

## Presidential Address

### TURN TO THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH: RETRIEVAL OF THE COSMOS IN THEOLOGY

*Prefatory Note.* Giving a presidential address is an awesome task, starting with the choice of topic. In the current ecclesial climate I was tempted to focus on the situation of theology or the role of the theologian, both under duress. However, the words of David Power, this year's John Courtney Murray award winner, came to mind. To a faculty demoralized by the unjust removal of one of our colleagues, he as chair of department never ceased repeating, "The best offense is to keep on theologizing." Subvert repression by moving ahead. This is not to say that taking a stand on internal matters is not occasionally necessary. It is. But while theologians have life and breath we must keep on pressing forward, practicing our craft, seeking understanding of the faith for the sake of our own and coming generations. Guided by that wisdom, I have chosen to address the Catholic Theological Society of America on a theological issue that quite literally is coming to be a matter of life or death, namely, the natural world.

#### INTRODUCTION

As the twenty-first century rapidly approaches, there is a vital theme largely absent from the thinking of most North American theologians, namely, the whole world as God's good creation. There are a few notable exceptions among our members, but surveying our work as a whole would quickly make this absence clear. This neglect of "the cosmos" by recent decades of mainstream Catholic theology has two deleterious results. It enfeebles theology in its basic task of interpreting the *whole* of reality in the light of faith, thereby compromising the intellectual integrity of theology. And it blocks what should be theology's powerful contribution to the religious praxis of justice and mercy for the threatened earth, so necessary at this moment of our planet's unprecedented ecological crisis, thereby endangering the moral integrity of theology. In this address I am going to try to persuade you of the following thesis: as theologians of the twenty-first century, we need to complete our recent anthropological turns by turning to the entire interconnected community of life and the network of life-systems in which the human race is embedded, all of which has its own intrinsic value before God. In a word, we need to convert our intelligence to the heavens and the earth.

## REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING THE COSMOS

It is instructive to remember the long-standing Catholic heritage that held high the importance of the cosmos in theology, and to examine how and why it got lost.

Theology is potentially the most comprehensive of fields. If there is only one God, and if this God is the Creator of all that exists, then everything is encompassed in the scope of theology's interest. Traditionally this is expressed in the idea that theology deals with three major areas: God, humanity, and world, a metaphysical trinity, so to speak. Nor can these elements be separated, for, as the history of theology makes evident, every understanding of God corresponds to a particular understanding of the natural world and the human.

Early Christian and medieval theologians took this view of things for granted, interpreting the natural world as God's good creation, a revealing pathway to the knowledge of God, and a partner in salvation. It was common for them to say that God has put two books at our disposal, the book of sacred scripture and the book of nature; if we learn how to read the book of nature aright, we will hear God's word and be led to knowledge about God's wisdom, power, and love.<sup>1</sup>

The conscious endeavor to integrate the cosmos into theology reached its zenith in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Inspired by the translation of ancient Greek scientific works along with works by Jewish and Muslim scholars, medieval theologians applied themselves to constructing an all-embracing Christian view of the world, writing innumerable treatises on the universe, on the world, on the picture of the world, on the philosophy of the world, on the nature of things. Their endeavor to interpret the whole world in the light of Christian faith gave vitality to their work and inspired impressive systems in which cosmology, anthropology, and theology of God formed a harmonious unity. Some examples:

• In her *summa* of Christian doctrine (*Scivias*) Hildegard of Bingen sees the whole universe imbued with the love of Christ, the sun of justice, who shines with "the brilliance of burning charity of such great glory that every creature is illumined by the brightness of this light."<sup>2</sup> In the midst of this marvelous vision stand human beings, "made in a wondrous way with great glory from the dust of the earth, and so intertwined with the strengths of the rest of creation that we can never be separated from them."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For this and what follows, see the study by Max Wilder, *The Theologian and His Universe: Theology and Cosmology from the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Paul Dunphy (New York: Seabury, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist, 1980) 94.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 98; adapted for inclusivity.

