

Through Him All Things Were Made: The Divine Ideas Tradition as a Medieval Synthesis of Science, Theology, and Liturgy for the Modern World

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Abstract

The medieval theological worldview was a synthesis of grace and nature that allowed theology and science to act together in a sacred and salvific pursuit of knowledge. This synthesis is beautifully expressed in the Divine Ideas tradition. In this tradition, the tapestry upon which ancient and medieval theology was written, created things existed by reflecting God's eternal ideas of them. This gave all natural knowledge a Trinitarian dimension because the generation of ideas in the Divine Mind and of created things in the world was isomorphic with the generation of the Son, the uncreated Logos. In my paper, I will argue that just as all things exist as a primordial sacrifice of the Creator offered and known outside Godself through the Son-Logos, so we participate in that primordial gift (in beatitude) when we, recognizing the divine profundity of nature, come to a knowing of God-in-things—to use Meister Eckhart's phrase. In this tradition, humans, made in God's image, are ordained to participate in God's knowing of all things, and to offer creation back up into Divine life by knowing and worshiping God through theology, science, and liturgy. The Divine Ideas model, then, would restore to the sciences a contemplative, salvific power in recognizing the mystical depth of creatures. I will examine theologians like Maximus the Confessor, the Victorines, and modern theologian Mark McIntosh as they see both scientific and theological knowing as a deifying participation in Divine life. I will look at the poetry of St. John the Divine and Thomas Traherne as it lifts the human imagination, illumined by nature and consecrated through liturgy into the life of the world to come. I will close by saying that this tradition becomes especially important in a world confronting the climate crisis. By recognizing the Divine dimensions of creatures, we see how the waste and pollution of the integrity and beauty of the wilderness blemishes the sacrifice of knowing and love that humanity is called to offer to God through theology, the sciences, and the eucharist.

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In the beginning, Adam and Eve were given the divine role of naming the creatures. In this primordial relationship between God and humanity, creatures represented the divine gift of existence. We were cast out of the garden once we stole from the Tree of Knowledge because we saw the fruit not as a sacrament of divine revelation to be contemplated, but as a commodity to be exploited.¹ Ever since we have denied the divine depth of creation. For the first 1500 years of Christianity, theologians developed a metaphysical infrastructure which saw creatures as ontological reflections of God's Being. This is the Divine Ideas tradition, the tapestry upon which all ancient and medieval thought was once woven. In this scheme, inherited from the neoplatonism of antiquity, the creature exists insofar as it reflects its creator. With the tragedy of the climate crisis looming over us, surely the effect of our denial of the divine depth of creation, I will give an account of this tradition, showing how it was crucial to the creature-Creator relationship of ancient and medieval theologians. I will argue that in this sacramental landscape dependent on the ideas, science and theology aid one another for the salvation of the world. The ideas become like a great cathedral portal, a bridge from scientific knowledge to beatitude. St John's Apocalypse, central to the medieval imagination, shows how by contemplating the mystical truth of creatures as divine gifts, humans assume the role as priests of creation and offer them up into the new creation through the eucharistic liturgy.

The Trembling Aspen, *Populus tremuloides*, whose brilliant white bark stands like Grecian columns across the high country of the American west, propagates and spreads underground through its roots into great quaking groves. The Divine Ideas tradition is like the roots of the as-

¹ Mark McIntosh, *The Divine Ideas Tradition in Christian Mystical Theology*, (New York Oxford University Press, 2021), 180. All my work on the Divine Ideas is deeply indebted to McIntosh (1960-2021), my one-time professor at Durham University. *Chorus angelorum te suscipiat, et cum Lazaro quondam paupere aeternam habeas requiem.*

