

IMAGING GOD AND "ANOTHER WORLD"

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"We wake, if we wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence....'Seem like we're just set down here,' a woman said to me recently, 'and don't nobody know why'....Some unwonted, taught pride diverts us from our original intent, which is to explore the neighborhood, view the landscape, to discover where it is that we have been so startlingly set down, even if we can't learn why."

Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (Bantam, 1977), 2. 12.

INTRODUCTION

When we wake up to the mystery that surrounds us, its beauty and its violence, we ask why are we here? "Seem like we're just set down here...and don't nobody know why." Indeed. Most religions are about suggesting answers to that question, which is a fiendishly difficult one. A somewhat easier, more immediate question is the other one: Where are we? As Annie Dillard suggests, "our original intent" as witnessed by a child's interest in and wonder at all things, is "to explore the neighborhood...to discover where it is that we have been so startlingly set down, even if we can't learn why."

How do images of God and the world change our perception of what questions we ask about our world and our behavior in it? Is another world possible if we stay with the traditional view of the God-world relationship? Can we explore the possibilities of our neighborhood-our world-if our major images of God do not support such an interest? If a different world is to be possible, then, one task is to think *differently* about its relation to God.

How distant, how close, are God and the world? Is God only transcendent over the world or also immanent in it? Is the relationship between God and the world more like a potter and a bowl or a mother and a child? Are we only externally related to God or are we internally related? Is the world more like another "subject" to God or more like an "object"? Is God "spirit" while the world is only "matter"? Does God have all power over creation or are human beings also responsible for creation? Are we puppets or partners? These and many more questions dealing with the nature of the relationship between God and the world lie at the heart of how we perceive and act in the world.

THE TRADITIONAL CREATION MYTH

The First Vatican Council (1890) expresses the God-world relationship that, with some variations, is a common one in major creeds of various Christian churches since the Reformation and which lies behind the traditional creation/providence story.

"The Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church believes and confesses that there is one true and living God, Creator and Lord of Heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, infinite in intelligence, in will, and in all perfection, who, as being one, sole, absolutely simple and immutable spiritual substance, is to be declared really and essentially distinct from the world, of supreme beatitude in and from himself, and ineffably exalted above all things beside himself which exist or are conceivable." *The Decrees of the Vatican Council, ed. Vincent McNabb (London, 1907)*

Given this view of the God-world relationship-one of total distance and difference-the story of creation and providence follows. That story, in its simplest form, claims that an absolute, all-powerful, transcendent God created the world (universe) from nothing for entirely gratuitous reasons. God did not need creation nor is God internally related to it: it was created solely for God's glory. Unfortunately, creation "fell" through the pride of one of its creatures-human beings-making it necessary for God to initiate a reversal of creation's downfall through Jesus Christ, who atones for the sins of all human beings. In this story creation and providence are part of one coherent, historical, all-inclusive drama in which God is in charge from beginning to end, creating all things and saving them through the atoning blood of his own Son.

This mythic story focuses on God's actions-God is the protagonist of the world drama-and its purpose is to answer why not where questions. The story speaks to our concerns about why the world was made, who is in charge of it, why it is no longer harmonious, and how it is made "right" again. This story does not speak to our interest in the world or how we should act toward our neighbors. Human beings are, in fact, minor players in the classic Christian story of creation and providence. Moreover, the action does not occur in our physical neighborhoods, the actual spaces and places we inhabit, but over our heads, as it were, in the vast panoramic historical sweep of time, with its beginning (creation), middle (redemption), and end (eschatology). In each of these events God is totally in charge; we, at most, like good children are grateful to our all-mighty, all-loving Father and try to follow his will. Even when sin and evil divert the drama from its triumphant course (and cause us to lose faith and hope), the Lord of history will prevail, the King will be victorious.