•Bonaventure instructs the soul journeying toward God to see the universe as a wonderful work of art in which one recognizes traces of its Maker:

Whoever is not enlightened by the splendor of created things is blind; whoever is not aroused by the sound of their voice is deaf; whoever does not praise God for all these creatures is mute; whoever after so much evidence does not recognize the First Principle is a fool [*stultus est* = an idiot].<sup>4</sup>

•Aquinas believes that theologians ought quite consciously to study nature and include a consideration of nature in their work. His own writing is pervaded with a cosmic sense as well as instructive analogies from the natural world, from fire to urine. Indeed, the whole cosmos itself is an astonishing image of God:

God brought things into being in order that the divine goodness might be communicated to creatures and be represented by them. And because the divine goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, God produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting in one in the representation of divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided. Thus the whole universe together participates in divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any single creature whatever.<sup>5</sup>

Medieval theology brought God, humanity, and the world into an ordered harmony. The resulting synthesis not only shaped art, architecture, liturgy, and poetry, it also remained for centuries a guiding influence in Catholic theology even when its underlying world picture was discredited by scientific advance.

And scientific advance there was, as the names of Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and later Darwin, Einstein, Heisenberg, and many others imply. Strange as it may seem in the light of a fifteen-hundred-year-old heritage, after the Reformation neither Catholic nor Protestant theology kept pace with new scientific worldviews. Instead, they focused on God and the self, leaving the world to the side.

Why this should have been the case has not been sufficiently studied. One factor frequently cited is the seventeenth-century ecclesiastical censure of Galileo, whose investigations challenged the medieval picture of the universe as geocentric, static, and perfectly ordered. According to John Paul II, speaking on

<sup>4</sup>"Qui igitur tantis rerum creatarum splendoribus non illustratur caecus est; qui tantis clamoribus non evigilat surdus est; qui ex omnibus his effectibus Deum non laudat mutus est; qui ex tantis indiciis primum principium non advertit stultus est." *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, c. 1, no. 15; adapted from *The Mind's Journey to God*, trans. Lawrence Cunningham (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup>*Summa theologiae* I, q. 47, a. 1. The first chapters of the *Summa contra gentiles* book II are even entitled this way: "That the consideration of creatures is useful for instruction of faith" (ch. 2); "That knowledge of the nature of creatures serves to destroy errors concerning God" (ch. 3), wherein it is written that "errors about creatures sometimes lead one astray from the truth of faith" (3.1).

the occasion of Galileo's rehabilitation, at the heart of the conflict was the fact that to church leaders "geocentrism seemed to be part of scriptural teaching itself."<sup>6</sup> Wedded as they were to a literal interpretation of scripture, they thought that since the Bible assumes the centrality of the earth, this was a doctrine of the faith. To have avoided the conflict "it would have been necessary all at once to overcome habits of thought, and to devise a way of teaching capable of enlightening the people of God." But most of them did not know how to do so.

Under pressure of ecclesiastical censure, Catholic theologians largely ignored the questions arising from a heliocentric and evolutionary world. Theology became estranged from ongoing thought about the universe. Even so, even as the medieval world picture disintegrated and was no longer available as a cosmological framework for Christian doctrine, the spirit of that great synthesis lingered like a ghost in the neoscholastic manuals. Those of us in the Catholic Theological Society of America of a certain age, who first studied theology before the Second Vatican Council, imbibed a sense of the cosmos with our first lessons. The implicit world picture may have been untenable, but at least there was a natural world there worthy of some consideration before God.

Vatican II marked a turning point in the saga of Catholic theology, directing thought with new openness toward dialogue with the modern world and with ecumenical and interreligious partners. Far from putting Catholic thought in touch with Christian theology that had kept pace with scientific advance, however, our first contacts with Protestantism heightened our own absorption with anthropology. For under pressure of the Reformation's great *solas*—Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone—Protestant thought had taken an intensely anthropocentric turn. Revelation discloses a gracious God bent over our sinfulness and justifying us in Christ: theology's vision stays focused on humanity. Furthermore, the Protestant thought we met was grappling with the modern discovery of history. History, interpreted through the lens of the Bible as linear time, was the locus of God's mighty acts. By contrast, nature was the realm of cyclic time where pagan deities were invoked. Nature thus came to be treated as simply a stage on which salvation history was played out. With the outstanding exception of American process thought, cosmology, for all practical purposes, had disappeared as a partner and subject of theology.

