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Ecology at the Heart of Christian Doctrine

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Something new happened in a recent Social Justice Statement of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference. For many years they have been bringing out statements on issues of justice and peace. In 2002, they extended their reflections beyond the human to embrace the rest of God's creation. In this statement, the circle of concern reaches out to include the animals, insects and plants of Australia, and the rivers, the seas, the atmosphere and the land itself. The bishops make it clear that there can be no justice for the poor of the Earth without respect, love and care for the Earth itself. Justice and ecology cannot be separated. Both are essential dimensions of discipleship in the twenty-first century.

At the centre of this statement is a call to *ecological conversion*.¹ This theme is taken from an address of Pope John Paul II, in which he points out that humanity has failed God in abusing the Earth and also celebrates the recent growth in ecological awareness:

However, if one looks at the regions of our planet, one realizes immediately that humanity has disappointed the divine expectation. Above all in our time, humanity has unhesitatingly devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted the waters, deformed the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, upset the hydro-geological and atmospheric systems, blighted green spaces, implementing uncontrolled forms of industrialization, humiliating – to use an image of Dante Alighieri – the earth, that flower bed that is our dwelling. It is necessary, therefore, to stimulate the 'ecological

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1. *A New Earth: The Environmental Challenge* (Sydney: Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, 2002).

conversion' which over these last decades had made humanity more sensitive when facing the catastrophe towards which it was moving.²

Obviously the Pope is thinking of the movement of ecological conversion as something that it far wider than the church. He is pointing to a world-wide change in consciousness, involving people from all kinds of political, ethnic and religious backgrounds. But this movement towards ecological conversion is very much a concern of the church because it can be understood as one of the signs of our times. It can be seen as one of the movements of hope that have been stirred up by the Spirit of God. Pope John Paul II is one of many who see this growing concern for preserving creation as one of the 'signs of hope' that the Holy Spirit provides for our times. If the church is to play its own vital part in this movement of the Spirit, this can only mean that in the first place the church itself is called to conversion.

I think it is obvious that Christians will be able to play their own particular role in this movement of the Spirit only by coming to a renewed understanding of the ecological meaning and consequences of their deepest faith convictions. There are some Christian thinkers who suggest that if we are to develop an ecological theology we need to abandon much of our Christian heritage. I will present another view – that this heritage is profoundly ecological when it is rightly understood. In this article I will explore the ecological significance of three key insights of Christian faith, the doctrines of the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit and the Trinity itself. In each case I will be not simply stating church teaching but doing a theological *interpretation* of the doctrine. I consider these doctrines as central to what the Second Vatican Council called the 'hierarchy of truths.' They are at the very heart of Christian faith.

The Creator Spirit

Cosmologists tell us that the observable universe began about fourteen billion years ago, expanding from an extremely small, dense and hot state, in what is known as the Big Bang. After about the first three minutes the universe was made up of the nuclei of hydrogen (about 75%) and helium (about 25%). After about half a million years it was cool enough for atoms to form and for radiation and matter to separate. Small fluctuations in the expanding universe produced sites where matter accumulated in clouds of gas, and condensed because of gravity. After about a billion years the first galaxies emerged from these clouds of gas and the first stars lit up. The stars were powered by nuclear processes in which the original hydrogen was converted to helium and then to other elements. About 4.6 billion years ago, our solar system began to take shape around the Sun, a new star in the Milky Way Galaxy. The Earth and the other planets were formed from the disk of gas and dust that circled the young Sun. It seems that the first bacterial forms of life appeared on Earth about 3.8 billion years ago. All the wonderfully diverse living creatures of the planet

2. Pope John Paul II, General Audience Address, January 17, 2001.

have evolved from these original bacteria. They evolved in interdependence with each other and with the Earth's geology, its oceans and its atmosphere.

Human beings and other animals are made up of atoms of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen. Apart from the hydrogen that comes from the Big Bang, these elements that make up our bodies have all been produced in the stars. *We are made of stardust.* Many things had to be extremely fine-tuned if the universe was ever to produce human beings. One example of this is the relationship between the rate of expansion of the universe and gravity. The universe expands at just the right rate to allow galaxies to emerge. Without the galaxies and the stars that make them up we could not be here. We can exist only because stars have long been converting hydrogen into elements such as carbon. Human beings are deeply interconnected with the whole fourteen billion year history of the expanding universe. We are children of the universe. And we are directly inter-related with all the living things that have evolved on our own planet.

