

# A Political Theology of Nature

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# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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’.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.’<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.’<sup>15</sup> 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’.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.'<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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?<sup>21</sup>

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. 80f.

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.<sup>22</sup> 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*.<sup>23</sup>

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.'<sup>24</sup> 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.

to the development of the notion of technically graceless *natura pura* in the sixteenth century, the separation in Protestantism of philosophy and theology and the divorce between the sciences and theology.<sup>25</sup>

A specific account of the Christian involvement in the environmental crisis emerges. The objectification of nature, with the alienation of humanity from its natural conditions, is thus supported by the attention given in Protestant theology to grace in relation to humanity.<sup>26</sup> The result is the steady attempt to describe grace in terms of a salvation history from which, it seems, nature is excluded. Theological interest in nature recedes further, especially in the ambivalence over natural theology,<sup>27</sup> together with a steady withdrawal by theology from attention to the institutional and social processes of natural humanity.<sup>28</sup> Writing in 1933, Bonhoeffer notes that ‘nature’ is not often treated in studies on Christology: ‘There has been little consideration of this question in Protestant theology in the past.’ Later, in *Ethics*, he writes: ‘The concept of the natural has fallen into discredit in Protestant ethics.’<sup>29</sup>

Given such developments, perhaps it is not surprising that Lynn White could write: ‘Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.’<sup>30</sup> Yet, we must also note that the modern period in the West is

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 174–81. The emergence of ‘new’ natural theology can, according to Dupré, also be traced to this juncture.

26. Of course, this account is intimately related to the claim that the development of the natural sciences is permitted, at least, by the disenchantment of nature: nature is transcended by God and yet is ordered. Nature thereby becomes available as an ‘object’ of human inquiry and systematic classification. For two rather different accounts of the drive of modernity towards the classification of nature, see Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, ch. 2; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989; 1991 pbk.), pp. 66–72. The emergence of the natural sciences is, in fact, not the primary and determining moment of the separation of humanity and nature, for such emergence presupposes the separation of humanity and nature (Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, ch. 3). The emergence of the contrast humanity/nature is, arguably, a wider anthropological development.

27. As Dupré points out, the different valuations placed on natural theology by Protestant and Catholic theology can be related to responses to the common factor of the separation of nature and grace in the late medieval period. See Louis Dupré, ‘Nature and Grace: Fateful Separation and Attempted Reunion’, in David L. Schindler (ed.), *Catholicism and Secularization in America* (Notre Dame, IN: Communio, 1990), pp. 52–73 (p. 61). Hence, although the rejection of natural theology reaches its greatest point of intensity in the twentieth century – see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 11/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), pp. 128–78 – such a rejection had been a common theme in nineteenth-century Protestant theology. Indeed, such rejection is prefigured by the separation in Protestantism of theology and philosophy: see Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, pp. 215–16.

28. Political judgments were, in Protestantism, derived from an approach which distinguished between Church and State together with an emphasis on ‘orders of creation’: see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 254f., 271f. The natural conditions of human life are not important in this view.

29. Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, p. 64; Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 120.

30. White, ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis’, 1205.

the most anthropocentric period the world has seen. The important question is therefore whether or not a dialectical reading of Christianity can be sustained: given the context (including Christianity's contribution to that context), is a political theology of nature possible which might offer a liberative account of un/natural humanity?

### **God, nature, humanity**

As a result of such a complex story, it becomes clear that the theological way forward cannot be the straightforward affirmation of a theology of nature as a way of correcting what is taken to be an overemphasis on the theology of history.<sup>31</sup> Why? First, because the relations are too complex to admit of such a reversal. Second, because in a straight reversal, which privileges nature over history and space over time, the issue of the presence of God is not attended to and thereby goes unresolved. A theology of the *common realm* of God, nature and humanity must rather show how the concept of God (re)establishes the concepts of nature and humanity. Overcoming the displacement of God is also the affirmation of humanity and/in nature.