In the decades since the council, Catholic theology has moved rapidly away from neoscholasticism, going through a series of turns: the turn to the subject in transcendental theology; the turn to the subject under threat or defeated, in political theology; the linguistic turn, reintegrating the subject to community; the turn to the nonperson through the praxis of justice in liberation theologies as well as in feminist, womanist, mujerista, and Third World women's theologies. In this

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<sup>6</sup>Quotations from John Paul II: "Lessons of the Galileo Case," *Origins* 22/22 (12 November 1992): 369-73. For what follows, see also Cardinal Paul Poupard, "Galileo: Report on Papal Commission Findings," *ibid.*, 374-75.

richness of theology's flourishing, however, it seems to me that something has been lost, namely, even that ghost of outdated cosmology that used to hover in our vision. Today one could go through a whole course of study in college, seminary, or university and never encounter the subject. And yet nature is one of the three main pillars of theology, along with God and humanity. What is needed now, I am convinced, is yet one more turn, a fully inclusive turn to the heavens and the earth, a return to cosmology, in order to restore fullness of vision and get theology back on the track from which it fell off a few hundred years ago.

At least two reasons persuade us to make this turn: the intellectual integrity and the moral integrity of theology, one not strictly separable from the other.

#### COSMOLOGY AND THE INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY OF THEOLOGY

Since theology is the study of God and all things in the light of God, shrinking attention to humanity apart from the rest of creation simply does not do justice to theology's intrinsic mission. Even more, ignoring the cosmos has a deleterious effect insofar as it paves the way for theology to retreat to otherworldliness, disparage matter, body, and the earth, and offer interpretations of reality far removed from the way things actually work. We must engage the world.

When theology today opens its door to the natural world, it is met with a wondrous array of insights. Medieval cosmology, which saw the world as geocentric, static, and unchanging, hierarchically ordered and centered on humanity, is gone. But gone too is the Enlightenment prejudice that held a mechanistic and deterministic view of nature inimicable in many ways to religious values. Instead, contemporary science is discovering a natural world that is surprisingly dynamic, organic, self-organizing, indeterminate, chancy, boundless, and open to the mystery of reality. There are still many gaps and uncertainties, but enormous discoveries are being made in our day.<sup>7</sup>

•The world is almost unimaginably old: about fifteen billion years ago a single numinous speck exploded in an outpouring of matter and energy, shaping a universe that is still expanding. Five billion years ago an aging, first-generation

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<sup>7</sup>Several key works that deal directly with scientific concepts are Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990–1991); Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine, and Human* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Ted Peters, ed., *Cosmos as Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989); John Polkinghorne, *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); and the series edited by Robert Russell et al. and published by the Vatican Observatory (Vatican City) and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (Berkeley): *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding* (1988), *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (1993), and *Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (1995).

star exploded, spewing out elements that coalesced to form our sun and its planets, including Earth. (The human race is only recently arrived.)

•The world is almost incomprehensibly *large*: more than 100 billion galaxies, each comprised of 100 billion stars, and no one knows how many moons and planets, all of this visible and audible matter being only a fraction of the matter in the universe. (We humans inhabit a small planet orbiting a medium-sized star toward the edge of one spiral galaxy.)

•The world is almost mind-numbingly *dynamic*: out of the Big Bang, the stars; out of the stardust, the earth; out of the earth, single-celled living creatures; out of the evolutionary life and death of these creatures, human beings with a consciousness and freedom that concentrates the self-transcendence of matter itself. (Human beings are the universe become conscious of itself. We are the cantors of the universe.)

•The world is almost unfathomably *organic*: everything is connected with everything else; nothing conceivable is isolated. In the words of scientist and theologian Arthur Peacocke,

Every atom of iron in our blood would not have been there had it not been produced in some galactic explosion billions of years ago and eventually condensed to form the iron in the crust of the earth from which we have emerged.<sup>8</sup> (We are made of stardust.)

