirectly by climate change: increasing poverty, mass migrations, refugee crises, and political upheaval can all be exacerbated by ecological destruction. These issues raise questions of salvation because they deepen our understanding of sin, because they show that the well-being of humanity is inextricable from the well-being of the rest of the planet, and because

they ask us to confront a history of escapist Christian soteriologies in which salvation is framed as solely beyond this world.

Global climate change refers to an unprecedented increase (approximately 1° C) in the earth's average temperature caused by a precipitous increase in greenhouse gas emissions since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and speeding up throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>1</sup> Greenhouse gases trap heat in the earth's atmosphere, causing glaciers to melt, sea levels to rise, arable land to turn to desert, and the frequency of severe weather events to increase, among other major consequences. This change is anthropogenic, meaning it is caused by human activity. While human actions already taken will continue to affect the warming of the planet for a long time to come, there are actions humans can take now to mitigate climate change and its effects. However, the damage is already here, and it is projected to get much worse without extreme intervention. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a United Nations body tasked with reviewing, assessing, and collating the most current research on climate change,<sup>2</sup> impacts include "increases in both land and ocean temperatures, as well as more frequent heatwaves in most land regions. Further, there is *substantial evidence* that human-induced global warming has led to an increase in the frequency, intensity and/or amount of heavy precipitation events at the global scale."<sup>3</sup> Another consequence that is already here is

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<sup>1</sup> O. Hoegh-Guldberg et. al., "Impacts of 1.5°C Global Warming on Natural and Human Systems," in *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C Above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty*, ed. V. Masson-Delmotte et. al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157940>, Executive Summary.

<sup>2</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "About the IPCC," [ipcc.ch/about](https://www.ipcc.ch/about).

<sup>3</sup> Hoegh-Guldberg et. al., "Impacts of 1.5°C Global Warming," Executive Summary.

that Earth's oceans have already acidified, leading to losses of species and ecosystems as well as impacts on fishing.<sup>4</sup>

The IPCC's 2018 special report focuses on ways to limit global warming to 1.5°C above the pre-industrial average, or at most, 2°, a goal set by the Paris Agreement, an international treaty reached in 2015.<sup>5</sup> In an Executive Summary, the IPCC writes:

The global transformation that would be needed to limit warming to 1.5°C requires enabling conditions that reflect the links, synergies and trade-offs between mitigation, adaptation and sustainable development. These enabling conditions are assessed across many dimensions of feasibility – geophysical, environmental-ecological, technological, economic, socio-cultural and institutional – that may be considered through the unifying lens of the Anthropocene, acknowledging profound, differential but increasingly geologically significant human influences on the Earth system as a whole. This framing also emphasises the global interconnectivity of past, present and future human–environment relations, highlighting the need and opportunities for integrated responses to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement.<sup>6</sup>

This summary introduces the notion that the problems of climate change, as well as its solutions, are complex and interconnected, and that they impact and interact with human societies in many ways. The executive summary references the Anthropocene, a term used to describe the current geologic epoch, which differs from others because of the accelerating impact of humans on Earth's climate and geology.<sup>7</sup> The concept of the Anthropocene, as the IPCC report notes, is a

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<sup>4</sup> Hoegh-Guldberg et. al., emphasis original.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, *Paris Agreement* (December 12, 2015), <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>.

<sup>6</sup> M. R. Allen, et. al., "Framing and Context," in *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, Executive Summary.

<sup>7</sup> See Yadvinder Malhi, "The Concept of the Anthropocene," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 42 (October 2017): 77-104, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102016-060854>, which traces the debate around the Anthropocene as a distinct geological epoch separate from the Holocene which preceded it, as well as showing the ways in which the term has become part of the zeitgeist in popular culture, literature, philosophy, etc.

useful lens for considering this new relationship of human activity to the destiny of the planet as a whole.

In order to limit global warming to 1.5° C, the world needs to reach net zero CO<sub>2</sub> emissions globally around 2050, with concurrent deep reductions in emissions of non-CO<sub>2</sub> greenhouse gases and other drivers of climate change, particularly methane.<sup>8</sup> Even with current commitments from signatories to the Paris Agreement, however, the world will reach 3°C above the pre-industrial average by the end of the century.<sup>9</sup> Current levels of climate change cross what environmental scientists Johan Rockström et. al. have proposed as a “planetary boundary,” a limit within which “humanity can operate safely” in order to avoid catastrophic environmental change that threatens human life on the planet.<sup>10</sup> Boundaries are not the same as tipping points but are the beginning of a “zone of uncertainty” that increases the risk of reaching a tipping point beyond which the earth system cannot maintain its resilience.<sup>11</sup> The boundary for climate change is 350 ppm (parts per million) of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, which has already been surpassed. This is one of nine proposed boundaries, four of which are already passed.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, then, so much more needs to be done.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Rogelj, “Mitigation Pathways Compatible with 1.5°C in the Context of Sustainable Development,” in *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, Executive Summary.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Environment Programme, *Emissions Gap Report 2020* (Nairobi, 2020), <https://www.unep.org/emissions-gap-report-2020>, Executive Summary, xxi.

<sup>10</sup> Johan Rockström et. al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (2009), <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art32>.

<sup>11</sup> Rockström et. al., “Planetary Boundaries.”

<sup>12</sup> Will Steffen et. al., “Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet,” *Science* 347, no. 6223 (January 15, 2015), <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1259855>. The four thresholds already transgressed are

Two issues raised by climate change are massive losses of individual species and of biodiversity and the more direct impacts of climate change on human communities. Though loss and extinction are ever-present realities, the current wave of species loss is different by virtue of being anthropogenic and out of proportion with usual rates. The IPCC report warns that a global temperature increase of 1.5°C is projected to lead to loss of geographic range for a variety of animals, and a 2° increase would be even worse.<sup>13</sup> According to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), “An average of around 25 per cent of species in assessed animal and plant groups are threatened, suggesting that around 1 million species already face extinction, many within decades, unless action is taken to reduce the intensity of drivers of biodiversity loss.”<sup>14</sup> These extinctions are driven directly by many factors: in order of importance, “changes in land and sea use; direct exploitation of organisms; climate change; pollution; and invasion of alien species.”<sup>15</sup> Climate change, while one of the main drivers, affects these other drivers or factors as well.<sup>16</sup> Authors of the IPBES report point out that while biodiversity fares better on lands controlled by indigenous communities, these lands are also under pressure from interrelated factors and biodiversity is declining there as well.<sup>17</sup>

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climate change, land system change, biochemical flows, and biosphere integrity (including biodiversity); see Fig. 3.

<sup>13</sup>IPCC, “Summary for Policymakers,” in *Global Warming of 1.5°C*.

<sup>14</sup> IPBES, “Summary for Policymakers of the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services,” ed. S. Díaz et. al. (Bonn, Germany, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3831673>, 12.

<sup>15</sup> IPBES, “Summary for policymakers,” 12.

<sup>16</sup> IPBES, 13.

<sup>17</sup> IPBES, 14.

Compounding the problem, areas where indigenous and poor communities live are disproportionately affected by climate change and related drivers of species loss.

The direct and indirect impacts on human communities are a second category of problems caused by climate change. Food and income insecurity as well as mass migration due to rising sea levels and desertification amplify the existing inequalities and injustices in the world's political structures. The IPCC report emphasizes the multiplying effect climate change has on issues of migration and poverty.<sup>18</sup> Because temperatures and sea levels will rise, human communities are vulnerable to negative impacts of climate change at 1.5°C above pre-industrial average temperatures, and even more so at 2°. Millions (and in some cases hundreds of millions) more people will be affected by water scarcity, flooding, drought, displacement by rising sea levels, food insecurity, loss of agricultural livelihood, and certain diseases.<sup>19</sup> These changes are projected to increase global poverty and income inequality. Moreover, the changes themselves will most affect those already living in poverty. "Climate change and climate variability worsen existing poverty and exacerbate inequalities, especially for those disadvantaged by gender, age, race, class, caste, indigeneity and (dis)ability."<sup>20</sup>

Why are all of these issues a religious and theological problem? On a basic level, the loss of biodiversity affects other aspects of human life. The IPCC points out that biodiverse spaces are often sacred spaces for indigenous peoples; the destruction of these spaces entails the destruction of an important spiritual dimension of these communities' lives. Many religious

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<sup>18</sup> Allen et. al., "Framing and Context."

<sup>19</sup> Hoegh-Guldberg et. al., "Impacts," 3.4; J. Roy et. al., "Sustainable Development, Poverty Eradication and Reducing Inequalities," in *Global Warming of 1.5° C*, figure 5.1.

<sup>20</sup> J. Roy et. al., "Sustainable Development," section 5.2.



traditions similarly hold the natural world as sacred, drawing from their environment in practices and beliefs. Second, the interrelationship between climate change's impact on nonhuman creatures and on human beings, particularly those most vulnerable, makes abundantly clear the interdependence of the earth community, a theme important in many religious contexts.

Moreover, and more specific to the task of Christian theology, there is a rich literature on the role theology has played and can play in both the causes of and the solutions to the ecological crisis. Many commentators within and outside of Christianity have criticized Christian theology's tendency to be individualistic, disembodied, and detached from the earth and its other creatures. The classic expression of the ecological critique of Christianity is medieval historian Lynn White's 1967 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." His thesis is that the roots of environmental destruction predate the industrial period's revolutionary fusion of science and technology; instead, these roots lie in the fundamental change of the relationship of human beings to nature that developed along with larger-scale agriculture in the medieval period. For White, "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."<sup>21</sup> Those who first engaged in total mastery over the earth were influenced to do so by their Christianity, which, for White, had stripped the nonhuman world of its spiritual reality and instilled a faith in humanity's perpetual progress and domination of nature. White claims that "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."<sup>22</sup> For White, Christianity's displacement of

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<sup>21</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1205, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1720120>.

<sup>22</sup> White, "Historical Roots," 1205.

“pagan” or “animistic” religions in which creatures had their own spiritual reality led to boundless exploitation of nature. Though he blamed Christianity for the attitude that leads to the destruction of nature, he also argued that it is a spiritual problem with a spiritual solution: “We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny.”<sup>23</sup> White proposed a spirituality that regards nonhuman creatures as equal to human beings and offered St. Francis as a “patron saint for ecologists.”<sup>24</sup> A Christian himself, White hoped that a new view of nature as spirit-filled would instill new values in the Christian and “post-Christian” West that would counteract the attitudes he viewed as so destructive to nature.

From this rallying cry, a newly formed “ecotheology” responded in various ways to White’s critique. Many qualified his claims as too broad; many took up his challenge to articulate new theologies and spiritualities that were not so disastrous for the planet.<sup>25</sup> Among other important developments since White’s work, scholars have excavated strands of Western thought about nature that “recognized a beauty, inherent value, and sensitivity toward nature unrecognized by White” and have emphasized that “‘nature’ was neither static nor constant and, moreover, that the boundary between human cultural and natural processes was ultimately an artificial one.”<sup>26</sup> In the decades since White’s critique, most of the Christian traditions have taken

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<sup>23</sup> White, 1207.

<sup>24</sup> White, “Historical Roots,” 1207. In 1979, Pope John Paul II would name Francis the patron saint of ecologists.

<sup>25</sup> For a summary of responses to White, see Elspeth Whitney, “Lynn White Jr.’s ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’ After 50 Years,” *History Compass* 13, no. 8 (August 2015): 396-410, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12254>. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of ecofeminist responses to White’s challenge.

<sup>26</sup> Whitney, “After 50 Years,” 400.

up ecological concern as part of their agenda and theological reflection. This has not been without precedent: care for the environment is theologically relevant because the Christian tradition as a whole recognizes the value both of particular creatures and of the diversity of creatures. How much value has varied across Christian history, but the Bible and the history of Christian doctrine both present nonhuman creatures as in some sense possessing both symbolic and inherent value. In one passage of the *Summa Theologica*, for instance, St. Thomas Aquinas writes, “because God’s goodness could not be adequately represented by any single creature, God produced many and diverse creatures, that what one lacked in representing divine goodness might be supplied by another.”<sup>27</sup>

Pope Francis has drawn attention to the problems of climate change in his landmark encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home*. In this encyclical, Francis dialogues with science and Christian tradition to show why climate change is a spiritual and religious problem and how all people of goodwill can and must work together to solve it. Drawing broadly on Catholic social thought and on the sciences, he is also inspired by the work of the “Green Patriarch” Bartholomew of Constantinople.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, he draws widely on documents from bishops’ conferences all over the globe concerned with ecological destruction and its local and worldwide impacts, such as the bishops of the Philippines’ “What is Happening to our Beautiful

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1947), <https://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html>, I., q47, a1.

<sup>28</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home* (2015), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_encyclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html), paras. 7-9. For some of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s addresses and writings, see John Chrissavgis, ed., *Cosmic Grace and Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) and Chrissavgis, ed., *On Earth as In Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

Land?”<sup>29</sup> Indirectly, Francis also seems to be echoing and answering Lynn White’s essay: like White, he is inspired by the ecological spirituality of St. Francis, naming the encyclical after a line from “Canticle of the Sun” and dedicating a section of the work to highlighting St. Francis as “the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically.”<sup>30</sup> Like White, he also critiques an interpretation of Christianity that grants human beings unlimited dominion over the earth, though he would argue that this is a false interpretation of the meaning of the book of Genesis.<sup>31</sup>

Francis begins with an analysis of the situation, summarizing the climate crisis and its impacts on society. He points out the loss of biodiversity, noting not only that such loss represents the loss of potential resources for humanity’s future, but that “Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.”<sup>32</sup> He also discusses multiple human impacts such as increasing inequality and disregard for the most vulnerable, highlighting, for example, the plight of migrants fleeing the effects of climate change, who he notes are not classified as refugees.<sup>33</sup>

The second chapter of *Laudato Si’* offers insights from Christian scripture and tradition, relating the ecological crisis to such themes as creation, sin, anthropology, Christology, and eschatology. For Francis, anthropogenic climate change is a consequence of sin, a “rupture” in

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<sup>29</sup> Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, Pastoral letter *What is Happening to our Beautiful Land?* (January 29, 1988), <http://cbcponline.net/what-is-happening-to-our-beautiful-land/>.

<sup>30</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, para. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Francis, para. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Francis, para. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Francis, para. 25.

our relationships with “God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself.... [T]he originally harmonious relationship between human beings became conflictual (cf. Gn 3:17-19).”<sup>34</sup> The fundamental sin is usurping the place of God and assuming that humans have control over the world and its creatures. These broken relationships, however, are to be healed:

The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things.... The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures, are moving forward with us and through us toward a common point of arrival, which is in God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their creator.<sup>35</sup>

For Francis, then, this is the theological rationale for caring for our common home: it is loved by God and shares in our destiny, which is that God will be “all in all.”

He next diagnoses “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis”<sup>36</sup> which he takes to be primarily what he calls a “technocratic paradigm.”<sup>37</sup> “A technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its own power.”<sup>38</sup> The technocratic paradigm, he argues, is the condition we face now in which technological innovation proliferates without an accompanying sense of responsibility or a shared set of goals. As he notes later in the encyclical, there are many means, but few agreed-upon ends.<sup>39</sup> The technocratic paradigm views innovation as a good in itself and does not see limits on its own domain. After thus diagnosing the problems that face “our

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<sup>34</sup> Francis, para. 66.

<sup>35</sup> Francis, para. 83.

<sup>36</sup> Francis, ch. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Francis, para. 101.

<sup>38</sup> Francis, para. 136.

<sup>39</sup> Francis, para. 203.

common home,” a fourth chapter outlines what Francis means by “integral ecology,” which is that it must incorporate “human and social dimensions”<sup>40</sup>—an emphasis shared, as we have seen above, by the IPCC. The final two chapters offer ways of proceeding as an international community, as churches, and as spiritual persons. While acknowledging that our individual practices of restraint and of respect for the earth and its creatures are not by themselves enough to effect changes that need to be implemented by governments, economic powers, and the international community, he highlights that such a spirituality can help us to live an “ecological conversion.”<sup>41</sup> At the same time, those who wield power have a great responsibility to make the needed changes to change the trajectory of ecological destruction.

Pope Francis’ encyclical, then, highlights ecological crisis as a religious issue because it reveals a fundamental problem, or “rupture,” in the way human beings relate to our fellow creatures and to God. We need not merely superficial change or better technology (something Lynn White also points out)<sup>42</sup>, but a true conversion to a different way of life and set of values. Moreover, Francis writes of the common destiny of humans and the earth; not only is our survival caught up with the survival of the planet’s ecosystems, but our salvation is also tied to our responsibility for the rest of creation, which ultimately shares a “common destiny” in God.

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<sup>40</sup> Francis, para. 137.

<sup>41</sup> Francis, ch. 6, section 3.

<sup>42</sup> White, “Historical Roots,” 1204. The IPCC report also notes that there are some technological means of mitigating global warming—such as carbon sequestration through planting new forests—but that these means often have unintended consequences such as further disrupting local ecosystems. They assert that ultimately societies must stop emitting greenhouse gases, not think of new ways to continue using them. See Rogelj et. al., “Mitigation Pathways,” Executive Summary.

For Francis and for ecotheologians, Christian theology cannot proceed as though our environment and our nonhuman neighbors are merely the stage upon which the drama of salvation plays out. In an essay on creatures (apart from the theological category of “creation” more generally), and meditating on the creatures named in the *Benedicite* from the Liturgy of the Hours, a canticle that calls on a litany of creatures to praise the Lord, Rachel Muers argues for “creatures” as a systematic theological category because this “forces us to acknowledge nonhuman creation in its needs, desires, interests and relation to God,”<sup>43</sup> “enable[s] us to attend to them—simply as they are, in their scale, power, beauty, diversity, unpredictability and order,”<sup>44</sup> and “locates humanity *among* the creatures.”<sup>45</sup> As Pope Francis notes, “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.”<sup>46</sup> Muers, like Francis, operates with “the assumption that nonhuman animals are to be understood as in some sense co-subjects with humanity in the history of God with the world, and not merely as background or context for a human history,”<sup>47</sup> while taking account of the distinctions between humans (and our unique responsibility for climate change) and other creatures. She points out that the interrelationship between humans and other animals, which would seem everyday and obvious for those living in agrarian societies, has become increasingly distant and complex, such that

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<sup>43</sup> Rachel Muers, “Creatures,” in *Systematic Theology and Climate Change: Ecumenical Perspectives*, ed. Michael S. Northcott and Peter M. Scott (New York: Routledge, 2014), 91.

<sup>44</sup> Muers, “Creatures,” 91.

<sup>45</sup> Muers, 91.

<sup>46</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, para. 39.

<sup>47</sup> Muers, “Creatures,” 100.

even as we (especially those in wealthy societies) have ever more effect on the environment, we are more isolated from these effects. Thus while our neighborly responsibility grows, our sense of being neighbor and co-creature, along with our sense of place, has degraded.<sup>48</sup> The ecological term for ecological relationships across large distances is “telecoupling,” coined by scientist and sustainability scholar Jack Liu, which refers to “socioeconomic-environmental interactions over distances.”<sup>49</sup> Understanding these interrelationships, according to the IPBES, is crucial for slowing the loss of biodiversity in our world. Muers acknowledges that our effects on the world can and should expand our sense of neighborliness, but at the same time that “the risk... is that it colludes in displacement; it obscures the real differentiated forms of co-habitation with other animals that exist in different human communities, and it invites the pursuit of global strategies at the expense of responsible local action.”<sup>50</sup> Perhaps sensing this risk, the IPBES follows its global suggestions, which include attention to telecoupling, with strong promotion of recognition of indigenous and local practices.<sup>51</sup>

Muers notes that

Barren or lifeless earth, both in the biblical literature and in contemporary ecological sensibility, is no longer earth that ‘makes sense’. In numerous biblical texts, in the context of a disruption of the conditions of life and the increase of desert, the earth mourns. This image is in part to be read through the close association of the earth’s fecundity with the fecundity of women.... A theological account of earth need not take up the personification of ‘the earth’ as feminine.... It can, however, recognize the

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<sup>48</sup> Muers, 100-101.

<sup>49</sup> IPBES, “Summary for policymakers,” 17.

<sup>50</sup> Muers, “Creatures,” 101.

<sup>51</sup> IPBES, “Summary for policymakers,” 17-18. For telecoupling, see J. Liu et. al., “Framing Sustainability in a Telecoupled World,” *Ecology and Society* 18, no.2 (2013): 26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-05873-180226>



importance of the capacity to bring forth life, to generate (relative) novelty and to replenish loss, as an aspect of creaturely flourishing.”<sup>52</sup>

The situation, then, is urgent enough to echo biblical lamentation. The destruction human beings have wrought on our environment is palpable and is beginning to make the earth feel barren and “laid waste” (Isaiah 24:3).

That humans are foreclosing on the possibilities of fellow creatures, and of our own habitat and posterity, should also raise reconsideration of the meaning and depth of human sin. Often, as we will see, Christian theology has had an individualistic view of sin that treats it as between an individual and God. Yet theology also speaks of sin as a condition humans have in common, something that in affecting one affects all. Liberation theologians have named sin primarily, though not exclusively, as oppression, and in so doing have shown that there are forms of sin that are structural or unequally distributed: not all are equally responsible for these sins. This is something that the climate crisis makes clear: we are not all equally responsible for the destruction of our environment, nor are we all equally affected by it. The notion of sin as between an individual and God, then, is inadequate to address the magnitude of the problem.

A second facet of sin’s complexity, present in theological history and put into stark relief by the environmental crisis, is its multiplicative or snowball effect. Like its communal aspect, this notion is present in the doctrine of original sin. It is also, perhaps, related to what is known in the tradition as corruption in the East or concupiscence in the West. Acts of destruction make it harder, both for ourselves and for future generations, to repair the damage done. Speaking of sin, Anselm uses the following illustration:

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<sup>52</sup> Muers, “Creatures,” 98. In chapter 2 I take up the close metaphorical ties between women and the earth.

Suppose someone assigns his bonds slave a task, and tells him not to leap into a pit from which he cannot by any means climb out, and that bonds slave, despising the command and advice of his master, leaps into the pit which has been pointed out to him, so that he is completely unable to carry out the task assigned to him.<sup>53</sup>

Anselm's point here is that even though the bonds slave is truly unable to complete the task on account of being in a ditch, he is still guilty for not completing it. By sinning, we make it impossible for ourselves to act rightly in the future, even if the obligation to do so remains. With climate change, however, it is as though we have thrown future generations into a ditch. Not only does it become increasingly harder as the years progress to halt or reverse the damage, but we have altered the world's landscape, which, for Thomas Aquinas, Pope Francis, and many others, is a living symbol of the beauty and goodness of God. Those most responsible for environmental degradation make it harder for others, and for future generations, to flourish or even to survive. No wonder, then, that the scientists who proposed the planetary boundaries approach discussed above use the language of "transgression" to describe the crossing of the planetary boundaries.<sup>54</sup> Such language echoes sin language in describing the pushing of limits that leads to further and deeper destruction. We do violence to other people, non-human creatures, and the earth itself, diminishing the moral capacities of not just ourselves but of others.

### **A Crisis in Soteriology**

Christian theology claims that the incarnation, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ bring salvation. But theologians have always differed as to the meaning of this central idea. Even the word salvation, which means healing, is a metaphor, an image that grasps

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<sup>53</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *Why God Became Man*, in Anselm, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), I.24.

<sup>54</sup> Rockström et. al., "Planetary Boundaries."

at a greater reality. Theology is multivocal on the ways in which Christ ushers in new possibilities for human beings that begin to make right what has gone wrong and that unite us further with God. Ecotheologians have critiqued theologies of salvation that they view as inadequate for addressing the depth of the problems created by climate change and the ecological crisis. In particular, the idea that salvation is salvation *from* the world has been extensively critiqued by ecotheologians. Christian soteriology has too often suffered from what Elizabeth Johnson terms “ecological silence,”<sup>55</sup> having nothing to say about the relationship between human beings and their environment and fellow creatures. At worst, Christian soteriology, and, relatedly, eschatology, have contributed to the problem of climate change.

Catherine Keller articulates this ecological critique of Christianity when she evocatively asks, “Has Christian reflection on the ultimate destiny of redeemed humanity sucked the best of life toward a heaven which only deathless and fleshless souls are fit to inhabit?”<sup>56</sup> She points out that our cultural notions of eschatology often go hand in hand with our treatment of the earth:

Thus it so happens that the neo-fundamentalist fantasy of the rapture out of this world, just as the going gets bad, followed by a supernatural new creation, claimed such public power in the eighties. This was precisely the time of the most profligate development of the throw-away consumer culture.... We cannot but be suspicious that the construction of salvation as supernatural has helped to cause the very destruction of nature from which the earth now needs saving.<sup>57</sup>

The analogue for this moment in the twenty-first century might be something of a perverted theology of the remnant, perhaps more informed by apocalypse movies than by the Hebrew

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<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 26.

<sup>56</sup> Catherine Keller, “Talk about the Weather: The Greening of Eschatology,” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 36.

<sup>57</sup> Keller, “Talk about the Weather,” 38-39.

Bible: salvation envisioned as being the last one standing to use up scarce resources—no hopeful vision of the future but the very brute strength that allows one to beat one’s enemies. Keller continues,

When salvation means removal from the earth to a heavenly home, then our *oikos* is abandoned to the assaults of those whose ultimate concern is neither heaven nor the earth, but the power and wealth of their particular households. These households, however, drain heaven and earth of what used to be called their ‘glory’ and that of their creator—their energy, their beauty, their disclosiveness. This makes for lousy weather.<sup>58</sup>

As we have seen above, ecological destruction has a snowball effect: “Late modern capitalism tortures time into something endless and undifferentiated like a line. Yet its actual praxis uses the creation as means to its own ends and brings about the very futurelessness it denies.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, climate change denial speeds up climate change. As Lynn White pointed out, our religious traditions shape our interaction with our environment. If our idea of salvation is one of escape from the world, we will see no reason to preserve it, and we will fail to see its destruction as sin.

As we have seen, there is, famously, no “settled” Christian doctrine of salvation. Theories as to the ways in which Christ’s life and death bring salvation abound, but some have achieved greater traction than others. “Theory” is not precisely the right word here; multiple motifs and metaphors were interwoven within early Christian writings, and none was expected to exhaust the complete meaning of salvation.<sup>60</sup> Gustav Aulén’s influential *Christus Victor* offers a typology of models of atonement: in Aulén’s time, he writes, the main argument is between the

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<sup>58</sup> Keller, 38-39.

<sup>59</sup> Keller, 45-46.

<sup>60</sup> Vigen Guroian, “Salvation: Divine Therapy,” *Theology Today* 61, no. 3 (October 2004): 313.

Latin model (also known historically as the “objective” type, and which I will refer to as the satisfaction model) and the subjective model (also known as the moral influence or moral exemplar model). Aulén makes the case, by contrast, for what he calls the “classic” or “Christus Victor” model.<sup>61</sup>

What, if anything, might these traditional accounts of salvation have to say about our ecological crisis? Before enumerating them, I want to note that these accounts, or atonement theories, offer mostly a model of *how* salvation is accomplished. This discussion, while immensely important, does not fully explain the “what” of salvation, or what Gustavo Gutierrez calls its “qualitative” dimension:<sup>62</sup> what is it from which we are saved, and for what? What does the redeemed life look like? What, fundamentally, *is* salvation? As S. Mark Heim puts it, “Theologians have considered *who* may be saved and *how*, but the *substance* of salvation itself is often more assumed than described. Perhaps it would be better to say that salvation is often defined by inversion, as the state achieved when the evils and estrangements of human life are overcome.”<sup>63</sup> As we will see below, Gustav Aulén makes this point in his criticism of the satisfaction model of atonement but exempts the classic model from it. I will try to demonstrate the negative and positive visions of salvation entailed, whether explicitly or implicitly, in each of these accounts.

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<sup>61</sup> Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, tr. A.G. Herbert (1931; London: SPCK, 1975).

<sup>62</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 151.

<sup>63</sup> S. Mark Heim, “Salvation as Communion: Partakers of the Divine Nature,” *Theology Today* 61, no. 3 (October 2004): 322.

## Satisfaction

Arguably the most enduring and influential in Western Christianity has been the satisfaction model of atonement. Articulated by Anselm of Canterbury in *Cur Deus Homo*, this model posits that Christ became incarnate and died in order to pay the debt of sin incurred by humanity. For Anselm, sin is fundamentally an offense against the honor of God. Since God is due *all* honor, even one instance of dishonor is impossible to repay. Moreover, as noted above, sin results in the tendency toward more sin, and the debt grows ever greater. Anselm's answer to the question, *Cur Deus Homo*, "why did God become man?" (or "why the God-man?") is that the incarnation and obedience of Christ solves this dilemma: it was necessary for a human person to pay the debt of honor owed, but only God could do such a thing.<sup>64</sup> The payment of the debt to God restores the relationship between God and humanity and makes it possible for human beings to be saved, not only because the debt has been settled but because in sacrificing himself, Christ went beyond what was required of him, since he was free from sin and did not need to die. Thus there is, for Anselm, a surplus, a reward from the Father that would go to Christ for his extravagant gift of himself—except that Christ has no need of anything. Instead, the reward goes to Christ's fellow human beings.<sup>65</sup> The satisfaction model is a precursor for, but not identical to, the penal substitution model that became more commonplace in later Protestant theology, the main difference being that in the penal substitution model Christ's death is seen as a punishment that satisfies a wrathful God, rather than an act of obedience that reconciles humanity with a just God.

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<sup>64</sup> Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, I.6.

<sup>65</sup> Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, II.19. This idea was later formalized by Aquinas and others into the "treasury of merit."

Anselm's conception of salvation is that saved humanity is able to fulfill the original purpose for which God made human beings: using our rational nature to choose the good and thus finding eternal happiness in knowing and loving God. This means the restoration of the state of sinlessness from which humanity has fallen: for Anselm, human beings would not have been subject to death were it not for sin. As we have already seen, in this vision of salvation, sin is dishonoring God; it is choosing a lesser good over the greater and thus rendering incomplete obedience and love to God.

