Part I

God, nature and modernity

1

Nature in Christian theology: politics, context and concepts

The aim of this book: political theology of nature

The motivation for writing this book lies in my belief that Christian theology has an important contribution to make to the reinterpretation of the human habitat demanded by ecology and the reconfiguration of human social life demanded by the imperatives of environmental sustainability. Yet I am also convinced that a new type of theology of nature is now required.

In theological discussions of the environment, attention has been focused on the relation between theology and the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the 'value' of nature, on the other.[1] Yet the concentration on these two areas is to construe the concerns of environmentalism too narrowly. Environmental concern is not directed to some abstraction, called Nature. Instead, such concern is directed towards the quality and character of habitation, including the habitation of humanity. Questions privileged by environmentalism include: how do life forms interact? How might the quality of life be improved? How can life be sustained in the long term? With these questions come certain perspectives for interpretation (global, aesthetic) and commitments to simpler, more sustainable forms of life (recycling and decentralisation, for instance).[2]

Such questions, perspectives and commitments are not exhausted by inquiries in the natural sciences or into the 'value' of nature. A third area of inquiry emerges: the distortions of human sociality as enacted in the

1. These distinctions are Douglas John Hall's, as reported in James McPherson, 'Ecumenical Discussion of the Environment 1966–1987', *Modern Theology* 7:4 (July 1991), 363–71 (367).
2. On the contours of environmentalism, see Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 71.

relations of un/natural humanity with nature. Because environmental concerns may be traced back to a disharmony between humanity and nature, environmental strategies are founded in and directed towards the distorted sociality of humanity. Environmental strategies are thereby redirective. Such strategies seek the reconstitution of human social life towards *wholeness*, *diversity* and *integrity* in its transactions with its natural conditions and away from patterns of *fragmentation* and *disintegration*. As we know, such patterns of fragmentation and disintegration have their own dynamics, leading to the suppression of the importance (but not the actuality) of the natural conditions of human life; our interdependence in the delicate and reciprocal interactions with nature which constitute our un/natural humanity is obscured. Competition over resources (social and natural), insecurity and distrust at all levels (international and national, racial and ethnic, gender and familial), rapid consumption of natural resources and reduction in biodiversity and the quality of agricultural land are instances of such fragmentation and breakdown.[3]

This book sets out some of the contours of a new theological approach, which I am calling *political theology of nature*. Such an approach directs theological attention not to the natural sciences nor to the 'value' of nature but instead to the interaction between un/natural humanity and socialised nature. The theological problematic presented here is concerned with the question: what theological specification can be given to the varied and variable relations between un/natural humanity and socialised nature in such manner that neither are lost? More strongly, can a political theology of nature within a doctrine of creation offer a perspective in which human freedom and contingent nature might be related to secure their mutual affirmation and healing? And we should note the importance of the matter to the wider reaches of theology: if no satisfactory response to this last question can be given, the significance of Jesus of Nazareth is put in question. For who is Jesus Christ if not the action of God in such narrative concentration that an embodied life of human freedom and contingent nature is the saving presence of God?

A political theology of nature is a complex inquiry given the varied and variable relations between humanity and nature. There can be no general construal of such variability; attention must be paid instead to particular

3. For a useful discussion of questions of global security, etc., see part 1 of Alan Race and Roger Williamson (eds.), *True to this Earth* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1995).

issues. Yet these issues do not offer themselves in neutral descriptions. The theological task is thereby twofold. First, to offer an analysis and critique of instances of the relations between humanity and nature. Second, to offer a theology of nature which might serve as the 'prequel' to the life, cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ such that God's engagement with (and against) humanity in our relations with nature might be specified more clearly. In short, how might the practices of this society, in its relations with nature, be directed more fully towards the expansionary presence of the triune God?

A political theology of nature is thus an exercise in theological anthropology in a liberative key. Maurice Bloch has noted that 'the very enterprise of studying man [*sic*] is always a political exercise, and that anthropology has always either challenged or legitimised the society in which it occurs'.[4] One of the central claims of this study is that a political theology of nature is oppositional: it seeks the liberative transformation of nature's meanings. For what is required is both the liberation of theology and the liberation of the world: a political theology of nature invites both the transformation of theology itself and the presentation of a theological concept of nature which affirms the reality of the natural conditions of human life in ways which foster unity and solidarity between creatures.