We are also biologically interconnected: human genetic structure closely parallels the DNA of other creatures—bacteria, grasses, bluebirds, horses, the great gray whales. We have all evolved from common ancestors and are kin in the shared history of life.

These and other discoveries of contemporary science coalesce into a picture of the world calling for new interpretations, especially as classical dualisms can no longer be maintained. What, for example, is the proper relationship of spirit and matter if they are in effect the inside and outside of the same phenomena?<sup>9</sup> And—a burning question—what is humanity's place in the great scheme of things? The ancient concept of the hierarchy of being ranks things according to their participation in spirit, from nonorganic to grades of organic life, all under the sway of the Source of Being (from the pebble to the peach to the poodle to the person to the powers and principalities). In this hierarchy, human beings with their rational souls are superior to the natural world, a ranking that easily gives rise to arrogance, one root of the present ecological crisis. Consider for a

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<sup>8</sup>Arthur Peacocke, "Theology and Science Today," in *Cosmos as Creation*, ed. Peters, 32.

<sup>9</sup>See the insightful essay of Karl Rahner: "The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, trans. Karl and Boniface Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 153-77. The works of Teilhard de Chardin are prophetic in this respect: cf. *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) and *Hymn of the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

moment, however, green plants. Predating the human race by millennia, green plants take in carbon dioxide and give off oxygen. Through this process of photosynthesis they create the atmosphere that makes the life of land animals possible. Human beings could not exist without these plants that neither think nor move. They, on the other hand, get along fine without us. Wherein, then, lies superiority?<sup>10</sup> In an interdependent system, no part is intrinsically higher or lower. Yes, more complex life represents critical evolutionary breakthrough, but not such as to remove humanity from essential dependence upon previously evolved creatures. The challenge is to redesign the hierarchy of being into a circle of the community of life. With a kind of species humility, we need to reimagine systematically the uniqueness of being human in the context of our profound kinship with the rest of nature.

In addition to prodding us to rethink basic categories, the new cosmology also offers a new framework within which to consider typical theological questions.<sup>11</sup> Each of our subspecialties is profoundly affected. In such an old, vast, dynamic, and organic world, how and for what reasons does one come to belief in God (foundational theology or apologetics)? What wisdom about the world can be found in biblical and historical authors and the writings of the world's other religious traditions? What does the book of nature in our day teach us about the mystery of God, the Creator of this magnificence, who continues to work creatively within its open and unpredictable systems? How to interpret the irreversible entrance of God into precisely *this* world through the incarnation of divine Wisdom and the transformation of *this* flesh in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? How to understand that the love revealed in Jesus' healings and feedings

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<sup>10</sup>This example is taken from Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 67. This scholar has contributed early, insightfully, and voluminously to ecological theology: see her *New Woman, New Earth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975) ch. 8; *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) chs. 3, 9, 10, and postscript; and *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992).

<sup>11</sup>It is good to report that the work has already begun. See, e.g., university symposiums: David Burrell, ed., *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) and Kevin Irwin, ed., *Preserving the Creation: Environmental Theology and Ethics* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994); pivotal essays: David Tracy, "Cosmology and Christian Hope," in his *On Naming the Present* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1994) 73-81, and Michael Himes and Kenneth Himes, "Creation and an Environmental Ethic," in their *Fullness of Faith* (New York: Paulist, 1993) 104-24; and book-length treatments: John Haught, *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose* (New York: Paulist, 1993); Tony Kelly, *An Expanding Theology: Faith in a World of Connections* (Newtown, Australia: E. J. Dwyer, 1993)—a little summa; and Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1995).

and poured out on the cross is the very same "Love that moves the sun and the other stars,"<sup>12</sup> so that Dante's vision is no pious lyricism but a theological truth? How to interpret the Spirit of the baptismal font as none other than the very Giver of Life to all the creatures of the rain forest (another undeveloped aspect of pneumatology to which this convention's theme has been drawing our attention)? Whence evil in such a self-organizing universe, and how does sin gain a foothold? Why suffering? How to preach salvation as healing and rescue for the whole world rather than an a-cosmic relation to God? How to let go of contempt for matter, the body and its sexuality, and revalue them as good and blessed? How to interpret human beings as primarily "earthlings" rather than tourists or aliens whose true home is elsewhere?<sup>13</sup> How to conceive of the church, its mission and structures in an evolving universe? How to recognize the sacraments as symbols of divine graciousness in a universe which is itself a sacrament? How to hope for the eschatological redemption of the whole material universe, even now groaning? What paths of spirituality does the new cosmology suggest?