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pens. Like the invisible reasons beneath the visible trees, the Divine Ideas are the subtle metaphysical scaffolding lying beneath much ancient and medieval theology, guiding the creature-Creator relationship in a way that grants infinite depth to the mortal creature and sensible nearness to the infinite, immortal God. The tradition is seldom explicitly referenced beyond signal words like *forms* or *exemplars*—borrowed from the *Timaeus*, neoplatonic literature, or Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. It was never part of a creed or a council, but rather functioned to guide and structure the imagination of numerous thinkers, preachers, and poets from antiquity to the Reformation. It has its origins in the neoplatonism of late antiquity, and it has thrived in Christian thought where neoplatonic tendencies have dominated, lingered, or been revived. One could spend chapters on the origin, evolution, and fall of this tradition, and, indeed, the likes of Louis Dupré, Gordon Leff, and Mark McIntosh have done so. But here I will focus on how the Divine Ideas aided the unity of theology and the natural world in ancient and medieval Christian thought. I will seek to show how this unity revives a shared theological vision and sacramental fullness between grace and nature, theology and science, and creature and Creator.

The Divine Ideas tradition has its origins in the neoplatonism of late antiquity. Augustine references the neoplatonists as he teters on the edge of conversion because they help him realize that the creatures exist “because they come from [God].”² He rejoices in realizing that the world is not arbitrary, but the deliberate creation of a God where the creatures “perform your word.”³ Rather than simply mapping neoplatonism onto theology, though, Augustine and others developed a new metaphysic in which creation exists by reflecting the inner operations of the Trinity.

² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), VII. xi.17.

³ *Ibid.*, VII. xiii. 19.

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Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas writes that just as “a work of art manifests the art of the artisan, so the whole world is nothing else than a certain representation of the divine wisdom conceived within the mind of the Father.”⁴ The ideas work like this: God knows all creation from before time, and his knowing is the generation of the Son, the divine Word. The generation of the ideas of all things, then, is isomorphic with the procession of the eternal Word of God.⁵ And so as creatures depend on the divine versions of themselves in God’s mind, here they whisper to us of the Word which spoke them into existence in the very beginning.

For Augustine, the earth becomes the first bible –the earthly version of the Word spoken by the Father in the eternal life of the Trinity.⁶ Maximus the Confessor, a prolific Christian neoplatonist like Augustine before him, writes: “In the Scriptures we say the words are the clothes of Christ and the meaning is his body...It is the same in the world where the forms of visible things are like the clothing, and the ideas according to which they were created are like the flesh.”⁷ In the Divine Ideas tradition, earthly being and knowing are not arbitrary to God, but are part of God’s self-communication. The 12th-century Parisian, Achard of St. Victor, wrote that “the same verse is thus corporeal and incorporeal, audible and inaudible, visible and invisible.”⁸ The human mind, then, is able to read the world and see through it the ineffable Word for “what was and is the Word expressed without sound there has become a kind of sound expressing the word here;

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on The Gospel of John*, 1. 5. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 58.

⁵ McIntosh, *The Divine Ideas Tradition*, 54.

⁶ Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1993), 216.

⁷ Maximus, *Ambigua*, in Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 217.

⁸ Achard, “On the Unity of God and the Plurality of Creatures,” in *Achard of Saint Victor: Works*, trans. Hugh Feiss, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2001), II.15, p. 465.

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what was and is truth alone and uncreated mind there has become an image of truth in a created mind... here.”⁹ His contemporary, Hugh, also calls the world “a kind of book written by the finger of God,” which was established to reveal the eternal Wisdom and Word of God.¹⁰ And so the Word becomes Flesh in the Incarnation to restore true divine meaning to the whole world and its creatures. Christ, as we will see, is the key to reading the world.

Hildegard von Bingen, the great Rhineland abbess, mystic, and proto-scientist, sows a vision of humanity’s work in a sacred creation which must be inspired from the verdant forests and vineyards of her Rhine valley home. She coins the word *Viriditas*, or greening power, to express how the uncreated Word refreshes and enlivens the world as the green source and exemplar of all life. Her poetic reflection on the prologue of St. John’s Gospel reveals just this: “In the beginning all the creatures were green and vital; they flourished amidst flowers; later the green figure itself came down.”¹¹ The Word who contains light and life (John 1:4), then, is the power behind all the earth’s growing and greenness —the hidden and eternal force which imbues both the light of the sun and the leafy chlorophyll which consumes its shining. The green figure who comes down from heaven is the Word made flesh —the incarnation breathing the eternal, Divine archetypal greenness into the world and granting it everlasting life. And so the tree which grows, spreads, trembles, bends, burns, and rises from the ash of wildfire would be, for Hildegard, a dendrological translation of the prologue of St. John. All trees and creatures are visible manifestations of scriptures, here to tell us of the vision of the Tree of Life, which, if we listen, speaks to

⁹ Ibid., II.14, pp. 462-463.