We may now see how the two claims are related: the separation of nature from God and the privatisation of theology are part of the same tendency: the eclipse of God. Thus, although Dupré speaks in Catholic terms of nature, grace and transcendence, his account offers a precise history of the changing relation between *revelation* and *creation*, *salvation* and *nature*, *justification* and *world* that Bonhoeffer traces in Protestant theology. 'The displacement of God from the world, and from the public part of human life', writes Bonhoeffer, 'led to the attempt to keep his place secure in the sphere of the "personal", the "inner", and the "private".'<sup>32</sup> Such privatisation of belief can be tracked in the loss of significance attributed to nature as a theological topic. In a description of the state of the debate on the concept of 'the natural' in Protestant theology, Bonhoeffer writes: 'For some [the natural] was completely lost sight of in the darkness of general sinfulness, while for others, conversely, it was lighted up by the brilliance of absolute historicity.'<sup>33</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer notes a tendency in Protestant theology to concentrate on humanity and God; nature is either obscured by sinfulness or occluded by reference to the 'historical' act of revelation. Hence two

31. As is noted by Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (London: SCM Press, 1981), pp. 57–70.

32. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 344.

33. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 120.

theological issues emerge: first, what theological account can be given of the *activity* of God *in concreto* to the reality of nature and humanity? Second, the problem of the *relevance* of the Christian God is also raised: can a theological account be given that engages with and learns from secular description of humanity-in-nature?<sup>34</sup>

An example of the close relation between the separation of nature, humanity and God and the privatisation of belief is technology. At first glance this seems unlikely: what has technology to do with God? Yet that is precisely part of the point: technology provides and supports a view of the world which appears to make God redundant. 'Nature was formerly conquered by spiritual means', Bonhoeffer writes, 'with us by technical organisation of all kinds.'<sup>35</sup> Yet in fact the concept of nature which permits technological development emerges in theology: only when the *telos* of nature is denied (as it was in nominalism), is it possible for a new *telos* of nature to be provided by humanity; nature is then available for appropriation by technology. As Dupré writes: 'But without a common teleology that integrates humanity with nature, the mastery of nature becomes its own end, and the purposes originally pursued by it end up becoming secondary . . . [Thereby] science was destined to give birth to the most comprehensive feature of modern life, namely technology.'<sup>36</sup> We see here again the double irrelevance of theological interpretation of the world: the emergence of technology is coterminous with the emergence of a grace-less nature; the development of technology contributes to the 'world come of age' which denies the relevance of transcendence.

In its reliance on the denial of the transcendence of nature, technology marks an aspect of modernity's displacement of God and the setting up of humanity *sicut deus* over nature. What are the consequences of such a denial for our understanding of humanity-in-nature? The denial of the transcendence of nature – that is, the denial that nature might receive its reality from outside itself and is thereby not sufficient unto itself – makes nature infinite. As Bonhoeffer noted, 'An infinite universe, however it may be conceived, is self-subsisting, *etsi deus non daretur*.'<sup>37</sup> Together with this notion of an infinite nature, comes the view that nature has to be given a *telos* by *human* action. Thus the presence and action of God are thrust

34. Often, it is assumed that Christianity has no contribution to make: see Val Plumwood's excellent philosophical book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), which offers an incisive account of the philosophical history of the dualism of (male) humanity/nature, but omits any reference to the importance of *transcendence*.

35. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 380.

36. Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 74.

37. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 360.

outside infinite nature; the stress is now placed on a human *telos* that incorporates nature. Hence a new view of the future emerges, together with an affirmation of 'progress': 'Unlike the apocalyptic future, which would violently interrupt the passage of time and bring history to a close, the modern future appeared as the endlessly postponed terminus of a continuing history.'<sup>38</sup> From the perspective of humanity–nature relations, the future then comes to be seen as a human endeavour; further, because ontological priority is now given to the future, human achievements are to be secured in the shortest possible time. But the future is this-worldly, to be secured by the actions of humanity.