Not least, how is moral decision-making affected? In the classic synthesis, there is a natural order in the world established by God and knowable by the human mind. To act morally or "in accord with natural law" is to transpose the order in the cosmos into human conduct, doing or avoiding acts according to their coherence with that order. How is this pattern of thought affected by the realization that the laws of nature are themselves not eternal principles but only approximations read off from regularities, and that their working is shot through with chance and indeterminacy?

Bringing cosmology into view, I am suggesting, shifts the axis of all theological questions, setting an agenda for years to come. Notice that one does not have to deal with the cosmos directly; rather, it provides both framework and substantive insights useful for *fides quaerens intellectum*. The intellectual integrity of theology, as public discourse of a North American community responsible to articulate faith in a global society, requires vigorous response to this intellectual challenge.

### COSMOLOGY AND THE MORAL INTEGRITY OF THEOLOGY

Besides an intellectual reason for theology's turn to the heavens and the earth, there is a compelling moral reason as well. In our day the human race is inflicting devastation on the life-systems and other living species of our home planet, havoc that has reached crisis proportions and even in some places ecological collapse. Due to the unceasing demands of consumerist economies on the

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<sup>12</sup>Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Dorothy Sayers and Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1962) canto 33, line 145.

<sup>13</sup>This is the expression of Sallie McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993) 84-98.

one hand and burgeoning population on the other, we are exploiting earth's resources without regard for long-term sustainability.

This assault on the earth results now in damage to the systems that sustain life: holes in the ozone layer, clear-cut forests, drained wetlands, denuded grasslands and soils, polluted air, rivers, and coastal waters, poisoned oceans, disrupted habitats, and hovering over all the threat of nuclear conflagration and the reality of nuclear waste. The widespread destruction of ecosystems has as its flip side the extinction of species with a consequent loss of earth's biodiversity. By a conservative estimate, in the last quarter of the twentieth century (1975–2000), twenty percent of all living species will have become extinct. We are living in a time of a great dying off. Life forms that have taken millions of years to evolve, magnificent animals and intricate plants, are disappearing forever, due to human actions. Their perishing sends an early warning signal of the death of the planet itself as a dwelling place for life. In the blunt language of the World Council of Churches Canberra assembly, "The stark sign of our times is a planet in peril at our hands."<sup>14</sup>

This ongoing destruction of God's good earth, when perceived through the lens of theology, bears the mark of deep sinfulness.<sup>15</sup> Through greed, self-interest, and injustice, human beings are violently bringing disfigurement and death to this living, evolving planet which ultimately comes from the creative hands of God who looks upon it as "very good" (Gen 1:31). Ecocide, biocide, geocide—these new terms attempt to name the killing of ecosystems and species that are meant to reflect the glory of God but instead end up broken or extinct. One of the "books" that teaches about God is being ruined, and this is a matter for theological concern, having even the character of a moral imperative.

In light of the devastation, the turn to the heavens and the earth bears the marks of genuine conversion of mind and heart, with repentance for the lack of love and the violence visited on the living planet. As we turn, we will be looking for thought patterns that will transform our species-centeredness and enable us to grant not just instrumental worth but intrinsic value to the natural world. This is a condition for the possibility of extending vigorous moral consideration to the whole earth, now under threat.<sup>16</sup> If nature with its own inherent value before God

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<sup>14</sup>"Giver of Life—Sustain Your Creation," in *Signs of the Spirit*, official report of the WCC's seventh assembly in Canberra, ed. Michael Kinnamon (Geneva: WCC, 1991) 55.

