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Introduction

A SUFFERING WORLD

This is a world of great beauty, physical intricacy and biological diversity, in which humans sometimes act with goodness, and occasionally with real heroism. It is also a world in which creatures inflict on each other considerable trauma through such behaviour as predation and parasitism, and a world in which natural phenomena such as the movement of tectonic plates cause enormous extents of suffering. Human beings, moreover, routinely act selfishly, and sometimes with great cruelty.

So much seems obvious enough. It is the very grain of our experience of the world from day to day. My observation of much Christian preaching, and the theology that lies behind it, is that in response to ugliness and suffering in the world, it still gives 'the ancient Christian answer'[1] that all these evils can be traced to the sin of the first humans. As I have shown in recent writing (along with many other theologians writing in dialogue with science),[2] this answer is now implausible in terms of chronology. We can be confident from the fossil record that both predation and disease pre-dated the human species by millions of years.

The conclusion that primeval human sin directly caused the suffering inflicted by animals on each other was always dubious theologically, as being a direct challenge to the goodness of God. Why would a good God

[1] J. Polkinghorne, 'Pelican Heaven', *Times Literary Supplement*, April 3 2009, 31.

[2] C. Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), chapter 2; also e.g., A. R. Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming – Natural, Divine and Human* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 248.

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allow one act of disobedience to cause suffering in so many creatures? I have also contested the notion that any rebellious power or mysterious force is responsible for all the disvalues[3] in the natural world.[4] That notion is problematic both theologically and scientifically. Theologically, because that would be to accord more power to a force opposed to God than the Christian tradition has typically been willing to accede.[5] It would be to suggest that God set out to create straw-eating lions and was unable to do so. Scientifically, because the difficult but fascinating conclusion to be drawn from evolutionary science is that it is the same process – evolution driven at least in part by natural selection – that gives rise to both the values of beauty, diversity and ingenuity in creation, and to the disvalues of suffering and extinction.[6] Further, it is the same processes that cause so much 'natural evil' among humans – earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes and typhoons – that made the world so extravagantly fruitful for life.

All of this runs counter to any simplistic theology that associates all goodness and beauty with God and all violence, cruelty, and suffering with rebellion either by humans or other powers opposed to God. Instead, it suggests that God, as the creator of the world, is deeply implicated in the causal structures that lead to such disvalues. Not only through the fact of having brought the world into existence, but also through having created processes to which disvalues were intrinsic.

However, I also recognise that gradually humans evolved the power of self-conscious freely choosing agency. This was the emergent power to make (while still somewhat constrained by genetic and environmental factors) both loving choices, out of a life of self-giving love,[7] and also evil choices. Those choices are real, and I discuss them further in Chapter 4. What they do not account for is the general suffering of the non-human world as part of the evolutionary process (as opposed to specific ecological harms that humans have subsequently committed), and harms

[3] The term 'disvalue', when applied to the natural world, stems from an important analysis by H. Rolston, III, 'Disvalues in Nature', *The Monist* 75 (1992), 250–78.

[4] C. Southgate, 'Re-Reading Genesis, John and Job: A Christian's Response to Darwinism', *Zygon* 46 (2011), 370–95.

[5] Moreover, a range of texts in the Hebrew Bible suggests that predation exists within the creative providence of God; see, e.g., Psalm 104.21, Job 38.39–41.

[6] On the reality of suffering among non-human creatures, see Southgate, *Groaning*, 3–4. On extinction as disvalue, see ibid., 14–15.

[7] Southgate, *Groaning*, chapters 4 and 6, and Chapter 5 of this book.

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directly attributable to the natural processes through which the Earth functions as a life-bearing planet.

Writing well before those processes came to be understood through the work of Darwin and his successors, that extraordinary visionary William Blake already poses the sharp questions that must bother Christians about the ambiguity of the world. In his poem 'The Tyger' Blake asks, 'what art, what anvil' formed tigerness? Did he who made the Lamb make the tiger? And perhaps most difficult of all, did God 'smile his work to see', though that work gives rise to a life of subtle stalking and terrible, flesh-tearing violence?[8] My conclusion, arrived at after a great deal of pondering, is that God's was the 'art', God's the 'anvil' (if so the process of natural selection may be termed), and that God does indeed smile on God's work in the tiger, even while lamenting and suffering with the struggle and trauma of the prey animal.[9]