Naught for your comfort: we are right to be suspicious of the concept of nature in that it has been used to defend that which is only conventional or artificial. Yet we are not convinced, rightly, that we are without nature. In my view, Christian theology is well placed to offer an oppositional reading of nature which specifies humanity in its un/naturalness. How does humanity relate to nature in the perspective of the triune God? – this is a revolutionary question. What do we know of the integrity and wholeness of un/natural humanity? How might such integrity and wholeness be enacted?

The argument of the book is thus to be found in two related ideas which, in theological perspective, form a single theme.

The first idea holds to the view that: 'The origins of the contingencies which are overwhelming us today lie in social contexts, and no longer

4. Maurice Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology* (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 131. In fact, 'challenge' does not quite cover the range of possible interactions of resistance. See my reinterpretation of the account of alternative, oppositional and specialising modes of resistance in the work of Raymond Williams in Peter Scott, *Theology, Ideology and Liberation* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 36f.

directly in nature.'[5] The balance of this statement is important: I do not hold to the view that nature is socially constructed *simpliciter*; the structures and processes of nature are real and 'excess to thought'. The engagement with that nature, through our socially formed discourses, is by a range of social practices in our habitation: knowledge of nature is always thereby perspectival and emerges in particular praxes.[6] Which means that the way in which social and political theory understands the natural conditions of life is central to this book. 'Economics, politics and social theory are reinterpreted [in ecology] from a central concern with human relations to the physical world as the necessary basis for social and economic policy.'[7] A political theology of nature offers such reinterpretation *in theology* concentrating upon human relations to the physical world in the politics of human habitation as construed by political ecology.

This book explores the issue of the presence of the triune God to political–ideological forms: how the core doctrines of Christian faith may be situated in the material processes of politics and ecology. It examines the 'symbolics of nature' as these inhibit or encourage views of material production, that is, the relations between the physical world and social humanity. The ecological claim of the centrality of human relations to the physical world is here privileged.[8] My account of nature is therefore an account of ecological nature as grasped within social and political theory. My concern is not with the scientific – natural or life – dimensions of nature, but instead with human relations to the physical world. What follows acknowledges that too often nature is interpreted as an abstract singular – my writing is an attempt in theology to make plural the singular.[9]

5. Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism* (Cambridge: Polity Press pbk. edn, 1994), p. 204.
6. Of the four epistemologies identified by David Demeritt as 'constructivist' (David Demeritt, 'Science, Social Constructivism and Nature', in Bruce Braun and Noel Castree (eds.), *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 173–93), my 'philosophical' position is closest to 'artefactual constructivism'.
7. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1976), p. 111.
8. In what follows, it will become clearer that I am less concerned with the institutional bases of these accounts of nature. Drawing on a distinction made by Perry Anderson, I am focusing not on the institutions which support such inquiries into nature (principally, academies) but rather on the issue of democratic extension: in what senses do these accounts of nature encourage greater participation by members of the *polis* in shaping the social and natural conditions of their lives? See Perry Anderson, *English Questions* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 242–3. Cf. Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation*, p. 23: 'Religious discourse . . . is one possible way a democratic people might achieve solidarity – that is, create the political will to elect leaders who in turn would create public policies that lead toward sustainability.'
9. For the claim that theology has, by the construal of the natural order in relation to a single cause, tended to simplify nature, see Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 69–70.

The second idea which governs this book is that the mediation of nature by social contexts is graspable as concrete, not abstract, in theological interpretation. Reality is the sacrament of command, writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer.[10] The difficulty, as Bonhoeffer well knew, is breaking through in thought to reality. The central theological claim here, analogous formally to the Christological claim that in the career of Jesus of Nazareth we have God in concretion, is that through the operations of the triune God in creation we encounter the dynamics of the interaction of humanity and nature *in concreto*. In such concretion the distorted sociality of humanity-in-nature will appear on the interpretative horizon thereby allowing the issue of wholeness and integrity of un/natural humanity to be adequately considered. The theological issue is to hold to the presence of God as interwoven with the natural conditions of humanity as these emerge in human social life. What may we discern of this presence? How might the humanity–nature relationship be rethought and reconfigured towards being in the truth of the triune God?

Concrete, specific and particular are thus, for theological reasons, related to abstract, general and universal: it is no surprise that the core of the book is taken up with analyses of human–nature interaction. What follows focuses not on general issues in the interpretation of humanity and nature but instead on particular issues in political ecology to show their concretely liberative or restrictive character in and through their relations to the concept and actuality of the triune God.