What is left out of this story of creation is creation itself, that is, "the neighborhood," the lowly, concrete, particular-and fascinating, wonderful-details of physical reality. In fact, the story does not seem to be about creation, but about a God whose "spiritual substance...is to be declared really and essentially distinct from the world." This God does not inhabit creation; in fact, the assumption behind this creation story is that spirit and matter are entirely distinct and in a dualistic, hierarchical relationship. God-and all things spiritual, heavenly, and eternal--are perfect and exalted above all things material, earthly, and mortal, with the latter being entirely different from the former and inferior to it. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this assumption-the dualistic, hierarchical relationship of God and the world-- for it encourages not only an understanding of salvation as the escape of individuals to the spiritual world, but also justifies lack of attention to the flourishing of this world. If God is spirit and creation is matter, then God does not occupy the earth and we need not attend to it either. But what if spirit and matter were not entirely different? What if all life-God's and ours, as well as that of all others on earth-was seen to be on a continuum, more like a circle or a recycle symbol, than like a dualistic hierarchy? What if spirit and matter were intrinsically related, rather than diametrically opposed? Would not this make a difference in how we thought of where God is and where we should be? Would it not turn our eyes to the earth, whether we were searching for God or trying to understand where we belong?

The World As God's Body

What if we did not insist on radical dualism between God and the world, with God being all spirit and the world being all matter or body, but imagined a model with God and the world being both? That is, what if the world were seen to be God's body which is infused by, empowered by, loved by, given life by God? What if the world were seen to be "within" God, not identical with God (as our own bodies are not identical with us, for we can reflect about them, guide them, direct them, etc.), but very, very intimately connected-sort of like a baby in the womb? Would such a model be a way of expressing profound interrelationship between God and the world, a way that might be closer to an incarnational understanding of the God-world relationship than are the other model we have considered?

Augustine helps us along the way with his wonderful sense of our ontological intimacy with God as expressed in this passage from his *Confessions* (I.2).

"Since I do indeed exist and yet would not exist unless you were in me, why do I ask you to come to me?.. Therefore, my God, I would not exist at all, unless you were in me; or rather, I would not exist unless I were in you 'from whom and by whom and in whom all things exist'....To what place do I call to you to come, since I am in you? Or from what place are you to come to me? Where can I go beyond the bounds of heaven and earth, that my God may come to for he has said: 'I fill heaven and earth?'"

If God is always incarnate, then Christians should attend to the model of the world as God's body. For Christians, God did not become human on a whim; rather, it is God's nature to be embodied, to be the One in whom we live and move and have our being. In Christianity, the God-world relationship is understood in light of the incarnation; hence, creation is "like" the incarnation. Jesus Christ is the lens, the model, through whom Christians interpret God, world, and themselves. The doctrine of creation for Christians, then, is not different in kind from the doctrine of the incarnation: in both God is the source of all existence, the One in whom we are born and re-born. In this view, the world is not just matter while God is spirit; rather, there is a continuity (though not an identity) between God and the world. The world is flesh of God's "flesh"; the God who took our flesh in one person, Jesus of Nazareth, has always done so. God is incarnate, not secondarily but primarily. Therefore, an appropriate Christian model for understanding creation is the world as God's body. This is not a description of creation (there are no descriptions); neither is it necessarily the only model; it is, however, one model that is commensurate with the central Christian affirmation that God is with us in the flesh in Jesus Christ and it is a model that is particularly appropriate for interpreting the Christian doctrine of creation in our time. Its merits and limitations should be considered in relation to other major models of the God-world relationship: God as clockmaker winding up the machine, as king of the realm, as father with wayward children, as personal agent acting in the world, and so forth.

An incarnational understanding of creation says nothing is too lowly, too physical, too mean a labor if it helps some creature to flourish. We find God in caring for the garden. Hence, this understanding of creation asks us to find out about the neighborhood so we can take care of it. It suggests that human beings are not the only creatures that matter; however, we are special. We are the caretakers, the ones who can help the garden flourish, help the body of God be well fed and healthy-or we can destroy it. We know the difference between good and evil: the unique feature of human beings as well as our greatest burden is that we know that we know. We not only know how to do many things (all animals know this), but we know that we can do many things, and that some of these things are good and some bad for God's creation, God's body, our planetary garden.