<sup>15</sup>See Sallie McFague's shrewd analysis of ecological sin in her *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1993) 112–29; her earlier work, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) is filled with data about the ecological crisis and offers a rethinking of God in its light.

<sup>16</sup>This intrinsic value is well attested in biblical theologies. God covenants with the earth as well as with humans; prophets invoke judgment over all that destroys life; Wisdom's playful delight in the natural world is not dependent on human participation. As oppressed people cry out to God, so too the earth can groan, lament, and shout out; conversely, rejoicing clothes the hills, the desert blossoms, the meadows and valleys sing

be the new poor, then our compassion is called into play. Solidarity with victims, option for the poor, and action on behalf of justice widen out from human beings to embrace life-systems and other species to ensure vibrant communion in life for all.

Moral reflection about the natural world under threat becomes more complex when we take into consideration the organic links that exist between exploitation of the earth and injustice among human beings themselves. The voices of the poor and of women bring to light the fact that structures of social domination are chief among the ways that abuse of the earth is accomplished. Attending to these voices prevents retrieval of the cosmos from being tagged as the interest of only a first-world, male, academic elite.

*The Poor.* Economic poverty coincides with ecological poverty, for the poor suffer disproportionately from environmental destruction.<sup>17</sup> In so-called Third World countries, the onset of development through capitalism brings deforestation, soil erosion, and polluted waters, which in turn lead to the disruption of local cycles of nature and the sustenance economies on which most poor people depend. Sheer human misery results. Again, plantation farming of commodity crops for export not only destroys biodiversity but also creates wealth for a few from the backbreaking labor of a class of poor people. Correlatively, lack of land reform pushes dispossessed rural peoples to the edges of cultivated land where, in order to stay alive, they practice slash-and-burn agriculture, in the process destroying pristine habitat, killing rare animals, and displacing indigenous peoples. To give a North American example, United States companies export work to factories across the Mexican border (*maquiladores*) that cheaply employ thousands of young, rural women to make high-quality consumer goods for export while they live in unhealthy squalor in an environment spoiled by toxic waste.

In a global perspective, these conditions result from an economic system driven by profit whose inner logic makes it prey without ceasing on nature's resources and seek cheap labor to turn those resources into consumer products.

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with gladness. See Richard Clifford, "The Bible and the Environment," in *Preserving the Creation*, ed. Irwin, 1-26.

<sup>17</sup>See David Hallman, ed., *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Geneva: WCC; Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1994); Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, eds., *Ecology and Poverty, Concilium 1995/5* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1995) esp. Eduardo Gudynas, "Ecology from the Viewpoint of the Poor," 106-14; Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1995); Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre, eds., *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995) esp. H. Paul Santmire, "Ecology, Justice, and Theology: Beyond the Preliminary Skirmishes," 56-62, and Vandana Shiva, "Development, Ecology, and Women," 161-71; and Vitor Westhelle, "Creation Motifs in the Search for a Vital Space: A Latin American Perspective," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 128-40.

The beneficiaries are the wealthy classes and nations, including ourselves, who consume without ceasing a disproportionate amount of the earth's resources not out of need to stay alive but out of need to be pleased and entertained. Even in these wealthy countries, ecological injustice runs through the social fabric. The economically well-off, for example, can choose to live amid acres of green, while poor people are housed near factories, refineries, or waste processing plants that heavily pollute the environment; birth defects, general ill health, and disease result. The bitterness of this experience is exacerbated by racial prejudice as environmental racism pressures people of color to dwell in these neighborhoods.

In sum, social injustice has an ecological face: ravaging of people and of the land go hand in hand. To be truly effective, therefore, the turn to the cosmos in theology needs to include commitment to a more just social order within the wider struggle for life as a whole, for healthy ecosystems where *all* living creatures can flourish.