Against the tendency to construe the ecological crisis as the context for theology or to respond to complaints of Christian collusion in the ecological crisis, I consider that attention must be paid to the way in which the concept of nature is present in theological theory in the context of the distorted sociality of humanity. As a contribution to this task, the next section seeks to locate the emergence of the modern meanings of nature in order to frame the present inquiry. It is not sufficient, in my view, to take the ecological crisis as evidence of the objectification of nature by humanity without attention to historical shifts of meaning. Nature, the most elusive term in our language, requires such circumspection.

Following that I give an account of some of the theological issues raised for a political theology of nature which serves also to locate my own work. Attention then moves to the relations between the terms,

10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'A Theological Basis for the World Alliance', in John de Gruchy (ed.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ* (London: Collins, 1988), pp. 98–110 (p. 103).

'creation' and 'nature'. Finally, I contend that Christian theology – in the form of the *political–ideological interpretation of nature* – is well placed to engage with its own history and contemporary debate towards the liberation of un/natural humanity in nature.

The disgracing of nature

'We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.' Thus Lynn White concludes on the contribution of Christianity to the ecological crisis.[11] Briefly summarised, White's thesis is that modern science and technology, although now international, have their origins in the West. To this development, Christianity makes no small contribution particularly through its creation story which, according to White, decisively introduces the notion of historical development, stresses the transcendence of humanity over nature and, last, claims that nature has been created by God for the benefit of humanity. Thus Christianity makes an important contribution to the disgracing and subsequent mastery of nature.

A veritable industry has grown up in theology to respond to White's thesis.[12] The best way to join the debate is, it seems to me, to set out Christianity's case for the affirmation of nature across its many dimensions. Such – with a focus on the interdependence of social humanity and nature – is the purpose of this book. In this section, I want to affirm only part of White's thesis: the attempted mastery of nature in the West involves the separation – indeed, alienation – of humanity from nature, and, further, that Christianity makes a contribution to this alienation and yet also seeks to overcome it. Indeed, *theologically*, the issue of the alienation of humanity from nature is graspable only in terms of developments in the relation between nature and grace through modernity. It is simply not the case that the fate of nature as the object of the dominion of humanity can be traced to Christianity. Instead, Christianity, as the history of the relation between nature and grace in the modern period demonstrates, has its own difficult passage, making along the way both positive and negative

11. Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), 1203–7.
12. Whatever the merits of White's case, it has, as James A. Nash notes, a wider public resonance thereby placing Christianity on the defensive in the discussion of environmental matters. See James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 70.

contributions.[13] Yet, in keeping with the general thrust of the argument of this book, I see no way beyond the alienation of humanity from nature, except dialectically. If the nature/grace distinction informs the alienation of humanity from nature, the way forward is through the *theological* criticism of the political–ideological structures and processes which support this distinction in order to present again the interrelation of humanity and nature as creatures before God.

The story of the disgracing of nature is often told as part of the history of the modern natural sciences.[14] From a theological point of view, at issue here is the failure of Christianity to incorporate the new account of nature given in the natural sciences into its own thinking. As Louis Dupré writes: 'Having failed to incorporate the world picture presented by modern science, theological doctrine withdrew [through the seventeenth century] from one bastion after another without making new intellectual conquests.'[15] Moreover there is, on Dupré's view, a more fundamental point: in the failure to incorporate the findings of the sciences into Christian doctrine, 'theology gradually withdrew from its millennial task of defining the fundamentals of the world view'.[16] The separation of nature, humanity and God (which Dupré explores in terms of the contrast between nature and grace) is thus one form of the retreat of theology from the contestation of and contribution to public meanings and concepts. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes from prison, in its long march through modernity Christianity eventually becomes associated with the themes of metaphysics, partiality and inwardness.[17] These three are interrelated in that the construal of Christianity in terms of partiality means that Jesus Christ is Lord not of all of life, but only of part of it. The restriction of Christianity to a part of the world connects with Bonhoeffer's assertion that religion is to do with the individual, in his or her inwardness. The address to the individual is validated and stabilised in terms of a metaphysical God who 'appears' at the margins of the world in the form of a supernatural realm. Bonhoeffer traces the marginalisation of the theological account of the world partly to the failure of theology to address the issues posed by

13. See Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).
14. See John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).
15. Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 247. **16.** Ibid., p. 69.
17. The list of letters which gives credence to this summary is long, but see especially those, collected in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1971), dated 30 April 1944, 5 May 1944, 29 May 1944, 8 June 1944 and 16 July 1944, and the important sketch, 'Outline for a Book'.

