

## Ecology and the Holy Spirit: The "Already" and the "Not Yet" of the Spirit in Creation

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**Abstract:** Is the Spirit present or absent in creation? An ecological theology of the Spirit will need to embrace both the "sacramental" and the "prophetic-eschatological" approaches to the work of the Spirit in creation. The Spirit can rightly be understood as the ever-present life-giving Creator. But this presence of the Spirit has the elements of "not-yet" as the Spirit suffers with groaning creation, and of "already" in the Spirit's communion in love with each creature.

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN THE EARTH seems a Spirit-filled place. Sitting in the shade of a Red Gum tree watching the play of light in a creek bed, being brought alive by the colours of Spring in a backyard garden, walking on the beach on a long Summer evening – in these and a thousand other moments it is easy to sense the presence of the Spirit of God in the experience of the natural world.

But there are other times when the world seems cold, empty and alien. The Spirit appears to be absent or, at least, hidden. When the clash of tectonic plates resulted in terrible suffering, death and grief for the people of Turkey in 1999, it was hard to think of nature as the place of God. When we stand before death in its many manifestations, or even when we contemplate one creature preying on another, it is not easy nor, perhaps, appropriate to speak in an unqualified way of the Spirit's presence.

Is the Spirit present or absent in creation? Can we discern the Spirit's presence at the heart of all things? This is obviously a matter of great importance for an ecological theology and spirituality.

Theologians writing on the Spirit offer different lines of thought on these questions. Some stress the presence and immanence of the Spirit in creation. They advocate what can be called a "sacramental" theology of divine presence. According to Yves Congar "the Spirit of God fills the universe" and "the Spirit is at work everywhere".<sup>1</sup> John V. Taylor sees

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1. Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit, Volume II* (New York: Seabury, 1983) 218-19.

the Holy Spirit as “that unceasing dynamic communicator and Go-Between operating upon every element and process of the material universe, the immanent and anonymous presence of God”.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Johnson sees the Spirit as “the dynamic flow of divine power that sustains the universe, bringing forth life”. This “indwelling, renewing, moving” Creator Spirit is the source of novelty in creation and of the communion between all creatures.<sup>3</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, by analogy with the use of field theory in physics, sees the Spirit as a field, “working creatively in all events as the power of the future”.<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Moltmann adopts the sacramental approach to the Spirit’s presence and sums it up succinctly: “The possibility of perceiving God in all things, and all things in God, is grounded theologically on an understanding of the Spirit of God as the power of creation and the wellspring of life.”<sup>5</sup>

Another group of theologians takes what might be called a “prophetic-eschatological” approach, stressing the need for the healing and redemption of creation, looking to an eschatological coming of the Spirit which will overturn what is. Moltmann can be found within this group as well. He sees nature suffering not only because of the terrible destructiveness of human abuse, but also because of its limitations and ambiguities, including death. He speaks of the “victims” and the “ambiguities” of evolution and sees redemption as running “counter” to evolution.<sup>6</sup> He writes that we experience creation as a “community of suffering” and as “a kind of winter of creation” and insists that we await the new creation, a rebirth of creation from the Spirit of God.<sup>7</sup> In Michael Welker’s recent book on the Spirit, no attention is given to the Spirit’s work in creation. Welker explicitly rejects any idea that the Spirit is present to creation as “a numinous entity”, or as some sort of “beyond” in the here and now, or as “a factor that is superficially present ‘everywhere’.”<sup>8</sup> John Zizioulas’s theology is permeated by a strongly developed theology of the Holy Spirit, and manifests a serious ecological commitment, but there is no emphasis on the presence of the Spirit in and through the act of creating. The Spirit seems to be

2. John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London: SCM, 1972) 64.

3. Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993) 42-44.

4. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994) 101.

5. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 35.

6. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (London: SCM, 1990) 303.

7. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (London: SCM, 1997) 122.

8. Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). For Welker what is specific to the Spirit, as the Spirit of Christ, is precisely “self-giving” and “free self-withdrawal”. He does affirm in one place that, in and through the Spirit understood as self-less love, “God is present in the midst of creation, establishing liberation” (339).

understood, not as already at the heart of nature, but as the eschatological one who will come, and who in some ways comes already, to transform nature, bringing it into communion with the divine Trinity. For Zizioulas, human beings have a crucial role in this communion as the priests of creation. He says that it is their role to "make a eucharistic reality out of nature, that is to make nature, too, capable of communion".<sup>9</sup>

In this paper I will suggest that an ecological theology of the Spirit will need to embrace both the "sacramental" and the "prophetic-eschatological" approaches to the work of the Spirit in creation. First, I will suggest that the Spirit can rightly be understood as the ever-present life-giving Creator. Then I will propose that this presence of the Spirit has the elements of *not-yet* as the Spirit suffers with groaning creation, and of *already* in the Spirit's communion in love with each creature. Finally, I will conclude with some reflections on our human experience of the Spirit in creation.