Critics of the satisfaction model of atonement raise the objection that Anselm's primary metaphor, and the one that has retained the most influence in Western theology, is a juridical or forensic one: Christ having paid the debt of honor, we are *declared* righteous before God. The influence of this model means that "little interest," as Vigen Guroian remarks, is given to "the deep, ontological repair actually needed for our weakened humanity to be transformed into a true state of holiness and righteousness."<sup>66</sup> Aulén, likewise, accuses Anselm of not taking sin seriously enough, despite the latter's emphasis on the gravity of sin: "If God can be represented as willing to accept a satisfaction for sins committed, it appears to follow necessarily that the dilemma of laxity or satisfaction really fails to guard the truth of God's enmity against sin. The doctrine provides for the remission of the punishment due to sins, but not for the taking away of the sin itself."<sup>67</sup> Like Guroian, Aulén sees the juridical conception of atonement as failing to solve the fundamental problem by making people more capable of holiness. "The relation of man to God is treated by Anselm as essentially a legal relation, for his whole effort is to prove that the

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<sup>66</sup> Guroian, "Salvation: Divine Therapy," 313.

<sup>67</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 92.

atonement work is in accordance with justice,” whereas in the classic view, which he favors, “it is essential that the work of atonement which God accomplishes in Christ reflect a Divine order which is wholly different from a legal order; the Atonement is not accomplished by strict fulfilment of the demands of justice, but in spite of them; God is not, indeed, unrighteous, but He transcends the order of justice.”<sup>68</sup>

Finally, Aulén also criticizes Anselm’s theory for its lack of an organic connection between incarnation and atonement,<sup>69</sup> and between atonement, justification, and sanctification:

The Latin doctrine gives us a series of acts standing in a relatively loose connection. The actual atonement consists in the offering of satisfaction by Christ and God’s acceptance of it; with this act men have nothing to do except in so far as Christ stands as their representative. Justification is a second act, in which God transfers or imputes to men the merits of Christ; here, again, there is no direct relation between Christ and men. Next, we have Sanctification, a third act with no organic connection with the preceding two.<sup>70</sup>

Anselm’s stress on the necessity that a man pay the penalty for sin means that the classic structure of atonement being God’s work through and through is lost. “God is no longer regarded as *at once* the agent and the object of reconciliation, but as *partly* the agent, as being the author of the plan, and *partly* the object, when the plan comes to be carried out.”<sup>71</sup>

Other critiques of the satisfaction model come from liberation theologies. Liberation theologians have focused on the fact that such atonement theories ignore the difference salvation makes for the here and now; in these theologies, salvation must be at least liberation from oppression. What the climate crisis has revealed about human sin underscores points already

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<sup>68</sup> Aulén, 90-91.

<sup>69</sup> Aulén, 87.

<sup>70</sup> Aulén, 150.

<sup>71</sup> Aulén, 88.



made by liberation theologians: that such sin is structural, and, moreover, that there is an asymmetry between the sins of oppressors and the consequences of these sins, which fall largely on the oppressed. While the wealthiest countries cause the most pollution and ecological harm, the poorest countries—and the poorest in wealthy countries—suffer from it. Liberationist thinkers also question the valorization of suffering that traditional soteriology often upholds. In her 1994 keynote address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, Elizabeth Johnson articulated contemporary challenges to satisfaction theory. By then it had “come under severe criticism” (she cites Ratzinger, Küng, Quinn, and Rahner, in addition to liberation theologies)

for the following reasons: for its focus on the death of Jesus to the virtual exclusion of his ministry and resurrection, thus truncating the biblical witness; for its methodological mistake of literalizing what is meant to be, in truth, a metaphor, turning it into an ontological reality; for its promotion of the value of suffering, easily exploited to maintain situations of injustice; and for its effective history which has fostered the idea of an angry God who needs to be recompensed by the bloody death of his Son."<sup>72</sup>

As this last criticism indicates, feminists such as Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker have pointed out that the penal substitution model in particular is a pattern for, and a divine justification of, child abuse. “When parents have an image of a God righteously demanding the total obedience of ‘his’ son—even obedience to death—what will prevent the parent from engaging in divinely sanctioned child abuse?”<sup>73</sup> As Johnson puts it, “even when given...positive spins... the fundamental connection made by the satisfaction theory between God's mercy and the suffering of an innocent person is repugnant to contemporary sensibilities.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, “Jesus and Salvation,” *CTSA Proceedings* 49 (1994): 5.

<sup>73</sup> See Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1-30.

<sup>74</sup> Johnson, “Jesus and Salvation,” 6.

More recently, Johnson has pointed out the inadequacy of Anselm's satisfaction theory of atonement to address the problems facing all of creation.<sup>75</sup> In particular, for Johnson, Anselm's theory encourages an "ethic of submission in the face of injustice"<sup>76</sup> and is marked by "ecological silence."<sup>77</sup> For Johnson, healing is a more appropriate way of looking at salvation than is the restoration of a legal relationship:

If Jesus fed, healed, soothed, and otherwise cared about persons precisely as embodied, and if his resurrection affirms the body's participation in the shalom of the reign of God, then salvation concerns not just the soul but also the body; not just the individual but also society; not just humanity but also the whole of nature. Indeed, salvation refers not only to the eschatological reality of heaven but also to *this* world.<sup>78</sup>

With these critiques in mind, we can see how the notion of Christ paying the penalty for sin with his obedience and death has little to say about salvation as healing the wounded creation we are so inextricably a part of. Climate change and its effects can, within this model, be addressed as an instance of human sinfulness, both in rejecting the divine mandate to take care of the earth and in rejecting our fellow creatures as such. The satisfaction model of atonement might view this as simply yet another instance of the debt to God that Christ has already repaid; we need merely to lay claim to the superabundance of merit that has resulted from his sacrifice. To its credit, the satisfaction model does have something to say about restoring the "order of justice." Sin has an effect on "the order and beauty of the universe," according to Anselm.<sup>79</sup> God

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<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*.

<sup>76</sup> Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 22.

<sup>77</sup> Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 26.

<sup>78</sup> Johnson, "Jesus and Salvation," 12.

<sup>79</sup> Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, I.15.

restores that order and beauty through the salvation of human beings, setting things right that have gone wrong. In Anselm's schema there is an order to the universe that is deeply disturbed and marred by sin; this idea has some ecological potential. Nevertheless, the problem evidenced by species loss cannot be solved or cured by a *de jure* pronouncement of justification. Neither can it be helped by a penal substitution model. Whether or not our sin of environmental degradation has been forgiven, or the debt paid, the earthly consequences remain. As its critics have emphasized, such a model of salvation removes debt, penalty, or punishment—but does not solve the root issues or have transformative power.

#### Moral Influence

The moral influence model, of which Peter Abelard is perhaps the earliest proponent, holds that Christ sets a supreme example of love so that other human beings are moved to love in return. Christ does not set an example for humans to follow in a rote manner; rather, Christ “arouses responsive love in men; this love is the basis on which reconciliation and forgiveness rest.”<sup>80</sup> This model is a response to, and critique of, Anselm's satisfaction theory and many other earlier metaphors for atonement, such as a ransom paid to the devil.<sup>81</sup> Abelard argues that if humanity incurred insurmountable debt through original sin, how much more was incurred by

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<sup>80</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 96.

<sup>81</sup> This view was a common motif in the Patristic era. According to the ransom model, original sin put humanity under the control of the devil; Christ's death pays the penalty and wins us back to God. Anselm's view is that such a model is inappropriate because the devil has no proper rights over human beings. See *Why God Became Man* I.vii. Aulén sees the ransom model as part of the classic view expressed by Irenaeus and other Church fathers; see *Christus Victor*, 27-31 and 47-56, and discussion below.

the unjust killing of Jesus Christ?<sup>82</sup> Would it make sense for God to will greater evil in order to accomplish God's redemptive purpose?<sup>83</sup> Instead, for Abelard, "Our redemption is that supreme love in us through the Passion of Christ, which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but gains for us the true liberty of the sons of God, so that we may complete all things by his love rather than by fear."<sup>84</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux and other detractors accused Abelard of Pelagianism, or the belief that "human beings do not need divine grace to act rightly;" this entails the denial of original sin.<sup>85</sup> However, Abelard's own view is more nuanced than these critiques allow. Abelard does not set out as clear an exposition of the dynamics of the Atonement as Anselm, as he is writing with a different purpose, and so there are differing interpretations as to what extent he held a fully-fledged "exemplar" theory.<sup>86</sup>

According to Aulén, Abelard's conception of atonement never took root in the medieval period the way that Anselm's theory did. He finds it interesting, however, that "the Latin theory of the Atonement had no sooner received its complete theological formulation than it found a critic."<sup>87</sup> More influential, he states, was Passion-mysticism, the spiritual contemplation and

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<sup>82</sup> Anselm does discuss this issue in *Why God Became Man* II.15, but his answer is evidently not compelling to Abelard.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Steven R. Cartwright, vol. 12 in *The Fathers of the Church, Mediaeval Continuation*, ed. Gregory F. LaNave et. al. (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2011), II.116-117.

<sup>84</sup> Abelard, "Romans," II.118.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Williams, "Sin, Grace, and Redemption," in *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, ed. Jeffrey E. Brower and Kevin Guilfooy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 259.

<sup>86</sup> Williams, "Sin, Grace, and Redemption," in Brower and Guilfooy, *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 259-260.

<sup>87</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 96.

imitation of Christ's sufferings on the cross, which "acted both as a complement to the Latin doctrine of the Atonement and as a counterpoise to it. It is, indeed, not surprising that an emotional mysticism of this type should appear side by side with the thoroughly rationalistic and juridical theory of the satisfaction of God's justice."<sup>88</sup> After Protestant Orthodoxy, which was for Aulén a continuation and refinement of the satisfaction model (after, he argues, Luther's theretofore unnoted return to the classic model), Pietism was the first movement to bring in a truly "subjective" doctrine of Atonement, and Enlightenment theologies also followed suit. Nineteenth century theologians like Schleiermacher continued this legacy, though they deepened it and fleshed it out more.

Abelard has a vision of salvation that involves love and freedom: freedom to do the right things out of love rather than fear, and restoration of the role of humanity as children of God. As in the satisfaction model, salvation is envisioned as the reinstatement of a proper relationship to God and brings happiness or blessedness to human beings. For Schleiermacher, salvation is consciousness of blessedness; it is a subjective appropriation of God's love for human beings.

Aulén criticizes the subjective views of atonement because, especially in their Enlightenment incarnation, there is inconsistency in the conception of God. Enlightenment theology sought to eliminate "the 'anthropomorphic' features and 'relics of Judaism,'"<sup>89</sup> preferring instead a God who was unchanging and benevolent; this God needed no satisfaction or Atonement (and the view of sin was weakened).

It is therefore a little surprising that, side by side with this emphasis on God's unchanging good-will, the idea appears of a certain influence exerted upon God from man's side. Man repents and amends his life, and God in turn responds by rewarding man's

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<sup>88</sup> Aulén, 98.

<sup>89</sup> Aulén, 134.

amendment with an increase of happiness. The ruling idea is therefore essentially anthropocentric and moralistic.<sup>90</sup>

Again, this criticism belongs much more to post-Enlightenment subjective theories of atonement than to Abelard's exposition. Aulén's concern in such criticism is to uphold the unified action of God in atonement; in his view, both the Latin and the subjective doctrines say that "man" does too much: "the Atonement is no longer regarded as in any true sense carried out by God."<sup>91</sup>

Formulated as it was initially in opposition to the Latin view, rather than as a complete theory of itself, Aulén finds it unsurprising that there are inconsistencies in the subjective view. However, for him, the classic model was long overdue for a return, since "in the course of the long controversy the two rival doctrines have thoroughly exposed one another's weak points; and now it is becoming clearer with every year that passes that they both belong in the past."<sup>92</sup>

Brown and Parker likewise criticize the moral influence model. In Abelard's formulation, the suffering of the truly innocent victim confronts human beings with their own sinfulness. We must see this unjust suffering in order to be edified by it. Brown and Parker connect this pattern to the way victimized persons are used as object lessons or exhortations to do good. The vulnerability and suffering of oppressed others, specifically women, is supposed to call people, specifically men, to live to a higher standard.<sup>93</sup> Yet this dynamic belies a hatred of women, because the call to change is seen as violating the nature of men. "We can protect God from

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<sup>90</sup> Aulén, 135.

<sup>91</sup> Aulén, 146.

<sup>92</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 145.

<sup>93</sup> See the example Brown and Parker give of the sexual ethic of twentieth century Christian ethicist Helmut Thielecke who views men's sexuality as inherently destructive and polygamous, and

our violent rejection by disciplining ourselves, but it is the vulnerable holy One who is to blame for our having to construct rigid systems of self-control. God must be hated—just as women are hated. The moral influence theories of the atonement sanctify love/hate relationships.”<sup>94</sup>

How might a “subjective” or “moral influence” model of atonement address ecological crisis? This is arguably a model that some ecotheologians might favor: Christ, as the perfect human, demonstrates not only perfect love for God and humanity, but also right relationships with the natural world. The moral influence or example of Christ comes, for many ecotheologians, such as Sallie McFague,<sup>95</sup> more from his life than from his death.

#### Christus Victor

Aulén’s thesis is that the Christus Victor model, which he also calls the “classic” and the “dramatic,” is both older and more forceful in understanding the meaning and salvific power of Christ’s work. He locates the basic expression of this view in Irenaeus, for whom Christ defeats the powers that hold dominion over humans: sin, death, and the devil. This victory is accomplished through the entire work of Christ, from incarnation to atonement, and, indeed, forward into the life of the Church. Christ recapitulates all of creation, restoring it and perfecting it.<sup>96</sup> For Aulén, this view presupposes and upholds a different model of God from the other views; namely, that God is the author of atonement from beginning to end. This view, he notes, contains a certain dualism; not a metaphysical dualism but rather a paradox or a disjunct:

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women’s sexuality as inherently vulnerable: “If a man is himself, he destroys us. If he saves us, he must contradict his own nature.” (Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” 13).

<sup>94</sup> Brown and Parker, 13.

<sup>95</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>96</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 21-22.

The Atonement is set forth as the Divine victory over the powers that hold men in bondage. Yet at the same time these very powers are in a measure executants of His own judgment on sin. This opposition reaches its climax in the tension between the Divine Love and the Divine Wrath. But here the solution is not found in any sort of rational settlement; it is rather that the Divine Love prevails over the Wrath, the Blessing overcomes the Curse, by the way of Divine self-oblation and sacrifice.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, any attempt, such as the Latin or the subjective, to settle the paradox at the center of the redemption story through rationality or calculation is doomed to fail and to fall short of the magnitude of God's work in saving us.

Another advantage of the Christus Victor model according to Aulén is that "the Atonement is not regarded as affecting men primarily as individuals, but is set forth as a drama of the world's salvation."<sup>98</sup> He finds this doctrine expressed not only in Irenaeus but in Scripture, in other Church fathers, and, later, in Martin Luther (though Luther's interpreters and later Lutheran Orthodoxy, in his view, have reverted to the "Latin" doctrine). Aulén argues that this model has a more coherent and positive vision of salvation than the other types. His criticism of the Latin doctrine, as we have seen, is that in it atonement and justification are two separate acts with no intrinsic connection. For the classic model, however,

If salvation is a deliverance both from sin and from death, and an entrance into life, this of itself forms a safeguard against the degradation either of the idea of sin to a moralistic level, or of the idea of the forgiveness of sin to the level of a mere remission of punishment. Salvation is...regarded positively, not negatively. It is always positive, wherever the classic idea is dominant, whether the actual terms used be the forgiveness of sins, union with God, the deifying of human nature, or some other. On the other hand, with the Latin doctrine the natural tendency is for forgiveness to be regarded negatively; for it is the fruit of the satisfaction made by Christ that the punishment deserved by man is remitted.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Aulén, 153.

<sup>98</sup> Aulén, 6.

<sup>99</sup> Aulén, 149.



So justification and atonement are two sides of the same coin, and they affect humanity as a whole, not merely as individuals.

In explaining why the “classic” doctrine seemed to have faded from view in his time, Aulén articulates earlier criticisms of the model, especially within modern liberal Protestant theology and historical scholarship which sought to strip Christianity of “mythical” influences.

As Jaroslav Pelikan traces this line of thinking:

Especially virulent has been the distortion perpetrated by Adolf von Harnack and his disciples. Proceeding on the assumption that Christian dogma is a product of the Greek spirit on the soil of the gospel, this school of historical theologians treated the language of the church fathers about the Atonement with condescension.<sup>100</sup>

In the nineteenth century the “classic” idea was also often dismissed by scholars who saw the “ransom” aspect of classic language about redemption in particular as overly mythological, and, as Anselm and Abelard also both argued, giving too much power to the devil. Aulén notes that patristic writers differ on whether the devil had rights over humankind following the Fall but that many accepted that “the devil acquired rights over mankind.”<sup>101</sup> Nineteenth century scholars also criticized the motif of deceiving the devil. As Aulén notes of Gregory of Nyssa’s treatment of this idea,

When the Godhead clothes itself in human form, the devil thinks that he sees a uniquely desirable prey; the Godhead in Christ is so hidden that he does not notice the danger which threatens him, and which under other circumstances he would immediately have avoided. Therefore he accepts the offered prey; as a fish swallows the bait on the fish-hook, so the devil swallows his prey, and is thereby taken captive by the Godhead, hidden under the human nature.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Pelikan, “Foreword,” *Christus Victor*, xiv.

<sup>101</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 48.

<sup>102</sup> Aulén, 52.

For Aulén, who defends this motif, its force is that

the devil is not a power equal and opposite to God, and in so far as he has power over men, he derives this power ultimately from God, for he stands, as it were, to execute God's own judgment on sinful and guilty man.... [the underlying idea] asserts, fundamentally, the responsibility of man for his sin, and that the judgment which rests on mankind is a righteous judgment.<sup>103</sup>

The “mythological” aspects of the classic idea of salvation demonstrate its character as fundamentally narrative and dramatic rather than discursive and rational.

Brown and Parker do not exempt the Christus Victor model from their critique of models of salvation. In this model, as in others, they argue, suffering, and violent suffering in particular, remains valorized. “The central image of Christ on the cross as savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive.”<sup>104</sup> This message reinforces systems of oppression by encouraging people, especially women, to suffer as a mark of faithfulness to Christ. In the Christus Victor approach in particular, they find the notion that suffering is preamble to great victory encourages passive acceptance of unjust suffering. It also encourages the notion that suffering is part of a greater plan and is leading to something greater. “In response to suffering it will be said, Be patient, something good will come of this. The believer is persuaded to endure suffering as a prelude to new life....When people say things such as, God had a purpose in the death of the six million Jews, the travesty of this theology is revealed.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Aulén, 54.

<sup>104</sup> Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” 2.

<sup>105</sup> Brown and Parker, 7.

## Other Models

Brown and Parker note three critical traditions that reexamine the role of suffering in atonement theologies: the “Suffering God”, the “Necessity of Suffering,” and the “Negativity of Suffering.” For Brown and Parker, each of these attempts to solve the problems of traditional atonement theologies, but they ultimately fall short because they still insist on seeing the suffering of Jesus on the cross as somehow salvific, which Brown and Parker want to reject altogether. The “suffering God” theological trajectory, influenced by liberation theology and expressed by Jürgen Moltmann, argues that God suffers with the oppressed and thus unites Godself with humanity.<sup>106</sup> Theologies that emphasize the “necessity of suffering” argue that suffering is a necessary part of the journey to liberation.<sup>107</sup> Theologians who assert the negativity of suffering deny that suffering is redemptive, but, according to Brown and Parker, do not go far enough.<sup>108</sup>

In Elizabeth Johnson’s address “Jesus and Salvation,” she presents another typology of contemporary soteriologies, each with a different approach to the problems historical consciousness has raised for classical atonement theories. For Johnson, theology is narrative, and each soteriology has a narrative interpretation of the story of redemption. Her “types” are mythological narrative, totalizing historical narrative, and postmodern or “contingent historical” narrative. Postmodern narrative is, for her, the most persuasive because it takes account of historical contingency, which can be neither mythologized nor totalized. Where mythology in

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<sup>106</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015). Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” 13-19.

<sup>107</sup> Brown and Parker, 19-21.

<sup>108</sup> Brown and Parker, 21-26.

some senses remains separate from human experience, and totalizing narrative does not fully account for human freedom, contingent historical narrative “generates...hope because it signals divine mystery unpredictably present in the very midst of contingent events of suffering, community, struggle, and joy.”<sup>109</sup> These types are not mutually exclusive, but they reveal the ways in which theology deals with the relationship between history and salvation.

#### Can Nature be Saved?

These expositions and criticisms of atonement theory focus, as we have discussed, on the “how” and the “what” of salvation. Another thread in soteriological discourse might be termed the “who” of salvation, or what Gustavo Gutierrez calls its “quantitative, extensive” dimension.<sup>110</sup> This is also an area to which feminist theology and ecotheology have made important contributions, by pointing out the anthropo- and androcentric assumptions of models of atonement. For example, both feminists and ecotheologians have pointed out the implications of the Christological dictum, “What is not assumed is not saved,” for both women and nonhuman creatures. If the salient fact about Jesus Christ is not his humanity but his maleness, feminist theologians ask, then how can women be saved?<sup>111</sup> Niels Gregersen draws the point out further: “even on anthropocentric premises (that is, in the soteriological interests of humanity) there *must* be a healing also of the non-human existence, *if* the whole of humanity is to be

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<sup>109</sup> Johnson, “Jesus and Salvation,” 9.

<sup>110</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 151.

<sup>111</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether asks this question in “Christology and Feminism: Can a Male Savior Save Women?” in *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 45-56. The answer is yes—but Jesus’ maleness must be de-centered.

healed.”<sup>112</sup> In other words, *even if* only the salvation of human beings matters theologically, it is still predicated on the healing of other creatures. Elizabeth Johnson and others have explored the issue of the intrinsic value of creatures and assert that at least in some sense, salvation extends to all of creation, human and nonhuman alike.<sup>113</sup>

Holmes Rolston III asks the question, “Does nature need to be redeemed?” His response is a test case for how we might think through the nature of salvation for all creatures. For Rolston the answer depends upon the nature of the question: “If redemption means being saved from the guilt of sin, then flora, fauna, rocks, and rivers have no guilt and cannot be redeemed.”<sup>114</sup> However, nature can be “saved from the consequences of sin” or “rescued from harm.” Most importantly for him, “if redemption can mean that there is a transformation by which destruction of the old, lower life is not really destruction but renovation, the creation of newer, higher levels of life, then our inquiry is promising indeed.”<sup>115</sup> Rolston sees an everyday redemption in nature; the dying of one creature to give life to another, or the destruction of a storm that is followed by new growth.

What does such a theology make of suffering? All organisms and systems can be stressed, but only higher organisms can truly be said to suffer: “Organic life requires an entirely

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<sup>112</sup> Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Christology,” in *Systematic Theology and Climate Change: Ecumenical Perspectives*, ed. Michael S. Northcott and Peter M. Scott (New York: Routledge, 2014), 45.

<sup>113</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Creation and the Cross* and *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Niels Henrik Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40, no. 3 (2001): 192–207; Sallie McFague, “An Earthly Theological Agenda,” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 84–98.

<sup>114</sup> Holmes Rolston III, “Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?” *Zygon* 29, no. 2 (June 1994): 211.

<sup>115</sup> Rolston, “Redeemed?” 211.

different model, one of suffering through toward something higher. Only later on, in humans, can this goal be consciously entertained.”<sup>116</sup> Indeed, in nature, “we can recognize...a principle both of redemptive and vicarious suffering.”<sup>117</sup> Nature itself, then, is cruciform:

The cruciform creation is, in the end, deiform, godly, just because of this element of struggle, not in spite of it. There is a great divine yes hidden behind and within every no of crushing nature. God, who is the lure toward rationality and sentience in the upcurrents of the biological pyramid, is also the compassionate lure in, with, and under all purchasing of life at the cost of sacrifice. God rescues from suffering, but the Judeo-Christian faith never teaches that God eschews suffering in the achievement of the divine purposes.<sup>118</sup>

Because, for nature, to be redeemed is to be conserved, nature is always being saved.

“Redemptive suffering is a model that makes sense of nature and history. Far from making the world absurd, suffering is a key to the whole, not intrinsically, not as an end in itself, but as a transformed principle, transvalued into its opposite.”<sup>119</sup>

For nature, Rolston’s vision of salvation is conservation and transformation through destruction. Christ, in this theology, is paradigmatic of what is always and everywhere true: that new life springs from old, and that suffering can give rise to something greater. Rolston’s soteriology is partially exemplarist: “The abundant life that Jesus exemplifies and offers to his disciples is that of a sacrificial suffering through to something higher.”<sup>120</sup> It also echoes the

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<sup>116</sup> Rolston, 217.

<sup>117</sup> Rolston, 218.

<sup>118</sup> Rolston, 220.

<sup>119</sup> Rolston, 220.

<sup>120</sup> Rolston, 220.

theology of the suffering God: God suffers in and with creation, and we can understand creation itself as participating in God in its natural processes of evolution, death, and new life.

Yet while Rolston does not wish to celebrate suffering for suffering's sake, Brown and Parker's critique of Christus Victor soteriology rings true here. Such a theology sets up suffering as being ordered to a greater cause. Another issue with Rolston's presentation is that he sees redemption in the regular occurrence of natural processes, but his acknowledgement that nature does indeed need to be redeemed now from the consequences of our sin has little to say about how the redemptive process might work. The destruction and suffering humans are imposing on nature is not creative. How might "suffering through to something higher" be paradigmatic for the changes needed to reverse the effects of ecological destruction? Does the sacrifice of Christ make a difference, or is it only a paradigm?

In the example of Rolston's essay, we can see some of the problems that face a theology of salvation that includes the whole earth community. His valuable insight is that all of nature images God in some sense, and that the role of humans emerges from within biological life as giving a new moral and spiritual dimension to that life that entails responsibility for conserving it. The dangers in such a theology, however, include the assumption that it is unproblematic for individuals to be sacrificed for the greater good, and that suffering naturally tends to produce something greater than came before.

### **Conclusion: Two Paths Forward**

A different understanding of salvation needs to take hold within Christianity that takes into account the serious moral, spiritual, and physical threat of climate change. As Pope Francis recently wrote in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, "We need to develop the awareness that nowadays we are all either all saved together or no one is saved. Poverty, decadence and suffering in one

part of the earth are a breeding ground for problems that will end up affecting the entire planet.”<sup>121</sup> Our understanding of salvation must develop with an awareness of the interconnectedness of both collective sin and collective salvation. It must understand our, and God’s, deep relationship to the earth and all of its inhabitants. It must offer critique, lament, and hope.

In the coming chapters I articulate important contributions to such a soteriology made by somewhat unlikely partners: ecofeminism and Patristic deification theology in which salvation is framed as union with God. Ecofeminist theology agrees with other liberation theologies that salvation must be at least liberation from oppression, even if it goes beyond that to something more. Ecofeminist theology suggests that salvation consists at least in conservation<sup>122</sup> and raises important questions about the suffering and death inherent in evolutionary processes and what this might mean for notions of eschatological fullness. Because of their focus on conservation and their justified criticism of escapist soteriology, these trajectories have led to what I would call a soteriological minimalism—an unwillingness to make overarching claims about the nature and goal of salvation.

Eastern theology has, at least at some points, had arguably the opposite issue: an extremely elaborate vision of the heavenly kingdom in which we are to participate. Having never developed the same scholastic approaches to atonement theory as the West, Eastern theology has

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<sup>121</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html), para. 137.

<sup>122</sup> Rolston, “Redeemed?”; Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 200: “Salvation, the good life, in the new paradigm means first of all the basic, physical needs of the earth’s creatures.”



been freed of some of the major problems of these atonement theories. Moreover, many concerned with ecological matters have pointed to Eastern traditions as a counterpoint to Western anthropocentrism. For example, Pope Francis takes inspiration from the “Green Patriarch” Bartholemew. Lynn White also exempts Eastern Christianity from his critique of Christianity as destructive of the earth:

the Greek East, a highly civilized realm of equal Christian devotion, seems to have produced no marked technological innovation after the late 7<sup>th</sup> century.... The Greeks believed that sin was intellectual blindness, and that salvation was found in illumination, orthodoxy—that is, clear thinking. The Latins, on the other hand, felt that sin was moral evil, and that salvation was to be found in right conduct.... The Greek saint contemplates; the Western saint acts.<sup>123</sup>

Yet an uncritical appropriation of Eastern visions of salvation is also not warranted; these must also be examined and critiqued, especially for the ways in which these soteriologies have led to quietism about social transformation. At the same time, the continued *ressourcement* of the sources common to both traditions and the dialogue between them on the nature of salvation does offer some paths forward.

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<sup>123</sup> White, “Historical Roots,” 1206.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ECOFEMINIST SOTERIOLOGIES

Ecofeminist Christian theology is a response to the interstructural (as Rosemary Radford Ruether puts it<sup>1</sup>) or intersectional (a term coined by legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>2</sup>) oppressions of women and the earth. It critiques the patriarchal and ecologically problematic elements of Christian theology and attempts to reconstruct a Christian theology that is more liberating to the oppressed and marginalized. As such it is a form of liberation theology and contextual theology. This chapter will briefly survey ecofeminist theology (and philosophy) as a movement in order to demonstrate why such an intersectional approach, rather than a “single issue” focus, is necessary to confront the ecological crisis. I highlight the soteriologies of three central figures: Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, and Sallie McFague.

#### **Ecofeminism**

The central insight of ecofeminism is that oppression of women and oppression of the earth are intimately connected. This is true across multiple axes, in practical as well as cultural-symbolic matters. Ecofeminism critiques the “hierarchical dualism” that has structured much of

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975; Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 116. Citations refer to the Beacon Press edition.

<sup>2</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberlé, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, no. 1: 139-167, <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>

Western thought and culture, arguing that the positing of binaries (male/female, mind/body, culture/nature, etc.) and the positioning of one as superior to the other has resulted in disastrous consequences for those who have been placed into the “lower” category—and, indeed, for those in the “higher,” whose artificial elevation above others can damage their humanity. Such divisions are not facts of experience, but rather categories superimposed on reality in order to structure it in ways that benefit some at the expense of others. Philosopher Karen Warren sees the problem, as she puts it, in the “logic of domination” as a justification of oppression.

Against hierarchical dualisms, ecofeminists assert ideals of “biophilic mutuality,”<sup>3</sup> “life-giving relations,”<sup>4</sup> and other expressions of cooperation for the common good of all.

Theologically, such a view also sees God as immanent in, rather than *merely* transcendent over and against, creation. This affects ecofeminist soteriology in several ways. Most prominently, as we will see, ecofeminist visions of salvation include and emphasize “this-worldly” elements and focus on the flourishing of the earth community.