The present study is in a way the complement to my previous book, *The Groaning of Creation*. In that book I was concerned with the enterprise of theodicy. I sought to answer the question how, given the reasoning just presented (especially in relation to the suffering of non-human creatures) can Christians continue to hold to the goodness of God? I provided a 'compound theodicy' in respect of 'evolutionary evil', including the following theological moves: constraint on the ways God could create a fruitful world; compassionate divine accompanying of each suffering creature; a final state of consummation from which all suffering had been removed; and a human vocation to act as partners, even co-redeemers, in the ultimate liberation of creation.[10]

I am concerned in the present project not so much with *explaining* the co-existence of the disvalues in creation with the goodness of God as with *facing up to* and *relating to* an ambiguous world, and seeking to explore and relate to its Creator and Redeemer.[11] So I am in need of a language for expressing how we might read God's ways with this ambiguous world, and how we might better understand the human call to respond to God.

[8] W. Blake, *Poetry and Prose of William Blake,* ed. G. Keynes (New York: Random House, 1946), 72–3.

[9] Southgate, *Groaning*, chapter 4.

[10] Ibid., chapters 1, 3–5, 7.

[11] This is a real challenge for much Christian worship. As Walter Brueggemann writes: Worship that is always 'happy, positive and upbeat . . . is destructive because it requires persons to engage in enormous denial and pretense about how life really is.' *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 47.

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This language has to be capable of encompassing God's creating of this ambiguous world, God's great reconciling act in Christ, and the final promise of an eschatological state from which all struggle and suffering have been eliminated.

That of course is a massive task, and even great systematic treatments ultimately seem, as Aquinas came to know, 'like straw', in the face of the task of speaking of God. This present modest study seeks first to face honestly the ambiguities of the world as God created it, and second to propose a set of lenses through which God's ways with an ambiguous world may be explored.

DISCOURSE ON DIVINE GLORY

In this book I re-present an ancient theological concept as a vehicle for speaking of God's self-communication to the world. This vehicle is *the concept of divine glory*. That may seem an odd choice as a way of engaging with ugliness bound up with beauty, but I suggest it is a very generative choice, for the following reasons:

1. Divine glory has about it an inalienable element of mystery, which is very important in seeking to find language to address God's ways with a suffering world. Glory is not something that will ever be neatly reducible to a straightforward proposition. Glory is always more, and other, and more dangerous.
2. The root from which is derived the principal term for divine glory in the Hebrew Bible, *kavōd*,[12] is associated with weight, importance, significance, rather than beauty or radiance.[13] Glory is therefore a discourse that can encompass the ambiguity of the world, and the ugliness of creaturely suffering, and face the possibility of God's involvement in, and even responsibility for, that suffering.[14]

[12] Variously transliterated with the consonants kbd or kvd, and with various accenting of the vowels.

[13] David Brown associates *kavōd* with 'a "weight" or what overwhelms . . . light or darkness might thus have very similar effects. Both brilliant light and impenetrable darkness might "weigh" or "press down" on the human observer in similar ways, creating awe or fear.' *Divine Generosity and Human Creativity: Theology through Symbol, Painting and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2017), 82–3.

[14] The greatest modern exponent of the theology of glory, Hans Urs von Balthasar, makes in effect the same move when he distances himself from 'aesthetic theology', which might explain away tragedy and death within an overall teleology, in favour of a theological aesthetics. Such an aesthetics cannot allow itself to 'exclude the element of the ugly, of the

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Glory is as Jason Fout has said 'prominent in first-order discourse about God',[15] but it is not a term that is well understood. Christopher Morgan notes that it is 'one of the hardest Christian terms to define'.[16] I want to suggest that the concept goes well beyond the familiar connotation of bright and beautiful light, and that it can convey the apprehension of ambiguity in the world that is my concern here.

When the seraphim in Isaiah 6 cry out that the whole earth is full of God's glory, that acclamation can be understood as the earth being full of the importance of God, the weight of the divine reality. The term *glory* is not simply testament to the beautiful aspects of the world. Indeed the vision of Isaiah is full of smoke and dread. And in the New Testament, Christ comes into his full glory at his 'hour', which is seen by the writer of the Fourth Gospel as beginning with Christ's Passion.[17] So divine glory encompasses not only light and radiance but also pain and suffering, degradation and death.