*Women.* Exploitation of the earth also coincides with the subordination of women within the system of patriarchy. Female symbolism for nature generally pervades human thought, arising from the fact that women are the lifegivers to every human child as the earth itself, Mother Earth, brings forth fruits. Feminist scholarship today points out how classical Christian theology has consistently used this symbolic affinity to interpret both women and the natural world in terms of hierarchical dualism, separating them from and subordinating them to the men they bring forth and sustain. While granted their own goodness before God, both women and nature are identified with matter, potency, and body more than with spirit, act, and mind. They are assigned mainly instrumental value in this world and excluded from direct contact with the sphere of the sacred, which is construed in analogy with transcendent male consciousness beyond the realm of coming to be and passing away. Women whose bodies mediate physical existence to humanity thus become the oldest symbol of the connection between social domination and the domination of nature.<sup>18</sup>

While the construals of Greek philosophy that undergird traditional subordinationist theologies may be superseded by other philosophies, the mentality that sees nature as something to be dominated continues to draw on the imagery and attitudes of men's domination of women. We speak of "the rape of the earth," revealing the extent to which exploitation of nature is identified with violent sexual conquest of women, and of "virgin forest," as yet untouched by man but awaiting his exploration and conquest. These and other linguistic metaphors point to the reality that ruling man's hierarchy over women extends also to nature, who

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<sup>18</sup>In addition to the writings of Ruether and McFague, see Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism, and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991); Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist, 1993); Adams, ed., *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*; and MacKinnon and McIntyre, eds., *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*.

is meant for his service while, he, in his nobility, has a duty to control and a right to use her.

The contribution of women from cultural positions other than white feminists is instructive here. For example, womanist theologian Delores Williams makes a telling connection between the violation of nature and the practice of breeding black women under slavery, both defilements leading to exhaustion of the body and depletion of the spirit created by God.<sup>19</sup> Describing the Chipko movement to protect local trees in India and the Green Belt movement for reforestation in Kenya, both led largely by women, Asian theologian Aruna Gnanadason analyzes how the women are affirming the life of their own bodies in the process.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in our day, women's bodily self-confidence, women's psychological and spiritual self-confidence, flows against the tide of ecological collapse, but meets mighty opposition in the process.

In sum, sexism too has an ecological face, and the devastating consequences of patriarchal dualism cannot be fully addressed until the system is faced as a whole. To be truly effective, therefore, the turn to the cosmos in theology needs to cut through the knot of misogynist prejudice in our systematic concepts, shifting from dualistic, hierarchical, and atomistic categories to holistic, communal, and relational ones.

The argument of this section has been that the moral integrity of theology demands that it extend its concern to embrace the great family of earth as a supreme value, now under threat. The vision motivating such theology is that of a flourishing humanity on a thriving earth, both together a sacrament of the glory of God.

#### ELLERY AND PARTICIPATION

Having scanned the history of the cosmological theme in theology and having argued for its retrieval on the grounds of theology's intellectual and moral integrity, I would like to engage you in a simple thought experiment, one that may whet your appetite for the work that lies ahead. Let us juxtapose a goldfish with Aquinas's notion of participation, and ask what might result if theology interpreted the former in the light of the latter.

We begin with nature writer Annie Dillard's description of her goldfish Ellery.

<sup>19</sup>Delores Williams, "Sin, Nature, and Black Women's Bodies," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Adams, 24-29; see also Shamara Shantu Riley, "Ecology Is a Sistah's Issue Too," in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, ed. MacKinnon and McIntyre, 214-29.

<sup>20</sup>Aruna Gnanadason, "Towards a Feminist Eco-Theology for India," in *A Reader in Feminist Theology*, ed. Prasanna Kumari (Madras, India: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, 1993) 95-105.

This Ellery cost me twenty-five cents. He is a deep red-orange, darker than most goldfish. He steers short distances mainly with his slender red lateral fins; they seem to provide impetus for going backward, up, or down. . . . He can extend his mouth, so it looks like a length of pipe; he can shift the angle of his eyes in his head [to] look before and behind himself, instead of simply out to his side. His belly, what there is of it, is white . . . and a patch of this white extends up his sides . . . as though all his [upper] brightness were sunburn.