THE PRESENCE OF THE SPIRIT  
AS THE "DEAREST FRESHNESS DEEP DOWN THINGS"

When Hopkins wrote the line, "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things", he captured perfectly the theological tradition's long conviction of the divine presence that is profoundly and intimately interior to all things. With the word "freshness" he found a way of suggesting that this creative presence is not something static, but life-giving, dynamic, and open to what is new. With the adjective "dearest" he conveys the idea of a profoundly relational and personal presence.<sup>10</sup>

In the bible, the Spirit of God is the Life-Giver. The bible opens with the "wind of God" (*ruach*) sweeping or brooding over the face of the waters (Gen 1:2). This wind or breath of God is the life-giving principle for all things. Creatures exist only because God gives them the "breath of life" (Gen 2:7; 6:3; 6:17; 7:15; Job 33:4; 34:14-15; Ez 37:9; Ps 33:6; Eccles 12:7; Jdt 16:14). In Psalm 104, we find: "When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground." In the Wisdom of Solomon, the Spirit of God is understood as the one who has "filled the whole world", who "holds all things together" (Wis 1:7) and who is "in all things" (Wis 12:1). In the light of the resurrection of Jesus and the experience of the outpouring of the Spirit, the early Christians saw the Spirit as the Life-Giver (*Zoopoion*) in the sense of the one who brings us a participation in resurrection life. This word "Life-Giver", which would become the credal affirmation of the Spirit after the Council of Constan-

9. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Press, 1985) 119.

10. This line is from "God's Grandeur", which can be found in W. H. Gardner (ed.), *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manly Hopkins* (London: Penguin, 1953) 27.

tinople in 381, is found in John 6:63, but the idea of the Spirit as life-giving is widespread in the Christian Scriptures (1 Cor 15:44-45; 2 Cor 3:6; Rom 5:5; 8:2; 8:9-11; John 3:3-8).

The early Christian community was convinced that the Holy Spirit, whom they experienced so vividly, was not only the life-giver but also the one who brought them into a communion with each other that was so profound it could be understood as an anticipation and a tasting of the divine life.<sup>11</sup> The outpouring of the Spirit was experienced in terms of *koinonia* (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35). The Holy Spirit comes upon those who follow the way of Jesus as the presence of divine love, bonding human beings to each other, with a love that involves not just human themselves but that is also a participation in the dynamism of the life of God (John 14:15-24; 1 John 4:16). Paul tells us that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). He blesses the community at Corinth with the prayer: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor 13:13). Obviously, the Holy Spirit does not suddenly become the Spirit of *koinonia* at Pentecost. The Spirit who has been ever-present with creation has been ever-present as the bearer of *koinonia*. The Spirit is life-giving Creator as the one who embraces each creature in the relationship of ongoing creation.

As the theology of the early church developed along explicitly trinitarian lines, it was the Spirit who was understood as the divine presence "in" things, but always in profound communion with the Source of all and with the eternal Word. God's action with regard to creation was understood as *one* act of the whole Trinity, but there was distinction within this one act. Athanasius can be taken as summing up this tradition with his saying: "The Father creates and renews everything *through* the Word *in* the Spirit".<sup>12</sup> According to Athanasius, "grace is given *from* the Father, *through* the Son and *in* the Holy Spirit".<sup>13</sup> For Athanasius, wherever God acts, whether in creation, incarnation or in sanctification, the whole Trinity acts as one, but the whole Trinity acts from the Father, through the Word and in the Spirit. Basil follows Athanasius, and specifies the Spirit's role not only as "life-giving", but

11. On this see John Zizioulas, "Implications ecclésiologiques de deux types de pneumatologie", in *Communion Sanctorum: Mélanges offerts à Jean-Jaques von Allmen* (Paris: Labor et Fides, 1981) 141-54. Zizioulas shows that while the West has favoured the missionary emphasis and the East that of communion, both dimensions are needed today for a genuine ecumenical theology. I have already made use of this distinction in the context of a theology of creation, in "The Spirit of God has Filled the Universe: Ecology and the Theology of the Holy Spirit" which will appear in a forthcoming book *Earth Revealing – Earth Healing*, to be published by The Liturgical Press. The focus in this article is on what can be said about a distinctive and proper role for the Holy Spirit in the one trinitarian act of creating.

12. *Letter to Serapion*, 1, 24.

13. *Letter to Serapion*, 1, 30.

also as “perfecting” or bringing all things to their eschatological completion in God. John McIntyre says with respect to Basil’s theology: “In carrying out these *energeiai* associated with him, the Holy Spirit does so in a very special way namely that of bringing to an effectual conclusion the work that God has done in creation and redemption.”<sup>14</sup>

In the tradition of Christian theology, the Spirit has been understood as the indwelling life-giving one, as the *ek-stasis* of God towards creatures in the divine action that encompasses creation, incarnation and sanctification. The implication of this in terms of ongoing creation is that the Spirit must be understood as present to all things in order that they actually exist. This is the deepest meaning of the patristic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*; not just that God began creation from nothing, but that it is the divine creative presence in the Spirit that enables creatures to exist from nothing at every point. It means that all creatures exist over an abyss of nothingness, held in being by the presence of the Creator Spirit.