It seems to me therefore that the language of glory (as distinct from beauty)[18] provides a vehicle for speaking honestly of the ambiguity of the created world and of human experience under God. Also, glory in the Scriptures is typically something apprehensible (usually by sight though occasionally by another sense[19]), therefore something that can be contemplated.[20] Through that contemplation, that search, more can be understood of the God who is ultimately mysterious and always beyond our understanding.

It remains to ask – what understanding of glory, a notoriously elusive concept, is both faithful to its use in Scripture and in the best of modern theology, and is also able to contain the ambiguity of the natural world,

tragically fragmented, of the demonic, but must come to terms with these': *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics,* Vol. 1, Seeing the Form, transl. E. Leiva-Merikakis, ed. J. Fessio, S.J. and J. Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 460.

15 J. Fout, *Fully Alive: The Glory of God and the Human Creature in Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Theological Exegesis of Scripture* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 26.

16 C. W. Morgan, 'Towards a Theology of the Glory of God' in *The Glory of God,* ed. C. W. Morgan and R. A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 153–87, at 156.

17 John 3.14; 12.23. See Chapter 2 for further exploration of this theme in John.

18 See Chapter 1 for further discussion of the distinctions between glory and beauty.

19 See, e.g., Sir 17.13 'their ears heard the glory of his voice'.

20 Carey Newman, insisting that *kavōd* in the Hebrew Bible 'cannot be reduced to a light phenomenon' continues that *kavōd*, 'when used in reference to Yahweh, is best semantically defined as revealed, visual, divine presence'. C. C. Newman, *Paul's Glory-Christology: Tradition and Rhetoric* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 137, n. 7.

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the suffering of Christ on the Cross, and the eventual Christian hope for the redemption of all things?

As I shall show in Chapter 2, the biblical witness to the glory of the Lord begins (canonically) with various appearances to the Hebrews in the wilderness. That glory is described as being 'in the cloud' (Ex 16.10), 'like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain' (24.17), and later filling the tabernacle (40.34), and appearing at the tent of meeting (Nm 14.10).

In interpreting texts of this kind, and in contemplating the natural world, seeking to understand something of God, there seem to me to be three basic options, three ways of expressing the relation of apprehensible indications of deity both to the divine and to the material. The first is a naïvely realist one, which sees deity directly and unreservedly expressed in physical manifestations. On this understanding Yahweh literally was the 'devouring fire' in texts such as Exodus 24.17.[21] That understanding may indeed represent an important early strand in Hebrew tradition, may indeed lie behind the introduction of the weightiness term *kavōd* as a way of expressing divine presence. However, such a local, physical understanding of God clearly struggles to incorporate transcendence, the sense that the divine *kavōd* is important across the whole world (as in Is 6.3), and that that importance in turn reflects something profoundly ineffable, something beyond human comprehension. The creator-creature distinction is necessarily compromised in such a naïve view. To the extent that this naïve realism may have been present in early expressions of Hebrew religion, it is countered (and necessarily so) by the apophatic instinct that emerged in the tradition, and which we see in texts such as Exodus 33.18–21, 1 Kings 19.11–12, and Ezekiel 1.28, and eventually in a reluctance even to write the divine name.

The second possibility is a Platonic metaphysics, in which the material is a copy of a more perfect spiritual world. In such a scheme 'the ideal is attained by jettisoning and devaluing material existence while the soul seeks unity with the Infinite'.[22] This is a very compelling scheme – hence its huge influence on Western thought ever since Plato. But this matter-spirit hierarchy is not, in the last analysis, the scheme to which the Incarnation points us. Felix Ó Murchadha notes that at the Incarnation:

[21] Though the texts themselves often undercut such naïve realism, Exodus 24.17 reads 'The *appearance* of the glory of the Lord was *like* a devouring fire'; cf. also Ezekiel 1.28: 'This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord'.

[22] S. M. Garrett, *God's Beauty-in-Act: Participation in God's Suffering Glory* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Books, 2013), 121.

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worldly hierarchies are undermined: the Word has become flesh, the immortal dies, the most high is as a slave. Such an incarnational logic . . . stands opposed to a sacred logic, which still governs Plato's texts . . . Christianity is profane precisely in its refusal of that logic.[23]

One danger of a Platonic scheme within Christianity is, as James K. A. Smith notes, that of making 'materiality and embodiment a kind of "necessary evil"',[24] rather than something primordially affirmed good, and of which the goodness is reaffirmed in the Incarnation. Such schemes, then, will always tend to be' 'overweighted' towards the transcendent and treat the material only as instrumental.