### The Relationship Between Women and “Nature”

In this section I will discuss ecofeminist philosophy, especially as framed by Val Plumwood and Karen Warren, and its critique of the conceptual framework of hierarchical dualism. I note the theological development of this critique and some theological examples of dualistic, hierarchical thinking. Finally, I will distinguish between an essentialist reading of the connection between women and nature and a “strategic essentialist” reading of this connection.

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<sup>3</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 143.

<sup>4</sup> Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 274.

If the central thesis of ecofeminism is that there is a connection between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature, what sort of connection is this? Feminist philosopher Karen Warren points to ten different ways in which women and “nature” are related. She calls these “women-other human Others-nature interconnections”<sup>5</sup> to highlight the way these same basic structures that oppress women and the earth (“nature”) apply to “other human Others,” such as those marginalized for reasons of class, race, religion, etc. These ten types are “historical (typically causal), conceptual, empirical, socioeconomic, linguistic, symbolic and literary, spiritual and religious, epistemological, political, and ethical.”<sup>6</sup> Theologian Heather Eaton shows that broadly speaking, these ten ways can be distilled into empirical analyses, on the one hand, and cultural-symbolic analyses, on the other.<sup>7</sup>

*Empirical* approaches involve both direct, lived experiences of the connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature (for example, women’s struggle to nourish their families amidst lack of access to clean water and adequate nutrition<sup>8</sup>), and analyses of why these connections exist. These approaches examine the ways in which the oppression of women and the destruction of the natural world coexist in measurable ways; for example, the disproportionate poverty of women when the land is exploited. Of the Green Belt Movement in

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<sup>5</sup> Karen Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why it Matters* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Heather Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, vol. 12 in *Introductions in Feminist Theology*, ed. Mary Grey, Lisa Isherwood, and Janet Wootton (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 27.

<sup>8</sup> See Nontando Hadebe’s discussion of Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt Movement in Kenya in Hadebe, “The Cry of the Earth is the Cry of Women: Ecofeminisms in Critical Dialogue with *Laudato Si’*,” *Grace and Truth* 2017/2: 50-65, and Wangari Maathai, “Nobel Lecture” (2004), NobelPrize.org, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2004/maathai/lecture>.

Kenya and across East Africa, its leader Wangari Maathai says, “Throughout Africa, women are the primary caretakers, holding significant responsibility for tilling the land and feeding their families. As a result, they are often the first to become aware of environmental damage as resources become scarce and incapable of sustaining their families.”<sup>9</sup> This experience led the group of women in what would become the Green Belt Movement to begin planting trees, but soon their experiential knowledge of the degradation of the environment also extended to the systems that enabled and caused that degradation: “it soon became clear that responsible governance of the environment was impossible without democratic space.”<sup>10</sup> Maathai adds, “Many countries, which have poor governance systems, are also likely to have conflicts and poor laws protecting the environment.”<sup>11</sup> Empirical analysis is thus indispensable for creating and developing knowledge about harm to women and to ecosystems, and the ways in which these harms are caught up with other evils such as war and poverty.

*Cultural-symbolic* analysis, on the other hand, is also known as ecofeminist theory,<sup>12</sup> and is concerned with symbolic representations of women and nature in and across cultures. This may involve literary, religious, philosophical, artistic, and other cultural analyses. Cultural-symbolic analysis might note, for instance, that the linguistic usage of gendered terms for nature and “natural” terms for women (“the feminization of nature and the naturalization of women”)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Maathai, “Nobel Lecture.”

<sup>10</sup> Maathai.

<sup>11</sup> Maathai.

<sup>12</sup> Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theology*, 28-29.

<sup>13</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 50.

shows that women are thought of as somehow closer to (“Mother”) nature. Soil is “fertile,” wilderness is “virgin,” and women can be “cows” or “whales.”<sup>14</sup> Delores Williams has pointed out that this linguistic exchange applies still more to women of color, whose bodies have been treated and exploited as property akin to land or chattel.<sup>15</sup> Eaton also argues that combined analyses yield a richer interaction between the empirical and cultural-symbolic streams of ecofeminism.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, both must be kept together.

How does one explain this contested connection between women and nature? While some early ecofeminists theorized about the origins of this connection, positing a pre-historical, pre-patriarchal matriarchy and thus a “fall” into patriarchy, the historical or pre-historical origins of sexism and dualism are disputed.<sup>17</sup> Others have traced the history of the interconnected oppression of women and nature to different eras, like the dawn of agriculture, Greek rationalism, or the scientific revolution.<sup>18</sup> In addition to attempting to trace historical origins of sexism and ecological destruction, ecofeminist theorists have pointed to other “isms” and forms

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<sup>14</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Delores Williams, “Sin, Nature, and Black Women’s Bodies,” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 24-29.

<sup>16</sup> Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 22-24. This is not to deny that matriarchies and egalitarian societies have existed and, in some cases, continue to exist. Rather, it is to point out that we lack evidence to claim there was a period in which matriarchy was the default social structure and that there was a “fall into patriarchy.” See Ruether, “Paradise Lost and the Fall into Patriarchy,” in *Gaia and God*.

<sup>18</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 22-23. For the dawn of agriculture, she cites Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); for rationalism she cites Val Plumwood, “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism,” in *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 155-80. For the scientific revolution, she cites Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

of domination to highlight the *structure* shared by these interlocking oppressions. Karen Warren describes the central problem as the “logic of domination,” which includes not merely hierarchy (what she calls the Ups over the Downs to generalize across multiple hierarchies) or subordination, but the logical underpinning that justifies both. Warren describes patriarchy as a type of “oppressive conceptual framework.” Such frameworks (including but not limited to patriarchy) have five features: “value-hierarchical thinking,” “oppositional value dualisms,” power as power-over, privilege, and, most importantly, a “logic of domination,” which is “a logical structure of argumentation that ‘justifies’ domination and subordination.”<sup>19</sup> The logic of domination is the key point in an oppressive conceptual framework because it can justify not only hierarchy (which in some cases is morally neutral in and of itself) but *unjust* hierarchy through the assertion that a given trait or type of “superiority” is justification for subordination. “Typically this justification takes the form that the Up has some characteristic (e.g., in the Western philosophical tradition, the favored trait is ‘mind,’ reason, or rationality) that the Down lacks and by virtue of which the subordination of the Down by the Up is justified.”<sup>20</sup> For Warren, it is this same logic of domination that links the oppressions of women and of the earth.

Similarly, philosopher Val Plumwood frames her analysis of interlocking oppressions in terms of what she calls “centrisms” (androcentrism, anthropocentrism, etc.) or logics of center and periphery. These systems share the following 5 characteristics: (1) radical exclusion, (2) homogenization, (3) denial and backgrounding of the other, (4) incorporation, and (5) instrumentalism. Taken together, these aspects are found across multiple forms of unjust

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<sup>19</sup> Warren, 46-47.

<sup>20</sup> Warren, 47.

domination, including sexism, colonialism, racism, and destruction of the earth. *Radical exclusion* is the expulsion of the other or the peripheral figure from the self-identification of the dominant or central figure. This peripheral figure is cast out of any sphere of life deemed important by the center, and is often physically separated. An example is the assumption that human beings and “nature” are two radically different things without continuity.<sup>21</sup>

*Homogenization* asserts that the periphery or the “other” is undifferentiated; e.g. “All women are alike” or “If you’ve seen one redwood, you’ve seen them all.”<sup>22</sup> *Denial and backgrounding* involve discounting and even failing to see the contributions of the other. A common example of this is the exclusion of female labor, including reproductive and care work, from consideration, study, or acknowledgement as labor.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the role of ecological systems in making a place livable are often ignored when humans seek to develop an area of land, as with deforestation in Kenya and its effect on everyday life and health. *Incorporation* involves defining the other in relation to the (central) self: “my wife,” “my slave.” Thus any contributions of the other are effectively one’s own. Finally, *instrumentalism* treats the other as a means to an end. This can be seen in tendencies to treat nature as a set of natural resources to be exploited.

Plumwood emphasizes the fact that “nature” is itself not a neutral term; rather, it is already defined by the centrism at play in our language and thought.

The category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature. . . . To be defined as “nature” in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-

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<sup>21</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 107.

<sup>22</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 107. She is referring to a common paraphrase of a remark made by then-gubernatorial candidate Ronald Reagan in 1966.

<sup>23</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 21.



agent and non-subject, as the “environment” or invisible background conditions against which the “foreground” achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) takes place.<sup>24</sup>

Thus the very way we think about nature already includes the intersection of race, class, and gender. For instance, colonizers of Australia thought of indigenous peoples as “semi-animals” rather than as full human beings.<sup>25</sup> The concept of nature, then, can be one way of thinking about an “other” that is outside of the central, dominant identity.

As we have seen, whether through critique of the logic of domination or of “centrism,” ecofeminist philosophers have provided theoretical and practical insight into the dynamics of systems of oppression. Some elite group elevates itself by defining the other as a lack and systematically devaluing that other both externally and internally (by denying the parts of itself that it identifies with otherness). This logic works in multiple ways within the history of Christian theology: through dualisms of God/world, man/woman, man/nature, as we have seen, and through the related anthropological dualism of mind/body or spirit/flesh.<sup>26</sup> The first of each of these pairs is elevated over the second, while the pairs align so that God, man, and mind are identified and world, woman, nature, and body are identified. Elizabeth Johnson has pointed out traces of this hierarchical dualism even in Christian doctrines of the Trinity: “When this pattern of thought turns to Trinitarian theology it keeps the focus on the relation of Father and Son, one

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<sup>24</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Christianity rejects an extreme version of mind/ body dualism, as it strongly rejects Gnosticism and emphasizes the goodness of the created, material world. Yet versions or traces of dualism remain both implicitly and explicitly in the history of Christian theology; see Elizabeth Johnson, “A Taproot of the Crisis: The Two-Tiered Universe, in *Woman, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (Notre Dame, IN: Saint Mary’s College, 1993), 19-20.

generating and the other being generated, finding it difficult even to know what proper name to give the Spirit. Dualism has trouble with threes.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, “neglect of the Spirit has a symbolic affinity with the marginalization of women and is an inevitable outcome of a sexist, dualist lens on reality, which also, let us remember, disvalues nature.”<sup>28</sup>

Some types of ecofeminists have celebrated the woman-nature connection and affirmed its reality. They acknowledge and condemn the subordination of the “woman-nature” nexus but they do not deny the identification of women with nature.<sup>29</sup> This is not the position I take here; while there is nothing wrong with identifying with and celebrating nature, there is no inherent or ontological reason to connect women more strongly with nature than men. Moreover, as Agnes M. Brazal puts it, identifying women with nature without nuance ignores and erases other social dimensions of relationship with the environment, including class, race, and colonization: “Women and even men who grew up nearer to nature may by their social position have greater affinity and care for nature than those women and men who were raised in the urban jungle.... Women’s closeness to nature and ecological virtuousness cannot thereby be accepted as a given fact but must be interrogated in each concrete case.”<sup>30</sup> I affirm the position that women are not inherently “closer” to something called nature but rather that all humans are part of “nature” (which, as Plumwood has explained, is constructed as such: nature is "a political rather than a

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<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *Woman, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 19-20.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *Woman, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 20-21.

<sup>30</sup> Agnes M. Brazal, “Ethics of Care in *Laudato Si*’: A Postcolonial Ecofeminist Critique,” *Feminist Theology* 29, no. 3 (May 2021): 222.

descriptive category”<sup>31</sup>) and that the symbolic structure that places women closer to the earth (even if in doing so it elevates them as earth mother, nature goddess, etc.) is unnecessary and harmful. However, as Warren points out, the shared experience of living with this symbolic connection does give women, especially marginalized women, insight into issues of domination and oppression, and experiences as being tied, rhetorically and socially, to the natural world give women a position from which to speak about ecology. Moreover, certain values and ways of acting and thinking that have been culturally deemed “feminine” and therefore devalued—for example, the values and behaviors that have been termed “care ethics”<sup>32</sup>—are important correctives to the dominant discourse and can help to build societies more attentive to the earth. Warren thus endorses “strategic essentialism,” a term coined by Gayatri Spivak, which “permits, as a practical strategy, talk about commonalities among individuals and groups... without thereby implying any biologically determined, socially unconstructed, conceptually essentialist account of moral persons, selves, women, and nature.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, no view of “women’s nature,” or indeed of binary gender difference, is needed to speak meaningfully of the harms of patriarchy or to advocate for feminist and ecofeminist causes. This is the position I take as well.

This discussion of the close connection between the oppressions of women and of nature suggests that the theological meanings of salvation for women and for the planet’s ecosystems are just as closely related, as Rosemary Radford Ruether has argued (see below). To rectify the

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<sup>31</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Care ethics is the term given by psychologist Carol Gilligan to the ethical prioritization of relationships and caring demonstrated by women, rather than the universal and abstract ideas of justice exemplified in Lawrence Kohlberg’s moral development theory. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>33</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 91.

destruction of the planet means also to examine the harm oppressive systems have done to women, and to affirm the salvation and value of women is to examine the harm patriarchal society has done to the earth.

### Ecofeminist Critiques of Ecological Movements

Why should we use an ecofeminist lens rather than simply an ecological one to evaluate the ecological crisis and to make the changes necessary to bring the planet back from the brink of disaster? In other words, why not simply focus on one problem at a time? In this brief section I discuss the problems ecofeminists find with masculine-centered forms of ecological activism in order to highlight the necessity of feminist viewpoints for a *truly* “integral ecology” as Pope Francis calls for.

There are many facets of ecological thought, one of the most influential of which has been deep ecology. Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who coined this term, contrasts “shallow” ecological movements, which tend to address surface-level problems such as pollution in isolation, as technical problems to be solved, with “deep” ecology, which is concerned with all species, not merely the human, and sees human relations with the environment as a “total field” rather than “man-in-environment:” that is, all are part of a complex web of interrelations rather than strictly opposed.<sup>34</sup> Val Plumwood critiques the deep ecology movement for its “denial of difference:” “Deep ecology locates the key problem area in human-nature relations in the separation of humans and nature, and it provides a solution for this in terms of the ‘identification’ of self with nature.”<sup>35</sup> While, as we have seen, Plumwood’s analysis of dualism

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<sup>34</sup> Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement, A Summary,” *Inquiry* 1 (1972): 95-100.

<sup>35</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 176.

highlights the need for “affirming both difference and continuity,” she claims that “major forms of deep ecology have tended to focus exclusively on identification, interconnectedness, sameness and the overcoming of separation, treating nature as a dimension of the self....”<sup>36</sup> This erasure of any boundaries, however porous, between self and other is, Plumwood states, part of “the master’s consciousness,” a consciousness “which presumes to violate boundaries and claims to subsume, penetrate and exhaust the other, and such treatment is a standard part of subordination.”<sup>37</sup> In addition to betraying a colonizing consciousness, this line of thinking does not necessarily yield good ethical fruit, according to Plumwood. “It is unclear how such a solution to removing human/nature dualism, by obliterating any human/nature distinction and dissolving self boundaries, is supposed to provide the basis for an environmental ethic. The analysis of humans as metaphysically unified with the cosmic whole will be equally true whatever relations humans stand in with nature.”<sup>38</sup> Deep ecology and the related creation spirituality movement of Thomas Berry and others also has a tendency to romanticize nature and to ignore the realities of death and destruction within natural processes, as Sallie McFague points out: “what Berry and other creation spirituality writers lack is a sense of the awful oppression that is part and parcel of the awesome mystery and splendor. The universe has not been for most species, and certainly not for most individuals within the various species, a ‘gorgeous celebratory event’.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Plumwood, 176.

<sup>37</sup> Plumwood, 178.

<sup>38</sup> Plumwood, 177.

<sup>39</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God*, 70.

Another influential ecological framework is Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, a rousing call for ecological activism that is nevertheless naïve in its connection of women with nature. Nichole Flores, Nontando Hadebe, and Agnes M. Brazal have all enumerated the ways in which the document misses the importance of gender analysis for an ecological ethic. Analyzing the familial metaphor inherent in St. Francis' phrase "Our sister, Mother Earth," Flores situates Pope Francis' analysis within "Latin American and Latinx theological anthropology"<sup>40</sup> with its own emphasis on familial relations and structures. She points out that while such a familial metaphor "strengthens Catholic social teaching as it pertains to ecological solidarity, this same metaphor risks obscuring important concerns about familial and gender justice, especially as they concern the enduring issues of inequality within families including gender inequality in Catholic social teaching."<sup>41</sup> Flores points out that "our sister, Mother Earth, is cast as the feminine victim, groaning in pain from abuse and exploitation. At the same time, the Church's magisterium... is cast as the father, a *paterfamilias* responsible for direction of the family."<sup>42</sup> Without a dual analysis that includes gendered "patterns of domination and subordination,"<sup>43</sup> ecological theology and activism can easily become paternalistic and remain within structures of patriarchy: "the salvation of the earthly, bodily feminine remains dependent on masculine governance, reinforcing a pattern of gender inequality firmly ensconced in Catholic social thought."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Nichole M. Flores, "Our Sister, Mother Earth: Solidarity and Familial Ecology in *Laudato Si'*," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (2018): 466.

<sup>41</sup> Flores, "Our Sister, Mother Earth," 466.

<sup>42</sup> Flores, 474.

<sup>43</sup> Flores, 474.

<sup>44</sup> Flores, 474.

Nontando Hadebe has also drawn attention to this aporia in the encyclical: “There is no reference to gender, feminism, patriarchy, and racism in *Laudato Si’* which is consistent with the homogenization of the poor who are described in generic terms as ‘men and women’ without an awareness of the differences among them.”<sup>45</sup> According to Hadebe, while there are many affinities between ecofeminist perspectives and *Laudato Si’*, namely their insistence that “the ecological crisis reflects social injustice; the two are inseparable,” their “contextual approaches that start with experiences and factual analysis of the situation,” “the role of human agency,” and “the inclusion of affective values such as love, friendship, care, mutuality and joy,”<sup>46</sup> they differ in their analyses of who is most affected by climate change and what social structures are at play.<sup>47</sup>

Most recently, Agnes M. Brazal has articulated the need to add postcolonial analysis to ecofeminist critique.<sup>48</sup> She argues that while *Laudato Si’* centers care for the most vulnerable, it “employs the language of care minus its gender component, even if the theory itself was largely developed by women and drawn from the experiences of women.”<sup>49</sup> In portraying “nature both as a mother that cares and nourishes and a vulnerable sister that is exploited,” the document reinforces symbolic representation of women “in terms of both virtuousness and vulnerability.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Hadebe, “The Cry of the Earth,” 62.

<sup>46</sup> Hadebe, 61.

<sup>47</sup> Hadebe, 61.

<sup>48</sup> Agnes M. Brazal, “Ethics of Care in *Laudato Si’*,” 220-233.

<sup>49</sup> Brazal, 224.

<sup>50</sup> Brazal, 224.

Brazal critiques Francis' treatment of gender relations as complementarian and binary<sup>51</sup> and his avoidance of any discussion of limiting population growth, even through such means as the education of women and natural family planning.<sup>52</sup> Finally, Francis' proposal that "only the dominion of a Father can put an end to the domination of humans over creation"<sup>53</sup> ignores views of God as Father and Mother in indigenous traditions in the Phillipines (the context from which Brazal is writing), the feminist retrieval of God as Sophia or Wisdom, and other feminist critiques of the image of God as Father.<sup>54</sup>

Ecofeminist critiques, then, have pointed out gaps and blind spots in ecological philosophies and theologies. They show the disproportionate harm to women caused by many aspects of ecological crisis.<sup>55</sup> They have also criticized the ways in which proposed solutions to ecological crisis may reinforce and reify patriarchal gender norms, especially of male dominance and female passivity.

### **Reimagining Salvation: Three Ecofeminist Options**

As we have seen above, ecofeminist analysis is needed to more thoroughly understand and respond to the full significance of the ecological crisis. This is true in theology as well as in

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<sup>51</sup> Brazal, 227.

<sup>52</sup> Brazal, 229-230. Brazal notes the critique of population reduction as a neocolonialist project that ignores the disproportionate impact of elite consumption on climate change. Her discussion is framed within the notion of "planetary boundaries;" See Rockstrom et. al., "Planetary boundaries."

<sup>53</sup> Brazal, 231.

<sup>54</sup> Brazal, 231-232. She also cites Emily Reimer-Barry, "On Naming God: Gendered God-Talk in *Laudato Si'*," *Catholic Moral Theology* (2015), <https://catholicmoraltheology.com/on-naming-god-gendered-god-talk-in-laudato-si>.

<sup>55</sup> Brazal points out, for instance, that women have been "more likely than men to die in natural disasters." Brazal, 225.



philosophy and ecological activism and policy: Christian theology had a role in creating the ecological crisis and must have a role in addressing it. Heather Eaton categorizes religious responses to Christianity's role in creating the ecological crisis<sup>56</sup> into several types: those who dispute the premise and argue that ecological devastation has nothing to do with Christianity, those who believe that "the devastation of the earth is part of the biblical apocalyptic predictions, and therefore it is a good sign that the end is near," and those who feel they cannot find resources for earth healing and spirituality within Christianity and turn instead to alternative spiritualities and religious traditions.<sup>57</sup> While these three foregoing types thus do not actively engage Christian theology and ecology, the fourth and fifth types do. The fourth, or "apologetic approach,"<sup>58</sup> mines Christian theological history for ecological resources, while the fifth responds to the challenge by

engag[ing] in a radical revisioning of an understanding of religion and religious truths. It seeks to reawaken a sense of the sacredness of the earth using multiple avenues and options, including within Christianity. The dialogue partners are numerous, including science, feminism, postmodernism, cosmology, inter-religious insights and spirituality. Their primary goal is to rekindle a religious experience of the earth and to resist further ecological degradation.<sup>59</sup>

Three influential thinkers in ecofeminist Christian theology are Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, and Sallie McFague. These three thinkers stand, some more than others, in continuity with their own Christian traditions—that is, they interrogate the symbols of traditional Christian theology while remaining within the broad tradition of Christian thought—and fall

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<sup>56</sup> For more on this role see the discussion of Lynn White's essay in Chapter One.

<sup>57</sup> Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 71.

<sup>58</sup> Eaton, 71.

<sup>59</sup> Eaton, 72.

between Eaton's fourth and fifth types. How do these three thinkers analyze the woman-nature connection, and what do they envision as the meaning of salvation?

Rosemary Radford Ruether

No discussion of Christian ecofeminist theology would be complete without attention to Rosemary Radford Ruether. From her earliest work, even that predating her use of the term ecofeminism, Ruether has had a critical awareness of the relationship between oppression of the earth and oppression of women, and, most relevant to this dissertation, of what this means for traditional soteriologies. This section discusses her contention that salvation is a reclamation of an "original goodness" already present in humanity and in all of creation. She sees this goodness being manifested and activated in groups of women, especially women of the Global South or "Third World," in their actions for peace and environmental justice.

As early as 1975, Ruether wrote,

The liberation of all human relations from the false polarities of masculinity and femininity must also shape a new relationship of humanity to nature. The project of human life must cease to be one of 'domination of nature,' or exploitation of a bodily reality which is outside and other than ourselves. Rather, we have to find a new language of ecological responsiveness, a reciprocity between consciousness and the world systems in which we live and move and have our being. Our final mandate is to redeem our sister, the earth, from her bondage to destruction, recognizing her as our partner in the creation of that new world where all things can be 'very good.' Thus the exorcism of the demonic spirit of sexism in the Church touches off a revolution which must transform all the relations of alienation and domination--between self and body, between leaders and community, between person and person, between social groups, between Church and world, between humanity and nature, finally our model of God in relation to creation--all of which have been modeled on the sexist schizophrenia. Sexism reflects both the heart and the ultimate circumference of the many revolutions in which we are presently involved.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 84.

The “sexist schizophrenia” Ruether refers to here is a split in reality, a fracture between things that ought to be in reciprocal relationship with one another. The “relations of alienation and domination” she describes applies to multiple axes of oppression: race, class, even the abuse of clerical power. Recognizing the relationship between the domination of women and the domination of what is called “nature,” Ruether uses the language of redemption—a key salvation metaphor—to describe the responsibility of human beings for the (feminized) earth which has been subject to the same oppression as women.

Ruether extends the logic of domination she traces here to our theological concept of God and world—in other words, the same unnecessary split or fracture has made its way into how we think about God in relation to the world. Thus, healing the earth and the relationships between persons and social groups also must entail healing our model of God-creation relationship.

Redemption in modern feminism follows a modern Western cultural shift from other-worldly to this-worldly hope. Redemption is not primarily about being reconciled with a God from whom our human nature has become totally severed due to sin, rejecting our bodies and finitude, and ascending to communion with a spiritual world that will be our heavenly home after death. Rather, redemption is about reclaiming an original goodness that is available as our true selves, although obscured by false ideologies and social structures that have justified domination of some and subordination of others.

Redemption puts us back in touch with a full biophilic relationality of humans with their bodies and one another and rebuilds social relations that can incarnate love and justice.<sup>61</sup>

Ruether rejects any notion of salvation that entails the eradication of mortality or materiality. For her, one of the “false ideologies” that obscure the true meaning of salvation is the “cultural avoidance of death,” which may be “the essential root of the inability of some human cultures to create sustainable ecosystems.”<sup>62</sup> “Such despising of finite but renewable life is closely related to

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<sup>61</sup> Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 53.

the despising of women as birth givers."<sup>63</sup> This is because we refuse to acknowledge the role death plays in nature's cycles as a fertile ground for regrowth. We create plastic that does not decompose and lasts forever, and we hope for a salvation that preserves us in the same way. Ruether points out that even for a church father such as Irenaeus, whose anti-Gnostic writings emphasize the goodness of creation, "salvation has to do with transcending mortality.... the only way he can finally think about redemption—not just of the human being, but of the cosmos as a whole—is by assuming that, through being infused by the immortal life of the divine, it will overcome its mortality."<sup>64</sup> For Ruether this amounts to denying the goodness of embodiment rather than embracing it, thus reinforcing within ourselves another false split. For Ruether, Irenaeus' theological insight that "creation is itself an incarnation of the Word and Spirit of God" and that "in the incarnation [of Christ] divine power permeates bodily nature in a yet deeper way, so that the bodily becomes the sacramental bearer of the divine, and the divine deifies the bodily,"<sup>65</sup> does not go far enough toward imagining a deification that is not linked to transcendence of bodily realities.

Despite the overemphasis on immortality, there are, for Ruether, positive aspects to be gleaned from the ancient Christian tradition. Asceticism is a valuable inheritance from this tradition, though many aspects of it as traditionally practiced are problematic:

One side of this tradition [asceticism], with its hostility to women, sexuality, and the body, and its contempt for the material world in favor of life after death, reinforces the patterns of neglect and flight from the earth. But asceticism can be understood, not as a rejection of the body and the earth, but rather as a rejection of exploitation and excess,

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<sup>63</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 140.

<sup>64</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 235-236.

<sup>65</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 235.

and thus as a return to egalitarian simple living in harmony with other humans and with nature.<sup>66</sup>

Salvation, then, means living in harmony with the earth and its creatures, embracing creaturely finitude, and affirming self and other by overcoming the harmful dualisms that structure our culture and religion.

#### Elizabeth Johnson

Elizabeth Johnson is somewhat unique among ecofeminist theologians for focusing specifically and at length on the doctrine of salvation as a key locus for examining ecotheology. A creative synthesizer of scientific knowledge, theological history, and feminist experience, Johnson offers a perspective that is both in deep continuity with Catholic tradition (she is the closest of the three thinkers I am examining to Eaton's fourth type as described above) and prophetic. As we have seen in Chapter 1, in her 1994 CTSA address on contemporary directions in Catholic soteriology, Johnson critiqued Anselm's influential atonement theory as inadequate for an understanding of salvation that includes the earth and all its creatures.<sup>67</sup> She noted also that atonement theory was not the only option available to Christians:

In the postbiblical world, the vigor of interpretations of salvation in differing historical contexts continued unabated. One key example is the differentiation that developed between the churches of East and West, each with its own basic mentality. More mystical, creation centered, and optimistic about grace, the East's metaphor of choice was divinization: thanks to rebirth in the Spirit of Christ, humanity participates in the divine nature to such a degree that we finite mortals are ultimately freed from corruption and death. Irenaeus' recapitulation theory and Athanasius' divinization theology are prime examples of this approach.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 188.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, "Jesus and Salvation," 13.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, "Jesus and Salvation," 4.

Johnson has expanded on both her critique of the more typically Western, Anselmian soteriology and her ecological concern in her recent books *Ask the Beasts* and in *Creation and the Cross*.

*Creation and the Cross* begins with a central question: “Many theologians have written of human redemption. But how in our day can we understand cosmic redemption? At a time of advancing ecological devastation, what would it mean to rediscover this biblical sense [Rom 8:18-25] of the natural world groaning, hoping, waiting for liberation?”<sup>69</sup> Johnson then advocates for what she terms a theology of accompaniment. In such a theology, salvation consists in God’s presence with and for God’s creation, including suffering with and alongside it. “[Going through the scriptures] fosters the idea of salvation as the divine gift of ‘I am with you,’ even in the throes of suffering and death. Redemption comes to mean the presence of God walking with the world through its traumas and travail, even unto death.”<sup>70</sup> Johnson has said that “Christian soteriology has basically a narrative structure.”<sup>71</sup> Within this narrative, the Creator Spirit works continuously to redeem the world through presence, accompaniment, and continual care. Salvation is not a matter of a dramatic rescue mission, however much we might want one. Indeed, when we glimpse salvation or redemption it is often fragmentary, contingent, and incomplete.

Johnson’s work retrieves resources from the Bible and the tradition to remind readers of the “great biblical theme of cosmic redemption” which “flew by in silence” in the wake of the

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<sup>69</sup> Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, xi.

<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 106.