This theology of the divine omnipresence to all creatures received profound expression in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Using Aristotelian categories, and with his own wonderfully dynamic concept of being as “*esse*” (literally the “to be” of things), Aquinas shows that it is the divine interior presence that enables all creatures to exist. He has a strong sense of the creatureliness, finitude and contingency of all things. Everything that is not God is radically contingent, existing only on account of God’s interior presence:

Now since it is God’s nature to exist (*esse*), God it must be who properly causes existence (*esse*) in creatures, just as it is fire itself sets other things on fire. And God is causing this effect in things not just when they begin to exist, but all the time that they are maintained (*conservantur*) in existence, just as the sun is lighting up the atmosphere all the time the atmosphere remains lit. During the whole period of a thing’s existence, therefore God must be present to it, and present in a way in keeping with the way in which the thing possesses its existence. Now existence is more intimately and profoundly interior to things than anything else, for everything as we said is potential when compared to existence. So God must exist and exist intimately in everything.<sup>15</sup>

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14. John McIntyre, *The Shape of Pneumatology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) 93. On the Pneumatology of this period see also John Zizioulas, “The Teaching of the 2nd Ecumenical Council on the Holy Spirit in Historical and Ecumenical Perspective” in J. S. Martins (ed.), *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum, Vol. 1* (Rome/Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983) 29-53.

15. *Summa Theologiae*, 1.8.2. The translation is by Timothy McDermott O.P. in *St Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae, Volume 2: Existence and Nature of God* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964) 113.

Aquinas's image, of the sun lighting up the atmosphere only as long as the sun continues to shine, conveys vividly the idea that things exist only in so far as God conserves them in existence. They exist only as God enables their "to be" (*esse*). This is the dynamic relationship of "*creatio continua*", a relationship which continues for the whole existence of every creature. For Aquinas, creation is simply "the relation of the creature to the Creator as to the principle of its very being".<sup>16</sup> It involves the dynamic presence of God at the inmost centre of every creature. Aquinas points out that a creature's existence, its *esse*, is more intimately interior to the creature than anything else. This profound interior of things is the place of the divine presence and of divine creative action. For Aquinas, this interior creative act does not overpower or eliminate a creature's own proper action, but enables the creature to be and to act with its own proper autonomy.

Karl Rahner has insisted that the tradition articulated by Aquinas needs to be developed in the light of biological evolution. God, now, must be understood not simply as the dynamic cause of the existence of creatures, but as the dynamic ground of their *becoming*. In evolutionary history, we can find instances where what is clearly old becomes something altogether new, as is the case in the emergence of self-conscious human beings. Rahner argues that we need to think of the divine act of ongoing creation, then, not simply as the divine "conservation" and "*concursus*" of all things, but as the enabling of creation to become what is new.<sup>17</sup> Rahner calls this process "active self-transcendence". He sees this capacity to become something new as a capacity that nature itself has. He insists that evolutionary emergence has its own autonomy and its own explanation at the level of science. It is to be explained by the laws of nature. But at the deepest metaphysical level, it is God who enables this becoming. God is the inner power of evolutionary emergence. For Rahner, God is not to be thought of as intervening from outside, but as empowering the whole process of ongoing creation from within.<sup>18</sup> Speaking in the language of Athanasius and Basil, one could say that this one ongoing dynamically creative act springs *from* the Source of all, occurs *through* the eternal Word and is present to us *in* the life-giving Spirit. It is the Spirit who is the life-giver present in all things, and who is at the same time the bond of communion between all things and the trinitarian God. The Spirit is the creative one who empowers the evolutionary unfolding of the universe from within.

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16. *Summa Theologiae*, 1.45.3.

17. The divine "*concursus*" or concurrence refers to God's ongoing cooperation, which is always needed to enable creatures to act. In the theological tradition, this concurrence is understood as allowing creatures to act with their own proper autonomy.

18. Karl Rahner, "Evolution", in Karl Rahner, Cornelius Ernst and Kevin Smyth (eds.), *Sacramentum Mundi: Volume Two* (London: Burns and Oates, 1968) 289-97.

Pannenberg stands in this tradition when he writes: "the Spirit of God is the life-giving principle, to which all creatures owe life, movement, and activity".<sup>19</sup> The Spirit of God is at work in evolutionary emergence whenever something radically new occurs, whenever nature reaches ecstatically beyond itself in the unfolding of the universe and in the dynamic story of life. This means that the Spirit of God is to be understood as present and acting in the first second of the Big Bang, in the formation of the first atoms of hydrogen and helium, in the evolution of galaxies, in the nucleosynthesis of elements in stars, in supernova explosions, in the development of our solar system 4.5 billion years ago, in the appearance of life on Earth about 3.9 billion years ago, in the emergence of complex eukaryotic cells and of multi-celled organisms in the explosion of life at the beginning of the Cambrian period, and in the appearance of the first bipedal apes about 6 million years ago, of *Homo erectus* about 2 million years ago and of modern humankind perhaps a hundred thousand years ago.

What Augustine said of human beings is true of all God's creatures. God, in the Spirit, is more intimately interior to each creature than they are to themselves.<sup>20</sup> Each is caught up in a life-giving relationship with God in the Spirit who is present to them as the "dearest freshness deep down things". Each tree in an old growth forest, each bird celebrating the morning, each kangaroo and echidna, is an expression of the divine life, and each is the dwelling place of the Creator Spirit.