That brings us to what I see as the third major possibility – that of a semiotic scheme, in which the material world – not as a sort of expedient but as a necessary outworking of the character of God – carries *signs* of the divine reality. In an important survey of the glory of the Lord in the Hebrew Bible, Carey Newman stresses that the Lord is not localized where the glory of the Lord (*kavōd Yahweh*) is seen; rather, the latter only appears at the 'periphery or edge' of 'where Yahweh is thought to be'.[25] Newman continues, 'Yahweh is never said to be located in *kavōd*'.[26] The glory functions rather as a sign of the divine. This is an insight of the first importance to an incarnational, sacramental faith.[27] In a helpful little article on sacramentality, Patrick Sherry draws on von Balthasar's essay on prayer, in which von Balthasar contrasts a Platonist spirituality, which will really desire directness of spiritual engagement with God, with one that accepts the mediating role of signs in the material world.[28]

Those signs are, however, not rightly discerned by everyone – even in respect of the Incarnate Christ, *the* great sign of the nature of God, the writer of the Fourth Gospel can note that 'he came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him' (Jn 1.11).[29] Even the ultimate

[23] F. Ó Murchadha, *A Phenomenology of the Christian Life: Glory and Night* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 6. As Garrett observes, the goodness of creation is always in question in a Platonic scheme; *God's Beauty-in-Act*, 121.

[24] J. K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of the Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2002), 176.

[25] Newman, *Paul's Glory-Christology*, 21.

[26] Ibid., 23.

[27] As David Jones recognised in his essay 'Art and Sacrament', *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings*, ed. H. Grisewood (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 143–79.

[28] P. Sherry, 'The Sacramentality of All Things', *New Blackfriars* 89 (2008), 575–90.

[29] Cf. also Simeon's prophecy in Luke 2.34: 'This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed'.

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demonstration of love, on Calvary, can be rejected, as Luke describes it being rejected by one of the two thieves (Lk 23.39).[30]

I pursue the question of how the natural world may be contemplated, and how that contemplation relates to the various objections to the enterprise of natural theology, in Chapter 3. But first I propose a way of construing divine glory as providing a language for this semiotic understanding of God's self-communication to the world.

DIVINE GLORY AS SIGN

My principal understanding of divine glory is as follows:

1. Because the depth of the divine reality is utterly beyond human knowing, and because glory is always represented in the Bible as something apprehensible, I propose that *the apprehension of divine glory is typically the perception of a sign or array of signs pointing beyond itself to the unknowable depths of the reality of God.*
2. That sign, being a self-communication of the divine nature, *always calls for a human response*.[31]

There is of course a Plato-influenced ontology at work in this scheme, in the sense that the material acts as sign of what transcends both the material and the human comprehension. What I seek to avoid, however, is the implicit or explicit denigration of the material that can be a feature of Platonic schemes. So Simone Weil, one of the most important theological Platonists of the twentieth century, associates 'gravity' with the risk of 'baseness',[32] whereas I use 'weight' or 'depth' of reality to connote

[30] As Douglas Dales points out, writing of the theology of Michael Ramsey, the differing response of the thieves 'reveals the power of divine love, and its agony in weakness, unable to force repentance, but able to save to the uttermost those who turn to God': *Glory: The Spiritual Theology of Michael Ramsey* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 29.

[31] So also Richard R. Melick, Jr., 'The glory of God is the self-revelation of his character (being) and the visible and energetic (power) presence of God . . . God's glory, then, is always dynamic. It produces a response from those who witness it.' 'The Glory of God in the Synoptic Gospels, Acts and the General Epistles': *The Glory of God*, ed. C. W. Morgan and R. A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 79–106, at 80.

[32] S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, transl. E. Crawford and M. von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2000 [1952]), 2.