<sup>71</sup> Johnson, “Jesus and Salvation,” 7.

anthropocentric conception of salvation.<sup>72</sup> Such anthropocentrism causes human beings to forget that

the human connection to nature is so deep that we can no longer completely define human identity without including the great sweep of cosmic development and our shared biological ancestry with all organisms in the community of life. We evolved relationally; we exist symbiotically; our existence depends on interaction with the rest of the natural world. . . . The flesh that the Word of God became as a human being is part of the vast body of the cosmos.<sup>73</sup>

Therefore the whole creation is included in a “deep incarnation” and, she argues, deep resurrection.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, “biologically speaking, new life continuously comes from death, over time. Theologically speaking, the cross gives grounds to hope that the presence of the living God in the midst of pain bears creation forward with an unimaginable promise.”<sup>75</sup> The hope of the resurrection, as with the truth of the incarnation, implicates more than just Jesus, and even more than just human beings: God’s accompaniment extends to all creatures, in and through their suffering. Johnson writes,

The early church axiom that ‘what is not assumed is not redeemed’ carried the insight that it is essential for the divine self-embodiment in Jesus Christ to encompass all that belongs to the creaturely human condition, or else it is not saved. Deep incarnation extends this view to include all flesh. In the incarnation Jesus, the self-expressing Wisdom of God, conjoined the material conditions of all biological life forms (grasses and trees), and experienced the pain common to sensitive creatures (sparrows and seals). The flesh assumed in Jesus Christ connects with all humanity, all biological life, all soil, the whole matrix of the material universe down to its very roots.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 195-196.

<sup>74</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 207ff.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 210.

<sup>76</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 196.

I will return in a later chapter to Johnson's rich discussion of deep incarnation and resurrection as it relates to both human and nonhuman creatures, as well as her work on the doctrine of God and the difference it might make for notions of deification.

Sallie McFague

I will spend the most time on Sallie McFague's soteriology because she explicitly discusses salvation as deification at length. McFague is known for her basic metaphor of the world as the body of God. She states from her earliest work that all theology is metaphorical; that is, our speech about God reflects not Godself but our relationship to and view of God.<sup>77</sup> When we change our language about God we change our view of that relationship, and in so doing, we change the models according to which we act in the world.<sup>78</sup> Models are those imagined structures in which we live, and the reason we live in one model rather than another

is finally a belief or wager that reality is like this more than it is like that. And if enough of us were so to live, reality would *become* more like we believe. That is not a vicious cycle, but a hope against hope. We can create reality—in fact, we do so all the time with the constructs we embrace unknowingly. We can also create reality knowingly—and humanely—by living within models that we wager are true as good for human beings and other forms of life.<sup>79</sup>

Moreover, she acknowledges that a metaphor for God never captures the reality of God:

we are dealing here with a model or metaphor, not a description: the universe as God's body is a rich, suggestive way to radicalize the glory, the awesomeness, the beyond-all-

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<sup>77</sup> See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), and McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (London, SCM Press, Ltd., 1987).

<sup>78</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 91

<sup>79</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 91



imagining power and mystery of God in a way that at the same time radicalizes the nearness, the availability, the physicality of divine immanence.<sup>80</sup>

In this context, reflecting on Exodus 33:23, she notes that “God’s transcendence is embodied. The important word here is ‘embodied’: the transcendence of God is not available to us except as embodied. We do not see God’s face, but only the back. But we *do* see the back.”<sup>81</sup>

McFague rejects deistic and monarchical models of God that have been present in so much of Western theological thinking. In their place she proposes an organic model, acknowledging that such a model was once extant in the church but that it took a much more hierarchical form. In its older form, the organic model was “expressed in the phrase ‘the church as the body of Christ,’” which was used as an exclusive proposition: it referred to human beings, and specifically to Christians. McFague notes that some, such as Origen, “speak of the world as a body filled with and ordered by the Logos in a manner similar to the Platonic World-Soul.”<sup>82</sup> Thus the older model is influenced by Platonism, complete with the dualism of this worldview that other ecofeminists have also critiqued. This classical organic model is unsustainable for today because:

Two issues are critical. First, in its primary form within Christianity, the church as the body of Christ, the model was spiritualized, excluding not only all of nature and most human beings but also the physical aspects of life, including sex and, therefore, women. Second, in its assumption that body meant *one* body, the human (and implicitly male) body, it was deeply conservative.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 133

<sup>81</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 133.

<sup>82</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 32.

<sup>83</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 35.

A more adequate model thus needs to be less imperialistic and more wide-ranging in its imagination of the body.

The organic model McFague proposes in place of the monarchical model and the older organic model is that of the universe as the Body of God. This model, she says, is the best fit for our understanding of the “new universe story” and “postmodern science” that provides the most accurate way of understanding how the universe came to be. She asks:

But what if the organic model did *not* assume a human (male or female) body for its base, but *bodies*, all the diverse, strange, multitude of bodies... that make up the universe? What if we changed our perspective from its narrow focus on the one, ideal, human (male) body as the base of the model to a cosmic focus, so that what came to mind when we thought of body was bodies—in other words, not sameness, but *difference*?<sup>84</sup>

In the model of the world as God’s body, God is immanent in the world in the way that a spirit (not mind) is immanent in a body.<sup>85</sup> McFague calls this an “organic-agential model,” which combines an organic model with the agential model, a model of God as an agent “whose intentions and purposes are realized in history.”<sup>86</sup> The downside of the agential model alone is that God is too often interpreted as merely the mind or intellect controlling what goes on in the world. God’s “body,” in such a view, would be a mere machine that obeys the sovereign will of God. McFague’s use of Spirit rather than Mind to describe the way God acts in the body “suggests... that God is not primarily the orderer and controller of the universe but its source and empowerment, the breath that enlivens and energizes it.”<sup>87</sup> This model is more in line with a

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<sup>84</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 37.

<sup>85</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 144.

<sup>86</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 139.

<sup>87</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 145.

panentheistic view, in which God is truly embodied and intimately present in the universe, though the universe does not contain or exhaust God. The panentheistic view is also shared by Ruether and Johnson.

In this model or metaphor, the body of God comprises all particular bodies, not just human bodies but all bodies. In this model the role of Christ is paradigmatic but not exclusive: the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth reveal the specifically Christic shape of God's body as compassion and healing. The biblical account of Jesus' life and death show Jesus of Nazareth's ministry as containing deconstructive, reconstructive, and prospective dimensions or phrases. Deconstruction is shown in Jesus' parables as a critique of the world as it is. Reconstruction is present in his healing ministry, which focuses specifically on bodily healing and offers a healing-focused paradigm for salvation. As McFague writes,

Bodies *count*, claims the healing ministry of Jesus, in the eyes of God. This perspective. . . suggests that redemption should be enlarged to salvation: redemption means to 'buy back' or 'repay' through, for instance, a sacrifice, whereas salvation means healing or preserving from destruction.... The healing metaphor for salvation is a modest claim. It does not suggest ecstatic fulfillment of all desires but rather preservation from destruction or, at most, the restoration to adequate bodily functioning.<sup>88</sup>

The prospective phase is eating with sinners, which points to a future of radical inclusion.<sup>89</sup> The resurrection of the body further emphasizes the importance of bodies.<sup>90</sup> Thus the Christic "shape" of the body of God is healing and inclusive.

Like Johnson, McFague offers a "deep" view of the incarnation: "We will suggest that the primary belief of the Christian community, its doctrine of the incarnation (the belief that God

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<sup>88</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 168.

<sup>89</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 168.

<sup>90</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 174.

is with us here on earth), be radicalized beyond Jesus of Nazareth to include all matter.”<sup>91</sup> In understanding reality in this way we are able to model our own lives and communities according to the model suggested by but not found exclusively in Christ’s ministry of healing and inclusion. Particular bodies, then, not just the overarching body of God, matter in this understanding. In the biblical narratives Christ does not heal in general, but rather heals the specific maladies of particular bodies: blindness, hemorrhage, leprosy. This is paradigmatic for Christian life and for our understanding of God.

The understanding of the world as God’s body reframes notions of sin and salvation. For McFague, we only understand the meaning of sin when we understand the meaning of salvation,<sup>92</sup> so we will begin with her description of salvation as “living appropriately on our planet, living as the one creature who can consciously help bring about God’s beloved community.”<sup>93</sup> Elsewhere she states that “Salvation, the good life, in the new paradigm means first of all the basic, physical needs of the earth’s creatures.”<sup>94</sup> McFague writes explicitly about salvation as deification:

There are several characteristics of deification as an interpretation of authentic human living that help to flesh out what is meant by the term.... It is not meant to be taken literally; it does not mean that we will all become little ‘gods’ and lose our humanity. Rather, the central insight was to stress continuity between who God is and who we are: in both instances, the intention is to underscore that God and human beings are not individuals, objects, or entities, but persons, subjects, and processes.... salvation is

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<sup>91</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, xi.

<sup>92</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 21.

<sup>93</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 21.

<sup>94</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 201

deification in the sense that to be fully human is to grow into what we were created to be—the image or reflection of God.<sup>95</sup>

McFague highlights the benefits of this understanding of salvation as acknowledging the fundamental kinship between the divine and the “world” (panentheism) and as overcoming atonement theory’s focus on the fate of the individual. For McFague, deification is a conversion to live a godlike life; a way of being in the world that is turned outward to the other members of God’s body and their needs:

the basic criterion of deification: if one wants to know whether one is becoming like God, look to the neighbor.... Deification, it appears, is not mystical ascent to another world. Rather, at least according to the saints, it is just the opposite, attending to others here on planet Earth.... Deification is also *empathy* for others.... Deification, then, is principally loving the neighbor, is the worldly, secular, mundane process of *knowing* the beloved others and *feeling* with them their pain and joy.<sup>96</sup>

McFague uses the example of “saints” as those who have become deified—not as examples of personal redemption from the corruption of the world, but as examples of conversion *to* the world.

McFague’s audience, which is well-off North American Christians, should “understand deification in terms of cruciform living. The abundant life for us must be conducted with a very sharp eye to the way consumerism... is both devastating the natural world and creating great inequities between the poor and the wealthy.”<sup>97</sup> Taking up one’s cross in a consumeristic and ecologically unsustainable society means personal discomfort and may entail more radical

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<sup>95</sup> McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis, MIN: Fortress Press, 2013), 200.

<sup>96</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 22

<sup>97</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 22

suffering. Yet suffering is not redemptive in itself; it is instead, like Jesus' death on the cross, "the inevitable result... of siding with the outcast and the vulnerable."<sup>98</sup>

If the abundant life of salvation means living in such a way that the whole earth may flourish as God's body, sin must be defined in contrast to this. Ecological sin has made earth "the new poor."<sup>99</sup>

While the deification view may at first glance appear to take sin and evil less seriously than the atonement view, it actually takes them more seriously. It views them not simply as individual failings for which human beings need forgiveness, but rather as all the forces—individual, systemic, institutional—that thwart the flourishing of God's creation.<sup>100</sup>

Sin in an ecological worldview takes on many of the characteristics of older notions of sin: failing to live within our limits, ignoring the truth of who we are, selfishness, pride. But it takes on a deeper dimension because of its acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of sin and suffering, not for the individual sinner, but for other members of the earth community. Sin thwarts the ability of all creatures to live abundantly.

Saints, those humans who exhibit the process of deification, are exemplars of a Christomorphic, theomorphic way of life:

the point of Christianity from a deification point of view is not personal redemption but a [sic] 'a conversion to the struggle for justice.' It means becoming 'conformed to Christ' since he is, for Christians, the lens by which we know God. If, however, the goal of creation is God's glory—every creature fully alive—then becoming christomorphic will involve very mundane work.... Deification, becoming like God or following Christ, means, then, becoming involved in such matters as ecological economics, the just distribution of resources on a sustainable basis. Deification, becoming more like the incarnate God, means making the body of God healthier and more fulfilled. Salvation is

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<sup>98</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 178.

<sup>99</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 165

<sup>100</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 185-186.

worldly work. Human existence ‘in the Spirit’ means working ‘in the body’ so that it may flourish.<sup>101</sup>

The way of deification is one of kenosis, in which human beings self-empty in order to attain to what McFague calls a “universal self”. In *Blessed Are the Consumers*, McFague describes the lives of three such “saints” (John Woolman, Dorothy Day, and Simone Weil) as a fourfold “conversion from belief to action” involving “1. Experiences of ‘voluntary poverty,’” “2. The focus of one’s attention on the needs of others,” “3. The gradual development of a ‘universal self,’” and a fourth step in which “4. The new model of the universal self operates at both the personal and public levels.”<sup>102</sup> McFague describes the universal self as a gradual process of shedding boundaries between self and other until “the world is your body”: another description of deification, since it is also God’s body.<sup>103</sup> Empathy, or feeling-with, all creatures, human and non-human, is part of this process of transformation.

What I find lacking in McFague’s appropriation of deification is the fact that it seems to be a process unique to individuals or “saints.” Thus, while deification as salvation is not a self-serving means of escape from the world, it doesn’t seem to have any particular social import apart from that which derives secondarily from personal holiness. Thus she offers a rather “thin” picture of deification that seems synonymous with other concepts like following Christ, conversion to an ecological way of life, and loving one’s neighbor. While this is a concrete vision of becoming like God, it can be expressed in terms other than deification. Such holiness and deification manifest in the political and public lives of those she discusses, but there is in this

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<sup>101</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 186

<sup>102</sup> McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers*, xii-xiii.

<sup>103</sup> McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers*, 115.

description of ecological holiness no sense of communal action. Ironically, the ecological model of deification also ends up being not only individualized but anthropocentric; the term applies only to human beings. In her model, “We human beings are the one life-form that does not fulfill its role as being a bit in God’s grandeur simply by existing; rather, we, made in the image of God, must grow into the fullness of that reflection of God by willing to do so.”<sup>104</sup> This may help to explain why she focuses on deification as a human phenomenon: the rest of the world is already living authentically as the body of God and we simply need to do our part. Yet how, then, does redemption include all of creation, as McFague earlier argued it must?<sup>105</sup>

An additional problem is that the “universal self” is too far removed from its own social mediations. McFague is right to highlight the kenotic and ascetic requirements of a spirituality of deification; however, one does not simply transition from an overly individuated self to a “universal” self. We must see ourselves as situated in concrete relationships with the earth and with others, and these relationships include mediating institutions (churches, governments), identities (race, class, gender), and physical realities (our own particular ecological locations, embodied limitations, etc.). Indeed, the very idea of the “universal self” can well be critiqued by ecofeminist philosophers and by Ruether, who have pointed out the universalizing, totalizing tendency of patriarchal valuation to see everything as part of the self or at least as defined in relation to it. Other feminists might also well critique McFague for her emphasis on kenosis, a concept that has been a double edged sword for women: on the one hand it critiques a view of divinity that relies on sheer power, but on the other hand it commends those parts of Christian

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<sup>104</sup> McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers*, 195

<sup>105</sup> See McFague, “An Earthly Theological Agenda,” 87.



spirituality and religiosity that have overwhelmingly been made the responsibility of women: putting the needs of others before one's own. The only alternatives are not crass individualism and a spirituality of unification with all that is: both can be totalizing and leave out difference, as Plumwood and others have pointed out. McFague does remark on the importance of attention to difference, especially with regard to carrying out the work required for an ecological ethic.<sup>106</sup> Yet it is hard to see how developing a self with no boundaries can at the same time avoid universalization and spiritualities of unification.

Finally, McFague is too quick to place the doctrine of deification in binary opposition to all that she considers "bad" about the West: "This is a deification, not an atonement, understanding of salvation. It is an incarnation rather than a cross emphasis, a creation rather than a redemption focus, from the Eastern Christian tradition rather than the Western."<sup>107</sup> While it seems true, in general, that this trajectory in theology is, as she says, more about creation than redemption, the incarnation than the cross, that does not mean that Eastern deification theology is free from all the problems of Western atonement-focused theology—its elevation of rationality, its instrumental view of creation, its androcentrism and anthropocentrism. Nonetheless, despite the shortcomings I have listed here, McFague points toward something important for ecotheology: its kinship with a rather ancient strain of thought about salvation that points toward union with God as the ultimate goal of all creation.

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<sup>106</sup> McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers*, 131-132.

<sup>107</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 185

## Conclusion

Several key themes emerge in the foregoing exploration of three ecofeminist soteriologies. First, each at some point connects their reformulation of the meaning of salvation with Patristic and Eastern Christian sources, mentioning that there is something about deification soteriology that speaks to ecofeminist concerns. Second, each rejects a view of salvation as the annihilation of the current state of things by an omnipotent external force. They insist that saved creation retains its creatureliness, including bodies, sex, and death. Third, not only McFague but Johnson and Ruether each “de-center and re-center”<sup>108</sup> Jesus the Christ as the bringer of salvation through his life, death, and resurrection. Deep incarnation, as expressed especially by McFague and Johnson, recontextualizes the uniqueness of Jesus but also gives a profound meaning to the (deep) resurrection as pointing toward newness of embodied life for the whole earth community.

Ecofeminism, then, stresses the “this-worldly” aspects of redemption that are about reclaiming original goodness and living in just and loving relationships with one another and with the world. The transformation of humanity from the image into the image and likeness of God thus involves dismantling sinful (patriarchal) structures and overcoming relationships of domination. Transformation does not need to go beyond this—human finitude remains even as sin is overcome. Yet is “original goodness” synonymous with the redeemed life, or, as Irenaeus and others claim, does God create human beings for a fuller union with God than they had “in the beginning”? If, as Irenaeus tells us, Adam was as a child whose task to grow into union with God was thwarted by sin, then salvation means more than the overcoming of sin: it means growing into that union. Deification as a step *beyond* redemption from sin, then, is not fully

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<sup>108</sup> McFague, “An Earthly Theological Agenda,” 94.

present in much ecofeminist writing. The next chapter will focus on the doctrine/theme of deification as one possible expression of this “more than” and its implications for ecological theology.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR'S THEOLOGY OF DEIFICATION

#### **Deification**

This chapter turns to consider the doctrine, theme, or motif of deification (*theosis*), focusing primarily on its possible contributions to ecotheology. As I will argue, deification reframes salvation in a way that encompasses the whole created order. Rather than being merely the stage for a human drama, all of creation becomes drawn into the life of God through human transformation. This doctrine offers a soteriology that takes seriously the destiny of the entire created world.

Deification, or *theosis*; that is, union with God or becoming god, was central to the thought of the Greek Fathers as a way of speaking about the ultimate destiny of human beings.<sup>1</sup> The theme is prevalent in the writings of the Fathers, though not always explained or elaborated

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<sup>1</sup> On deification, see, among others: Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, eds., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2006); Vladimir Kharlamov, ed., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2012); M. David Litwa, *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul's Soteriology* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2012); Litwa, *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013); Georgios Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984); David Vincent Meconi and Carl E. Olsen, eds., *Called to be Children of God: The Catholic Theology of Human Deification* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016); Jared Ortiz, ed., *Deification in the Latin Patristic Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019); Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Daria E. Spezzani, *The Glory of God's Grace: Deification According to St. Thomas Aquinas* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2015).

with the same precision: “the same truth which was originally expressed in metaphorical language came in the early Byzantine period to be expressed conceptually and dogmatically.”<sup>2</sup> The classical formulations of the doctrine itself are in Irenaeus and Athanasius. Irenaeus wrote that Christ “did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is Himself.”<sup>3</sup> Athanasius, likewise, wrote, “He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.”<sup>4</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius defined deification as “the attaining of likeness to God and to union with him so far as is possible.”<sup>5</sup> The doctrine was developed into a highly complex metaphysical system by Origen, and retained in the work of the Cappadocians.<sup>6</sup> It attained arguably its most developed form in the work of Maximus the Confessor. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Orthodox theologians have revisited this classical doctrine, and from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to today, Western theologians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have followed suit. This chapter will give particular attention to the contribution of Maximus and his treatment of deification.

Part of the renewed interest in deification soteriology, at least from Western theologians, is an attempt to expand the meaning of salvation beyond the more typically modern, Western notions of salvation as merely salvation *from sin*. Salvation as deification encompasses the whole

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<sup>2</sup> Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5, Preface.

<sup>4</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. a religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 8.54.

<sup>5</sup> Ps-Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies* 1.3, PG 3.376 A, quoted in Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough review of the history of the doctrine see Russell.

story of God's relationship with human beings, and indeed with the cosmos, from creation through eschatology, to the time in which human beings will become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). This broader story is a helpful corrective to the narrower story of fall and atonement. Vladimir Lossky writes that Christ's work "is seen primarily by fallen humanity in its most immediate aspect, as the work of salvation, the redemption of a world captive to sin and death. Fascinated by the *felix culpa*, we often forget that in breaking the tyranny of sin, our Saviour opens to us anew the way of deification, which is the final end of man."<sup>7</sup> Andrew Louth expresses this well:

Deification is the fulfillment of creation, not just the rectification of the Fall. One way of putting this is to think in terms of an arch stretching from creation to deification, representing what is and remains God's intention: the creation of the cosmos that, through humankind, is destined to share in the divine life, to be deified.... There is, then, what one might think of as a lesser arch, leading from Fall to redemption, the purpose of which is to restore the function of the greater arch, from creation to deification. The loss of the notion of deification leads to lack of awareness of the greater arch from creation to deification, and thereby to concentration on the lower arch... it is, I think, not unfair to suggest that such a concentration on the lesser arch at the expense of the greater arch has been a characteristic of much Western theology.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the process of human salvation takes place within a context of divinization: having through sin lost the likeness (but not the image) of God, humanity, renewed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, undergoes a spiritual and ethical ascent through participation in Christ through the Church back into likeness to God as far as possible. In their own way, though not in essence, they become God: as Maximus puts it, "the whole man wholly pervading the whole God, and becoming everything that God is, without, however, identity in essence, and receiving the whole

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<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (1944; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 134.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Louth, "The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology," in Christensen and Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 34-35.

of God instead of himself, and obtaining as a kind of prize for his ascent to God the absolutely unique God.”<sup>9</sup> Notions of deification, then, are dependent upon one’s doctrine of God.

At first glance this doctrine—becoming God—might seem hubristic to those steeped in Western theologies of salvation and might sound unhelpful for a time of ecological crisis. After all, is it not part of the problem that humans have “played God,” in the monarchical sense of God as one who exerts ultimate control, with the natural world? Yet the cosmology undergirding these theories of deification is one in which both God and human beings are deeply implicated in the life of all creatures, and vice versa. In the work of Maximus the Confessor, human beings are microcosms of creation, the nexus at which the vast diversity of the universe is united in a single point. Christ’s incarnation, in this vision, enables us to once again bring together the disparate elements of the universe and draw all toward God.

### **Maximus the Confessor**

Maximus the Confessor was born in 580. He was a monk who lived variously in Palestine, North Africa, and eventually Rome. The particular details of his life are difficult to ascertain due to the contradictory *Lives* written about him. There are three Greek *Lives* of Maximus which are hagiographical in nature, and an earlier, Syriac *Life* which is a polemic against him. Scholars weigh these two traditions variously, but the Syriac account has begun to be taken more seriously in recent decades.<sup>10</sup> According to the Greek accounts Maximus was

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<sup>9</sup> Maximus, *Ambiguum 41*, in Constas, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, 2:1308B. Quotations from *Amb. 41* are from Constas’ translation unless otherwise noted.

<sup>10</sup> Much of this biographical material is drawn from Pauline Allen, “Life and Times of Maximus the Confessor,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, ed. Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Jankowiak and Booth prefer the Syriac *Life*; see Marek Jankowiak and Phil Booth, “A New Date-List of the Works of Maximus the Confessor,” in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 19-20.

from Constantinople and served in the imperial court before becoming a monk later in life. In contrast, the Syriac account claims that he was born in Palestine and entered the monastery in the 610s. Maximus probably first went to North Africa by 632, at a time when the Byzantine Empire was undergoing a series of invasions. He went back to Palestine around 634. During this period he began to speak out against monoenergism, the teaching that Christ had only one “activity” or “operation,” and its successor monothelitism, the doctrine that Christ had only one will. These positions were upheld by successive Byzantine emperors in an attempt to broker compromise between Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian factions within the church; monoenergism and monothelitism were in many ways outgrowths of the difficulty some had with accepting the two natures of Christ, transposing the debate on natures into a different domain of energies or wills. “To the Confessor and others, Byzantine military defeats were directly caused by the monoenergist and monothelite policies of Emperors Heraclius and Constans II.”<sup>11</sup> In 636 the teachings of Maximus and his associates against monothelitism were condemned at the Council of Cyprus. Maximus returned to North Africa by 641, and in 646 he went to Rome, where he was involved in the Lateran Synod. The church in the East did not consider this synod an ecumenical one, and “[b]ecause of its anathematization of three patriarchs of Constantinople... the Lateran Synod encountered a very angry reception in the eastern capital which culminated in the arrest of the synod's proponents, Pope Martin, Maximus, and his disciples, and their subsequent trials, exiles, and deaths.”<sup>12</sup> Maximus’ tongue and right hand were cut off, and he died in exile in 662 in what is now Georgia. Because of his role in the monothelite controversy and the Lateran

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<sup>11</sup> Allen, “Life and Times,” in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, 7.



Synod, Maximus is an important figure bridging Eastern and Western Christianity, and recent interest in his life and work reflects this influence.<sup>13</sup>

His earlier writings (prior to 636) show that Maximus was a respected expert in the monastic life; he had correspondence with many important people, and fellow monks wrote to him for his wisdom in discerning difficult texts, whence some of his most important works: the *Ambigua to John*, most likely written sometime between 628 and 633, explicate difficult passages in Gregory of Nazianzus, while *Responses to Thalassios*, probably from before 634 but after the *Ambigua to John*, are on difficult Biblical passages.<sup>14</sup>

Maximus was steeped in the language and themes of deification, but his expression of this theme is one of the fullest. In refuting certain extreme Origenist positions, Maximus provides an alternative reading of deification to that of Origen's intellectual heirs. In this he is also heavily influenced by the Cappadocians, on whom much of his commentary is written. In the *Ambigua*, for instance, he is often providing a counter-Origenist reading of the work of Gregory of Nazianzus. Maximus' clearest expositions of the theme or doctrine of deification appear in the *Ambigua to John*, especially 7 and 41, and in his *Commentary on the Our Father*

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<sup>13</sup> For studies on Maximus see, among others: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003); Paul M. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Adam Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jean-Claude Larchet, *La Divinisation de l'Homme Selon Saint Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1996); Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996), Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1995); Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Maximus, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios*, trans. Maximos Constas (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018).

and *Mystagogia*. All of these were written before 636; after this Maximus' writings are largely devoted to defending the doctrine of Christ's two wills (dyothelitism) and thus discuss deification much less. They are also less systematic; while Maximus was always an occasional writer, his later writings are even more intensely focused on this central issue. However, this is not to say that his earlier and later work are unconnected, as Maximus' doctrine of deification relies on his Christology in which the divine and human natures and wills are united but not confused.<sup>15</sup> I will examine each of the key texts in turn and will then discuss the implications for ecotheology of Maximus' theology of deification.

#### Theological Anthropology: *Ambiguum* 7

*Ambiguum* 7, on a sermon of Gregory of Nazianzus, is where Maximus most fully lays out his theological anthropology. The issue, or *ambiguum*, at hand is whether the creation of human beings was itself a fall away from perfect participation or rest (*stasis*) in God, as it seems the text of Nazianzus could be interpreted in this way. Nazianzus wrote, "What is this great mystery? Or is it God's will that we, who are a portion of God that has flowed down from above, not become exalted and lifted up on account of this dignity, and so despise our Creator? Or is it not rather that, in our struggle and battle with the body, we should always look to Him, so that this very weakness that has been yoked to us might be an education concerning our dignity?"<sup>16</sup> Maximus is interested in explaining what Gregory might mean by "a portion of God...flowed down from above," and in addressing what Adam Cooper calls "an old question... concerning

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<sup>15</sup> On the close relationship between Maximus' Christology and his cosmology, see, for instance, Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 49; Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of Maximus the Confessor*, especially "The Concept of Participation."

<sup>16</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratio 14.7, PG 35.865C, quoted in Maximus, *Amb.* 7, 1068D-1069A.

the purpose of the body and especially physical suffering in God's plan for human life."<sup>17</sup> At stake, then, is the question of whether the ultimate purpose of human life is to return to a disembodied state of perfection that we already once had and lost. If that is what deification is, surely it has no place in an ecologically sound theology. Yet this is precisely what Maximus argues against in the text.

Maximus' presentation of the origin and purpose of fragile and suffering human life stands in contrast to an Origenist reading of creation. In Origen's *On First Principles*, and subsequently in the work of his followers, the creation of the present world follows a prior state of existence in which rational beings (*logikoi*), characterized by unity, equality, and nondifferentiation, were already united with God and at rest (*stasis*). However, possessing free will, they eventually became "satiated from sharing the life of God"<sup>18</sup> and thus turned away from unity and stability toward diversity and movement. If we envision this turning away from God as a fall, the present created world "catches" the *logikoi* to keep them from falling completely into nonbeing and subsequently serves a pedagogical role in their ultimate return to being at rest with God.<sup>19</sup> Origen approached this theory of a first and second creation in a somewhat tentative and speculative manner; however, it became dogma for some of his later followers.<sup>20</sup> Origenists thus

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<sup>17</sup> Adam Cooper, "Spiritual Anthropology in *Ambiguum 7*," in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 360.

<sup>18</sup> Andreas Andreopoulos, "Eschatology in Maximus the Confessor," in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 328.

<sup>19</sup> Andreopoulos, "Eschatology," in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 327.

<sup>20</sup> Pascal Mueller-Jourdain, "The Foundations of Origenist Metaphysics," in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 151; see also 158.

conceived of the world as coming into being in a triad of *stasis-kinesis-genesis*, or rest-movement-creation.

Maximus, in contrast, argues for a different triad: *genesis-kinesis-stasis*. He makes the case that movement (*kinesis*), is not a bad thing indicating fallenness from a previous union with God:

For it belongs to God alone to be the end, and the completion, and the impassible, since He is unmoved, complete, and not subject to passion. It belongs to beings, on the other hand, to be moved toward that end that has no beginning, and to cease from their activity in that perfect end which is devoid of all quantity, and passively to experience the Unqualified, without being or becoming it in essence, for everything which has come to be and is created is clearly not absolute.<sup>21</sup>

Motion, here, “denotes not the physical locomotion of objects in space but a logical relationship on a spiritual level; it represents the highest form of causation, the mode by which spiritual entities exercise their causal function, and by which effects return to their causes.”<sup>22</sup> Thus movement is primarily what draws human beings toward, not away from, God. Maximus here also emphasizes that *stasis* belongs to God alone, and that even deified persons do not share in God’s unique essence.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Amb.* 7, 1073B.

<sup>22</sup> Constatas, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, 1:478, n. 2.