Let us look more carefully at a couple of implications of this model. The implications of the model of the world as God's body are, first, that we must know our world and where we fit into it; second, that we must acknowledge God as the only source of all life, love, truth, and goodness.

Knowing the Body, Tending the Garden

In our model, the body of God is the entire universe; it is all matter in its myriad, fantastic, ancient and modern forms, from quarks to galaxies. More specifically, the body of God needing our attention is planet earth, a tiny piece of divine embodiment that is our home and garden. In order to care for this garden, we need to know about it; in order to help all creatures who constitute this body flourish, we need to understand how we humans fit into this body.

All understandings of creation and providence rest on assumptions about what the world is like and where humans belong in it. First century Mediterranean, medieval, and eighteenth-- century views of the world and the place of humans differ; the twenty-first century view does as well. In our evolutionary, ecological view of reality, everything is interrelated and interdependent. "Ecological unity" is both radically individualistic and radically relational. In an organism or body, the whole flourishes only when all the different parts function well; in fact, the "whole" is nothing but each and every individual part doing its particular thing successfully. Nothing is more unified than a well-functioning body but, also, nothing relies more on complex, diverse individuality.

Hence, the neighborhood that we have been set down in is one that we must learn to care for in all its diverse parts and needs. We must become "ecologically literate," understanding its most basic law: that there is no way the whole can flourish unless all parts are cared for. This means distributive justice is the key to sustainability or, to phrase it differently, our garden home, the body of God, will only be healthy longterm if all parts of it are cared for appropriately. Before all else, the community, our planet, must survive (sustainability) which it can do only if all members have access to basic necessities (distributive justice). We need to learn "home economics," the basic rules of how our garden home can prosper-and what will destroy it. Most simply, these house rules are: Take only your share; clean up after yourself; and keep the house in good repair for others.

We must do so because, as the self-reflective part of God's body-the part that knows that we know-we have become partners with God in maintaining the health of creation. We are no longer the peak of creation, the one above all the others and for whom the others were made; rather, we are at one and the same time the neediest of all creatures and the most powerful. We cannot exist beyond a few minutes without air, a few days without water, or a few weeks without the plants but we are also, given our population and high-energy lifestyle, the one species that can undermine the planet's well-being, as global warming, the decline of biodiversity, and the increasing gap between the rich and the poor are illustrating. In a strange paradox, we who have unprecedented power over the planet are at the same time at its mercy: if it does not thrive, neither can we.

As is evident, this first implication of creation modeled as God's body supports and underscores a radically ecological view of the world. It is

entirely opposed to the cult of individualism endorsed by modern religion, government, and economics, all of which claim that human beings are basically separate, isolated individuals who enter into relationships when they wish. This is the view of human beings that underlies both New Age and born-again Christianity, as well as market capitalism and American democracy ("life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"). Perhaps the most important implication of creation as God's body is the new anthropology it demands: we are-basically, intrinsically, and always-interrelational, interdependent beings who live in total dependence on the others who compose the body, while at the same time being responsible for the well-being of one tiny part of the body, planet earth.

God as Source of Life and Love

A second implication of the model of creation as God's body is that it radicalizes both God's transcendence and God's immanence. This model has been criticized by some as pantheistic, as identifying God and the world. I do not believe it is. If God is to the universe as each of us is to our bodies, then God and the world are not identical. They are, however, intimate, close, and internally related in ways that can make Christianity uncomfortable, when it forgets its incarnationalism. But we Christians should not shy away from a model that radically underscores both divine transcendence and divine immanence. How does it do so?