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what can be partially explored through contemplation (humble and faithful interpretation of signs) but ultimately transcends comprehension.[33]

I propose then a new interpretative strategy for approaching the concept of glory in the Scriptures and in the contemporary world. In work on ecological reading of the Pauline epistles,[34] colleagues and I articulated the concept of a 'hermeneutical lens', a way of reading texts and events to bring out issues of contemporary importance. In the current book, *our principal lens for reading divine glory will be as a sign of the divine reality*. In Chapter 2 this lens is used to interpret biblical texts on glory. In Chapter 3 signs of God in the natural world are read in terms of glory.

In Chapter 2 I seek to show that a semiotic reading of biblical texts on glory emphasizes helpfully both what is revealed and what is concealed in the manifestation of divine glory. The texts on divine glory in Exodus are particularly telling in this regard. At the same time they show that this interpretation of divine glory has to be more flexible than a straightforward semiotic interpretation, because sometimes the reference of the term is more directly to the divine essence, rather than to a sign of God's nature. Also, application of our lens to the ministry and Passion of Christ, in particular through the reading of the New Testament's most explicitly semiotic text, the Fourth Gospel, enables us to see glory even within darkness, pain and degradation. And further application of the lens to the life of the believer, as explored in the Pauline letters, suggests possibilities for the Christian's participation in the divine semiosis (Chapter 5).

It is important to clarify what type of interpretative strategy this is. Horrell et al. write that:

> a kind of acknowledged circularity is necessarily intrinsic to a fruitful hermeneutic: *hermeneutical lenses are at one and the same time products of the tradition and the means for its critical rereading and reconfiguration*. Equally crucial, however, is the impact of the relevant contemporary context in generating the particular priorities which shape the formulation of hermeneutical lenses.[35]

[33] An understanding influenced by the apophatic tradition that stems from the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. For an introduction to this tradition, see D. Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[34] D. G. Horrell, C. Hunt, and C. Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

[35] Horrell et al., *Greening Paul,* 43, emphasis in original. We also make there the important point that any given hermeneutical lens will bring some aspects of the object of study into focus, while leaving others blurred. Ibid., 42.

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The contemporary context shapes this hermeneutical lens in two important ways. First, it includes the analysis of semiotic categories developed by C. S. Peirce,[36] and helpfully re-explored in recent work by my colleague Andrew Robinson.[37] Application of these categories to a semiotic reading of glory will lead in the course of the book to some new ways of expressing God's interaction with the world. Second, the natural sciences, especially evolutionary biology and plate tectonics, force us to acknowledge God's involvement as creator in processes that occasion great suffering. This leads to a requirement for a richer understanding of the mystery of the divine reality than is seen in much Christian theology, which has, as I began by indicating, a tendency to 'cherry-pick' what it shows off from the ways of God with the world.

For the Christian, such a semiotic understanding of divine glory as I am advancing here comes easily, because Christ functions as the quintessential example of such a sign of the divine reality. So in John 1.14 KJV 'we beheld his glory', which is described as being 'as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth'. In other words, 'we' saw the weightiness, the importance, the 'significance' of Jesus.[38] The author of the Fourth Gospel saw this importance as being that of an utterly reliable sign of the character of God – so that to see the Son is to see the Father (Jn 14.9), to know of God's character that though it is beyond our knowing, it is full of grace and truth.[39]

A related thought is expressed by Paul at 2 Corinthians 4.6, when he writes: 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness",

[36] See T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[37] A. Robinson, *God and the World of Signs: Trinity, Evolution, and the Metaphysical Semiotics of C. S. Peirce* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); A. Robinson, *Traces of the Trinity: Signs, Sacraments and Sharing God's Life* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2014).

[38] David Jones quotes Maurice de la Taille to the effect that Jesus at the Last Supper 'placed himself in the order of signs' ('Art as Sacrament', 179). But what the Johannine Prologue seems to suggest is that Jesus did this throughout his ministry. For Rowan Williams, Christ reveals 'the divine character, the inner integrity of God', 'Theology in the Face of Christ', unpublished lecture given on 4 October 2004, rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org.

[39] As Frances Young puts it, writing of the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, 'the hidden Father [is] made luminously manifest in the infinite icon of [Christ's] beauty': *God's Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 173. To say this is not to seek to reduce the complexity of Christ's life, or to oversimplify the character of God. As I note further in Chapter 5, Jesus could be stern, seemingly impossibly demanding, even (at first) excluding of the needy as in the story of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7. In speaking of him as a sign of the Father we should not, I believe, flatten out or seek to explain away these difficulties.

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