<sup>23</sup> This discussion reflects the Eastern Christian distinction between the essence and energies of God. The energies are the uncreated activities of God *ad extra*. Jean-Claude Larchet notes that “the notion of the divine energies distinct from God’s essence is present in Maximus’ great predecessors like Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea or Dionysius the Areopagite. But Maximus gives this notion a remarkable development in recognizing the full place it merits in the framework of divinization, while purging it of all Neoplatonic emanationist and theurgic connotations, as he sees that it is always the three divine Persons who manifest the energies of the essence common to them, and that the divinized faithful person receives and is penetrated and transformed by them in the context of a personal relationship with God.” Larchet, *La Divinisation de l’Homme*, 684, translation mine.

With this reversal, Maximus addresses several problems with the Origenist view: first, the idea that one could ever be satiated by God's presence; second, a negative view of the material cosmos and its diverse, differentiated beings; and third, an anthropology that separates the creation of human beings into two stages (first as rational creatures, and then as properly human beings). For Origen, the goal toward which rational beings are moving is identical to the state they have left. He states this as a general principle:

For the end is always like the beginning, as therefore there is one end of all things, so we must understand that there is one beginning of all things, and there is one end of many things, so from one beginning arise many differences and varieties, which in their turn are restored, through God's goodness, through their subjection to Christ and their unity with the Holy Spirit, to one end, which is like the beginning.<sup>24</sup>

Pascal Mueller-Jourdain asserts that this understanding of humanity's trajectory away from and back toward God would have been common in Maximus' time and place, and that Maximus himself "inherited the general cosmic vision of all realities introduced by the original inquiry of *On First Principles*" but "effected a radical and orthodox reconfiguration of Origen's metaphysics."<sup>25</sup> For Maximus, in contrast to the Origenists, the end cannot be identical with the beginning. For one thing, it would then be possible, in principle, for rational beings to once again become satiated and initiate the entire process over again. According to Andreas Andreopoulos,

What solves the problem for Maximus is that the final condition of rest, as he understands it, is not the same as the first rest, but it includes and accommodates continuous movement... it is... a permanent condition, where it is possible to move only toward God, and not away. The brilliant paradoxical expression, "ever-moving rest," describes

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<sup>24</sup> Origen, *Princ.* 1.6.2, quoted in Mueller-Jourdain, "Origenist Metaphysics," in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 153.

<sup>25</sup> Mueller-Jourdain, "Origenist Metaphysics," in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 149. For more on the concept of "ever-moving rest" see Sotiris Mitralaxis, *Ever-Moving Repose: A Contemporary Reading of Maximus the Confessor's Theory of Time* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

precisely this dynamic permanence which allows the creature to continue their movement towards the infinity of God, without ever exhausting it.<sup>26</sup>

Although Origen's first and final rests include a sort of movement—perpetual progress in the love and knowledge of God<sup>27</sup>—they are not secure or permanent. In another key difference from Origen's final rest, for Maximus

the final rest is not leading to a disembodied, abstract realm, but it includes created nature. Likewise, the eternal movement towards God involves the entire human being—not just soul or body, but the human being as the union of the two—Maximus emphasizes at the end of the *Ambiguum* that the soul and body are created simultaneously and cannot be divided. The anthropology of Maximus, which is strongly non-dualist, is not annulled by his eschatology.<sup>28</sup>

In Origenist mythology, bodily being and the rest of created nature are not necessarily taken up eschatologically:

In this survey [of the created order, within *On First Principles*], Origen leaves aside the case of other living beings such as 'dumb animals and birds and creatures that live in water, it seems superfluous '[for him] to inquire about them, since it is certain that they should be regarded as of contingent and not primary importance.'<sup>29</sup>

To sum up, then, rest in and union with God is not a pre-existing state that human beings need to get back to after a temporary, regrettable sojourn in the world. Rather, God creates human beings within that world *in order that* they might be united with God.

What, then, might Gregory of Nazianzus mean when he writes that we are “a portion of God... flowed down from above”? Having excluded the possibility of a primordial unity of rational beings before the foundation of the world, Maximus offers his own explanation.

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<sup>26</sup> Andreopoulos, “Eschatology,” in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 328.

<sup>27</sup> Mueller-Jourdain, “Origenist Metaphysics,” in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 161.

<sup>28</sup> Andreopoulos, “Eschatology,” in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 328.

<sup>29</sup> Mueller-Jourdain, “Origenist Metaphysics,” in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 153 n.2, quoting *Princ.* 2.9.3.

He is a ‘portion of God,’ then, insofar as he exists, for he owes his existence to the logos of being that is in God; and he is a ‘portion of God’ insofar as he is good, for he owes his goodness to the logos of well-being that is in God; and he is a ‘portion of God’ insofar as he is God, owing to the logos of his eternal being that is in God.<sup>30</sup>

Human participation in God, then, is threefold: through our existence in and from God, our goodness in and from God, and our Godhood or deification in and from God. This is a further Maximian triad: that of being, well-being, and eternal well-being. This triad represents the human being’s path from creation to deification, which Maximus elaborates upon further:

In honoring these *logoi* and acting in accordance with them, he places himself wholly in God alone, forming and configuring God alone throughout his entire being, so that he himself by grace is and is called God, just as God by His condescension is and is called man for the sake of man, and also so that the power of this reciprocal disposition might be shown forth herein, a power that divinizes man through his love for God, and humanizes God through His love for man. And by this beautiful exchange, it renders God man by reason of the divinization of man, and man God by reason of the Incarnation of God. For the Logos of God (who is God) wills always and in all things to accomplish the mystery of His embodiment.<sup>31</sup>

Deification is made possible through the Incarnation, here portrayed as not a one-time event but as a pervasive force in God’s action in the world.

Maximus’ notion of the *logoi* and their participation in the Logos merits further comment.<sup>32</sup> *Logoi*, a difficult term to translate, means something like God’s ideas of created beings, or blueprints according to which everything has been created. Most writers in English leave it untranslated since, as Louth notes, the word *logos* “can be translated... ‘word,’ ‘reason,’

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<sup>30</sup> *Amb.* 7, 1084B-1084C

<sup>31</sup> *Amb.* 7, 1084C-1084D.

<sup>32</sup> On the *logoi*, see Jordan Daniel Wood, “Creation is Incarnation: The Metaphysical Peculiarity of the Logoi in Maximus Confessor,” *Modern Theology* 34, no. 1 (January 2018): 82-102, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12382>; “The Logos, the logoi, and Created Beings” in Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor*; “Maximus’ ‘Logical’ Ontology: The λόγοι of Beings,” in Mitralaxis, *Ever-Moving Repose*.

‘principle,’ ‘meaning;’ but this fragments the connotation of the Greek word, which holds all these meanings together.”<sup>33</sup> The Logos, the one Word of God, recapitulates or sums up all of these *logoi* within himself, and in turn can be partly known through these *logoi*:

Who... would not, I ask, fail to know the one Logos as many *logoi*, indivisibly distinguished amid the differences of created things, owing to their specific individuality, which remains unconfused both in themselves and with respect to one another? Moreover, would he not also know that the many *logoi* are one Logos, seeing that all things are related to Him without being confused with Him, who is the essential and personally distinct Logos of God the Father, the origin and cause of all things, *in whom all things were created*...<sup>34</sup>

The *logoi*’s preexistence does not mean that created beings have no free will. Rather, Maximus makes a distinction between *logoi* and *tropoi*, with a *tropos* being the “mode” in which one exists—a pattern of motion towards or away from God. In the Fall, Adam and Eve initiated a *tropos* away from God that, due to the interdependence of all created things, ultimately affects the tendencies of other created beings. This, says Maximus, explains what Gregory means by “slipped down from above”: that human beings chose motion towards created things rather than towards God. Only in Christ is the movement toward God definitively restored.

The movement from being to eternal well-being involves the virtuous life:

...anyone who through fixed habit participates in virtue, unquestionably participates in God, who is the substance of the virtues.... In this he is a genuine advocate of God, since the goal of each thing is believed to be its beginning and end, for it is from the beginning that he received being and participation in what is naturally good, and it is by conforming to this beginning through the inclination of his will and by free choice, that he hastens to the end, diligently adhering to the praiseworthy course that conducts him unerringly to his point of origin. Having completed his course, such a person becomes God, receiving from God to be God, for to the beautiful nature inherent in the fact that he is God’s

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<sup>33</sup> Louth, “The Cosmic Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 188.

<sup>34</sup> *Amb.* 7, 1077C.



image, he freely chooses to add the likeness to God by means of the virtues, in a natural movement of ascent through which he grows in conformity to his own beginning.<sup>35</sup>

This passage demonstrates the common, though not universal, Patristic distinction between the image and the likeness of God, a distinction drawn by Irenaeus and many others.<sup>36</sup> According to Maximus, human beings are created in the image and are meant to grow into the likeness through adhering to their *logoi* in their free acts of will.

How, then, does Maximus answer the original question about the role of the body?

It is as if Gregory were saying that God in His goodness made man as a union of soul and body, so that the soul which was given to him, being rational and intellectual—because it is the very *image* of its Creator—should, on the one hand, by means of its desire and the whole power of its total love, cling closely to God through knowledge, and, growing in *likeness to God*, be divinized; and, on the other hand, through its mindful care for what is lower, in accordance with the commandment to *love one's neighbor as oneself*, it should make prudent use of the body, with a view to ordering it to the mind through the virtues, and acquaint it with God as its fellow servant, itself mediating to the body the indwelling presence of its Creator, making God Himself—who bound together the body and the soul—the body's own unbreakable bond of immortality. The aim is that 'what God is to the soul, the soul might become to the body,' and that the Creator of all might be proven to be One, and through humanity might come to reside in all beings in a manner appropriate to each, so that the many, though separated from each other in nature, might be drawn together into a unity as they converge around the one human nature. When this happens, *God will be all things in everything...*<sup>37</sup>

Here we see a series of correspondences similar to those we will encounter in the *Mystagogy*.

The unity of soul and body in the human being images the indwelling of God in the human soul, so that God indwells the whole human person and, by extension, the cosmos. The body is a constitutive part of human beings, not an extra burden added onto them—there is no soul without

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<sup>35</sup> *Amb.* 7, 1081D-1084A.

<sup>36</sup> Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*, 97. See also Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 107 (regarding Irenaeus), 135 (regarding Clement of Alexandria).

<sup>37</sup> *Amb.* 7, 1092B-1092C.

the body, as they were created together and bound together by God. To be sure, there is, as in the *Mystagogy*, a definite hierarchy of soul over body. Yet Maximus argues that Gregory is explaining not the existence of bodies per se, but the existence of suffering: it is a pedagogical result of our turning away from the higher (God) as our goal and toward the created world instead. Because our freedom has been improperly used, the “good things of this earthly life”<sup>38</sup> cause us pain, at least in part, to turn us back toward God. Yet, against an Origenist reading of Gregory, Maximus asserts that “all things in everything” includes bodies.<sup>39</sup> We will return more to the role of the body below and in the next chapter.

Maximus’ presentation of the doctrine of the *logoi* and his use of the Biblical assertion that God will be all in all raises the question of whether he can be considered to be a panentheist. If, as we have seen Maximus claim, the many *logoi* are the one Logos, all things are created in God, and humans are a “portion of God,” this would seem to indicate an affirmative response, since the plain meaning of panentheism is “all in God.” At the same time, deification never entails becoming God “in essence;” that is, creation is always ontologically distinct from God. In panentheism, God permeates but is not exhausted by creation; God is both transcendent and immanent. Andrew Louth affirms that Maximus is panentheistic in this sense, especially in his doctrine of the *logoi*, while being careful to clarify that Maximus’ panentheism “differs... from some modern forms of panentheism in that there is no sense in which God may be said to be

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<sup>38</sup> *Amb.* 7, 1093A.

<sup>39</sup> Larchet notes that this insistence has a Christological and not merely an anti-Origenist basis because the nature assumed by Christ is a bodily nature; see Larchet, *La divinisation de l’homme*, 638-640.

affected by the cosmos itself.”<sup>40</sup> Maximus, in keeping with the Chalcedonian structure of his work, always maintains the gulf between the created and the uncreated, while at the same time asserting the hypostatic union of the two in Christ.

In brief, *Ambiguum 7* presents deification as the end goal of a dynamic process set in motion by a God who purposefully created a diversity of beings, including human beings, who, being simultaneously created of soul and body, image that diversity within themselves and are tasked with drawing the whole toward God. This is the theme explored further in *Ambiguum 41*.

#### Uniting What is Divided: *Ambiguum 41*

*Ambiguum 41*, commenting on a passage from an Epiphany sermon of Gregory of Nazianzus, contains a rich discussion of the process of deification and how the human being unites in itself the disparate parts of creation, or “divisions of being.” The relevant passage from Gregory reads, “The natures are innovated, and God becomes man.”<sup>41</sup> The sermon reflects on the seeming paradox of the Incarnation: “what could not be mixed has been mixed.”<sup>42</sup> *Ambiguum 41* lays out Maximus’ explanation for the re-making of human nature in Christ. The work begins by describing the divisions of being. Next, Maximus sets out how the purpose of human beings is to bring together all of these divisions. In a third step, he demonstrates how Christ in fact accomplished this mediation where human beings had failed. He then recapitulates the argument

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<sup>40</sup> Louth, “The Cosmic Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor,” in Clayton and Peacocke, *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, 184. See also Thomas Klibengajtis, “The World as God’s Body? Remarks on the Panentheistic Tradition Exemplified by Maximus the Confessor,” *Studies in Science and Theology* 11 (2007-2008): 113-130.

<sup>41</sup> St. Gregory the Theologian, Oration 39.13, trans. John Behr, supplementary handout, Master class on Maximus, Lumen Christi Institute, Chicago, IL, February 2020.

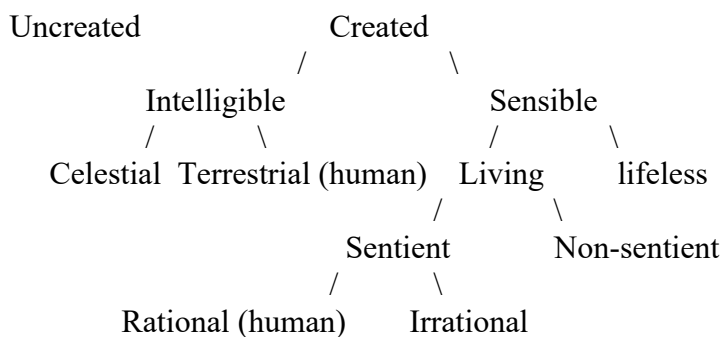
<sup>42</sup> St. Gregory the Theologian, Oration 39.13, trans. Behr.

twice, once as a more philosophical treatment of genera and species, following Pseudo-Dionysius, and once in more summary form. In what follows I will focus on the first three of these sections.

### The Divisions of Being

Maximus describes the human person as “a most capacious workshop containing all things, naturally mediating through himself all the divided extremes.”<sup>43</sup> “This is why man was introduced last among beings—like a kind of natural bond mediating between the universal extremes through his parts.”<sup>44</sup> What are these extremes?

Andrew Louth suggests that Maximus takes a then-well-known trope, that of divisions of being, and modifies it. Louth believes that Maximus has in mind Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote of five divisions of being. Most fundamental is the division between the created and the uncreated. The created world is divided into intelligible and sensible; the intelligible is divided into angels (celestial) and humans (terrestrial); the sensible is divided into living and lifeless, and the living is divided into sentient and non-sentient. Sentient beings are further subdivided into rational and irrational. Each division of the created world terminates in human beings.<sup>45</sup>

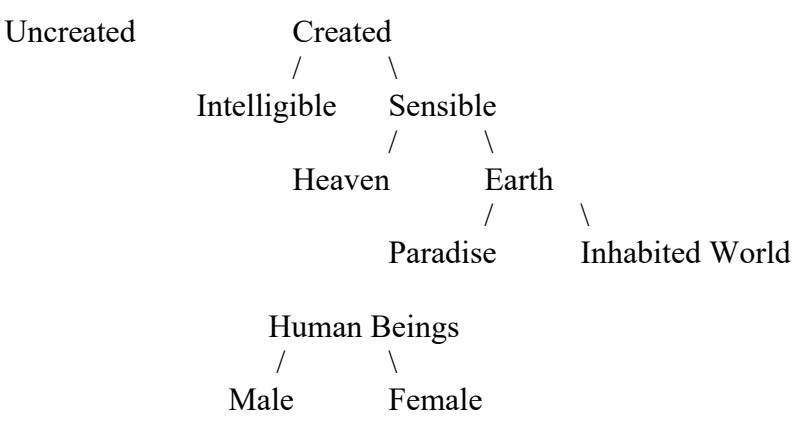


<sup>43</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305A.

<sup>44</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305B.

<sup>45</sup> Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 72.

In contrast, for Maximus the divisions are between uncreated and created, intelligible and sensible, heaven and earth, paradise and the inhabited world, and male and female.



Maximus’ schema is organized differently, more like a fractal structure or a Porphyrian tree, except for the last division, which does not proceed directly from the previous, since human beings are not subsets of the inhabited world but rather unify the whole tree.<sup>46</sup> This fits his purpose of illustrating how the process of deification consists in unifying each division and thus moving progressively toward God. In fact, the schema is so different that John Behr suggests that the model for Maximus’ divisions of being is not based on Gregory of Nyssa’s so much as it is based on his reading of the Gospels as demonstrated in *Ambiguum 41*. That is, the notion of divisions of being was taken from his cultural and intellectual milieu, but these divisions are filled out with attention to the Jesus Christ of scripture. According to Behr, Maximus’ understanding is that Christ, rather than being a “Plan B” after the fall, is the way in which God

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<sup>46</sup> Louth’s illustration of Maximus’ schema does position male and female as subsets of the inhabited world; see Louth, “The Cosmic Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor,” in Clayton and Peacocke, *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, 192.

always intends to fulfill the divine purpose in creating human beings.<sup>47</sup> We will see this in the section on Christ below.

### **The Human Task**

As we have already seen, the human being for Maximus is the workshop that gathers together all the divisions of being: “by making of his own division a beginning of the unity which gathers up all things to God their Author, and proceeding by order and rank through the mean terms, he might reach the limit of the sublime ascent that comes about through the union of all things in God, in whom there is no division.”<sup>48</sup> “His own division” begins with sexual difference, which is overcome through “a supremely dispassionate condition of divine virtue.”<sup>49</sup> What he means here is somewhat disputed, as we will see below [in chapter 4] in the discussion of Maximus and gender, but at the very least the human being is meant at this stage to become “solely a human being according to the divine plan,”<sup>50</sup> that is, “no longer male and female,” as in Galatians 3:28.

In a second step, “by his own proper holy way of life, man would have fashioned a single earth, not divided by him in the difference of its parts, but rather gathered together, for to none of its parts would he be subjected.”<sup>51</sup> Third, the human person unites heaven and earth by being like

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<sup>47</sup> Master class on Maximus and conversation with John Behr, Lumen Christi Institute, Chicago, IL, February 2020.

<sup>48</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305C.

<sup>49</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305C.

<sup>50</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305C.

<sup>51</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305D.

the angels through virtue, through which the intellect “would... hasten purely to God.”<sup>52</sup> If being equal to the angels in virtue completes this step, being equal to them in knowledge completes the next, which unites the sensible and the intelligible.

The final union is not one of knowledge or of nature but of love between the created and the uncreated—the first division of being. Maximus’ interjection here—“Oh, the wonder of God’s love for mankind!”<sup>53</sup>—suggests that it is God’s love, not humankind’s, that accomplishes this union (and indeed, the whole process of unification is presented as a gift of God). In this final consummation, Maximus describes “the whole man wholly pervading the whole God, and becoming everything that God is, without, however, identity in essence, and receiving the whole of God instead of himself, and obtaining as a kind of prize for his ascent to God the absolutely unique God.”<sup>54</sup> This union does not take place on “the level of being,” since the created can never be the uncreated, but on the level of grace.

The above ideal process is the purpose of human beings as mediators of creation.

However, humanity has made itself unable to fulfill this task because it has acted contrary to its nature:

moving naturally, as he was created to do, around the unmoved... was not what man did. Instead, contrary to nature, he willingly and foolishly moved around the things below him, which God had commanded him to have dominion over. In this way he misused his natural, God-given capacity to unite what is divided, and, to the contrary, divided what was united, and thus was in great danger of lamentably returning to nonbeing.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1308A.

<sup>53</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1308B.

<sup>54</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1308B. Louth has “the whole [creation] wholly interpenetrated by God.” Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*.

<sup>55</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1308 C.

We have already seen in *Ambiguum* 7 how created beings are meant to move toward their first cause but have adopted a *tropos* counter to their rational nature.

### **Christ Fulfills the Task**

Maximus' preceding discussions of the divisions of being and the human task lead to his exposition of the fulfillment of the purpose of human beings in the Incarnation. Having shown how humans had moved wrongly "around the things below," he writes that in contrast, "in a paradoxical way beyond nature that which is completely unmoved by nature is moved immovably around that which by nature is moved, and God becomes a human being, in order to save lost humanity."<sup>56</sup> The paradox Gregory of Nazianzus describes in his Oration is amplified here with even more language of paradox to highlight the contrast between the movement of human beings and the movement of God. The Incarnation completes creation by summing up, or recapitulating, everything that has come before, so that Christ's reversal of human movement not only draws humanity toward God but gathers the whole universe into its salvific embrace: "*He* [Christ] *recapitulated in Himself*, in a manner appropriate to God, *all things*, showing that the whole creation is one, as if it were another human being, completed by the mutual coming together of all its members."<sup>57</sup> We will see this correspondence of the human being as microcosm and the world as a human being again in the *Mystagogy*.

Maximus proceeds to recapitulate the union of the divisions of being accomplished by Christ through a Biblical and credal narration of his life, death, and resurrection: he unites male

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<sup>56</sup> *Amb. 41*, in Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 1308D.

<sup>57</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1312A.



and female by being a “perfect human being”<sup>58</sup> who was like us in every way but sin and “to become man... had no need of the natural process of connubial intercourse.”<sup>59</sup> He unites Paradise and the inhabited world in that “He proceeded unhindered to paradise after his death,”<sup>60</sup> saying to the thief on the cross next to him, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:43) and appearing to his disciples after death. He united heaven and earth through his bodily ascension, and the sensible and intelligible by passing into the “intelligible orders of heaven.”<sup>61</sup> Finally, he presents himself as a human being to God: “As Word, he cannot be separated in any way at all from the Father; as man, he has fulfilled, in word and truth... everything that, as God, he has pre-determined is to take place, and has accomplished the whole will of God the Father on our behalf.”<sup>62</sup> As such he unites the created and uncreated in himself. The union of each of the divisions of being is accomplished through the revelation of the principle that binds them together, as Maximus expounds in the following section on species and genera. Male and female are, ultimately, human beings; the sensible and intelligible realms are, ultimately, the created world. These categories unite their disparate parts without collapsing their differences. Christ, by ascending through them in a fully human way, shows the destiny of human beings even as he reveals the divine order and logic of the whole chain of being. The paradox is that God, who is uncreated, enters into the created world, accomplishing the final union between the uncreated

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<sup>58</sup> *Amb. 41*, in Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 1309A.

<sup>59</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1309A.

<sup>60</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1309B.

<sup>61</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1309C.

<sup>62</sup> *Amb. 41*, in Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 1309D.

and created—the division that cannot be transcended even by deified human beings except by mystical participation in Christ’s union with God.

#### Commentary on the Our Father

Maximus’ *Commentary on the Our Father* takes the form of a letter to a fellow monk expounding the Lord’s Prayer. In it, Maximus describes the prayer as containing in summary the important points of Christian life and doctrine, so that proper understanding and practice of the prayer is central to the Christian life: “If the realization of the divine counsel is the deification of our nature, and if the aim of the divine thoughts is the successful accomplishment of what we ask for in our life, then it is profitable to recognize the full import of the Lord’s prayer, to put it into practice and to write about it properly.”<sup>63</sup> As such, the Commentary provides a helpful summary of Maximus’ central themes regarding deification.

For Maximus, “the words of the prayer make request for whatever the Word of God himself wrought through the flesh in his self-abasement. It teaches us to strive for those goods of which only God the Father through the natural mediation of the Son in the Holy Spirit is in all truth the bestower.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, the prayer has a pedagogical function; it does not ask for anything that has not already been given by God, but instead forms the person praying it to appropriate these goods.<sup>65</sup> Maximus frames the prayer as containing seven central mysteries pertaining to deification: “theology, adoption in grace, equality of honor with the angels,

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<sup>63</sup> Maximus, *Commentary on the Our Father*, in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 102.

<sup>64</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 102.

<sup>65</sup> See also *Commentary on the Our Father*, 105: “Scripture calls this a prayer because it makes a request for the gifts which God gives to men by grace.”

participation in eternal life, the restoration of nature inclining toward itself to a tranquil state, the abolition of the law of sin, and the overthrowing of the tyranny of evil.”<sup>66</sup> To address each of these in detail would be beyond the scope of this chapter, but I will highlight some key points with regard to deification, which, for Maximus, is the goal to which this and all prayer points.

Just as it is throughout Maximus’ work, deification in the *Commentary* is correlative with Incarnation, which he calls the “mysterious self-abasement of the only-begotten Son with a view to the deification of our nature, a self-abasement in which he holds enclosed the limits of all history.”<sup>67</sup> Expanding on the theme of adoption in grace, Maximus remarks, “By the humbling of the passions it [the free will of a person born in grace] takes on divinity in the same measure that the Word of God willed to empty himself in the incarnation of his own unmixed glory in becoming genuinely human.”<sup>68</sup> As we saw in the discussion of *Ambiguum 41*, the Incarnate Word is the one who fulfills humanity’s purpose and makes deification possible and real for the rest of creation.

In discussing the gift of “equality of honor with the angels,” Maximus reflects on the power of the Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension to unite what is divided: “after having ascended with the body he had assumed, he united through himself heaven and earth, joined sensible to insensible things, and showed the unity of created nature.”<sup>69</sup> This is the union of the divisions of being that he describes in greater detail in *Ambiguum 41*. The Word also “restores

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<sup>66</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 103.

<sup>67</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 102.

<sup>68</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 103.

<sup>69</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 103; see also the discussion of these unities in *Ambiguum 41* above.

nature to itself<sup>70</sup> in a similar way, through unifying what has become divided, including the human will, which in its corruption tends away from its “natural” end, which is God, as we have seen in *Ambiguum* 7.

After this prologue laying out his understanding of what the prayer does; i.e. conveying the central, correlative mysteries of incarnation and deification, Maximus proceeds to the petitions of the prayer. Here the theme of uniting what is divided persists: in the petition “Thy Kingdom come,” Maximus reads the kingdom of God as the dwelling place of God within the humble and meek believer.<sup>71</sup> Through contemplation and virtue, this deified person shares in Christ’s tranquility, which Maximus describes as freedom from the passions. Referencing Paul’s dictum that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, Maximus writes that “male and female” mean anger and lust, two passions which divide persons against themselves. The Christian life, which is the ascetic life, thus involves the believer “always in movement toward God by his mind... abandoning his body and whatever is the body’s”<sup>72</sup>—avoiding both literally and figuratively anything to do with “male and female,” which is associated with corruption.<sup>73</sup> Thus, just as Christ unites in himself the divisions of being, the meek and humble person being deified begins this union by overcoming the passions, striving “intensely toward that communion

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<sup>70</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 104.

<sup>71</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 107-108.

<sup>72</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 112.

<sup>73</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 108.

of life with God, thinking that the only loss—even if he were master of everything on earth—would be the failure of the deification by grace which he pursues.”<sup>74</sup>

The one in whom the Spirit dwells is single-minded in pursuit of deification. Thus in the discussion of the petition, “Give us this day our daily bread,” Maximus writes, “Let us then flee, as much as we can, a fondness for matter and wash our involvement from it as dust from our spiritual eyes. Let us be satisfied only with what makes us subsist and not with what serves for our pleasure in the present life.”<sup>75</sup> The fondness for matter to be avoided includes not only gluttony or lust but also excessive worry about the future and greedy storing up of goods for that future: “let us without anxiety ask in prayer for one day’s bread and let us show that in the Christian way of life we make life a preparation for death, by letting our free will overtake nature... and by cutting the soul off from the concerns for bodily things.”<sup>76</sup> Maximus emphasizes purifying oneself from the marks of corruptibility borne by the body and the passions, in preparation for life with God in the spiritual body.<sup>77</sup>

This brief commentary on the Church’s prayer reflects Maximus’ conviction that contemplation and asceticism are essential to sharing in the life of God. It is through the training of prayer and contemplation that we become like God and a dwelling place of God. Similarly, in the

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<sup>74</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 112.

<sup>75</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 114.

<sup>76</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 114.

<sup>77</sup> See *Commentary on the Our Father*, 114-115: “We thus make of the body rendered spiritual by its virtues a messenger of the soul, and by its steadfastness in the good we make the soul a herald of God.”

*Mystagogia*, to which we now turn, he addresses the formative power of the liturgy for deification.

### On The Church's Mystagogy

Like the *Commentary on the Our Father*, the *Mystagogy* sums up many of Maximus' key themes regarding deification.<sup>78</sup> For Thomas Cattoi, “the narrative of the *Mystagogy* is fundamentally the narrative of Maximus' triad<sup>79</sup>—an initiatory process, whereby the community of the faithful anticipates in the present the mystical restoration of all things that will come at the end of time.”<sup>80</sup> The *Mystagogy* leads the reader through several different parts of the Divine Liturgy. Maximus does not discuss every part of the liturgy; he notes that he skips many things he feels are better covered by (Ps-)Dionysius in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.<sup>81</sup> First, however, Maximus presents an unfolding series of “echoing correspondences”<sup>82</sup> in which the Church (both building/ sacred space and assembly), world, human being, and God are variously images of each other. In the first chapter, Maximus describes the Church as the image of God by virtue of its unifying power. Christ unifies the Church, and God the whole creation; Maximus uses the image of God as the center and circumference of a circle, unifying the lines that begin in the center but diverge at the periphery. In the following chapters, Maximus focuses on the reciprocal

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<sup>78</sup> See Andrew Louth, “Man and Cosmos in St. Maximus the Confessor,” in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*, ed. John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 71.

<sup>79</sup> i.e. being, well-being, and eternal well-being

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Cattoi, “Liturgy as Cosmic Transformation,” in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 419.

<sup>81</sup> *The Church's Mystagogy*, in Berthold, *Maximus Confessor*, 184.