For this creature, as I said, I paid twenty-five cents. I had never bought an animal before. It was very simple; I went to a store in Roanoke called "Wet Pets"; I handed the man a quarter, and he handed me a knotted plastic bag bouncing with water in which a green plant floated and the goldfish swam. This fish, two bits' worth, has a coiled gut, a spine radiating fine bones, and a brain. Just before I sprinkle his food flakes into his bowl, I rap three times on the bowl's edge; now he is conditioned, and swims to the surface when I rap. And, he has a heart.<sup>21</sup>

As Sallie McFague comments, "the juxtaposition in this passage of twenty-five cents with the elaborateness, cleverness, and sheer glory of this tiny bit of matter named Ellery is frankly unnerving. For the intricacy of this little creature calls forth wonder, and suddenly we see that it is priceless."<sup>22</sup> What would be an appropriate theological interpretation of Ellery? I suggest that Aquinas's notion of participation is a resource with great and largely untapped potential to help answer that question.

According to Aquinas, all creatures exist by participation in divine being.<sup>23</sup> This is an awesome concept, suggesting an intrinsic, ongoing relationship with the very wellspring of being, with the sheer livingness of the living God who in overflowing graciousness quickens all things. Exemplifying the catholic imagination at work, Aquinas works with a fine analogy to explain this.<sup>24</sup> God's presence among creatures awakens them to life the way fire ignites what it brushes against. We know that fire is present wherever something catches on fire. Just so, everything that exists does so by participation in the fire of divine being. Everything that acts is energized by participation in divine act. Everything that brings something else into being does so by sharing in divine creative power. Every act of resistance to the history of radical suffering is fueled by the inexhaustible source of new being. Conversely, thanks to the relation of participation, we can affirm of God in a surpassing and originating sense all the

<sup>21</sup>Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek: A Mystical Excursion into the Natural World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 124.

<sup>22</sup>McFague, *The Body of God*, 210. I am indebted to this author for her discovery and use of this passage.

<sup>23</sup>For what follows, see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, questions 4 (a. 3), 8, 13, 15 (a. 2), 18, 44, 45 (a. 7), and 104; and *Summa contra gentiles* III, chs. 17-21, 65-70.

<sup>24</sup>ST I, q. 8, a. 1, 2, 3; and SCG 3.66, par. 7.

vitality, radical energy, spontaneity, and charm encountered in the world. In turn, we can see that creatures themselves in some way resemble God.

Does Ellery exist by participation in divine being? Is this glorious little fish in some way an image of God? Is he a word in the book of nature that reveals knowledge of God? Is God intimately present to this goldfish preserving him in existence at every moment? Does he have his own intrinsic value which we are called upon to respect? If so—and I hope you are answering "Yes" to these questions—then we can ill afford to neglect him. Including Ellery, and by extension the whole universe, in theological reflection is of critical importance.

### CONCLUSION

This address has been seeking to persuade you that theology needs to complete the many recent worthy turns to the subject with a turn to the heavens and the earth. Whatever our subdisciplines, we need to develop theology with a tangible and comprehensive ecological dimension. I am not suggesting that we just think through a new theology of creation, but that cosmology be a framework within which all theological topics be rethought and a substantive partner in theological interpretation. There is hard work ahead. We need to appreciate all over again that the whole universe is a sacrament, vivified by the presence of the Creator Spirit. We need to realize that its destruction is tantamount to a sacrilege. And we need to fathom that human beings are part of the mystery and magnificence of this universe, not lords of the manor but partners with God in helping creation to grow and prosper.

Recovering the cosmocentric power of the fuller Christian tradition puts us in line with our ancient and medieval forebears and fosters the intellectual and moral integrity of theology. Not doing so would be to make our theologizing increasingly irrelevant. It would also be to fail in responsibility to our profession, to the Church, and to generations yet unborn, human and nonhuman species alike. Doing so sets theology off on a great intellectual adventure, one where both wisdom and prophecy will intertwine on the way to a new theological synthesis and praxis. This, friends and colleagues, is a monumental challenge as the Catholic Theological Society of America begins its second half-century of Catholic talk.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>See Peter Steinfels, "Fifty Years of Catholic Talk," *New York Times*, 20 June 1995, A12, on the fiftieth anniversary convention.