In the world as God's body, God is the source, the center, the spring, the spirit of all that lives and loves, all that is beautiful and true. When we say "God," that is what we mean: we mean the power and source of all reality. We are not the source of our own being; hence, we acknowledge the radical dependence of all that is on God. This is true transcendence: being the source of everything that is. Our universe, the body of God, is the reflection of God's being, God's glory; it is the sacrament of God's presence with us. The most radically transcendent understanding of God is, then, at the same time the most radically immanent understanding. Because God is always incarnational, always embodied, we can see God's transcendence immanently. Meeting God is not a momentary "spiritual" affair; rather, God is the ether, the reality, the body, the garden in which we live. God is never absent; God is reality (being); everything that has being derives it from God (we are born of God and re-born by God). The entire cosmos is born of God, as is each and every creature. We depend on this source of life and renewable absolutely. To realize this is an overwhelming experience of God's transcendence; it calls forth awe and immense gratitude. Yet, at the same time, as Augustine puts it, God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Where can we go where God is not, since God fills heaven and earth: "I would not exist if I were not in you." The God whom we meet through the earth is not only the source of my being, but of all being. We see glimmers of God in creation (God's body) and we see the same God more clearly in Jesus Christ, the major model of God for Christians.

The second implication of our model, then, is that it allows us to meet God in the garden, on the earth, at home. We do not have to go elsewhere or wait until we die or even be "religious." We meet God in the nitty gritty of our regular lives, for God is always present in every here and now. This second implication underscores the first: since God is here in our world, then surely it is indeed our neighborhood, our planet and its creatures, that we should be caring for. What other vocation could we have but to care for God's body?

CONCLUSION: CREATION OR REDEMPTION CHRISTIANITY?

The model of the world as God's body suggests a creation-oriented Christianity in contrast to the tradition's heavy emphasis on redemption. In the end, there are many similarities between the two perspectives, for on each God is both creator and savior. However, the greatest difference between them is "where we are at home." In creation Christianity we are at home here on the earth, an earth that exists within God. We may not know why we have been placed here, but we know where we are: we live within God. We live within God before we are born, during our time on earth, and after we die. We are always in the same place-within God.

In the other version of the Christian story, we are not at home on the earth. To be sure, God came to earth at one point, in the incarnation of the redeemer Jesus Christ, but otherwise God is only externally related to the world. In both stories we belong to God, but in the redemption-oriented one, we can only find God in and through Jesus Christ and the community founded by him. We are "at home" in the church, the body of Christ, but not in the world (which is not seen as the body of God). Our final home, where we really belong, is in another time and another place: we reach this world of eternal life through accepting Christ's reconciling death for our sins. Neither God nor we are at home on the earth; it is not where God is or where we (properly) belong.

But in the model of the world as God's body, there is only one world, our earth, which we inhabit and of which God is the source, spring, and power. God is primarily and always incarnated, and creation is the witness of that continuous presence with us. In Jesus of Nazareth, Christians believe God's embodied presence reaches its culmination; the implicit becomes explicit; the shadows of divine love and goodness, truth and beauty, move into the light. We see the revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ. In Jesus' ministry of feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and siding with the poor and oppressed-actions which countered conventional mores and led to his death-we see concretely what living rightly in God's body means. In the story of Jesus we are brought face to face, as it were, with God's presence, a presence that we have always lived in and at times acknowledged. In this story we learn two things about where we are: we are in God and we are called to live as disciples of Jesus. We live within God; hence, we can relax and enjoy, for we are at home and there is no other place we want to be. We live also (and at the same time) on the earth; hence, we can get busy caring for our garden home. Moreover, the story of Jesus provides us with a vision of how we should care for this home in the kingdom of God, the eucharistic banquet, to which all are invited to share the feast. The story of ecological economics-home economics for planet earth-provides us with a way to work toward that vision: through sharing resources with all creatures so earth may prosper (distributive justice for sustainability).

We close with yet another reminder that all models are partial and inadequate. No one model is adequate, for each allows us to see some aspects of the God-world relationship, but shuts out others. The model of the world as God's body is meant as a corrective to the tradition, not as a substitute for it. It is offered as one model that is commensurate with Christianity's central incarnational belief and, for our time, helpful for the flourishing of all God's creatures. The final word, however, on this model and on all models is one of caution: "Be careful how you interpret the world; it is like that" (Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind* [World, 1961], 211).

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