<sup>82</sup> Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 77.

relationship, and ultimate unity, between the parts of the church's building and symbolic space. There are sanctuary and nave, but they are one church. He describes the Church in subsequent chapters as an image of the whole world (visible and invisible, united and diverse), of the sensible world (the sanctuary and the nave image heaven and earth), of the human being (who is also a mystical church, with the soul for the sanctuary, mind for the altar, and body for the nave), and of the soul alone. In the sixth chapter, Scripture is described as a human being.

In the seventh chapter, Maximus sums up these correspondences by describing the world as a human being and the human being as a world:

Man made up of body and soul is a world... (i)ntelligible things display the meaning of the soul as the soul does that of intelligible things, and sensible things display the place of the body as the body does that of sensible things. And... intelligible things are the soul of sensible things, and sensible things are the body of intelligible things.... that both make up one world as body and soul make up one man, neither of these elements joined to the other in unity denies or displaces the other according to the law of the one who has bound them together....<sup>83</sup>

Again we see the theme of unity in diversity that has been present throughout the first seven chapters.

It is by this kinship [between different things] that the universal and unique mode of the invisible and unknowable presence in all things renders them unmixed and undivided in themselves and in relation to each other. And it shows that they exist by the relationship which unites them to each other rather than in themselves, until such time as it pleases the one who bound them together to separate them in view of a greater and more mystical arrangement [economy] in the time of the expected universal consummation, when the world, as man, will die to its life of appearances and rise again renewed of its oldness in the resurrection expected presently."<sup>84</sup>

Maximus here extends the correspondence between human being and world to its implications for eschatology: like a human being, the world itself will also die and rise again.

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<sup>83</sup> *Mystagogy*, chap. 7, 196.

<sup>84</sup> *Mystagogy*, chap. 7, 197.

There is some ambiguity in Maximus' description of bodies above: the unifying relationship of body and soul might be broken in the "more mystical dispensation"—and there are hints that for Maximus the body has at this point outlived its usefulness, for in order to live a life pleasing to God, Maximus advises "any one of these three men—the world, holy Scripture, and the one who is ourselves" to "as best he can take care of the soul which is immortal, divine, and in process of deification through the virtues, and let him disdain the flesh which is subject to corruption and death and able to soil the soul's dignity by its carelessness."<sup>85</sup> However, it becomes clear later, as Maximus, leading the reader through the parts of the liturgy, describes the significance of the Trisagion, that he does not envision the end of the body entirely, but rather the end of its corruptibility:

The unceasing and sanctifying doxology by the holy angels in the Trisagion signifies, in general, the equality in the way of life and conduct and harmony in the divine praising which will take place in the age to come by both heavenly and earthly powers, when the human body now rendered immortal by resurrection will no longer weigh down on the soul by corruption and will not itself be weighed down but will take on, by the change into incorruption, potency and aptitude to receive God's coming.<sup>86</sup>

This further specifies what he means by the "resurrection expected presently" and its relationship not to disembodied souls but to the entire human being, and, in a similar unity of diverse natures, the entire world.

### **Ecotheological Interpretations of Maximus**

Why might the idea of created human beings being made divine be useful to ecotheology, a movement that tries to draw us closer to the earth? I argue that this connection can be made due to two main aspects of deification: the ways in which it situates the human being in the context

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<sup>85</sup> *Mystagogy*, chap. 7, 197.

<sup>86</sup> *Mystagogy*, chap. 24, 210.



of the cosmos at large, and the importance it places upon kenosis. Many scholars have already highlighted the possibilities of Eastern theology more generally, and of Maximus in particular, for ecological theology. Deification, because it is so central to the thought of Maximus and other key thinkers, is thus also central to any retrieval of this tradition for its ecological potential.

### Cosmic Scope

The cosmic scope of deification places human beings in the context of the entire cosmos that God has created. For Maximus this means that human beings are “microcosm and mediator”<sup>87</sup> of the universe as a whole. As we saw most vividly in *Ambiguum 41*, the place of human beings in God’s world is to stand at the center point of the “divisions of being” as a “workshop” or “natural bond” between them.<sup>88</sup> The process of deification proceeds outward in a series of expanding unity and identification of the human with the divisions of being: male and female, paradise and the inhabited world, heaven and earth, the intelligible and the sensible, and the created and uncreated.<sup>89</sup> Participating in both “poles” of each opposition, the human being alone is able to hold these oppositions together as differences-in-unity. This vision of the cosmos, in which humanity is implicated in every aspect of creation from the smallest creature to the farthest star, resonates with what the sciences tell us about our interdependence with and material relations to every part of the universe. Moreover, unity-in-difference describes any functioning organism, ecosystem, or human community. This is surely what Sallie McFague would call an “organic model” for the divine as opposed to a mechanistic one.

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<sup>87</sup> Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*.

<sup>88</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305A-1305B.

<sup>89</sup> *Amb. 41*.

Eastern Orthodox and Western theologians alike have recently emphasized the contributions of the cosmic scope of the Eastern Christian tradition to a theology of environmentalism.<sup>90</sup> As John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz point out in the introduction to their volume on Orthodox theology and ecology, Lynn White's critique of Christianity stops short of indicting the Eastern churches: in the East, White posits, nature was and is a realm of symbolic meaning and God's communication to human beings rather than an object of scientific inquiry to be exploited.<sup>91</sup> For Chryssavgis and Foltz, the Eastern Christian tradition is uniquely positioned to articulate an ecological theology and spirituality, centering on the conviction that

the Eternal Son of God, the Logos through whom the world is created, is mirrored and expressed in all things--in every leaf and blade of grass--as their inner meaning and depth, their *logoi*, thereby allowing us truly, in Blake's words, to see "Heaven in a wildflower." Hence, once the soul is purified (*katharsis*) through spiritual discipline (*askesis*), our Edenic ability to engage in a seeing of nature (*theoria physike*) can be at least partially restored to us.<sup>92</sup>

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Sallie McFague also points to parts of Eastern Christian doctrine as a foil to the Western soteriologies she criticizes. Radu Bordeianu responds to the ecological critique of Christianity by offering up the Eastern Christian tradition, and most

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<sup>90</sup> See, for instance, Chryssavgis and Foltz, eds., *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*. A helpful summary of recent Orthodox contributions to ecotheology can also be found in Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics: Reclaiming the Deep Ecology of Christian Tradition," *Religions* 8, no. 7 (June 2017): 116.

<sup>91</sup> John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, "Introduction," in Chryssavgis and Foltz, eds., *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, 2-3; see White, "Historical Roots," 26.

<sup>92</sup> Chryssavgis and Foltz, "Introduction," in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, 3.

particularly Maximus, as a tradition of thought and practice that “condemns the attitudes that perpetuate the present environmental crisis, and offers spiritual solutions to solve it.”<sup>93</sup>

Elizabeth Theokritoff highlights Maximus’ insistence that the diversity of created things is good.<sup>94</sup> Human beings are tasked with “healing the divisions” between the parts of creation, but “[i]t becomes clear that ‘healing the divisions’ does not mean eradicating differences but removing their divisive potential.”<sup>95</sup> In other words, the task of human beings is to mediate the diversity of created things in a unity that is not uniformity. In this theological vision there is no such thing as “mere” nature. In the doctrine of the *logoi*, each thing is created with divine purpose and God is already present in, though radically distinct from, the world. There is no sense in which human beings can responsibly be alienated from or free of responsibility for the rest of creation because of the unity of the created world.

The link between human beings and the rest of creation goes even further for some theologians: in at least some sense, all of creation is meant to be divinized. Jean-Claude Larchet concludes that, although Maximus does not specify how it is that all creatures are divinized, it is clear that they are divinized in a manner appropriate to their specific capacities and nature; their divinization is unlike that of humans, who have free will, but is nonetheless affirmed by

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<sup>93</sup> Radu Bordeianu, “Maximus and Ecology: The Relevance of Maximus the Confessor’s Theology of Creation for the Present Ecological Crisis,” *Downside Review* 127, no. 447 (April 2009): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001258060912744702>.

<sup>94</sup> Elizabeth Theokritoff, “The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor: That Creation May All Be One,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, ed. John Hart (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2017), 222.

<sup>95</sup> Theokritoff, “The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor,” 224. See also Bordeianu, “Maximus and Ecology.”

Maximus.<sup>96</sup> Andrew Louth likewise states, “the goal of deification is not limited to the human but is the destiny of the whole cosmos.”<sup>97</sup> Christina Gschwandtner, in the same volume, writes that

It is well known that the notion of theosis as the transfiguring and deifying of believers is the central redemptive thrust of Eastern theology... Yet such transfiguring does not apply only to the human person. Rather, the liturgy takes up and transforms all of creation, including the very space and time in which it takes place. Increasingly, Orthodox scholars are recognizing the potential of this insight for the ecological debate. In fact, a phrase from the Eucharistic action of the liturgy is used most often to confirm Orthodox valuing of all creation: “Thine own of Thine own, we offer unto Thee, on behalf of all and for all.”<sup>98</sup>

As priests of creation, human beings are tasked with bringing all of the creation to God, and this is enacted liturgically and, by extension, perhaps in acts of ecological solidarity.

Torstein Tollefsen extends this concept of the deification of all creation to reflect on the destiny of specific created beings, which I quote at length:

In *Amb. Io.* 41 Maximus describes the divine intervention as a recapitulation of *all being* in Christ. We may wonder, when we talk of 'all being', what is included and what is excluded? Maybe one finds the question strange? Should not 'all' be 'all'? But what about my dog, the flowers in my garden, butterflies, the worm crawling on the earth? In short, what has this beautiful piece of advanced theological and metaphysical speculation to say about the sensible world we live in? From the way Maximus presents his cosmic view, the way he stresses the microcosmic and mediator role of human beings, which is fulfilled in Christ as the real centre of the cosmos, one gets the impression that nothing is excluded, except corruptibility and sin. When Maximus speaks of 'beings', he mentions the intelligible creation, but he focusses on human beings. He never says explicitly that animals, vegetation, natural elements, and minerals have any place in the soteriological scheme. However, the way he contemplates the world in its divine roots (the *logoi*), arranged as it is, to use a metaphor, in concentric circles of genera with the centre of all being in the Christ-Logos, it seems in principle impossible that any being at all is

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<sup>96</sup> Larchet, *La Divinisation de l'Homme*, 633-635.

<sup>97</sup> Andrew Louth, “Man and Cosmos,” in Chryssavgis and Foltz, *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, 68.

<sup>98</sup> Christina Gschwandtner, “All Creation Rejoices in You: Creation in the Liturgies for the Feasts of the Theotokos,” in Chryssavgis and Foltz, *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, 307.

wasted..... The creation of this kind of world, in all its sumptuous variety, even if fallen to corruption, is not made to be annihilated, but rather to participate in the universal transfiguration and glorification.... Even if Maximus does not address such questions explicitly, a definite answer surely follows from the principles of his system.<sup>99</sup>

The question of the deification of nonhuman animals and plants is, as Tollefsen notes, outside the purview of Maximus' writings. But for Tollefsen as for others, it makes sense to extend the logic of Maximus' system to address a question which is crucial for ecological theology: that is, the destiny of nonhuman creation.

### Kenosis

The other major theme of deification soteriology is its emphasis on the necessary relationship between the self-emptying of the Word of God and the exaltation of human beings. Athanasius makes it clear, as does Maximus, that deification is correlative to incarnation. Maximus writes, "By the humbling of the passions it [the free will of a person born in grace] takes on divinity *in the same measure* that the Word of God willed to empty himself in the incarnation of his own unmixed glory in becoming genuinely human."<sup>100</sup> This emphasis on kenosis means that divinity and self-emptying are inseparable. Thus, rather than presuming to lord it over nature because of our divine destiny, deified humanity is precisely *humble* humanity. The process of divinization, especially as described by Maximus, requires the Christian to be an ascetic, not in the sense of rejecting the world but in the sense of never using or consuming more than is necessary. In his commentary on the Lord's Prayer, Maximus writes, "Let us then flee, as much as we can, a fondness for matter and wash our involvement from it as dust from our

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<sup>99</sup> Torstein T. Tollefsen, "Christocentric Cosmology," in Allen and Neil, *Oxford Handbook*, 319.

<sup>100</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 103, emphasis mine.

spiritual eyes. Let us be satisfied only with what makes us subsist...”.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, if human beings, especially the wealthiest and most powerful, could be satisfied with what is needed for subsistence, our ecological outlook would be much better. This sort of asceticism, which does not reject the material world either by ignoring it or by destroying it, is a spirituality well suited to ecological action.

Many scholars have pointed out the value of ascesis in adopting an ecologically sound way of life. Elizabeth Theokritoff warns that the eco-friendly effects of asceticism (Christians buying less or eating less meat), though important, are not the theological point. Asceticism is meant to be a way to purify the human ability to apprehend the meaning inherent in creation. In our fallen state we are unable to see the logic of the *logoi* and the interrelation of all things.<sup>102</sup> This failure of perception is clear in Maximus’ work, as he frequently describes Christ as *showing* a unity of all things. Irenaeus, similarly, wrote of our inability to transform into the likeness of God because we had not yet seen it until Christ.<sup>103</sup> Asceticism clears humanity’s vision, which can be so often obscured by the primacy of striving and desiring. As Theokritoff writes, “The affirmations of harmony, order, and cosmic celebration in the natural world are not a willfully blinkered or scientifically naïve gloss on the fallen world accessible to our senses: they are statements—for most of us, taken on trust—of the world as perceived by purified senses, as received back after ascetic renunciation: the world perceived according to its *logoi*.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 114.

<sup>102</sup> Elizabeth Theokritoff, “Green Patriarch, Green Patristics,” 13.

<sup>103</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 5.16.2.

<sup>104</sup> Elizabeth Theokritoff, “Green Patriarch, Green Patristics,” 13.

## Problems

I agree with Theokritoff, Bordeianu, Chryssavgis and Foltz, and others that Maximus' (and other Patristic and Orthodox sources') vision of the cosmos is extremely relevant to the ecological crisis. Yet I also share an ecofeminist concern with some of the cosmological presuppositions that seem to undergird such thought: a highly structured universe of hierarchies (though, it should be pointed out, not dualisms) in which human beings are at least in some ways and on some readings meant to transcend their particularity, including their very embodiment.

Those who—correctly, I would argue—hold up Maximus' vision as one with rich possibilities for ecotheology have not addressed what I find to be some pressing problems. First, despite the fact that Maximus rejects Origen's denigration of the body and of matter, the status of particular bodies is unclear. Created things serve a pedagogical and even sacramental function, but these functions serve the deification of human beings. As Adam G. Cooper sums up the role of the body in Maximus, "God has affirmed the corporeal world—bodily and cosmic—as an essential *means of access* to intelligible reality and as the providential locus of communion between creature and creator."<sup>105</sup> Is there a place in this vision for valuing the (non-human part of the) material world in itself? What does the deification of all creation, which some proponents of Maximus' theology extrapolate it to affirm, really mean? Ambiguity about the value of the body also sheds light on some of the problems feminist theologians have raised with traditional notions of kenosis and asceticism—that these ideals are oppressive for women and all those whose bodies are already devalued.

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<sup>105</sup> Adam G. Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*, 251, emphasis mine.

A related and perhaps more important question is that of the centrality of “incorruptibility” to Maximus’, and indeed much of the patristic tradition’s, vision of the deified human being. The metaphysical assumption here is that humans were created to be immortal and that, having lost the likeness but not the image of God, they became subject to death and corruption (including, on many readings, sexual reproduction and parturition). Thus deified human beings, having regained the likeness of God, are incorruptible, unmoved, stable, dispassionate.<sup>106</sup> Here an ecofeminist critique arises: the suspicion of sexuality is also suspicion of women, and female-associated contributions and experiences, namely childbirth, are erased in the deified ideal. Moreover, the focus on incorruptibility and immortality is not consonant with contemporary knowledge about natural processes: rather than static essences secondarily undergoing change and decay, the nature of things is fundamentally fluid and transient. Ruether goes so far as to claim that one of the premises for an ecological spirituality is “the transience of selves.”<sup>107</sup> For Ivone Gebara, “the primal sin in Christianity has been to negate the non-negotiable existential circumstances of life: vulnerability, finitude, and mortality.”<sup>108</sup> If the primary way we become like God in the transformative process of deification is to become incorruptible, is this a salvation we should want?

### **Conclusion**

Can there be an ecofeminist appropriation of deification soteriology? I argue that there can, and that it takes the shape of a reimagining of the goal of creation in line with a revised

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<sup>106</sup> See Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 42, in Constat, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, especially 2:1349A.

<sup>107</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 251.

<sup>108</sup> Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 264.



cosmology and doctrine of God. In the next chapter I will bring the discourses of ecofeminism and deification into conversation to explore how ecofeminist understandings of God as immanent in creation resonate with but also correct some of the Patristic assumptions about God's interaction with God's creation. Sallie McFague's metaphor of the world as God's body in particular provides an interesting conversation partner with the doctrine of deification, though perhaps speaking of the world becoming God's body may be more appropriate in the context of deification. Also relevant is Niels Gregersen's notion of deep incarnation.<sup>109</sup> I will suggest that, as in the patristic exchange formulas of Athanasius and Irenaeus, there are rich resources for thinking of a corresponding deep deification, in which the goal of all creation is divinization: the broken and crucified body of God restored to new life and invited into the life of the Trinity.

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<sup>109</sup> Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DEEP DEIFICATION: ECOFEMINISM AND DEIFICATION IN CONVERSATION

#### **Introduction**

Having analyzed the two trajectories that I have argued hold the most promise for soteriology that speaks to the concerns of the current time of ecological crisis, this chapter will begin to articulate an ecofeminist deification soteriology. First, I will place Maximus' deification soteriology into conversation with ecofeminist soteriology on the topics indicated as points of friction in the previous chapters: the question of salvation as more than redemption from sin; whether deification soteriology necessarily entails hierarchical dualism; and the role of bodies, including "corruptibility," sex, and death. Then, after introducing Niels Gregersen's notion of "deep incarnation," I will extend this notion toward a vision of "deep deification"—a soteriology that sees the universe as already, but not yet, God's body.

#### **Salvation as Deification**

Ecofeminist theology, as I have outlined above, tends to be minimalistic in its claims about salvation. As Heather Eaton puts it,

The belief that the world/Earth is flawed is related to beliefs that a "next world" will be paradise....This limits a capacity to experience the world, and the natural world in particular, to appreciate the extraordinary privilege of being alive and the vitality of and kinship with other life forms. It limits an ability to integrate evolution or consider the universe within which Earth developed. It disregards feeling wonder, immense gratitude and reverence, and acknowledging that we are enveloped in mystery active throughout

the natural world. Such awareness [of mystery] translates into protecting, rather than destroying, the conditions that make life possible....<sup>1</sup>

Salvation as deification may appear at first to recapitulate some of these problems, since it does envision a “world to come” and relies on a conception of nature as in some sense fallen.

However, deification soteriology also overcomes some of these extremes in seeing the world as fundamentally revelatory of God’s mystery and in incorporating the “world” into the economy of salvation. The fallenness of nature is not in its material existence as such, but in the corruption of the good relationships between its parts. Moreover, while it does in many ways center the human, deification soteriology makes clear that human beings (in Christ) are fundamentally responsible for preserving and elevating the world to its full potential as disclosive of divine glory.

A view of the world as “flawed” or fallen rests on two possible assumptions: one is that matter itself is evil; the other is that human sin has distorted the harmony and order of creation. The former is anathema to orthodox Christianity, and is certainly anathema to Maximus, as we have seen in the analysis of his works, especially *Ambiguum* 7. The latter assumption, however, seems self-evidently to be the case, as indicated by anthropogenic climate change and indeed by even earlier human disruptions of ecosystems, such as the deforestation that characterized preindustrial human civilizations’ impact on their environment.<sup>2</sup> However, there are distortions of this position as well; for example, as Rosemary Radford Ruether argues, the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity means that the fall is seen as completely breaking the connection between God

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<sup>1</sup> Eaton, “Ecofeminist Theologies in the Age of Climate Crisis,” *Feminist Theology* 29, no. 3 (2021): 219.

<sup>2</sup> See Malhi et. al., “The Concept of the Anthropocene.”

and nature.<sup>3</sup> In popular Christianity, the emphasis on heaven over resurrection can also lead to the assumption that the body, and thus the material world, is somehow unreal or unimportant. But these views are not the only ways to understand the world as flawed or fallen. It is not that there is something intrinsically wrong with the created world; it is rather that the relationships between creatures and their environments have been, in some cases irreversibly, torn asunder by human action and inaction. For Ruether, the remedy for the unjust relationships that structure the present life on earth is not recourse to eschatological escapism, but a conversion to the earth and to the other.<sup>4</sup>

While this “soteriological minimalism” is an important counterpoint to escapist eschatologies, as I have said in Chapter 2, it sometimes neglects the “larger story” beyond fall and redemption, that of creation and deification. Deification does not annihilate what is earthly and human but transforms it in ways that are genuinely new. In Maximian terms, God’s purpose in creating the world is to unite it and bind it to Godself. It is particularly interesting to note that in *Ambiguum 41* he uses the language of both making and showing to describe this process of unification. Through the contemplation of the principles or *logoi* of all things, the person being deified “shows them to be” one, but also *makes* them one through being properly and fully human, able to unite the polarities of the universe.<sup>5</sup> This is not an issue of perception only, though it is that, but of genuine transformation: “so that he might be shown forth as, and become solely a human being;” “[man] would have fashioned a single earth;” “would have made the

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<sup>3</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 192.

<sup>4</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 256.

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion of the “divisions of being” in *Ambiguum 41* in Chapter 3 above.

sensible creation absolutely identical and indivisible with itself;” “would have made the whole of creation one single creation.”<sup>6</sup> The task of human beings is co-creative with God and, in some sense, with the rest of creation: the work of taking disparate parts and making them a whole while preserving their differences is the essential human task, fulfilled by Christ and, through participation, by humanity being deified. For God to be all in all is both eschatological gift and human task, mediated and made possible by and in Christ.

### **Hierarchy**

It is clear that Patristic thought generally, and Maximus in particular, exhibits a strong sense of hierarchy. What remains to be seen, however, is whether Maximus’ vision necessarily participates in a “hierarchical dualism” or other oppressive framework as outlined by ecofeminist philosophy. Does Maximus exhibit such a dualism in his explorations of male and female, soul and body? The answer to this question is not simple, but I think he does not—or at least, not to an irredeemable extent.

The “divisions of being” in *Ambiguum 41* show a clear hierarchy in the sense of being a Porphyrian tree or taxonomic structure. This hierarchy is a logical one and not a “hierarchical dualism” in the negative sense explained in Chapter 2. However, there is also an implicit hierarchy *within* the paired terms themselves; the intelligible is higher than the sensible, heaven is higher than earth.<sup>7</sup> That these hierarchies are not dualisms is clear through a parallel reading of the *Mystagogy*, in which he likens both heaven and earth and the intelligible and the sensible to the sanctuary and nave of a church, and declares them to be one (world or church) through the

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<sup>6</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305C.

<sup>7</sup> Male is not higher than female, however; see the section on Sex and Gender below.

unity that comes through their mutual coinherence and relationship.<sup>8</sup> This mutual coinherence extends also to the body and soul (though Maximus here also assumes a tripartite division of the human being and equates the mind with the altar to preserve the correspondence). Such a notion is not anathema to ecofeminism; Sallie McFague uses spirit and body language in her agential-organic model of the God-world relationship, though she emphasizes the immanence of both terms.<sup>9</sup>

Adam Cooper's book *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor* focuses primarily on the role of the body in Maximus' theology. Cooper works through an apparent central tension in Maximus: that is, the positive role he famously accords to the material realm, on the one hand, and his intense asceticism, on the other hand, that seeks to "subject the flesh to the spirit, mortifying and enslaving it by every sort of ill-treatment."<sup>10</sup> Cooper notes that von Balthasar, at least before he wrote much more positively about Maximus, criticized "what he saw as a tendency evident in the Greek Fathers especially that 'proceeds unambiguously away from the material to the spiritual.'"<sup>11</sup> This would indicate a hierarchical dualism between spirit and body that would echo the problems that, as we have seen, many such theological assumptions cause for an ecological spirituality. After all, if we are to hate and deny our own body, how can we

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<sup>8</sup> *Mystagogy*, chaps. 2 and 3.

<sup>9</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 144.

<sup>10</sup> *Liber Asceticus* 41.927-8 (CCSG 40. 109), quoted in Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*, 5, citing von Balthasar, "The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves," *Communio* 24 (1997): 376, originally published as "Patristik Scholastik und wir," *Theologie der Zeit* 3 (1939): 65-104.

respect and care for other earthly bodies, even God's body? Cooper argues that there is hierarchy here but not dualism:

the Fathers pose this priority [of the spiritual over the material] not primarily in terms of a strict opposition between the spiritual and material per se, but in terms of an eschatologically oriented order (*taxis*) in which the external and material dimensions of the cosmos become charged with efficacious, performative potency precisely and exclusively in their subordinate relation to the "internal," spiritual sphere.... this order is rooted not in a dualistic metaphysics but in the miracle of the incarnation.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, as many commentators have noted,<sup>13</sup> the Chalcedonian principle Maximus is famous for defending, of union without division or confusion, rather than applying only to the two natures of Christ, applies also to multiple dimensions of the relationship between the spiritual and the material.

The mutual co-inherence of *praxis* and *theoria* in no way upsets the necessary hierarchical *taxis* or gradation between them that corresponds to the ontological, epistemological, and eschatological priority of intelligible over sensible, *apophasis* over *kataphasis*, soul over body, spirit over letter. In the progressive ascent of the spiritual life, these corporeal entities 'are not to be eliminated as impure, but to be transcended as insufficient.' The mortification of the flesh, brought about by ascetic participation in the cross of Christ, finds its true purpose in the resurrection of the intellect in contemplation.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Cooper concludes that "the very integrity of the material order lies in its being transcended."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cooper, 5-6.

<sup>13</sup> On the close relationship between Maximus' Christology and his cosmology, see, for instance, Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 49; Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of Maximus the Confessor*, especially "The Concept of Participation."

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*, 64, citing Vittorio Croce, quoted in Aidan Nichols, *Byzantine Gospel: Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 38.

<sup>15</sup> Cooper, 253.

Are we dealing here with a set of hierarchical dualisms? One criterion from ecofeminism is that a hierarchical dualism justifies the subordination of an actual other, whether that be other species, women, or other groups seen to be inferior. Within this scheme of mutual coinherence, such subordination can and should be avoided. Each person is spiritual and bodily, material and intelligible. Each created thing, according to Maximus, has a spiritual reality and meaning that points back to God. These hierarchies can set the stage for dualism and oppression if the “lower” part is associated with a group or category of being, but this does not have to be so; in fact, to associate one group or species with the lower of these pairs is to miss the point that they are interconnected. The priority of the spiritual over the material is a dynamic that suffuses and applies to all of creation, in its parts and in its wholes.

### **Bodies and the Body of God**

Sallie McFague has pointed out the difficulty theology has had in dealing with bodies:

Christianity is the religion of the incarnation *par excellence*... Christianity has been a religion of the body..... And yet, the earliest Christian texts and doctrines contain the seeds that, throughout history, have germinated into full-blown distrust of the body as well as deprecation of nature and abhorrence and loathing of female bodies. If Christianity is *the* incarnational religion, its treatment of embodiment, nature, and women is very strange indeed.<sup>16</sup>

She continues to remark that feminism has a similar problem with the body, as I described in Chapter 2: on the one hand, feminists want to uphold the worth of the denigrated and despised body, but on the other hand, we do not want to perpetuate the stereotypical identification of women with the body.<sup>17</sup> For McFague, it is crucial to overcome the dualism that separates soul from body in the first place:

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<sup>16</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> McFague, 14-15.



We do not *have* bodies, as we like to suppose, distancing ourselves from them as one does from an inferior, a servant, who works for us.... We *are* bodies, “body and soul.” One of the most important revelations from postmodern science is the continuum between matter and energy... which overturns traditional hierarchical dualisms such as nonliving/living, flesh/spirit, nature/human being.<sup>18</sup>

Maximus’ principle of the mutual indwelling of body and soul<sup>19</sup> is here extended to mean that the very boundaries between visible and invisible, energy and matter, are permeable and uncertain. McFague goes on to ask,

What if we did not distance ourselves from and despise our own bodies or the bodies of other human beings or the bodies of other life-forms, but took the positive evaluation of bodies from Christianity, feminism, and ecology seriously? What if, with Christianity, we accepted the claim that the Word is made flesh and dwells with us; with feminism, that the natural world is in some sense sacred; with ecology, that the planet is a living organism that is our home and source of nurture? What if we dared to think of our planet and indeed the entire universe as the body of God?<sup>20</sup>

McFague’s “organic model” seeks to incorporate both terms of traditional dualisms so that there is no strict division between them and so that the relation of body and spirit extends to our understanding of God as indwelling the world.

As we have seen, Adam Cooper’s discussion of the body in St. Maximus the Confessor affirms its goodness as that through which the spiritual transformation of human beings takes place. Yet in Maximus, the body is also the site of corruption, and sex is associated with death. Moreover, at least in Cooper’s analysis, bodies and the material things of creation seem to serve an instrumental purpose in the deification of human beings, rather than having intrinsic worth in and of themselves. Even if deification soteriology as I have described it so far is essentially

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<sup>18</sup> McFague, 16.

<sup>19</sup> See *Amb.* 7, 1100C.

<sup>20</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 19.

nondualistic, there may be a danger in the emphasis on the spiritual over the material: that of overlooking the material on the way to the spiritual. There are two particular loci of discourse about the body that I want to focus on here. One, which I will deal with at length, is the much-disputed topic of Maximus' view on sex and gender. The other is the importance of corruption as the negative side of embodied existence in Maximus' work.

### Sexual Difference

One issue regarding bodies is the theological status of sexual difference.<sup>21</sup> As the fifth and final division of Maximus' schema in *Ambiguum 41* (and therefore the first to be overcome or unified by Christ), the "difference and division" between male and female holds some significance for the Confessor. Therefore, a more substantial discussion of this division in particular is warranted. An ecofeminist appropriation of Maximus' thought needs to deal with his view of the relationship between male and female, men and women. Does Maximus' thought on this issue rest on a fundamental, essentialist difference between male and female persons? More specifically, does Maximus presume that sexual difference was introduced by God only because of God's foreknowledge of the Fall? And, eschatologically, does Maximus envision the elimination of sexual difference altogether, or merely the elimination of the divisiveness among humans resulting from the corruption of sexual difference that is to be overcome?<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Following Cameron Partridge, "Transfiguring Sexual Difference in St. Maximus the Confessor" (PhD diss., Harvard Divinity School, 2008), UMI no. 3329577, 5-6. I use this term to refer to the pair "male and female" in the *Ambigua* as it is more precise and less anachronistic than "gender."