If this is true, it has ecological consequences. It means that life forms cannot simply be understood as human "property" or simply as "things" without their own life and meaning. Rosemary Ruether points out what this means: there must be "an ultimate *caveat* against reducing animals or plants, soils, or mountains to the status of 'things' under our power". Each being "has its own distinct relation to God as source of life". Each has its value: "Each life form has its own purpose, its own right to exist, its own independent relation to God and to other beings". She rightly insists that when human beings make use of other creatures, and when they exercise their covenantal role as caretakers, they are called to do this only within a larger sensibility of kinship, "rooted in the encounter with nature as 'thou', as fellow beings each with its own integrity".<sup>21</sup>

THE GROANING OF THE SPIRIT WITH CREATION  
"NOT-YET" AND "ALREADY"

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19. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2*, 76.

20. See his *Confessions*, III, 6, 11.

21. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) 227-8.

We do not have to await the future end-time to find the Spirit revealed as the healing, reconciling, communion-bringing one. The Spirit whom the Scriptures see as the breath of life for all creatures, the Spirit who is the one who empowers the unfolding of the universe from the Big Bang and the evolution of life on Earth in all its complexity and abundance – this life-giving Spirit is none other than the eschatological bringer of communion. The Spirit is at work in the creation of all things as the giver and the gift of divine communion. The Spirit creates by bringing each creature into relationship with the life of God. Creation is an act of communion, not the same as the communion of grace, not yet the eschatological communion of all things in God, but precisely that communion between God and each creature which enables it to exist and to become in an inter-related world of creatures. This communion in the Spirit is both a future, eschatological reality in its fullness, yet something that is already anticipated in the Spirit's presence to creatures now. I will explore briefly these two dimensions of this role of the Spirit: the Spirit as "groaning" with creation in the experience of *not-yet* and the Spirit as present *already* in loving communion with all creatures.

#### The Not-Yet: Groaning in Bringing to Birth

If the unfolding of the universe and the emergence of life in all its diversity is the work of the Creator Spirit, if the Spirit is the "dearest freshness deep down things", is there any more that needs to be said? A Christian ecological theology rightly celebrates the diversity of creation as the divine self-expression, and takes delight in living creatures as God delights in them. But more does need to be said. Theology cannot afford to adopt a romantic view of nature that obscures struggle, pain and death. Nature does not always present a face to us that can be accommodated within an uncritically positive view of the world. A theology of creation cannot be simply a theology of divine presence in things.

The movement of tectonic plates and changing weather patterns, along with tides and seasons, creates the endless array of niches, that gives rise to the glorious diversity of living things. But the same processes give rise to deathly earthquakes and tidal waves. Random mutations not only provide the novelty that enables better adaptation to an evolutionary niche, but they also bring suffering and death. About 248 million years ago, more than 90% of the wondrous variety of marine species became extinct. But this extinction was followed by a flourishing of life forms, with the emergence of dinosaurs, flying reptiles and mammals in the Triassic and Jurassic periods, and of birds and flowering plants in the Cretaceous period. At the end of the Cretaceous period, about 65 million years ago, the dinosaurs along with 65% of the

Earth's species were wiped out. The extinction of the dinosaurs left habitats for mammals to fill and they diversified and flourished.

Two inescapable dimensions of bodily existence are the fact that we creatures feed off other creatures and the fact that we die. No amount of denial can remove predation from the story of life. Human beings have to eat and we have to eat other living creatures. Even conscientious vegetarians still eat things that were once alive. It seems that all we can do is acknowledge our dependence on other creatures and accept our debt to them respectfully and thankfully – attitudes inculcated by a number of ancient indigenous religious traditions.

Some Christians have understood pain and death not as part of original creation but as deformities that arise as a result of human sin. Human sin certainly has deadly effects on the whole biosphere. The destruction of the Earth's rain forests, the extinctions of uncounted species of creatures, global climate change, the damage to the ozone layer point to human sin on an inconceivable scale. However, I believe that to attribute biological death in itself to human sin is a mistake, based upon a misunderstanding of our biological natures and a few slim biblical references taken too literally.

Evolutionary change in complex organisms depends upon both sex and death. Sexual reproductions involve a shuffling of chromosomes in every generation, giving rise to evolutionary diversity that can take advantage of changing niches. But without death there would not be a series of generations and without a number of generations there could be no evolution. Ursula Goodenough points out that death is part of the evolutionary strategy of complex sexual organisms in a way that is not true for simple bacteria. Death is not programmed into the life cycle of a bacterium or an amoeba, although they can be killed or die for lack of food. They do not need to evolve to cope with changing niches. Their survival strategy is to produce large numbers of simple, specialised organisms. But the evolutionary strategy of sexual multicellular creatures involves death. Early in the formation of the embryo, some cells switch on genes that commit them to becoming germ line cells. These are the precursors of the egg or sperm cells, with the role of transmitting the genome to the next generation. Other cells are committed to becoming ordinary somatic cells, with the role of negotiating an evolutionary niche. These ordinary somatic cells are programmed to die. It is because of death that there is the possibility of rapid evolutionary change that can allow something as intricate as the eye to develop. It is precisely because of the combination of sexual recombination and death that we have the variety of complex creatures we find on Earth today. Without death there would be no wings, hands or brains. Ursula Goodenough writes: "Death is the price paid to have trees and clams and birds and grasshoppers, and death is the price paid to have human

consciousness."<sup>22</sup> Lynn Margulis tells us that death is the price we pay for "fancy tissues and complex life histories".<sup>23</sup>

The death of creatures, whether it be that of a dinosaur, a butterfly or a human being, is part of the pattern of biological life. It seems to me that Christian theology has no satisfying theoretical answer to the question of why there is pain and death in nature. This is the way things are in this finite, limited, bodily world. Christian theology can only bear witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus give expression to divine love as radically forgiving, reconciling, healing and liberating. But the death of Jesus also reveals a God who enters into the pain of the world, who suffers with suffering creation. The cross tells us that the divine capacity for love involves an incomprehensible vulnerability and self-limitation. The self-revelation of the cross suggests a God who is freely self-limiting, a God who relates in compassionate, self-limiting love with each creature, respecting each creature's proper nature and autonomy.