¹⁰ Hugh of St Victor, “On the Three Days,” trans. Boyd Coolman in McIntosh, *The Divine Ideas Tradition*, 128.

¹¹ Matthew Fox, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, (Rochester: Bear & Company, 1985), 44.

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us through them. Hildegard writes: “We are dressed in the scaffold of creation: in seeing—to recognize all the world, in hearing—to understand... In this way humankind comes to know God, for God is the author of all creation.”¹² A hymn the Virgin Mary expresses her agency in the Divine Ideas: “You glowing, most green, verdant sprout... you bud forth into light... and bring lush greenness once more” to the “shriveled and wilted world.”¹³ And so Christ, as the hidden reason and source of the world, and his mother who walks in the prelapsarian verdancy of Eden (as W.H. Auden once wrote), work to resurrect the whole created order back—not to the mortal life of earth—but to the primordial greenness and vitality which exists eternally in the life of God.¹⁴ Hildegard’s ancient abbey still presides over the lush, green Rhineland, and her Benedictine great-granddaughters still chant the psalms hour by hour.

Theologian Mark McIntosh is largely responsible for the reawakening of the Divine Ideas tradition in contemporary scholarship. He argues that the new scientific curiosity of the medievals worked in tandem with their spiritual marveling at the universe, and that the reply to scientific discovery was praise for the divine Maker.¹⁵ McIntosh often suggests that nobody understands this better than the medievalist C.S. Lewis. In Lewis’ *The Silver Chair*, the children find that the mazes of the ruinous city they’d been lost in spell out the directions for their destination: “Under Me.”¹⁶ Like Lewis and the Victorines, McIntosh doesn’t think the reduction of creation

¹² Gabriele Uhlein, *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen*, (Rochester: Bear & Company, 1983), 104.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁴ W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. Mary is identified as the one who unknowingly still walks in Eden before the Fall.

¹⁵ McIntosh, *The Divine Ideas Tradition*, 129.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, 100.

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to the letters that spell out its “sub-phenomenal scientific formulae” excludes those who can read it from discovering a deeper magic beyond the molecules and isotopes.¹⁷ Scientific discovery and spiritual exegesis are united in a scriptural and sacramental landscape where all knowledge is a liminal threshold, like an open, Narnian wardrobe into the Divine mind.¹⁸

The 13th-century English prelate, scientist, and theologian Robert Grosseteste, who discovered the optics of the rainbow through observation, also understood the cosmos through the divine ideas tradition. To study the optics of a rainbow was not to deny its role as sign of God’s covenantal promise, as some have argued, but to engage in an exegesis of creation.¹⁹ The science of the divine illuminates the science of human reason, and any reduction of the optics of the rainbow still points to the intensity of color and infinite radiance of the Divine mind! Robert has read the rainbow. Indeed, after his transcendent vision at Ostia, Augustine looks back upon the world with a contemplative gaze, saying “I said to all these things in my external environment: ‘Tell me of your God! ...’ And with a great voice they cried out: ‘He made us.’”²⁰ Reading the universe is a kind of worship, then, for these theologians, and this is wonderfully expressed in the poem of Gregory of Nazianzus: “*All creatures praise thee... those that can think and those that have no power of thought... Everything that exists prays to thee. And to thee, every creature that can read thy universe sends up a hymn of silence.*”²¹

¹⁷ McIntosh, *The Divine Ideas Tradition*, 129.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” 1206.

²⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, X.v.9.

²¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Dogmatic Poems,” in Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 28.