<sup>22</sup> A helpful analysis of different positions on this issue can be found in Jacob Van Sickle, "The Meaning of Male and Female in Maximus the Confessor" (PhD diss., St. Louis University, 2017), ProQuest no. 10279504, 16-27 and ch. 3. See also Behr, "A Note on the 'Ontology of Gender,'" *St. Vladimir's Quarterly* 42, no. 3-4 (1998): 363-372; Sotiris Mitralaxis, "An Attempt at Clarifying Maximus the Confessor's Remarks on (the Fate of) Sexual Difference in *Ambiguum 41*," *Philosophy and Society*

In Maximus' description of the human being uniting the five divisions of being,<sup>23</sup> he claims that "the property of male and female...in no way was linked to the original principle of the divine plan concerning human generation."<sup>24</sup> Later, describing Christ's actual uniting of the divisions, he adds,

In this way, He showed, I think, that there was perhaps another mode, foreknown by God, for the multiplication of human beings, had the first human being kept the commandment and not cast himself down to the level of irrational animals by misusing the mode of his own proper powers—and so He drove out from nature the difference and division into male and female, a difference, as I have said, which He in no way needed in order to become man,<sup>25</sup> and without which existence would perhaps have been possible. There is no need for this division to last perpetually, for in Christ Jesus, says the divine apostle, there is neither male nor female.<sup>26</sup>

There are several unique characteristics of the fifth division of being. First, as noted by Cameron Partridge and Jacob Van Sickle, this division does not proceed from the previous one as a species does from a genus.<sup>27</sup> While heaven and earth, for example, are both subcategories of the sensible, male and female are not listed as subcategories of the inhabited world, but of the human being. Another unique feature is the mode of overcoming this division: Lars Thunberg divides the five "mediations" into those effected by praxis (of virtue), contemplation, and mystical union. The

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32, no. 2 (2021): 194-203; and Cameron Partridge, "Transfiguring Sexual Difference," especially chs. 1 and 3.

<sup>23</sup> See the discussion of *Ambiguum 41* in Chapter 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305C.

<sup>25</sup> Louth has "which human nature in no way needed for generation" rather than "which He in no way needed to become man." *Amb. 41*, in Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 1309A. John Behr prefers "which was in no way needed... to come-to-be a human being." Behr, trans., *Amb. 41*, supplementary handout, Master class on Maximus, Lumen Christi Institute, Chicago, IL, February 2020.

<sup>26</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1309A-1309B.

<sup>27</sup> See Partridge, "Transfiguring Sexual Difference," 133; Van Sickle, "The Meaning of Male and Female," 97.

first two mediations (male/female and paradise/inhabited earth) belong to praxis: overcoming these divisions is a matter of virtuous action, whereas uniting as heaven and earth or the intelligible and the sensible are a matter of contemplation and understanding.<sup>28</sup> The final mediation (created/uncreated) is a matter of mystical union effected by God's love. Finally, there is a linguistic difference between the first mediation and the others: while Maximus describes the other stages, he uses the language of "uniting," while for male and female, he uses the language of "driving out" and "completely shaking off." Moreover, it is the difference *and* the division (διαφορὰν τε καὶ διαίρεσιν) that is driven out, not merely the division. These features lay the groundwork for debates about sexual difference within Maximus.

Scholars relate these passages about "male and female" back to Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Creation of the Human Being*. Most argue that Nyssa, to whom Maximus is much indebted, held a theory of "double creation": that in the "first creation" (or, to be more precise, in God's original intention for humanity, though not fully realized until the eschaton<sup>29</sup>) human beings were androgynous and that sexual difference was added "in foresight of the Fall."<sup>30</sup> Assuming that Maximus inherits such a conception of sexual difference from Gregory of Nyssa, we can then read *Ambiguum 41* as positing that sexual reproduction is the purpose of sexual difference, and that without the fall, humanity would have had "some other means" of multiplying.

However, this is not the only way to read this text. John Behr, for instance, disagrees with the common reading of Nyssa. He argues that sexual difference is in fact part of our intended

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<sup>28</sup> Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 331.

<sup>29</sup> Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De Hominis Opificio*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 220, <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.1999.0021>.

<sup>30</sup> Behr, "Rational Animal," 220.

nature as “rational animals” who combine characteristics of nonhuman animals (including sex) with a rational nature that images God. When Gregory speaks negatively of the human mode of reproduction, he is commenting on the postlapsarian tendency of human beings to corruption through desiring the lower over the higher. Like other elements of the human condition, sexuality has become corrupted through sin. For Behr, to become simply a human being is an eschatological state rather than a protological one: when God says “let us make [man] in our image,” this work is not complete until Christ on the cross says “It is finished.”<sup>31</sup> The project of humanity is not yet complete; as Irenaeus said, Adam was like a child, and true humanity is not shown in its fullness until Christ. Behr also disagrees that sexual difference is solely related to reproduction, or that sexual reproduction was a “Plan B” for creating human beings:

The fact that procreation is not ‘in Christ’ is not due to fallenness, sinfulness, or passion, as it would be in a “Plan A/Plan B” model, where it might be claimed that sexual procreation is only the result of the fall, and that before the fall we had another, non-sexual manner, mode of procreation. No, it is simply a different category: procreation is in Adam, while birth into life is a passage from Adam to Christ; procreation continues the race of Adam, begetting sons and daughters of Adam, while baptism is the filling up the body of Christ with martyrs, living human beings... The problem with procreation is not so much the impassioned embrace of husband and wife, but the involuntary coming into existence of the one thus begotten, in contrast to the voluntary birth into life of the one taking up the cross.<sup>32</sup>

Behr’s conviction is that we misunderstand both Nyssa and Maximus when we read their remarks on “making man” as pertaining to sexual reproduction rather than as pertaining to becoming human beings.

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<sup>31</sup> Behr, “From Adam to Christ: From Male and Female to Becoming Human,” *The Wheel* 13/14 (Spring/Summer 2018): 20-21, <https://www.wheeljournal.com/13-14-behr>.

<sup>32</sup> Behr, “From Adam to Christ,” 28. Behr is making the argument here that being born or coming into existence is not what Nyssa or Maximus mean by becoming a human being. To become a human being is a task.

While Behr is mostly alone in reading Nyssa this way,<sup>33</sup> he is certainly not the only theologian who interprets Maximus as suggesting that sexual difference or gender will not be overcome eschatologically but will rather be transformed through virtue. This thread runs from Thunberg's *Microcosm and Mediator* to more contemporary commentators such as Doru Costache, for whom the transcendence of gender occurs through virtue and does not obliterate the particularity of men and women, and Adam Cooper.<sup>34</sup> Costache emphasizes the "supremely dispassionate condition of divine virtue"<sup>35</sup> through which humanity is supposed to overcome the division into male and female. Virtue and the virtuous life are genderless, but the sexed nature of human beings remains. We will see below how passions and virtue relate to male and female in Maximus' corpus.

On the other side of this debate, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jean-Claude Larchet, and Andrew Louth, among others, read Maximus as saying that sexual difference will be eradicated entirely in the eschaton.<sup>36</sup> In attempting to clarify what Maximus says specifically in *Ambiguum 41*, without reference to other texts, Sotiris Mitralaxis concludes that, however we may interpret and extrapolate from such a claim, Maximus does in fact claim that sexual difference is to be eliminated eschatologically. He sums up his analysis:

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<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Partridge, "Transfiguring Sexual Difference," ch. 2.

<sup>34</sup> See Van Sickle, "The Meaning of Male and Female," 60-61; Doru Costache, "Living Above Gender: Insights from Saint Maximus the Confessor," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 261-290, <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2013.0016>; Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*.

<sup>35</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305C.

<sup>36</sup> Van Sickle, *Male and Female*, 60; see Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 203-205; Larchet, *La Van Sickle*, 60; see Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 203-205; Larchet, *La divinization de l'homme*, 201; and Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 73 (and see 213 n9).

Maximus... does not only assert that sexual difference (and not only sexual division or reproduction), will not endure the eschata, thus going beyond standard interpretations of Gal 3:28, but he also goes on to assert that the differentiation between male and female is not even part of humanity's logos of nature, of God's prelapsarian (or rather a-lapsarian) will and intention for humankind—quite contrary to Genesis.<sup>37</sup>

This is, for Mitralaxis, a quite novel claim, though, as we have seen, the idea that sexual difference was introduced because of God's foreknowledge of the fall is a common interpretation of Nyssa's *On the Making of the Human Person*.

An important complication of Maximus' discussion of the difference and division between male and female is that it is clear he is not using these terms solely to refer to men and women. This is hinted at by his phrasing in *Ambiguum 41*: "Thus [Christ] united, first of all, ourselves in Himself through removal of the difference between male and female, and instead of men and women, *in whom this mode of division is especially evident*, He showed us as properly and truly to be simply human beings."<sup>38</sup> The existence of sexed human beings, as men and women, is representative of this division but does not exhaust it. Instead, the division exists within the human person itself, both corporately and individually.

In the *Commentary on the Our Father*, Maximus associates male and female with the passions—anger and desire, respectively.<sup>39</sup> With this symbolism in mind, the driving out of the properties of male and female takes on another level of meaning. We should not assume that this is *all* Maximus means by "shaking off" every property of male and female. However, this is

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<sup>37</sup> Mitralaxis, "An Attempt at Clarifying Maximus the Confessor's Remarks," 199.

<sup>38</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1311D-1312A, emphasis mine.

<sup>39</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, 108-110. Berthold translates "ἐπιθυμία" as lust, but I will be referring to it here as desire, given Maximus' further treatment of this passion in *Amb. 10*, among other places, which treats lust as a subcategory of desire. Thunberg uses "concupiscence."

almost certainly one level of what he means, especially since the method of overcoming the division of male and female is precisely through “a supremely *dispassionate* condition of divine virtue.”<sup>40</sup> This association is not arbitrary but connected with a long line of Greek psychology in which the “animal soul” is divided into the irascible and concupiscible faculties or powers. Anger (θυμός) is the corruption of, or vice associated with, the irascible faculty, while desire or lust (ἐπιθυμία), is associated with the concupiscible faculty. Thunberg argues that both of these faculties have positive or virtuous uses as well, so that it is the misuse which is eliminated and not the faculty itself.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, as passions, they can tear at the internal as well as interpersonal unity of human beings, thus truly being occasions for the division of the human person.

Jacob Van Sickle traces the history of gendered language about these faculties, noting that earlier commentators associated “male” with the higher, rational soul and “female” with the lower, irrational soul, or even simply with the body, the third and lowest part of this tripartite division.<sup>42</sup> To relate both male and female to passions, or misuses of the parts of the irrational soul, puts them on a more even level, though Van Sickle notes that there is still a tradition of desire being a more basic passion than anger, one that can lead to anger.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, Van Sickle reads Maximus’ characterization of male and female as the two main passions as entailing

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<sup>40</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1305C, emphasis mine.

<sup>41</sup> Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 379. See also *Amb. 10*, chaps. 43-44 in Constas, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*. In *Amb. 10* these parts are not associated with male and female, but they are something that internally divide the person and must be brought under the rational control of virtue.

<sup>42</sup> Van Sickle, “The Meaning of Male and Female.”

<sup>43</sup> Van Sickle, 129-130.



“a deliberate rejection of the prevailing tradition... which spoke of the spiritual life as a process of ‘becoming male.’”<sup>44</sup> The “becoming male” tradition arises out of the aforementioned Greek psychology that associated men with the higher, spiritual plane and women with the lower, physical one.

The “becoming male” tradition of speaking of growth in virtue, traced by Van Sickle and others,<sup>45</sup> is also evident in Byzantine hagiography, as Ashley Purpura describes. Reading Byzantine hymns about male and female martyrs, she shows how the acquisition of virtue is gendered:

Women have gender instability. Indeed, the hymns represent and perpetuate a patriarchal tradition where women are required to put off their womanliness and to become manly to be holy, but with men the reverse is not overtly represented.... The consequence is not a gender neutral or androgynous putting on of Christ, but rather a distinctly masculine acquisition of virtue.<sup>46</sup>

Maximus, then, subverts this trope by speaking of the elimination of male and female through virtue, rather than the acquisition of masculine virtue. Cameron Partridge makes a similar point: “Instead of Christ becoming an ἄνδρα τέλειον, ‘a perfect man,’ he becomes τέλειος ἄνθρωπος, ‘a perfect human being.’ I suggest that this substitution is no accident. Indeed, I see Maximus as attempting to intervene here in an explicitly androcentric tradition [that of becoming male].”<sup>47</sup>

What does a feminist analysis of Maximus’ view on sexual difference yield? I agree with readings of Maximus that take him seriously when he writes that differentiation into male and

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<sup>44</sup> Van Sickle, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Van Sickle, chap. 2; Partridge, “Transfiguring Sexual Difference,” 142-145.

<sup>46</sup> Ashley Purpura, “Beyond the Binary: Hymnographic Constructions of Eastern Orthodox Gender Identities,” *Journal of Religion* 97, no. 4 (October 2017): 533, <https://doi.org/10.1086/693162>.

<sup>47</sup> Partridge, “Transfiguring Sexual Difference,” 146.

female is eliminated in the deified person. Moreover, I read *Ambiguum 41* as underlining the fundamental equality of men and women, even to the point of denying that there are truly meaningful differences. Instead of “becoming male,” the goal of each is to become “simply a human being,” a goal that is made possible in Christ. In this vision of equality Maximus agrees with his Cappadocian predecessors, who repeatedly affirm the spiritual equality of men and women.<sup>48</sup> Yet, as Verna Harrison has shown, the affirmation of spiritual equality and of the essential genderlessness of the image of God did not necessarily translate, for the Cappadocians, into advocacy for the sociopolitical equality of women, though it did, to some extent, open up new ways of life for those women within ascetic, monastic structures.<sup>49</sup> Rather, the spiritual and eschatological equality of men and women relativized unjust social structures, while the life of asceticism transformed them into occasions for holiness. This is a quietism that serves as an example of overlooking material conditions in the name of spiritual perfection.

Beyond the question of whether theoretical equality ought to be translated into earthly equality, we come back to the question of the body as a site of sex and gender. Most relevant here is Maximus’ association of sexual difference, and sex itself, with corruption and death. This is a commonplace in the Greek Fathers, and it bears some discussion for its impact on the relationship of mutable, changeable, passible, transient, mortal bodies to deification. Van Sickle describes a third register of the meaning of “male and female” in Maximus—apart from the actual sexual difference between actual human beings and the symbolic level of anger and desire.

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<sup>48</sup> Verna E.F. Harrison, “Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 41, no. 2 (October 1990): 452, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/41.2.441>.

<sup>49</sup> Verna E.F. Harrison, “Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology,” 452. As she details, there is variation among the Cappadocians in how much their theology of spiritual equality influenced their view of social issues.

This third register is the meaning of male and female as “marks of subjection:” ““there is neither male nor female,’ that is, no marks or passions of a nature subject to corruption (φθορά) and generation (γένεσις).”<sup>50</sup> For Van Sickle,

This third gloss of the meaning of “male and female” is not a new definition of the terms. Rather, it suggests a way in which the literal register of the words and the allegorical register both describe the same reality. Both the marking of our bodies with the distinction between male and female, and the passions anger and desire, indicate our subjection to corruption and generation.<sup>51</sup>

These two levels of meaning seem, for Maximus and his interpreters, to come together in sex and reproduction: “Thus after the transgression, all human beings possessed pleasure as something naturally antecedent to their proper birth, and absolutely no one was by nature free from an impassioned birth conditioned by pleasure.”<sup>52</sup> Sexual intercourse itself seems to be the site of the passions, something which signals the relationship between sex, birth, and death.

Balthasar sees in this trope a mistrust of the body and sexuality that seems to him overly Gnostic, despite Maximus’ overall anti-Origenizing orientation.<sup>53</sup> Thunberg and Cooper, among others, point out that these associations do not mean that Maximus denies the value of (marital) sexuality, but rather that he envisions an original *logos* of sexuality that is purified of corrupt elements.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in terms of the connection between birth and corruption/death, the passage

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<sup>50</sup> *Commentary on the Our Father*, chap. 4, cited in Van Sickle, “The Meaning of Male and Female,” 147. See 2 Peter 1:4.

<sup>51</sup> Van Sickle, 147-148.

<sup>52</sup> Maximus, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture*, 61.4.

<sup>53</sup> See Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 204.

<sup>54</sup> Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 389-391; Cooper, 210-211.

in *Commentary on the Our Father* also takes up the theme of the three births of the human being: bodily birth, baptism, and resurrection.<sup>55</sup> As Adam Cooper elaborates,

Each Christian, by virtue of baptism, is called to a new kind of procreation in which the soul as both virgin and mother gives birth to Christ ‘spiritually’ (κατὰ λόγον). For Maximus, we notice however, the Christ who is born of the virgin soul is made flesh in the fully corporeal practice of the virtues. While this is a vocation by no means exclusive to the physically virginal, physical celibacy more closely typifies and prophetically embodies the pregnant virginity of the soul. What is achieved by baptism is not the elimination of a person’s gender or sexual, bodily identity, but the dissolution of his or her subjection to a genesis “from corruption, to corruption.”<sup>56</sup>

Thus not only is the Christian reborn in baptism, but also gives birth. On the one hand, this can be read in an egalitarian light. On the other, it recalls Rosemary Radford Ruether’s criticism that “The Christian Church teaches that birth is shameful.... Only through the second birth of baptism, administered by the male clergy, is the filth of mother’s birth remedied and the offspring of the woman’s womb made fit to be a child of God.”<sup>57</sup> Though this is an overarching criticism of gender oppression in Christianity and not aimed at a particular thinker, Ruether’s objection is that the emphasis on physical birth as entailing corruption and birth through baptism as a higher (and, implicitly, more masculine) entry into life casts women’s bodies in a negative light. While Maximus is more nuanced than this—physical birth is not bad; it is the first stage in the triad of births—the association of women with corruption remains.

As we have seen, while scholars disagree on how and to what extent sexual difference is something to be overcome, it is clear that for Maximus, it is. This is a division that Christ

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<sup>55</sup> See *Commentary on the Our Father*, in Berthold, *Maximus Confessor*, 109; Amb. 42 in Conostas, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*.

<sup>56</sup> Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*, 224.

<sup>57</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 260.

overcomes in such a way as to render men and women equally in need of and capable of deification. At the same time, however, his denial of the lasting importance of sexual difference also brings with it a discomfort with embodied, sexed and sexual, existence. As Karolina Kochańczyk-Bonińska concludes her study of sexual difference in Maximus, writes, “Like other Christian Neoplatonic philosophers, he had a great problem maintaining consistency between his philosophical system and the Christian faith in the resurrection of bodies.”<sup>58</sup> Maximus associates bodies with corruption, a corruption which, even if unintentionally, is associated predominantly with *female* embodiment, as we will see below in the discussion on corruption.

A contemporary ecofeminist appropriation of deification soteriology cannot and should not take as given the entire sexual anthropology of patristic sources. However, there are parts of Maximus’ discussion of sexual difference that resonate with the ecofeminist project of identifying and eliminating the intertwined oppressions of women and the earth. Maximus denies the priority of male over female and, as we have seen, goes so far as to assert that not only the division between male and female, but even the difference itself, is overcome—and that overcoming it is the linchpin of the entire project of returning the universe to God. This echoes with Ruether’s statement that “The liberation of all human relations from the false polarities of masculinity and femininity must also shape a new relationship of humanity to nature. . . . Sexism reflects both the heart and the ultimate circumference of the many revolutions in which we are presently involved.”<sup>59</sup> There is something basic and fundamental about the division of humanity

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<sup>58</sup> Karolina Kochańczyk-Bonińska, “The Philosophical Basis of Maximus’ Concept of Sexes: The Reasons and Purposes of the Distinction Between Man and Woman,” in *Maximus the Confessor as a European Philosopher*, ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis et. al. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 237-238.

<sup>59</sup> Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 84.

into male and female—and especially the reification of this division—that hinders our ability to relate appropriately to each other and to the world. Maximus is by no means a feminist, but there is also no warrant in his writings for something like complementarianism, which views sexual difference as not only innate and unchangeable but also as applying to the entirety of a person’s life.

### Suffering, Corruptibility, and *Pathos*

As we have seen, incorruptibility and immortality are a key part of the discourse of deification. To become like God is to take on, by participation and as far as possible, God’s key quality of impassibility.<sup>60</sup> For Maximus and other thinkers associated with the doctrine of deification, the primary way in which deified humanity becomes “like God as far as possible” is through incorruptibility. But must this be the only metaphor for understanding deification? Ecofeminist critique has challenged the centrality of impassibility for the doctrine of God. Rosemary Radford Ruether claimed that “Late-antique culture is obsessed with the fear of mortality, of corruptibility. To be born in the flesh is already to be subject to change, which is a devolution toward decay and death.”<sup>61</sup> Ivone Gebara, as I have noted, believed that “the primal sin in Christianity has been to negate the non-negotiable existential circumstances of life: vulnerability, finitude, and mortality.”<sup>62</sup> Can the doctrine of deification as articulated by Maximus survive a revised doctrine of God, in which God is truly said to be relational and suffering?

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<sup>60</sup> Creatures are still moved around God; this is the notion of “ever-moving rest,” noted in Chapter 3 above.

<sup>61</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 79.

<sup>62</sup> Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 264.

Cooper is suspicious of such a doctrine; noting that twentieth and twenty-first century theology have been characterized by an aversion to the doctrine of divine *apatheia*, he claims that such “convictions run parallel to a whole trend in modern theology (unconsciously?) indebted to process philosophy in which God ends up necessarily subject to the evolutionary vicissitudes (and ultimately, the dark nihilism) of a meaningless universe.”<sup>63</sup> Cooper addresses the problem of a suffering God in Maximus, arguing that while Maximus uses language that sounds like theopaschism, to say that “God suffers” is instead in keeping with Maximus’ consistent Chalcedonian understanding of Christ’s two natures and one single, unified hypostasis.<sup>64</sup> Rather than predicating miracles of Christ’s divine nature alone, or suffering of his human nature alone, Maximus insists that the natures’ energies are “thoroughly united by their mutual adhesion and interpenetration.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, “at the modal, empirical level, divine acts are seen to be performed in a human manner, human acts in a divine manner.”<sup>66</sup> Cooper concludes,

In Christ, in so far as he actually embodies the point at which the future fullness of human deification is realized, pathos becomes ‘supernatural’ (ὕπερ θύσιν). Deification is as much ‘suffered’ as it is ‘achieved.’ . . . Christ’s suffering, death, and holy flesh, and, implicit with these, the inherent passibility of created human nature, are not obstacles to union with God, but the fundamental loci for God’s proleptic demonstration and historic realization of humanity’s goal of union with him, and indeed, the expansive media through which he turns suffering and death on its head and brings the whole cosmos to its pre-planned perfection.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*, 118.

<sup>64</sup> See Cooper, ch. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Opusc. 7 (PG 91.88A), quoted in Cooper, 158.

<sup>66</sup> Cooper, 149.

<sup>67</sup> Cooper, 164.

Therefore, passibility and even suffering are not denied as part of human life—even as a good part of human life. They have a role to play in deification.

Maximus presupposes that there are two kinds of passibility, or *pathos*; one is blameworthy and one blameless. Adam’s action in introducing sin into the world resulted in a blameworthy passibility. Christ’s taking on of human nature, but without sin, meant that he was blamelessly passible. Moreover, not all the passions are inherently blameworthy, and some are used by God to restrain the more blameworthy ones. This type of *pathos* is more pedagogical in nature: a kind of suffering introduced into human nature in foresight of sin, as a corrective against it to keep human beings from falling even further from God. The “dialectic of pleasure and pain” also infuses Maximus’ anthropology: while Cooper, following other scholars, insists that bodily passions including pleasure and pain are themselves *morally* neutral, they are certainly suspect, since they were introduced as a means of keeping humans from falling further into sin. Pleasure is associated with corruption; one leads to the other. Bodily birth is tied to death; pleasure in sex is tied not only to pain in childbirth but to the daily struggle for physical survival and the very corruptibility and mortality of the human body. “Maximus calls pleasure ‘the mother of death,’ for the sexual desire that leads to intercourse and conception gives birth to a life subject to pain and suffering and bordered by corruption and death.”<sup>68</sup> As Cooper notes, there is a certain existential resonance in Maximus’ statement that

For wanting to flee from the painful sensation associated with pain we seek refuge in pleasure, endeavouring to appease the nature that is hard pressed by the torment of pain. And striving through pleasure to dull the disturbance of pain, we fully conform to the

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<sup>68</sup> Cooper, 213, citing Q.Thal. 61. 138-9 (CCSG 22.93).



‘written charge against us’ (Col. 2:13) and are unable to have pleasure without pain and hardships.<sup>69</sup>

Christ, who willingly takes on the same human nature with all its passionate capacities, reverses the disobedience that lands humanity in this bind by bringing the passions under the control of reason or logos. “The actual temptations of Jesus also feature centrally as salvifically-charged moments whose redemptive significance lies chiefly in the way they undo Adam’s surrender to diabolical seduction.”<sup>70</sup> While the pleasure-pain connection is largely associated with sex and death in both Maximus and secondary literature,<sup>71</sup> I think it is important to note here that the temptations to which Jesus is subjected in the desert, like the temptations faced in Eden, are food and power—not sexual pleasure. Anger and desire, as passions, are paradigmatically associated with sexual nature, but they apply more broadly to human vice and selfishness.

For Cooper, following Blowers and others,

in being deified, man [sic] does not leave his passible faculties behind. . . . Even those passions that only on account of the fall were grafted into the more irrational part of nature such as pleasure, pain, desire, grief, and the like, are through the reorienting and purifying work of ascetic struggle and contemplation able to be brought under the mediating hegemony of divinely informed reason and so transformed in character.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Q.Thal.61.92-100 (CCSG 22. 89-91), cited in Cooper, 213-214.

<sup>70</sup> Cooper, 226.

<sup>71</sup> As Balthasar puts it, “The built-in sadness of sexual desire is nothing else than the dark contradiction one senses in sexuality.” Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 198. Thunberg writes, “male and female in passionate action are the main expressions of a sinful misuse of anger and concupiscence.” Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 380.

<sup>72</sup> Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*, 238.

The moral valence of the use of the passions lies in their object: they can “become good in the earnest—once they have wisely severed them from corporeal objects and used them to gain possession of heavenly things.”<sup>73</sup> But their moral valence depends upon

the subjective moral intent of the particular soul using them, but also by the harmony of that intent and use with the divinely ordained nature of the faculties themselves.... Scripture takes away nothing given by God for our use: it forbids neither eating, having children, nor the possession and right management of goods. Rather it restrains immoderation and corrects their irrational use—such as gluttony, fornication, and greed—vices that arise out of an empasioned (ἐμπαθῶς) relationship with created things.<sup>74</sup>

The problem, then, is both an excess and immoderation in our use of our passions, and their direction toward “lower,” bodily, sensible realities rather than intelligible reality. Importantly, the viciousness of such “downward” appetite has to do, in Maximus’ moral psychology, with immoderate self-love that seeks pleasure or the avoidance of pain in a surface-level appropriation of material things rather than in understanding their true nature.<sup>75</sup> “It is not food that is evil, but our gluttony; not procreation, but fornication; not money, but avarice; not glory, but our thirst for glory. Thus there is nothing evil in things but the misuse [we make of them], which grows out of the disorder of the mind in making use of nature.”<sup>76</sup> It is selfishness that makes “downward”

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<sup>73</sup> Q.Thal. 1.18-20 (CCSG 7.47) quoted in Cooper, 223.

<sup>74</sup> Cooper, 239.

<sup>75</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou also understands this selfish and objectifying tendency as the problem that needs to be overcome in sexual intercourse. For him, marriage is an opportunity for growth in virtue and for theosis. See Papanikolaou, “Sex, Marriage, and Theosis,” *The Wheel* 13/14 (2018): 91-99, <https://www.wheeljournal.com/13-14-papanikolaou>.

<sup>76</sup> Maximus, *Centuries on Love* 3, 4; PG 90, 1017C-1017D, quoted in Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 305.

attention and desire bad, not matter itself. If contemplated properly, nature leads to deeper appreciation of God.

In a final evaluation of *pathos*, Cooper views suffering as inherent to the process of deification:

George Berthold once suggestively referred in a footnote to suffering as “the tropes of deification,” but did not go on to elaborate upon this theme. Yet as far as I can see it is the nearest one can come to answering the question at the heart of our study as to what happens to the body when it is deified. The short answer is: it suffers.<sup>77</sup>

Yet for Cooper, this suffering is not in and of itself a likeness to God. Rather, it is the paradoxical occasion for the gift of impassibility and incorruptibility by God’s grace.

Against theologians who refuse to allow death and suffering an intelligible place in the natural world apart from sin, Elizabeth Johnson contends that “pain, suffering, and death are intrinsic parts of the process of evolution. As such, they are woven into the very fabric of the origin of species, and need to be distinguished from the harm human beings do.”<sup>78</sup> Death is part of the process that produced all that has evolved, including ourselves. The view, then, that evil entered into the world through human beings is true in the sense of moral evil but not of natural evil, including death.

Maximus’ language about corruption does have ecological resonance. In *Ambiguum 41*, he sums up original humanity’s failure to complete the task of mediation: “he [the human being] misused his natural, God-given capacity to unite what is divided, and, to the contrary, divided what was united, and thus was in great danger of lamentably returning to nonbeing.”<sup>79</sup> At stake in

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<sup>77</sup> Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*, 241.

<sup>78</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 190.

<sup>79</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1308C.

human sinfulness is actually the dissolution of the cosmos as cosmos—that is, as a united whole in relation to God. Like the pleasure-pain dialectic, this statement seems experientially and existentially relevant in the face of mass extinction and climate change. Dividing what is united—literally, splitting the atom, removing carbon from the earth, exiling creatures from their habitats, causing strife between people, communities, and nations—is a precise description of the social and ecological havoc wrought in the Anthropocene. “Returning to nonbeing” indicates that human beings have rejected the task of preserving and promoting the conditions of life and flourishing for all creatures. The result is death. Human beings are not the cause of death itself, but of unjust, untimely, world-destroying death. Corruption, then, is the refusal to operate as a unifying force and accept the responsibility, as thinking and feeling creation, to preserve and even elevate the created world.