In the light of the cross, God's transcendence can be thought of as the capacity to love in a way that is beyond all human comprehension. If one starts from the biblical notion that God is love, and this love is expressed in the cross of Jesus, then God can be understood as supremely able to enter into loving relationships. God's transcendence can then be thought of as transcendent loving, the capacity to give oneself in love in a way beyond human possibilities. It is the "foolishness" of divine love that is radically beyond all human wisdom (1 Cor 1:21-31). The divine capacity of free self-limitation in love is, then, not to be understood as a diminishment of God or a loss of transcendence, but the real expression of divine transcendence. The God revealed in the cross is capable of freely entering into the self-limitation and vulnerability of love, without compromising the freedom and autonomy of the creature on the one hand or divine transcendence on the other. In our human experience of relationships the person most capable of love is the one who freely makes room for others to be themselves. This involves a form of self-limitation, a letting be of the other, a making room for the other. If God is understood as a trinitarian communion-in-love, and if creation is seen as the ecstatic free expression of this love in the diversity of creatures, then God can only be understood as creating by embracing creatures in a relationship of love. God freely accepts the limitation and vulnerability of such relationships.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that the Creator

22. Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 151.

23. Lyn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New View of Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998) 91.

24. Here I am differing from Aquinas, who rightly wanting to preserve divine transcendence, found it necessary from within his own system to see the relation of God and Creation, from God's side, as conceptual rather than real. From the side of creatures he saw creation as a real relation. See *Summa Theologiae*, 1.13.7; 1.45.3 ad 1.

Spirit, because of divine free self-limitation which respects the otherness of creatures, may not be free to overturn the proper unfolding and emergence of creation, but may rather be committed to respecting the proper autonomy and independence of all things.<sup>25</sup> If God is to be understood as true and faithful, then the Christic pattern of vulnerable and self-limiting love governs not just the story of Jesus and the church, but also God's creative presence to all creatures in the Spirit.

The resurrection functions as a promise that creation has a future in God. The promise that Christians see encapsulated in the resurrection runs through all the biblical literature. In a recent study of the prophetic tradition, Carol Dempsey has shown how in diverse ways these books show that the "the eschatological hope of humanity's redemption is intrinsically linked to the restoration of all creation". She shows how the prophetic vision of salvation involves a relationship of harmony between God, humans and all other creatures.<sup>26</sup> This promise finds beautiful expression in the vision of Isaiah: "the wolf will lie down with the lamb"; "the lion shall eat straw like the ox"; "the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp"; "they will not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain; for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa 11: 6-9).

Paul saw, in the resurrection experience of the Spirit, the beginning and the guarantee of this transformation of creation. James Dunn points out that for Paul, as for Jesus, "the Spirit is the power of the new age already broken into the old".<sup>27</sup> The Spirit is the "down-payment and guarantee" (*arrabon*) that God will complete what has been begun in Christ (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13-15). The Spirit is the "first-fruits" of God's harvest (Rom 8:23). The Spirit is the first instalment of our inheritance of the Kingdom (Rom 8:15-17; 14:17; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 15:42-50; Gal 4:6-7; 5:16-24).<sup>28</sup> The early Christian community understood its vivid experience of the Spirit's presence as a foretaste and pledge of the promised renewal of creation. The risen Christ is understood as the beginning of the "new creation" in which the believing community already participates (2 Cor 5:17).

In Romans 8, Paul speaks of the "sufferings of the present time" in relation to the glory that is to come. In this context, he personalises creation and talks of creation waiting with "eager longing" for its

25. These themes are developed in more depth in *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 122-30, and in *The God of Evolution: a Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) 35-55.

26. Carol J. Dempsey, "Hope Amidst Crisis: A Prophetic Vision of Cosmic Redemption" in Carol J. Dempsey and Russell A. Butkus (eds.), *All Creation is Groaning: An Interdisciplinary Vision of Life in a Sacred Universe* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1999) 282.

27. James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit: Volume 2 Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998) 14.

28. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit*, 14.

liberation from “bondage to decay” and for “the freedom associated with the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19-23). Paul offers a startling image: “For we know that the entire creation has been groaning together in the pangs of childbirth up till now” (8:22).<sup>29</sup> In his commentary on this passage, Joseph Fitzmyer says that Paul appears to be borrowing from contemporary Greek philosophers who compared the rebirth of nature each spring to a woman’s labour. But Paul’s focus is certainly not on the yearly cycle. He sees the labour and groaning of creation as expressing the eschatological expectation of the whole of creation.<sup>30</sup> Paul sees the suffering of non-human creation, and understands it in terms of something being brought to birth. At the same time he sees creation as still in bondage to death, and under duress because of human sin. But it shares with us, who already have the first fruits of the Spirit, the hope of liberation from death and decay. Fitzmyer notes that when Paul speaks of the “corruption” of nature, his words ring true today in the context of our contemporary ecological crisis, “even though he did not have in mind what modern industry and corruption have done and are doing to the Universe and the Earth’s ozone layer”.<sup>31</sup>

Brendan Byrne points out that, in Paul’s argument in chapter 8 of Romans, there are three inter-related groanings: in verses 19-22, *creation* groans in childbirth; in verses 23-25, *we*, who already have the first fruits of the Spirit groan while we await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies; and, in verses 26-27, *the Spirit* intercedes with groans too deep for utterance.<sup>32</sup> The Spirit groans in prayer for us, coming to our aid in our weakness. We cannot see or imagine the goal to which we and the rest of creation are heading, but the Spirit intercedes with prayerful groaning for us. Paul seems to have explicitly in mind the Spirit groaning within human beings. He does not talk explicitly of the Spirit groaning and suffering with creation. But Paul certainly does see creation as groaning in the suffering of childbirth, human beings as groaning in anticipation of God’s future, and the Spirit’s prayerful groaning as related to the other two groanings. It seems entirely appropriate to build on Paul’s thought to see the Spirit as groaning, suffering with creation in its labour. Then the Spirit will be understood as the companion of creation in its travail and as the mid-wife of new creation.

All through the ages, the Christian community has continued to cry out “Come Holy Spirit! Come Creator Spirit!” It continues to pray: “Send out your Spirit and renew the face of the earth”. The trans-

29. I have used Brendan Byrne’s translation from his *Romans: Sacra Pagina 6* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1996) 254.

30. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: The Anchor Bible: Volume 33* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 509.

31. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 505.

32. Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, 255.

formation that we call for is imaged in biblical texts as an overcoming of the struggle, as shalom, as entering into the Sabbath of God. It is imaged as a liberation from both predation and death. This needs to be understood as an image for what is beyond imagining -- the future participation of all creatures in the dynamism of the divine life.<sup>33</sup>

#### The "Already": The Presence of the Spirit as Redemptive Love

Because this promise is at the heart of the biblical view of creation, I am attracted by Pannenberg's idea that the Holy Spirit can be understood as "the power of the future that gives creatures their present and duration".<sup>34</sup> Of course, the Spirit is more than an impersonal power. The Spirit is the anticipatory *personal presence* of eschatological communion. The Spirit is the presence of the future to all creatures, a presence that is a foretaste and promise of each creature's place in the divine communion.

Pannenberg writes that, from the side of God, the Spirit is the presence of the transcendent God with creatures, and from the side of creatures, the Spirit is "the medium of the participation of the creatures in the divine life, and therefore in life as such".<sup>35</sup> I like this formulation because it brings out the idea mentioned above, that the Spirit is the power of ongoing creation, the life-giver, precisely as the eschatological Bringer of Communion. It is because creatures are already brought into the communion of divine life by the Spirit that they exist. This relationship is creation. The power of the future, the power of creation, is nothing other than the power of love. God's eschatological future exerts its influence on the present in the Spirit, constantly, faithfully, lovingly in all events and in all creatures.

God is not to be understood as an interventionist, but as one who is committed to respect for the finitude and proper autonomy of creation. God is present in all the incompleteness of things. The triune God is present, in the Spirit, to each creature here and now, loving it into existence and promising its future. Creation is an act of love. This means that salvation begins in and with creation. I agree, then, with Ruth Page when she refuses to separate God's presence with creatures from God's salvation of them. God's presence involves both creation and redemption. She writes that "in relation to creation God's being there in freedom and love is already saving".<sup>36</sup> To be taken into divine communion *is* salvation. In my view, this does not mean that nothing

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33. Catherine Keller offers a critical reflection on the way religious eschatologies contribute to the ecological crisis and constructive proposals in "Talk about the Weather: The Greening of Eschatology" in Carol J. Adams, *Écofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993) 30-49.

34. *Systematic Theology, Volume 2*, 102.

35. *Systematic Theology, Volume 2*, 32.

36. Ruth Page, *God and the Web of Creation* (London: SCM, 1996) 62.

more need to be said. As I have indicated above, I believe that the Spirit is the presence in anticipation of God's eschatological future, a future in which all things will be taken up into the life of God.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike Ruth Page, I would argue for God achieving divine purposes through the whole process of creation and through all its contingencies. But I agree with her that there is a teleology *now* as "the divine presence companions each individual non-human creature".

I am in complete agreement with what I take to be her central claim that "the individual organism in its individual conditions, no matter how limited these look from a human point of view, is the outcome of God's gift of freedom and the subject of God's love".<sup>38</sup> God companions each creature with love that respects each creature's own identity, possibilities and proper autonomy.

This conviction has immediate ecological consequences. God knows and cares about each creature's experience. This means that "God knows, as a fish or any other river creature knows, what it is like when poisonous effluent flows into its habitat".<sup>39</sup> It means that those who commit themselves to such a God commit themselves to something like the divine feeling for fish, and thereby commit themselves to fish habitats.