the new cosmology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: 'As in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally, "God" is being pushed more and more out of life, losing more and more ground.'[18]

Thus the theologian is faced with a double difficulty: the separation of humanity and nature *and* the marginalisation of God are aspects of the same tendency. The overcoming of the displacement of God requires the articulation of a world view. Or, better, attention to the presence of God requires the theological reconstruction of the concepts of God, nature and humanity. Paulos Mar Gregorios has suggested that the modern conception of nature as other than humanity emerged as the stress on nature as related to God's grace receded.[19] If so, the theological response must take the form of a public argument in favour of a *common realm* of God, nature and humanity.

We may agree, as a matter of historical record, that nature, meaning that which is *other* than humanity, emerges at the beginning of the modern period.[20] Unsurprisingly, Karl Marx captures modernity's objectification of nature in the hope of its mastery by humanity:

> Subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground – what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?[21]

Yet the theological way forward cannot be a strategy of mere reversal. If the modern period has stressed the *otherness of humanity to nature* ('the subjection of nature's forces to humanity'), a sound strategy cannot be a stress on the *proximity* of nature. For the displacement or eclipse of God remains in place for both strategies. Instead, the problem which needs to be addressed is to overcome the separation of nature and grace in such manner that the concept of God is constitutive of a liberative understanding of nature.

The disgracing of nature thereby involves the marginalisation of the concept of God from an account of humanity-in-nature. Thus when

18. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 326.
19. Paulos Mar Gregorios, *The Human Presence: Ecological Spirituality and the Age of the Spirit* (New York: Amity House, 1987; orig. 1978), pp. 19–20.
20. Even so, the emergence of modern meanings of nature has been a complex affair: the work of Keith Thomas suggests that in popular culture the divide between humanity and non-human nature has persistently been crossed. See Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 8of.
21. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Verso, 1998; orig. 1848), pp. 40–1.

Gordon D. Kaufman writes of the standard Christian metaphysical schema as God–humanity–world, we should not agree too easily.[22] Although Kaufman's account may be a true *description* of the Christian schema, it makes no reference to the interaction between these terms towards the formulation of a theological concept of nature.

Yet it is clear, as Louis Dupré has argued, that there is an intimate relation between nature, humanity and God. Indeed, Dupré contends that from the end of the Middle Ages and through the early modern period there is a profound alteration in the concept of nature on account of changes in its relations to God and humanity. The direction of this tendency has the theological accent falling on God and humanity. The origins of this stress are not to be found in the Reformation. Rather the Reformation is a partly modern attempt to reunite nature and grace. However, the attempt is not wholly successful, leading to a partial restriction in Protestant theology to the theme of *the-anthropology*.[23]

Yet this restriction has been long in the preparation. Louis Dupré argues that patristic Christianity took further certain tendencies present already in Stoic and Epicurean thought: 'The Christian doctrine of individual salvation further detached the person from the cosmic context in so far as it made each individual responsible to God. Each person stood in direct relation to God rather than to the cosmos.'[24] However the crucial pre-modern theological moment is late nominalism. In the fourteenth century, the concept of nature becomes decisively detached from its context in grace (as had been the position of Augustine and Aquinas, for instance). What nominalism sets in train is the unravelling of our three themes: God, nature and humanity. The distinction between the *potentia absoluta* and the *potentia ordinata* permits an interpretation of nature as given, yet without a specific theological context. The *telos* of nature, as given in the actions of the creator God, is hereby denied. Although there are a number of efforts to rejoin nature to grace – the Renaissance, the Reformation and Jansenism – none is persuasive. The way is then open

22. Gordon D. Kaufman, 'A Problem for Theology: The Concept of Nature', *Harvard Theological Review* 65 (1972), 337–66 (349).

23. For example, the weaknesses of Barth's account of non-human nature are carefully explicated by Santmire: see H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 148–54. A comment by the early Bonhoeffer confirms Santmire's reading of Protestantism: 'The inadequacies of nature and history are God's cloak. But not everything corporeal, not all nature and history, is meant to be sacramental. Nature as such does not symbolise Christ. His presence is confined to the forms of preaching and the two sacraments.' *Christology* (London: Fount, 1978), p. 54. For Dupré, see *Passage to Modernity*, chapters 7 and 8.

24. Ibid., p. 95.