With the emphasis on an immanentist future comes the separation of humanity from nature. Paradoxically, the stress on a self-sufficient totality of nature leads to the separation of humanity from that totality. Hence there runs through modernity an increasing stress on the objectivity of nature: the classical and medieval onto-theological synthesis that held together nature, self and the transcendent, loses its power. Of course, differing interpretations of the synthesis have been given. Christianity secured an especially important demotion of the cosmos: the creator is transcendent over God's creation. Yet that did not, at first, encourage the view that cosmos and self could be separated. The modern period manages precisely this feat, however:

Modern culture has detached personhood from the other two constituents of the original ontological synthesis. For Greek and medieval philosophers the person formed an integral part of a more comprehensive totality, yet ruled that totality in accordance with a teleology both immanent in its own nature and transcending it. The image of the person which emerged in the sixteenth century became increasingly more enclosed within itself. Eventually it narrowed its teleology to one of self-preservation or self-fulfilment, either social or individual.<sup>39</sup>

The implications for theology of the new teleology, which sees humanity as placed in an open horizon and as other than nature, are profound. For now humanity sees itself as at the leading edge of history (which in this temporal scheme is also the centre of the world). The theme of *creatureliness*, which might permit an account of humanity placed in the *middle* of the world as part of nature, is displaced by a view of humanity as superior to nature's contingencies. God's blessing, if it is appealed to at all, is

38. Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 156.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 163–4.

understood in terms not of living from the middle, but living at the scientific, technological edge.

Yet the actuality is different from the promise: although all stress is now placed on self-directed humanity, humanity's emancipation from nature is not humanity's emancipation from itself.

Our immediate environment is not nature, as formerly, but organisation. But with this protection from nature's menace there arises a new one – through organisation itself. But the spiritual force is lacking. The question is: What protects us against the menace of organisation? Man is again thrown back on himself. He has managed to deal with everything, only not with himself . . . In the last resort it all turns upon man.<sup>40</sup>

Humanity is opposed to nature; nature and humanity are opposed to God. The view of humanity as at the leading edge of history obscures the presence of God, denies the rule of God and privatises belief. Further, the world is left as it is: humanity remains locked into the attempt to free itself from its own natural conditions. It is therefore no exaggeration to conclude that: *nature is the problem of modernity*. In the concept of nature are to be found the interrelated issues of a humanity which refuses to live out of the middle of its existence, a stress on the domestication of nature and the displacement of God.

### **Human freedom, natural contingencies**

The theological task emerges more clearly: not to leave the world as it is. What might be the outline of a theological account which declines to leave the world as it is? The contribution of a political theology of nature is Christological: the common realm of God, nature and humanity has Christ as its centre. 'God is no stop-gap; he must be recognised at the centre of life . . . The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He is the centre of life.'<sup>41</sup> This commitment to the Christological form of the presence of God supports the notion of a common realm. The presence of God returns humanity to *die Mitte*. What does this mean?

We have seen that the reduction of a stress on grace leads to the separation of humanity from nature and the objectification of nature. I have already noted that the attempt merely to reunite humanity and nature is theologically insufficient: it fails to acknowledge that the concept of God

40. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 380.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 312.

too has been displaced in the separation of humanity and nature. Such displacement is no small matter. At issue is whether or not some justification can be given of the circumstance in which humanity finds itself: as free yet within a context that resists (to some extent) that same freedom. Philosophers influenced by the German idealist tradition gloss this problem in terms of freedom and necessity. So Dupré: ‘The search for an adequate conception of transcendence appears far from finished. How does the necessary allow genuine contingency? How does the contingent affect the nature of necessity?’<sup>42</sup>

In line with the theological politics being advanced in this book, I shall speak less of dependence and autonomy and more of the hegemonic situation in which humanity is placed as opposed to social freedom, of the ideological forms of knowing contrasted with practical truth. Yet the basic point remains: how are the three figures of God, nature and humanity to be related such that the justification of the relation between these three can be seen? The issue is practical: without such a justification, history must bear its own burden. Hence the constant modern stress on the improvement of humanity’s environment, the emphasis on progress and the constantly receding Siren of the ‘good life’ and the ‘American dream’. Here we encounter the conditions in present human society of the ‘limitless’ exploitation and degradation of the environment.