The Spirit, who creates all things and brings them into a creaturely communion with God, is also, as Moltmann points out, the foundation of all the inter-relationships between creatures. He writes: "For *the community of creation*, in which all created things exist with one another, for one another, and in one another, is also *the fellowship of the Holy Spirit*. For us human beings, the discovery of the cosmic breath of God's Spirit cannot but lead us to respect for the dignity of all created things."<sup>40</sup> They are part of us and we are part of them, inter-related in one world, enlivened by the one Spirit who holds all things together. We are interconnected in a web of life, in symbiotic relationship, in food chains, in local ecosystems, in a biological community on Earth, in a community that stretches beyond the Earth to the solar system and beyond the solar system to the universe.

#### HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF THE SPIRIT OF GOD "DEEP DOWN THINGS"

I have been suggesting that the Spirit of God is present to all creatures, enabling them to exist in a network of relationships, enabling them to become in an evolutionary universe. But I have argued that the

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37. Jesus' preaching and practice of the Reign of God communicates this structure. The coming of God is a future, eschatological event, but Jesus' hearers already encountered this coming of God in an anticipatory way in Jesus' preaching and in his healings, meals, community life and in his whole person.

38. Page, *God and the Web of Creation*, 71

39. Page, *God and the Web of Creation*, 71.

40. *The Spirit of Life*, 10.

Spirit is present both as suffering with them in their finitude, death and incompleteness, as they await their fulfilment in God, and also as loving and delighting with them in their fecundity, their inter-related diversity, and their beauty, as they already exist as God's self-expression in a finite world. I will bring this exploration to an end with brief reflections on the way we humans experience the Spirit, not only in both the beauty and the struggle of creation, which has been the main theme of this paper, but also in radical mystery, and in liturgical prayer.

As I write these words, I am in a little shack on the coast just south of Adelaide, looking out through an open door to rolling green farmlands that stretch off to the Willunga hills. Above the hills there is a sky of pale blue, with a few frothy white clouds. The front yard of the shack is lined on either side by wattle trees; their gold blossoms muted from what they were a few weeks ago. Near the door is small bottle-brush tree. It is in full bloom, with great red flowers brilliant in the sunshine. While I work it is visited by a number of honey eating birds, including the tiny New Holland honey-eaters, brilliant in yellow and black. It is easy to feel one with all this, to feel connected with the birds, the trees, the hills. This experience opens out naturally into an awareness of the mysterious presence of the Spirit, the "dearest freshness deep down things". It leads to wonder and to praise.

Such experiences, which are not uncommon, can be understood, theologically, as encounters with the Spirit of God, as moments of grace. Of course, as always, there is the need to "test" the spirits. There is always room for self-delusion. There is always the possibility that some such experiences may express escapism and self-absorption. But when such experiences are named in terms of the Gospel, when they resonate with what we know of Jesus, when they lead us to love, when they take us to the side of the poorest, when they commit us to the love of all God's good creation, then surely they can be named moments of sheer grace, and as experiences of the Holy Spirit.

But we also experience creation as harsh and sometimes as bloody. Cats drag home small birds and animals. White Sharks prey on seals. Birds attack other birds that stray into their territory. Survival of some creatures means death for others. There is death as well as life built into all ecological systems. Violence and pain are part of the natural world. Where is the Spirit of God in this kind of natural violence? Can the experience of helpless horror also be an experience of the Spirit?

The temptation is to deny the blood, and to escape into a romantic view of nature. Jay McDaniel suggests that an authentic response involves facing what is, honestly and compassionately. He says that the Christian response is not to become violent ourselves, nor is it to wallow in guilt. It is, rather, "to be honest and open about the violence around us and within us, not hiding from it; trustful that the very Heart of the universe suffers with each and every living being that suffers; and

inspired toward a nonviolent way of living that shares with the world the non-violence of God".<sup>41</sup> The Spirit is present with each and every creature, as co-sufferer and companion. The Spirit groans with each creature, feeling its pain, enabling it to have its own integrity, and longing for its completion and fullness of life in God. The experience of the Spirit at this level is one that leads to a radical compassion for other creatures. As McDaniel suggests, it can help us to feel the pain of the world, to accept our complicity in some of the violence, and to respond to the divine call to be peacemakers.<sup>42</sup> So, alongside the experience of the Spirit as gracious presence there is the experience of the Spirit a co-sufferer, groaning with creation as it groans in its travail.

There is a third way in which we experience the Spirit in creation – as radically mysterious to us. When we stand before nature at the level of quantum physics, we find that reality is completely counterintuitive and unimaginable. There is wave-particle duality, so that an atom is to be understood as having wave-like and particle-like aspects depending on circumstances. There is the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, which tells us that one cannot know at the same time the position and the momentum of a given particle, since measuring the quantity of one rules out precise knowledge of the other. There is the principle of non-location, which tells us that once quantum entities have interacted with each other, they retain a power to influence each other no matter how widely they are separated from one another. All of this leaves us gasping. Common sense is revealed as a very unreliable guide to the real nature of reality. At the macro level, that of the universe, we find it easy to feel lost and completely insignificant. We are told that our own Milky Way Galaxy contains perhaps 200 billion stars and that there are more a 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe. We find that at the heart of twinkling stars there are unimaginably powerful nuclear processes. We foresee the time, thankfully very distant from now, when our Sun will begin to run out of fuel, swell in size to become a red giant star, and eventually engulf nearby planets, including the Earth. Even the slightest exposure to astronomy and cosmology takes us far beyond the human comfort zone. In these and many other experiences we are confronted with nature as profoundly *other*.