When we Christians confess in the Creed that the Holy Spirit is the Giver of Life, we are saying that the Spirit is the creative energizing power of God that enables the universe and everything in it to emerge and evolve. The Spirit's role in creation is often overlooked. Our thinking about the Spirit is so focussed on the wonderful event of Pentecost that we tend to forget the Spirit's role as the life-giving Creator. We need to rediscover the big story of the Spirit. It is a story not just of the one episode of Pentecost, but a story with *four* great episodes: the Spirit's work of *creation* that enables a universe of creatures to exist and to evolve, the Spirit's work of *grace* that brings God's saving love to human beings throughout history, the Spirit's work of bringing about the *Christ event* and the Spirit's work at *Pentecost* that empowers the disciples and constitutes them as the church of Jesus Christ.

The affirmation of the Creed that the Holy Spirit is the *Giver of Life* picks up two inter-related biblical ideas. The first is the Old Testament concept of the Spirit as the Breath of Life that enables creatures to live. Creatures exist only because God breathes into 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; 104: 30; Eccles 12:7; Jdt 16:14; Wis 1:7; 12:1). The second is the New Testament concept of the Spirit as the one who enables believers to participate in new life in Christ. The Spirit is the Life-Giver (*Zōopoion*) in the sense of the one who brings us a participation in resurrection life (Rom 8:2,11; 1 Cor 15:45; 2 Cor 3:6; John 3:5; 4:14; 6:63; 7:37-39). In both senses, that of creation and new creation in Christ, the Spirit of God is the Life-Giver.

The great theologians of the East, such as Irenaeus, Athanasius and Basil, see the Word of God and the Breath of God as always involved *together* in creation and redemption. They constantly return to the words of the Psalmist – 'By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their hosts by God's Breath' (Psalm 33:6). In a famous image, Irenaeus sees the Word and Spirit as the 'two hands of God' at work in creation and salvation. In the West, Ambrose of Milan not only sees the Spirit as the one who brings life to all things but also as the one who brings *grace* and *beauty* to creation.³ He sees

the Spirit's work as both the creation of the world and its renewal in Christ. Ambrose's most powerful and interesting argument about the Spirit's roles as Creator comes from the incarnation. He insists that it is the Spirit who brings about the incarnation – 'the fruit of the womb is the work of the Spirit.'⁴ If the Spirit is responsible for the incarnation, then this suggests to him that there is nothing that the Spirit has not created. If the Spirit is the author of the humanity of Jesus, then we can rightly see the Creator Spirit as the author of all that exists in the universe: '*So we cannot doubt that the Spirit is Creator, whom we know as the author of the Lord's incarnation.*'⁵

The Spirit of God was at work in our world long before Pentecost, long before Moses led the people of God from slavery, long before Abraham and Sarah were called to leave their home in Ur and journey into the unknown, long before the first hominids appeared in Africa. The Spirit of God was the dynamic, energizing presence that enabled the early universe to exist and evolve from the first part of the first second some fourteen billion years ago. As particles of hydrogen and helium separated out from radiation and formed the first atoms, as the clouds of gas compressed to form the first generation of galaxies, as the universe was lit up by the first stars, it was the Spirit of God who breathed life into the whole process. As the Earth began to form around the young Sun 4.5 billion years ago, as the first bacterial life emerged on the new planet 3.8 billion years ago, as simple cells finally became more complex and multicellular creatures emerged, as life forms developed wonderfully in the seas, as life moved onto the land, and as mammals and then hominid species evolved, the Creator Spirit was the immanent presence of God breathing life into the whole process.