We are confronted by a central problem of modernity: human freedom, *qua* freedom, cannot be dependent on any conditions. Otherwise that very freedom is contradicted. Such freedom is only operative (and, it is hoped, effective) in a particular context. Yet the context is given: as Marx noted, humanity lives from the dead labour of the past. Hence the attempt by humanity to dominate its environment in order to secure its basic needs runs into insoluble contradictions if humanity does not see itself as placed in that environment. Abstract freedom struggles against abstract nature. The contours of Western life as we have them today are, then, founded upon the distorted sociality of humanity and the destruction of the environment.

The claim that in theological understanding such issues are properly addressed needs to be made good. A theological account of the common realm of God, nature and humanity needs to show how, in conceptual form, the distortions of social humanity can be reframed towards an

42. Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 253.

extended account of freedom by, in and for nature. A theological interpretation of nature grants finitude to nature and to humanity, thereby placing humanity in the middle of nature and history. A theological interpretation offers an account of the reality of the relations between humanity and nature. The combination of these two commitments – humanity in the middle, the centrality of the relations between humanity and nature – requires ontological specification.<sup>43</sup>

The theological justification of nature and humanity raises questions about standard ways of reflecting on nature. First, postmodern emphases which reject all ontology must themselves be rejected. Such critiques are right to detect a problem in the relation between the freedom of the subject and the necessity of nature. Such critiques are right, in part, also to reject the notion of the free subject. But there remains the matter of the reality of nature in its relations with humanity which needs to be addressed. The dispute between the freedom of humanity and the necessity of nature cannot be resolved by eliminating nature, as some seek to do. Consider here the following comments: ‘We made Nature and it just *is* our descriptions of it and the way we treat it. Nature is a cultural product.’ ‘Nature has come to an end.’ ‘We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us.’<sup>44</sup> It may be true, as these comments suggest, that the necessity of nature is not given in the order of things. Yet it cannot thereby be ignored. How the partial freedom of humanity relates to nature still needs to be specified.

Second, appeals to science in the form of a new creation story which do not explore these ontological issues are equally suspect. Resolutions to the problem of the alienation of nature and social freedom cannot be resolved in favour of some ‘natural’ basis (learned either from ecology or the natural sciences).<sup>45</sup> Simply stressing nature where once humanity was emphasised does not address the vital issue: what is the relation between the sociality of humanity and the ecology of nature (which is after all the root of the problem)? For theology, the attempt must be made to show how the

43. If the turn by the natural sciences towards the explanatory power of narrative offers a clue, the boldness of my ontological endeavour is less out of step with the wider intellectual culture than perhaps it would have been twenty years ago.

44. Don Cupitt, ‘Nature and Culture’, in Neil Spurway (ed.), *Humanity, Environment and God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 35; Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 102; Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 58.

45. Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 39.

common realm of humanity, nature and God establishes the reality, interrelations and liberation of humanity, nature and God.

Such commitments, stated briefly and baldly, hint at some of the theological principles operative in this book. In my view, the theological task is *reconstructive* rather than *constructive*. That is, I am committed to the basic shape of Christian doctrine in the theological consideration of nature. Such a decision involves judgments about natural theology, the doctrines themselves and the dynamic articulated by Christianity. Yet I do not think that some reconstructive theological proposals, which seek to reinvigorate the motifs of human dominion of nature or stewardship, are tenable.<sup>46</sup> Instead, the relation between humanity and nature requires fundamental reconsideration; the metaphors of dominion and stewardship are not central to my position. Rather, I offer here an extended attempt to specify, in theological perspective, the natural conditions of humanity. The relevance of the Christian schema is defended in and through a move into the doctrine of creation: the liberating dynamic of Christianity is reconstrued under the rubric, 'Christ and creation'.<sup>47</sup>