Ursula Goodenough reflects on this kind of experience from a naturalist rather than a theological perspective. She tells how as a young woman she looked up at the once familiar night sky, and seeing it in terms of the physics she had been learning, she became overwhelmed with terror. She says: "A bleak emptiness overtook me whenever I thought about what was really going on out in the cosmos or deep in the

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41. Jay McDaniel, *With Roots and Wings: Christianity in an Age of Ecology and Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995) 53.

42. McDaniel, *With Roots and Wings*, 54.

atom". She goes on to describe herself finally moving beyond emptiness and nihilism by accepting the apparent pointlessness as the very locus of Mystery: the Mystery of why there is anything at all, the Mystery of where the laws of physics came from, and the Mystery of why the universe seems so strange. She speaks of coming to make her own "Covenant with Mystery", in which "nature takes its place as a strange but wondrous given".<sup>43</sup> She points out that the "gasp" before mystery can terrify, but it can also emancipate.

This Covenant with Mystery is also the shape of the most honest and searching of responses to the way things are in the biblical and theological tradition. It is the ultimate response found in the book of Job, when God addresses Job from the whirlwind, asking,

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ...Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? ...Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cord of Orion? ...Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high? (Job 38: 4, 16, 31; 39:27).

Job has no answers. He cannot comprehend or control the immensity of nature. He cannot deal with the forces of chaos, symbolised in the primordial monsters Behemoth and Leviathan, modelled on the hippopotamus and the crocodile (40:15-41:34). In the encounter Job knows the mystery of God, not simply by hearsay, but in seeing or experiencing in the midst of incomprehension (42:5).

Karl Rahner has built his approach to theology on the conviction that God is unfathomable mystery.<sup>44</sup> He points out that in theology we must speak of God, but we speak of what is ineffable. We stammer with words about that which cannot be expressed in words. We offer our thoughts on the one who is incomprehensible. We Christians believe that this ineffable mystery has drawn near to us in Jesus, but Jesus is not the explanation of this burning mystery but the one who plunges us more deeply into it. In his later work, Rahner reflected on the way that the size of the universe and the story of evolution can make us feel "lost in the cosmos". It produces disorientation and a "cosmic dizziness". Rahner suggests that this experience can lead to the good result of a new and more profound sense of our contingency and finitude. In this sense, he suggests, we can think of the cosmos of modern science as having become "more theological". It can lead to a deeper sense of our creaturehood and God's mystery. Rahner considers that "the feeling of

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43. She writes: "The realization that I needn't have answers to the Big Questions, needn't seek answers to the Big Questions, has served as an epiphany. I lie on my back under the stars and the unseen galaxies and I let their enormity wash over me. I assimilate the vastness of the distances, the impermanences, the *fact* of it all". *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, 12.

44. See, for example, Rahner's foundational article, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology", in *Theological Investigations, Volume IV* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 3-73.

cosmic dizziness can be understood as an element in the development of people's theological consciousness".<sup>45</sup>

In all of this we face the ever-amazing mystery of our own profound inter-connection with all these processes. We come to see that we are instances where the matter of the universe has come to consciousness. The atoms that make up our bodies, like the atoms of birds and trees and koalas, have all, apart from primordial hydrogen, been made in the stars. We are literally made from stardust. The experience of the profound mystery of our own existence in relation to a wondrously mysterious universe can open out into self-acceptance before Holy Mystery. This too can be an authentic experience of the Spirit of God at the heart of creation.

The experience of gracious presence, the experience of groaning with creation, and the experience of radical mystery are all experiences of the Spirit of God that can lead us to worship and thanksgiving. In eucharistic liturgies, we bring the gifts of creation to the table and invoke the Spirit over them, that they might be sacramentally taken up into the divine communion, thus anticipating the final communion of all things in God. In taking a eucharistic stance before the universe, human beings can be called, with Orthodox theology, "priests of creation". As John Zizioulas points out, the experience of the liturgy, in which all of creation is caught up in anticipation in the divine trinitarian life, can transform human perceptions of all other creatures. A liturgical stance before creation leads to a profoundly Christian ecological "ethos". This will change us radically if we let it.

In reflection on liturgy and prayer, we speak metaphorically of bringing creation to God. What we mean, I think, is that we bring creation to mind, *our* minds, in prayer and in praise and thanksgiving. We become conscious of other creatures and attend to them in the very place of our God-attentiveness. In our loving union with God we are drawn to love the creatures that God loves. We come to recognise what Aldo Leopold once suggested, that God "likes to hear birds sing and to seek flowers grow".<sup>46</sup> But we do not literally bring creation to God. The Spirit of God was with all things and in all things long before the first spark of human consciousness.

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45. Karl Rahner, "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith", in *Theological Investigations* XXI (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 50.

46. Aldo Leopold, "Some Fundamentals of Conservation in the Southwest", *Environmental Ethics* 1 (Summer 1979) 140-41.