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In a long All Saints Day sermon, Achard gives an account of how knowing the creatures as ideas in God's mind is also salvific. This scheme of ascent, like Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, ends in a transcendent knowing where Achard now sees in God's mind the creatures he had seen in the world: "those he had formerly seen in themselves he now sees in their eternal reasons."²² Radiant with the light of contemplation, Achard's mind then "gives birth when it reaches what it strives for, when [the door] is opened to the one knocking."²³ And so not only in studying the scientific sub-structures of the world and its creatures, but also in delighting in them as theophanic gifts of a self-diffusive God the human opens the door and passes through the wardrobe. He finds more than the beauty of the wardrobe itself, but another world which is even more beautiful, and his *observing* the creatures through the microscope is the first step to *knowing* them as they exist in the Divine mind.

A similar birth is seen in the thought of Meister Eckhart. Like the scientific observer who must see creatures objectively, the soul for Eckhart must detach himself and see them only as God does. Just as the Father generates the Son and ideas in the Trinity, we give birth to Christ in our lives when, in beholding the creatures as gifts, we value them only for their divine identity.²⁴ God builds the wardrobe, then, not so that we may store in it a great menagerie of scientific novelties like some Victorian grand exposition, but so that we may pass through it into the divine versions of all things. Eckhart preaches "The more [one] is separated from all things and turned into himself, the more he knows all things clearly and rationally within himself... and the more

²² Achard, "On the Feast of All Saints," VI: 18-20, in *Achard of Saint Victor: Works*, 284-286.

²³ *Ibid.*, 288.

²⁴ Eckhart, "Sermon 5b," in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*. trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1981), 184.

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he is a man.”²⁵ And so because, for Eckhart, “all created things are God’s speech,” by knowing them not as exterior commodities, but inwardly as the self-contemplation of the Father, we step into the mind of God and participate in the begetting of the Word.

Thomas Aquinas writes that Christ, who knew all things in his divinity, still “marveled” at the world in his humanity so that he might teach us to marvel too.²⁶ The synthesis of theology and science in the world of Divine Ideas, then, marries the practical to the contemplative. For the medievals, the fruit was still for spiritual nourishment, not commodification. In a magnificent study of Maximus, Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that contemplative “insight into creatures is an immortal food that nourishes the mind.”²⁷ And so the contemplative mind feeds by a marvelous knowing of the divine truth on the deeper magic hidden in the creatures. Sacred and scientific knowing is fruitful, then, not when it is stolen from the tree as a commodity, but when it beholds the fruit as revealing something deeper. The mind which marvels at God’s eternally offered gifts is nourished with its real food because it copies the activity of the Divine mind. Like the generation of the Word, the true ideas of all things flow forth from it as an offering, and this brings us to the ideas and the eucharist.

The final end of the synthesis of science and divine revelation takes place as creation is gathered together and offered up by humanity as priests of creation into God’s life through the eucharistic sacrifice. Just as we come to exist through God’s self-knowing in the Word, so we offer creation back up to God by our contemplating of their divine identity alone. The humble

²⁵ Ibid., “Sermon 15,” 191.

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Tertia Pars, 15, 8.

²⁷ Maximus. *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 51. in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 304.

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Anglican cleric Thomas Traherne wrote that “the idea of Heaven and Earth in the Soul of Man, is more Precious with GOD than the Things themselvs... The World within you is an offering returned.”²⁸ The world becomes even more real in our mind by contemplation, and we fulfill our divinely ordained role, then, when we offer the creatures which flow forth as divine gifts back up into the new creation. Maximus writes that as the high priest of creation the soul “offers nature to God on his heart as if on an altar.”²⁹ The whole world is drawn into the hypostatic union when humans fulfill their priestly role of contemplating creatures in the same way that God does.³⁰ When the human becomes true divine human, so the tree becomes divine tree, and the dog a divine dog. The Florentine platonist and philosopher-priest, Marsilio Ficino captures this when he writes that in this vision of what the creatures truly are, we “see both God and all things in God, and love both Him, and all things which are in him... Such a man will certainly return to his own Idea, the Idea by which he was created.”³¹ As liturgy transforms humans and creatures into their eschatological truths, the creatures sense a change in us too. Isaac of Nineveh writes that the wild beasts are drawn to such a man transformed because they smell the scent of the prelapsarian Adam; they lose their own savagery and are drawn into the garden of communion.³² With Adam’s *imago Dei* restored, and anointed by Christ as high priests, humans offer the creatures into the new creation as they adopt for themselves the divine imagination.