In the face of both “natural”<sup>80</sup> and anthropogenic suffering and death, Johnson asserts, “the most fundamental move theology can make... is to affirm the compassionate presence of God in the midst of the shocking enormity of pain and death.”<sup>81</sup> This compassionate presence is especially evident in Jesus Christ, “the living God who creates and empowers the evolutionary world and also enters the fray, personally drinking the cup of suffering and going down into the nothingness of death, to transform it from within.”<sup>82</sup> In Maximian terminology, Christ makes possible the reversal of the *tropos* of humanity that leads to nonbeing. In Johnson’s view, the

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<sup>80</sup> This distinction is a real one; however, it is important to be careful with it. A prime example is Hurricane Katrina: while hurricanes are “natural disasters” (and this is becoming a more difficult distinction to make as well, since an increase in their frequency is one outcome of climate change), the subsequent flooding, displacement, and humanitarian crisis were caused by moral, not natural, evil.

<sup>81</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 192.

<sup>82</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 192.

suffering and compassion of God are key to a doctrine of God that speaks to the vicissitudes of evolutionary and human history. Thus, while not rejecting all notions of divine *apatheia*, Johnson argues that it is an apophatic concept: “God does not suffer the way creatures do,” but “God may yet suffer in a way appropriate to divine being.”<sup>83</sup> To say that God is in relation and this in some sense passible is no more anthropomorphic than to say that God is impassible, because a “patriarchal model has given the concept of impassibility its orientation and content in the human mind.” For feminism, “self-containment and the absence of relationship are not necessarily the highest perfections but signify lack.”<sup>84</sup>

With the doctrine of God as suffering and relational in mind, physical birth, once a central symbol for the tragic and fallen state of humanity, takes on a new resonance. It is not a mark of corruption but “a superb metaphor for Sophia-God’s struggle to birth a new people, even a new heaven and a new earth.”<sup>85</sup> Like Maximus, Johnson sees levels of birth beyond the physical: “Intense suffering as an ingredient in intense creative power marks the depth of divine involvement in the process. And it is not over yet; only eschatologically will the delivery take place.”<sup>86</sup> Unlike in Maximus, the physical labor of the mother is not denigrated as a secondary type of coming into being that damages the one giving birth, but held up as a model of God.

What if compassion, rather than impassibility, were the central motif of our concept of deification? Even if we in some sense uphold divine *apatheia*, to become “like God as far as

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<sup>83</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 251-252.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 252.

<sup>85</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 255. She then quotes Isaiah 42:14: “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself. Now I will cry out like a woman in labor. I will gasp and pant.”

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 255.

possible” can in principle never include being uncreated or unmoved. Our likeness to God, our divinization, is rooted in the Logos of God who wills to be incarnate—that is, to go outside of itself in order to draw all creation into Godself, to “move immoveably,” as Maximus puts it. The deification of the world, then, and of humanity as the mediator of the world, entails *being moved*—toward God as creator, in and through the other creatures we encounter.

### **Conclusion: Deep Incarnation, Deep Deification**

The term “deep incarnation” was coined by Niels Gregersen in 2001.<sup>87</sup> As he describes it, “I propose a notion of ‘deep incarnation’ according to which God has not only assumed human nature in general, but also a scorned social being and a human-animal body.... In this sense the cross of Christ becomes a microcosm of the whole macrocosm of evolutionary history.”<sup>88</sup> The notion of deep incarnation has support in the poetic language of patristic writers such as Athanasius: “The Word (Logos) spread himself everywhere, above and below and in the depth and in the breadth: above, in creation; below, in the incarnation; in the depth, in hell; in breadth, in the world. Everything is filled with the knowledge of God.”<sup>89</sup> Deep incarnation thus reflects a patristic insight into the radical reach of the incarnation, but reframes it in the light of modern science in order to illustrate more precisely the implications of this reach.

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<sup>87</sup> Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World.” See also Gregersen, “Deep Incarnation: Why Evolutionary Continuity Matters for Christology,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 173-188, <https://doi.org/10.3138/tjt.26.2.173>.

<sup>88</sup> Gregersen, “Cross of Christ,” 193.

<sup>89</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 16, quoted in Gregersen, “The Extended Body of Christ: Three Dimensions of Deep Incarnation,” in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Gregersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 225.

Reflecting on the Prologue of the Gospel according to John, Gregersen notes that the author does not say that the Logos became human, but that it became “flesh.” The word “flesh” (*sarx* in Greek; *kol-bashar* [all flesh] in Hebrew) has multiple biblical meanings: it can refer to the human body of Jesus, but also to human frailty and sin (John 3:6); and to creatures and the created world more generally, including not only connotations of limitation and mortality (grass and flowers in Isa 40:6b-8), but occasionally positive connotations, as in “hearts of flesh” in Ezekiel (11:19, 36:26).<sup>90</sup> The Word’s enfleshment can be understood in all these ways.

Gregersen claims that “deep incarnation” applies to three dimensions: “materiality, sociality, and divine-creaturely suffering.”<sup>91</sup> Incarnation is not merely human, but it must *be* human:

The self-embodiment of God’s Word or Wisdom must have its anchorage in a particular member of the human species because, as far as we can tell, only human beings can be mindful of the universe at large.... Moreover, only human beings are capable of cultivating an ethical concern.... Finally, only human beings evidence a self-reflective relation to God as the source of all that is.<sup>92</sup>

This is similar to Maximus’ notion of the human being as the workshop in which the divisions of being can be united. Our cosmology is, of course, different, but the idea of the human being, and specifically of Jesus Christ, as microcosm remains resonant. Knowledge of evolutionary history has made it clear that human beings emerge quite late in the time scale of the universe, and even in the time scale of life. The late emergence of the human as self-conscious life, or, as the Epistle

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<sup>90</sup> Gregersen, “Extended Body,” 229, 232.

<sup>91</sup> Gregersen, “Extended Body,” 225.

<sup>92</sup> Gregersen, “Extended Body,” 226.

of Barnabas says “suffering earth,”<sup>93</sup> challenges our notions about human beings (and our planet) as the center of the cosmos; at the same time, this emergence “re-centers,” as McFague would put it, the human precisely in terms of our self-conscious relation to all that is—with all the promise and danger this entails.<sup>94</sup>

Elizabeth Johnson draws out the specific material implications of deep incarnation for Christology:

In becoming flesh, the Word/ Wisdom of God lays hold of matter in the form of a human being, a species in which matter has become conscious of itself. . . . The *sarx* of Jesus of Nazareth was a complex unit of minerals and fluids, an item in the carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen cycles, a moment in the biological evolution of this planet. The atoms comprising his body were once part of other creatures. The genetic structure of his cells made him kin to the grasses, the fish, the whole community of life that descended from common ancestors in the ancient seas.<sup>95</sup>

Thus the body of Jesus Christ drew, and draws, together extremes of the universe in ways Maximus did not and could not envision. In the realm of sociality, Gregersen writes of Jesus’ relationships with God, human beings (especially the poor and marginalized), animals, and plants. Johnson calls this Jesus’ “deep ministry,” emphasizing the physicality of his healing and feeding practices.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Epistle of Barnabas 6:9.

<sup>94</sup> I would add here that these characteristics of human beings are on a continuum with other species. Animal studies continuously disrupt our understanding of the “uniquely human;” see, for example, James B. Harrod, “The Case for Chimpanzee Religion,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2014): 8-45, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v8i1.8>.

<sup>95</sup> Johnson, “Jesus and the Cosmos: Soundings in Deep Christology,” in Gregersen, *Incarnation*, 138.

<sup>96</sup> Johnson, “Jesus and the Cosmos,” 143.



In the realm of “divine-creaturely suffering,” Jesus’ co-suffering along with creatures makes a statement about God’s presence in the world, not directly within suffering itself but with creatures in their suffering:

Neither divine omnipresence nor incarnation presuppose that God is ‘omni-manifest,’ that is, revealed in all the vicissitudes of natural evolution and human history, including natural and human horrors. Rather, the point is that the embodied Word of God shares *from within* the sufferings of all who suffer from the powers of tsunamis, earthquakes, and hunger, and *takes the side of* the victims of the horrors that human beings inflict upon one another.<sup>97</sup>

Johnson sees this taking place in “deep cross and resurrection.”<sup>98</sup> She writes, “I suggest we employ the idea of ‘deep resurrection’ to extend the risen Christ’s affiliation to the whole natural world.” She quotes Ambrose of Milan: “In Christ’s resurrection the earth itself arose,”<sup>99</sup> and points out the joyful materiality of the Easter Vigil in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>100</sup> She argues that Christian faith points toward a resurrection from death, in some mysterious way, for all creation, not just human beings. Even though this is a new thing that cannot be imagined based on what has gone before it, it extends hope into the future for each creature, and for matter itself: “As Rahner observes, in the incarnation the divine Logos became material—forever. The consummation of his finite reality does not strip off this materiality but retains it eternally.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Gregersen, “Extended Body,” 235.

<sup>98</sup> Johnson, “Jesus and the Cosmos,” 145.

<sup>99</sup> Patrologica Latina 16:1354, quoted in Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 208 and “Jesus and the Cosmos,” 148.

<sup>100</sup> Johnson, “Jesus and the Cosmos,” 151.

<sup>101</sup> Johnson, “Jesus and the Cosmos,” 147, citing Karl Rahner, “The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith,” in *Theological Investigations* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 6:170.

The notion of deep incarnation shares resonances with Maximus' theology, in which, as we have seen, the one Logos is identified with and unifies the many *logoi* of beings. In other words, the principles of beings, their purpose, God's ideas of and wills for them, participate eternally in the Logos. In a sense, then, each being is an incarnation of its particular *logos*, after the pattern of the one Logos.<sup>102</sup> The incarnation of the one Logos, then, unites created, material beings and brings them to their fulfillment. In Maximian language it is the incarnation that draws all creation from being to well-being and into eternal well-being. The Word wills "always and in all things to accomplish the mystery of his embodiment."<sup>103</sup>

For Patristic writers, deification is correlative to incarnation. Deep deification, I suggest, is the correlative to deep incarnation. If "God became man that man might become God," we can also say that "God became flesh and matter, that flesh and matter might become God." To say this is not to elide any distinction between human beings and other creatures; it is rather to highlight the solidarity between us. Such a notion is latent, as we have seen in Chapter 3, in Maximus' discussion of deification, even though he focuses on the deification of the human being.

Here I return once more to Sallie McFague's notion of the world as the body of God. This, too, has resonance with Maximus' theology, especially in the seventh chapter of his *Mystagogy*. There, he writes that, just as the human being is a world (a microcosm), so the world is also a human being. He stresses the unity that holds together the disparate elements (body and soul, visible and invisible) of both the human being and the world, and the resurrection of both.

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<sup>102</sup> See Jordan Daniel Wood, "Creation is Incarnation."

<sup>103</sup> *Amb.* 7, 1084D.

The “body” of the world is made up of what is sensible, and its “soul” of what is intelligible. McFague, likewise, stresses the indissoluble body-soul unity of the human person and the person-likeness of the cosmos. Maximus never likens the body of the world to God’s body, but in his discussion of the resurrection of the body, he reflects: “Then the body will become like the soul and sensible things like intelligible things in dignity and glory, for the unique divine power will manifest itself in all things in a vivid and active presence proportioned to each one, and will by itself preserve unbroken for endless ages this bond of unity.”<sup>104</sup> As Johnson wrote, God is not omni-manifest, but Maximus contends that God wills to be and will be omni-manifest. The bond of unity Maximus speaks of, as we have seen elsewhere, is the *logos* of the world’s being.<sup>105</sup> The transparent unity of all things is envisioned here as an eschatological gift, not something accomplished by human beings, even deified ones, yet at the same time the oneness of the cosmos is indeed a present reality, one that Christ “shows” and makes manifest. Deification is the progressive realization of this ultimate unity, as we have seen in the progressive unification of *Ambiguum 41*, in which the cosmos is also likened to a human being: “showing that the whole creation is one, as if it were another human being, completed by the mutual coming together of all its members.”<sup>106</sup> The world is God’s body, the deep incarnation of the *logos*—yet we do not yet perceive it as such. It is only unified in Christ; this unification has yet to be realized in concrete existence. This is the task of virtue, mysticism, and ascesis.

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<sup>104</sup> *Mystagogy*, chap. 7, 197.

<sup>105</sup> For a discussion of the *makranthropos* in *Mystagogy* ch. 7, see Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 140-142.

<sup>106</sup> *Amb. 41*, 1312A.

Deep deification, I suggest, means the world *becoming* the body of God. As with incarnation, this becoming occurs on multiple levels. Deification, salvation, pertains to individuals (of all species) but also to communities and to levels of being, as well as to the whole world as an organic whole. It is not enough to think of salvation as the deification of an individual human person, in part because we are not *merely* individual human beings. We are ever-changing clusters of cells, members of families, churches, nations, and species, each with its own meaning (*logos*) and integrity. We are bodies and members of bodies, and other bodies are members of us. Because “creation is incarnation” of the *logoi*, the world is already in some sense God’s body. Yet the promise of deification is the actualization of the *telos* contained in the *logos*. Deification is each creature and body of creatures becoming what God intends for it in its integrity. Though each creature has its own integrity and its own intrinsic worth, human beings have a role to play in their destiny, both as the intended “microcosm and mediator” of the cosmos and as those whose transgression of “planetary boundaries” and oppression of the earth and of one another lead to a need for the earth to be healed.

## CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters, I have engaged ecofeminist and deification trajectories in soteriology, placing them into conversation in order to show how a critical and creative synthesis of these ways of speaking about salvation can be fruitful for a time of ecological crisis. In what follows, I will continue to articulate how “deep deification,” as I have called it, can be a useful concept for a constructive theology of salvation. What does such an ecofeminist approach to deification look like?

### **Salvation From and For**

As we have seen in our discussion of what Andrew Louth has called the “lesser arch” of sin and redemption and the “greater arch” of creation and deification, Maximus the Confessor’s soteriology is one in which the focus is on God’s intention to gather creation to Godself. Salvation as deification is the *telos*, the goal of all creation, not merely the remedy for a Fall. The Incarnation is not “Plan B” for the salvation of all but is the reason for creation and is, in a sense, the inner life of creation. This emphasis on incarnation as reflecting the goodness of the created world is also found in ecofeminist soteriology.

Such an emphasis reframes notions of what we are to be saved from. In classic atonement theories such as those discussed in Chapter One, human sinfulness and its consequences—both of which are expressed as separation from God—are the predicament in which we find ourselves and from which we need saving. This holds true to an extent in Eastern deification soteriology, though there is more of a stress on corruption and death as that from which we need saving. These notions are not separate; corruption and death are seen as consequences of sin. Classic

notions of sin involve its portrayal as pride, self-centeredness, alienation, and descent from being into non-being. Older treatments of sin also speak of sin as communal, as something that affects all of humanity and indeed all of creation. Within the atonement theories surveyed in Chapter One, the human situation is seen primarily, though not exclusively, as alienation between God and human beings. Both ecofeminist theology and deification theology, however, offer the insight that such alienation takes place through and within alienation from others and from the natural world. This is not to equate God with the natural world but rather to uphold the sacramental principle that sees God's presence in the world and the (deep) incarnational principle that sees the Logos in the many *logoi*, in God's intentions for the particular nature of each thing. Sin, then, is both personal and corporate; both a schism between God and humanity and a schism between human beings, one another, and the natural world. Salvation entails the restoration of these relationships.

Our current situation of ecological crisis reveals a great deal about what we as a planetary community need saving from. Ecofeminist analysis of the structures of sin in our world reveals a human and environmental condition of widening inequality. This inequality also entails alienation and separation on many levels: those who consume most of the world's resources are alienated from the consequences of this consumption due to a system that foists the burdens and consequences of climate change onto the most poor and vulnerable, a majority of whom are women. Even when climate change begins to affect the wealthy and powerful, mechanisms exist by which they can insulate themselves from these consequences. Those of us with greater economic and social mobility can move if conditions worsen where we live; we can pay to keep ourselves from extreme shifts in temperature, we can repair the things destroyed by worsening storms or fires. There is even money to be made by exploiting the conditions of climate change,

as well as by encouraging climate change denial. In extreme examples, there are those who think the ultimate solution to climate change will be to colonize other planets—surely an escape meant mostly for an elite while the rest of the world suffers from environmental destruction.

Earth itself, as a planet, can survive most of the anthropogenic destruction human beings might wreak upon it—and, indeed, might reach a new equilibrium and rebuild biodiversity without human interference. To be sure, the planet as a whole has been changed but not utterly destroyed by human forces since the beginning of the Holocene epoch. Yet despite the resilience of the earth as a whole, there are real nonhuman beings affected by human-caused environmental degradation, not only the millions of individuals and species being lost, but microclimates and biotic communities being disrupted—good and rich instances of being, reduced to nonbeing, falling into corruption and nothingness.

As I have discussed above in Chapter Four, Maximus' notion of corruption as that from which we are to be saved poses challenges for ecofeminist thought. Corruption is associated in Maximus' thought with bodily birth and with death, aspects of creaturely life that ecofeminists want to uphold as part of a good creation. Yet I think we can retrieve what is certainly part of the meaning of incorruptibility in Maximus. His discussion of how human beings fall into corruption is illustrative: we “moved around” what was “below:” in other words, we directed our activity toward the acquisition of created things rather than the acquisition of unity with the Creator. Though Maximus frames this in terms of moving around (or being motivated and ruled by) what we were commanded to have “dominion” over, a more ecologically aware reading of his work might note that the consequence of this *tropos* away from God is “dividing what was united, rather than uniting what was divided, as he was meant to do, and thus was subject to descent into nonbeing:” that is, disordered human attitudes toward the things of creation have the potential to

lead to the disintegration of the created order itself. This, then, is a retrievable meaning of corruption: an attitude toward the natural environment that leads to its, and ultimately our, destruction.

If, as Rosemary Radford Ruether's critique goes, classic ideas of deification such as that expressed by Irenaeus rely too much on the overcoming of mortality as the true meaning of reclaiming our likeness to God, then a revised doctrine of God in which likeness to God is envisioned as compassion rather than impassibility changes the meaning of deification. Ruether, Johnson, and McFague all relativize the eschatological hope that "death will be swallowed up in victory." At the same time, however, each affirms that God is a God of life and that to image God is to reverence the integrity of all living things. It is just that, for them, a part of this integrity involves their fragility and mortality. The focus, then, turns to unjust death, rather than death itself. God saves from death in that every moment of our existence is held in and by God. But the sense of the wholesale overcoming of death as the *central* meaning of salvation, even if still held as an eschatological hope, must be changed.

Deification involves salvation from sin and its consequences of corruption, division, destruction, and unjust death. What, then, is salvation *for*? Salvation as deification takes on meanings of preservation of the natural world and of communal healing of the splits that fracture human society—meanings that resonate with both ecofeminism and with Maximus' deification soteriology. Ecofeminist theology gives us the insight that experiences of salvation are often fragmentary. This accords with language about salvation in the Hebrew Bible, where salvation is often envisioned as relief from immediate harm or simply continuing day-to-day existence (See Psalm 68:19). The same theme is present in the New Testament with Jesus' acts of healing and feeding. Yet the larger theme of cosmic salvation also emerges throughout the entire Bible.



These two are not separate but moments in the same process. Maximus' writings also contain a sense of salvation and deification as often fragmentary experiences of a greater, anticipated whole. As Lars Thunberg puts it,

there is obviously no fixed chronological order between the different elements in Maximus' scheme of spiritual perfection. Deification is as it were simply the other side of Incarnation—i.e. incarnation both in Jesus and the individual—and thus it takes place wherever this incarnation takes place, i.e. whenever the Divine can be said to 'penetrate' into the human.<sup>1</sup>

Because Christ wills “always and everywhere to be incarnate,” moments of salvation/deification are also instances of incarnation.

If, as I have suggested, deep deification is correlative to deep incarnation, then deification cannot affect only humans—it must have broader resonance. Deep incarnation posits that the existence Christ entered into was an embodied existence shared with all of creation. We should retrieve the sense of theosis as applying not only to human individuals, but (in a manner appropriate to each) to other creatures and to the world as a whole. This means daring to envision the salvation of the whole world as its coming to be in God. In a sense, the world is already the body of God, but in another sense it is becoming the body of God—and, as McFague rightly points out, that process is Christomorphic and cruciform. Therefore, I will turn briefly to the meaning of the cross before offering a view of how deep deification applies to the whole created world.

### **Atonement and the Cross**

An incarnation-centered Christology, and a deification-centered soteriology as its correlative, point toward an interpretation of salvation that stretches beyond the narrower fall-

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<sup>1</sup> Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 432.

atonement focus of many soteriologies. Its focus is on a nascent but as-yet-unrealized reality in which just, sustainable relationships obtain between members of the creation community. But what does such a theology make of the Cross? Both ecofeminist theology and Maximus' discussion of deification center the cross as a site of redemption far less than much Western soteriology. Both, as McFague has pointed out, focus on Christ's incarnation rather than on his crucifixion and death. This is not to oversimplify deification theology and say that it denies any redemptive significance to the cross. Rather, Jesus' death is seen in the context of his whole incarnate and kenotic existence, indeed as an intensification of the kenosis undergone in the Incarnation and an outcome of the alignment of his human and divine wills.<sup>2</sup> Yet the cross is de-centered in the discussions of divinization I have outlined here; it is Christ's words to the thief crucified with him, as well as the resurrection, that are narrated in *Ambiguum 41* as key moments in the renewal of human nature. There is no sense of Jesus' suffering on the cross as substitutionary atonement for human sin. There is also no sense of Jesus' death as in any way a political reality or as a specific manifestation of human injustice. Rather, it is seen as the human-divine way of dealing with suffering, pain, and death, to be imitated by all human beings: by taking it on voluntarily and transforming it through virtue and love. As we have seen in Chapter 4, Maximus has much to say about Christ's suffering and death as a voluntary entry into the universal human condition in a way that fundamentally transforms it.

This way of viewing the cross is quite different from a liberation view, including an ecofeminist one, though it shares some resonances. Liberation theologies call attention to the

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<sup>2</sup> On Maximus and the cross, see Blowers, "Active Passivity: Maximus on the Passion of Jesus Christ," in *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World*.

historical and political dimension of Christ's execution by an imperial power, and, as we have seen in Chapter One, they often deny that it is Christ's suffering itself that is redemptive. Rather, in McFague's words, the cross is the natural consequence of acting in the way Jesus did, in solidarity and just relationships with the marginalized. Following Christ, then, becomes the way of the cross and of suffering, not for suffering's sake, but for the sake of humanity and the planet. Thus, for McFague, cruciform living involves, as it does for Maximus, a voluntary poverty and a voluntary taking on of certain kinds of suffering in order to live appropriately on the earth. For Johnson, the cross shows God's accompaniment of God's creatures even down into the worst of experiences of suffering.

Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino's call to take the crucified down from the cross also echoes here.<sup>3</sup> The cross is part and parcel of incarnation and deification—as Adam Cooper notes, the deified body suffers. Yet this suffering itself is not what is redemptive—it is certainly not a vicarious replacement or representative for the deserved suffering or punishment of all. The cross of Christ, not merely as suffering but as *unjust* suffering, calls us to ask where crucifixions occur now—in the “lynching tree,” as James Cone has written, and in all situations where injustice crucifies people. Jacob Erickson has written of the vicarious suffering of the people and lands of areas of the globe sacrificed to meet energy needs—“sacrifice zones” like the prairies of North Dakota, on which oil rigs stand like crosses and pipelines cut through indigenous lands.<sup>4</sup> Sallie

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<sup>3</sup> Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Erickson, “Crucifying the Prairie: An Eco-Theology of Resistance for Good Friday,” *Religion Dispatches*, April 13, 2017, <https://religiondispatches.org/crucifying-the-prairie-an-eco-theology-of-resistance-for-good-friday/>

McFague has called nature the “new poor.”<sup>5</sup> Such language reminds us that the idea of one or few suffering for the many can have, and has had, violent implications, as Parker and Brown perceived. Yet the cross is paradigmatic, as McFague says, of the “Christic paradigm” of divine-human suffering that accompanies the victims of unjust suffering in kenotic solidarity. The cross also witnesses to these instances of unjust suffering.

Attending to ecological crucifixions recalls the experience at the heart of Abelard’s writing about the cross. As I wrote in Chapter One, this experience is not itself what saves us, but it is part of the Christian encounter with Christ. Analogous to this experience of moral influence might be the phenomena known as ecological anxiety and ecological grief.<sup>6</sup> These are feelings of worry, loss, sadness, fear, and anger experienced by those affected by and/or concerned about climate change. Though these affective responses require further study to tease apart how they affect individuals’ and communities’ actions and resiliency, such feelings seem appropriate in the face of loss and threats of loss. We might look at the cross in the same way, as a site of grief for the broken body of God in many manifestations. This is different from what Aulen calls the “passion mysticism” of the middle ages, for we do not and cannot venerate the suffering of creation in and of itself, nor dwell on it with devotion. At the same time, we can, like medieval people, look at the wounds and see our own complicity to varying extents. Khaled Anatolios has recently referred to salvation-as-deification as “doxological contrition:” the realization of our

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<sup>5</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, xii and 165.

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of current research on these issues see Maria Ojala, Ashlee Cunsolo, Charles A. Ogunbode, and Jacqueline Middleton, “Anxiety, Worry, and Grief in a Time of Environmental and Climate Crisis: A Narrative Review,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 6 (October 2021): 35-58.

own need for repentance in the face of the glory of God as experienced in the liturgy.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this is a moment when we can see creation as simultaneously reflecting and proclaiming God's glory and calling us to repentance.

### **Becoming the Body of God**

I have, I hope, shown how the two traditions of ecofeminist theology and deification theology mutual enrich and sometimes mutually critique one another. Sallie McFague's treatment of deification shares much in common with Maximus'. Both, as we have seen, share what McFague calls an "organic" model of the universe and of reality, and both highlight the diversity of that bodily universe. Although McFague places more emphasis on the irreducible plurality of the bodies in the Body of God, Maximus likewise takes great care to show that differences, the particular *logoi*, are preserved in his vision of deification. Both also emphasize the roles of *praxis* and *theoria*: of active virtue as cruciform, ascetic, kenotic living, and of contemplation as a way of seeing the world more in tune with reality and without self-serving distortions.

From ecofeminist critique, we see the tendency of even the creation-positive Eastern tradition to mistrust and sideline bodies. Moreover, I argue, ecofeminism can provide a corrective to tendencies to instrumentalize created things—even if a deeper and more correct interpretation of Maximus' theology shows all created things to participate in God, the human relationship to these things depicted in many discussions of Maximus' work is still

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<sup>7</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Deification Through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020).

instrumentalizing and shows a “centrism” that focuses on the human being’s knowledge of and ascent to God rather than the valuing of created nature for its own sake.

I have criticized McFague’s treatment of deification as curiously individualistic, as something that occurs in the lives of saints such as John Woolman, Dorothy Day, and Simone Weil. From Maximus’ literature on deification, virtue is viewed as acquired in community, and although monastic and liturgical community is assumed here, we can extrapolate to expand this vision of deification to one that necessarily includes communities of many kinds—certainly liturgical ones, but also any community in which ecological virtue is acquired and practiced: families, communities of protest, nations and international bodies. Maximus’ theology of deification is inescapably liturgical, as Hans Urs von Balthasar and others have amply shown. In the *Mystagogy*, we see the layered multidimensionality of Maximus’ vision of church and universe. The church, but not only the church, is God’s body; the body, but not only the body, is an image of the universe. Thus in Maximus’ view (again extrapolated), we belong to an ever-expanding series of loci and communities that shape our ability to divide and unite not only ourselves and those communities, but the cosmos itself.

Taking insights from these treatments of deification, what does *deep* deification mean for our fractured, warming world? I have shown how, as this deification corresponds to deep incarnation, all of creation, not just humanity, is implicated in this salvation. While only human beings need to be saved from sin, both human and nonhuman creation need to be saved from the consequences of sin—from death, corruption, and destruction. I have suggested that deep deification means seeing the world as becoming the body of God. To return to Maximus’ triad of being, well-being, and ever-well-being as outlined in *Ambiguum 7*, the world has its being in God and was created for well-being and eternal well-being. Well-being is a project, a process of

movement toward our goal and source in God. It is not present “in the beginning” except as a possibility. Well-being as the flourishing of creatures is a process. Human sin has thwarted the genuine well-being of the earth’s creatures in choosing to prioritize the comfort and range of options of some over the flourishing of all. The human task is to mediate, represent, and unite the separate and diverse parts of the universe, to make the world whole and to see and contemplate it as a whole. Thus, while the world is “in God,” it is not yet the “body of God” in the sense of completing its goal of union with God. This is accomplished in Christ as mediator—the offering back of all matter to God—but is not yet fully realized in historic existence. To continue to incarnate the Logos is part of the meaning of deification for humans, but also for all created things in their own integrity and their own way.

Rereading *Ambiguum 7* in an ecofeminist manner can help us to see deification as a more complete vision of salvation than redemption from sin. The “end” or goal of earthly existence is not the same as the beginning but moves toward God, from being to well-being to ever-well-being, and from genesis to movement to ever-moving rest—that is, a rest that is not static and self-contained but remains relational. With this in mind, a creative rereading of *Ambiguum 41* narrates the restoration of human community with God and the earth through the saving work of Jesus Christ—whose birth from a woman, as with all aspects of his life, signify solidarity with animal and human life, healing the division that sexism has caused in associating women with corruption. He unites paradise and the inhabited earth—that is, he shows that the Earth is one and makes possible a restored relationship with nature in its original blessedness. He unites heaven and earth—showing the unity and interdependence of the created universe. His union of the intelligible and sensible reveals the meanings and principles (*logoi*) inherent in all of creation. The final mediation, that of created and uncreated, remains shrouded in a mysterious cloud of

unknowing, but brings human beings, together with the cosmos, into the very life of God.

Deification as participating in the life-giving and life-sustaining compassion of God relativizes the emphasis on incorruptibility and immortality as the central meaning of *theosis*. We can imagine this, again, as an alternative meaning for “ever-moving rest:” the plurality and interconnectivity of creatures, their interpenetration or *perichoresis*, is part of their eternal life in God.



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