Yet, as can be seen from the opening section of this chapter, the theological task undertaken here focuses on the *polis*. Thus there is an important 'liberal' emphasis in what follows thereby to incorporate a theological account of the world. In support of this incorporation, in the next chapter I shall engage with the concept of nature by way of a philosophical theology which enjoys certain liberal characteristics. Yet the engagement will be thoroughly theological. For the political theology of nature presented here needs to be differentiated from the theologies of nature which lean more heavily upon philosophies of nature, usually derived from the natural sciences, which are alien to Christianity. With this openness to the natural sciences – often construed generally in terms of a common creation story – there remains the danger that the content of the natural sciences

46. This way of the attempted re-presentation of the relevance of standard Christian models of human responsibility for nature is rich and varied: see Thomas Sieger Derr, *Ecology and Human Need* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975) who continues to use the language of 'mastery' of nature; Robert Faricy, *Wind and Sea Obey Him: Approaches to a Theology of Nature* (London: SCM Press, 1982); Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and New York: Friendship Press, 1986); the early Bonhoeffer: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1–3* (London: SCM Press, 1959; lectures given in 1933).

47. Further examples of work in this area include Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985); Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Gregorios, *The Human Presence*; Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*; Nash, *Loving Nature*. In his stress on the ambiguity of modernity and his attempt to construct an ontology of communion of humanity and nature, Hall's *Imaging God* fits partly in this category.

is extended – reductionistically – to specify the context of theology. On this view, particular stress can be laid on the incarnational presence of God or the cosmic Christ in nature.<sup>48</sup>

I am more sympathetic to those theologies which address the *politics* of nature. Yet such accounts offer, often in subtle ways, a substantial and far-reaching alteration to Christianity. For instance, it is not always clear in this approach whether or not there is a determining place for Jesus Christ: the incarnation is transferred from Christology to the doctrine of God in order to account for God's presence in and to the world.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the stress on the natural sciences does not properly address the matter of the *interaction* between humanity and nature. Last, the appeal to the natural sciences is considered to be the way in which theology secures its credentials as a public discipline. Yet, in fact, the 'publicness' is specified by the natural sciences.

A political theology of nature, as I have described it, directs theological attention to the relations operative in the common realm of God, nature and humanity. The rationale of this attention is Christological. Yet there remains the important matter of the theological account of the 'world come of age' by way of a theological engagement with the 'secular' politics of nature. Setting out the contours of this double commitment – Christ and world – is the task of this political theology of nature.

### Creation, nature

I have already advertised my commitment to the basic shape of Christian doctrine throughout this argument. In connection with the doctrine of creation, this involves a commitment to two rules of theological thinking. First, that creation is the free, unconstrained act of God. Creation is to be understood not as necessary but as contingent: traditionally, this rule has

48. Consider, for example, the work of process theologians such as John B. Cobb, *Is it Too Late? A Theology of Ecology* (Beverly Hills, CA: Bruce, 1972); David Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Jay B. McDaniel, *Of Gods and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989) (at least in the area of metaphysics) and, especially, Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1959), and *The Divine Milieu* (New York, Harper, 1960). James B. Gustafson's *A Sense of the Divine* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) may also fit here.

49. Examples in this area abound: see Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (London: SCM Press, 1987) and *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1993); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (London: SCM Press, 1994); Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983); Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1994); Gordon D. Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Manchester University Press, 1985).

been glossed as *creatio ex nihilo*. In other words, God creates out of God's freedom and will; there is no pre-existing material nor any resistance to God's will. Creation in its entirety is the result of God's action. 'God's relation to the world is like this: not a struggle with pre-existing disorder that is then moulded into a shape, but a pure summons.'<sup>50</sup> Creation is the free decision of the social God: a gratuitous action. God has no 'need' of creation; creating is rather an action of God's love. When God wills to be not-God, creation comes to be. Against pantheism, the world is contingent, that is, not necessary; it is thereby truly other to God.