²⁸ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, ed. Jan Ross, (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), II, 90.

²⁹ Maximus, “Mystagogia,” 4, in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic liturgy*, 327.

³⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 322.

³¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love*, VI, 19, trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985), 144-145.

³² Isaac of Nineveh, “Ascetic Treatises,” 20, in Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 224.

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And for the medievals, there was no better imagination than that of St. John the Divine! In Revelation we see how the eschatological reunion of the city and the garden in a new creation is both given to and offered by us through the eucharistic feast. In his final tome on the Christian imagination, Douglas Hedley points to Revelation 22 as containing the final, uniting vision of human with nature, city with garden, and Creator with creatures.³³ Here, springs and fruit trees offer not only shade and refreshment, but dazzling beauty to the garden of the Lamb. Hedley believes that it is this Romantic vision of nature as archetype and temple of God that inspired environmentalists like John Muir in their battle for conservation.³⁴ The beauty of nature is itself, as Ficino put it, the radiance of God, adorning the mind with the Divine Ideas.³⁵ This is why we see the beauty of nature, then, as an image of paradise, of the temple where the eternal feast of the Lamb is enjoyed. Another exegete, the Anglican Priest Austin Farrer (and a friend of Lewis), writes that as a vision of things to come, Revelation presents a “realm which has no shape at all but that which the images give it.” Like an oak tree in the midst of a great meadow, the creatures that are offered up by the human imagination are allowed to grow and to match the true Divine Ideas of themselves.³⁶ And so we are back in the garden of the Tree of life. Bonaventure ends his meditation on the same tree with this vision: the Lamb of the heavenly Jerusalem, clothed with the ideas descends to earth to meet the resurrected dead and inaugurate the new creation.³⁷ And

³³ Douglas Hedley, *The Iconic Imagination*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 218.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

³⁵ Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, II.5.

³⁶ Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St John's Apocalypse* (Glasgow: University Press, 1949), 17.

³⁷ Bonaventure, “The Tree of Life,” 11.44. in *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey Into God; The Tree of Life; The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins, (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 1978), 168.

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Maximus too interprets the radiant garments of the Transfiguration as ideas adorning the body of the resurrected Logos. By knowing the creatures only as radiant divine gifts, the church offers nature up into new creation in a great thanksgiving –the eucharistic sacrifice. As we offer the divine identity of the creatures, which is pure gift, rather than exploited commodity, they too *become* the body of Christ, the eucharistic feast freely given to nourish our imaginations and usher us into the new garden.

And so for the medievals, spiritual and scientific knowledge of the world aid one another fruitfully, framing the threshold by which we can gaze on the divine identity of all creatures. But perhaps most importantly in our day, they also hallow the lowliest creature. Nature and scientific knowledge must be sought for their own sake, as divine revelation. If we don't listen to or read the creatures as divine communication, then not only do we hinder our salvation, but we participate in the desolation of the temple –as we are doing every day in the great Holocene extinction. Like the transformed eucharistic host, the divine ideas tradition allows the truth of all creatures and the whole scriptural landscape to point to God's vision of eternal life. The creatures become important guests at the feast, and we feed on them not as commodities, but in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving. And so, the Douglas firs of the northwest which we clear-cut by the millions, whose mossy bark veils seven centuries of growth beside still waters, and the American bison, a pilgrim and relic of the Pleistocene, whose herds of millions we nearly extinguished, and the eared quetzal, who purportedly still hides his feathery refulgence in the remote sky islands of Sonora, are each transfigured from mere casualties of the inevitable progress of civilization into radiant theophanies. They are the garments of the resurrected Christ, clinging beatifically to Word of the Father, and speaking out to us, like the psalmist, saying: "Thou deckest thyself with

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light as it were with a garment, and spreadest out the heavens like a curtain... O LORD, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy riches.”³⁸

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³⁸ Psalm 104, Coverdale Psalter.

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