Second, the order of creation is dependent on God's act. The act of creation is not to be understood as concerned only with a beginning but also with the middle and the end of the world. Creation is never to be understood as an immanent, creative process; the notion of *natura naturans* is, in line with mainstream Christian commitments, hereby rejected. In sum, the world is internally related to God: it exists, and continues to exist, on account of God's loving purposes. An account of creation that is externally related to God, as in deism's interpretation of creation as machine, is ruled out.

It is likely that this *creatio ex nihilo* has its source in Israel's understanding of the activity of God in the covenant. 'The cosmic order and origin were traced back to the God of salvation history, and thereby unlimited power came to be seen in God's historical action', argues Wolfhart Pannenberg.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Rowan Williams traces the theme of creation out of nothing to Israel's return from Babylonian captivity:

This deliverance, decisive and unexpected, is like a second Exodus; and the Exodus in turn comes to be seen as a sort of recapitulation of creation. Out of a situation where there is no identity, where there are no names, only the anonymity of slavery or the powerlessness of the ghetto, God makes a human community, calls it by *name* (Is. 40–55), gives it or restores to it a community. But this act is not a *process* by which shape is imposed on chaos; it is a summons, a call which establishes the very possibility of an answer.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, in Christian tradition, there can be no discussion of covenant or deliverance except by reference to Jesus Christ (cf. John 1.1–18). Thus creation is always understood to be an event related to incarnation. For incarnation has to do with the liberation and transformation of creation.

50. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 68.

51. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 11, p. 11.

52. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 67–8.

In other words, creation is understood to be a Trinitarian action; creation is the external action of the triune God.

Why, then, do I describe this book as an inquiry into the theology of nature rather than into the doctrine of creation? Further, what might the relation be between the concepts, 'nature' and 'creation'?

When, in conversation, I have tried to explain the thesis of this book on 'nature' to others, one of the most popular questions has been: 'what about *creation*?' How does the concept of 'creation' relate to the account of 'nature' proposed here? And interlocutors have become impatient when I have been unable to give them a clear answer. Yet, there are reasons, bound up with the history of the doctrine of creation, why people pose the question and why in the past I have been stuck for an answer. These reasons further complicate, as I hope to show, an inquiry into the theology of nature.<sup>53</sup>

First, one of the reasons why the question 'what about creation?' proves difficult to answer is that one interpretation of creation has been to see it as a context for asking questions of salvation. Such an approach is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'methodism': the search for every opportunity to convict people in their sins. Thus to ask a question about creation is to ask about the context of the drama of salvation. What is being inquired after is the affirmation of the reality of free will, the ubiquity of sin and meaningfulness of human action. A question about creation is, it transpires, a question about the possibility of, the need for and the capacity to respond to, grace.<sup>54</sup> Or, in a more defensible version of the same approach, creation is construed as preparatory for the purposes of God. 'If theology is primarily concerned with the Trinitarian God as purposive', Daniel Hardy writes, 'creation is the condition for the realisation of the purposes of this God, and receives its reality from the realisation of these purposes'.<sup>55</sup> Attention to these purposes then becomes the primary concern rather than a direct inquiry into the conditions, possibility and potential of the world. In response to the concept of 'nature', people ask after 'creation' in order to draw nature within the reconciling dynamic of salvation.

Yet there is a further, none the less intimately related, use of the word 'creation' which has recently become popular: Max Oelschlaeger's *Caring*

53. In reflecting on this matter, my thinking has been clarified by the important essay, 'Creation and Eschatology' by Daniel W. Hardy, in *God's Ways with the World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), pp. 151–70.

54. Precisely such a view of creation is operative in 'philosophical' forms of theodicy: see John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966).

55. Hardy, 'Creation and Eschatology', p. 154.