The Spirit is the presence of God immanent in every aspect of creation. This cannot be understood as a static presence. It can only be understood in dynamic terms. In the emergence of life, in the emergence of self-conscious creatures, and in many other instances something radically new happens. More comes from less. Creation has an inner capacity to transcend itself. It is the indwelling Spirit who enables things not only to exist but *to become what is new*. The Spirit of God, always in the communion of the Trinity, is the one who goes forth and fills creation as the power of *continuous creation* (Job 33:4; 34:13-15; Wis 1:7; 12:1). The Spirit is the power of becoming, the power that enables the self-transcendence of creation. The Creator Spirit is the presence of God that empowers the evolution of the universe and the evolution of life on Earth. It is the Spirit of God that enables the emergence of all the diverse forms of life. We need to think of the Spirit as loving life in all its fecundity and diversity, treasuring it in its every instance.

There can be no avoiding the problem of pain and death in an ecological theology. The long history of life on Earth is not only a history of fecundity, beauty, cooperation and symbiosis, but also a history of predation,

3. Ambrose, *The Holy Spirit* 2, 5, 33-34 (FOC 44, p.108).

4. Ambrose, *Holy Spirit* 2, 5, 38.

5. Ambrose, *Holy Spirit* 2, 5, 41.

competition, death and the extinction of species. Death is central to the pattern of biological life. Without death there could be no evolution. It is the price that is paid for birds and butterflies and the human brain. Death is part of the way things are in a finite, limited, bodily world. In this context, Christian theology has no theoretical answers, but can only bear witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The death of Jesus reveals a God who enters into the pain of the world, who suffers with suffering creation. The resurrection is a promise that death does not have the last word for human beings or for other creatures.

I believe that Christian theology needs to take another important step and redefine its notion of divine power. This would involve the suggestion that God, who is freely self-limiting in love in the incarnation (Phil 2:5-11), may also be understood as freely self-limiting in love not only with regard to human freedom but also with regard to natural processes. I believe that we should stop thinking of divine power as the capacity to do anything no matter how arbitrary. God is not like some absolute human tyrant. God's power is revealed in the cross as self-limiting in love. Perhaps we need to think of the Creator Spirit as freely self-limiting out of loving commitment to the proper autonomy and independence of creaturely processes. This would mean that God would not be free to simply overturn natural processes, but would respect them out of love.

I believe that we can think of the Spirit as suffering with suffering creation. The Spirit is *with* creatures in their finitude, death and incompleteness, holding each suffering creature in redemptive love, drawing each into an unforeseeable eschatological future in the divine life. I find it helpful to think of the Spirit as the *midwife to the birth of the new*. Paul speaks of creation waiting with 'eager longing' for its liberation from 'bondage to decay' and for 'the freedom associated with the glory of the children of God' (Rom 8:19-23). He writes: 'For we know that the entire creation has been groaning together in the pangs of childbirth up till now' (8:22). It is the Spirit of God who enables the new to be born. Paul sees the Christian experience of the Spirit as the beginning and the guarantee of the transformation of creation. The Spirit is the 'down-payment and guarantee' (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13-15), the 'first-fruits' of God's harvest (Rom 8:23). If the Spirit is the mid-wife to new creation, this points to the unimaginable: the participation of all creatures in the dynamism of the divine life. The Spirit is present with each creature, with every wild predator and its prey and with every dying creature, as midwife to the unforeseeable birth in which all things will be made new.

And in all the pain and loss the Spirit is the faithful Companion to each creature. The Spirit is already present with every creature in the universe, accompanying each with love, valuing it, bringing it into an interrelated world of creatures, holding it in the dynamic life of the divine Communion. This life-breathing Spirit is present in all the incompleteness and finitude of things. 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 in some way salvation begins in and with creation. I agree, then, with Ruth Page when she argues that God's presence to creatures involves both creation

and redemption. She sees God as *companioning* each creature with a 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. God knows and cares about each creature's habitat.⁶ This, of course, can only mean that the Spirit is grieved (Eph 4:30) when human beings wilfully abuse and destroy habitats.

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. In a theology of the Creator Spirit, we are ever more profoundly deeply inter-connected with all other creatures, because the one Spirit dwells in all of us. In the communion of the one Spirit we are in kinship with other creatures.

Word made Flesh

The story of the birth of a baby in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, who was 'wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger' (Luke 2:7), is central to the whole Christian community. It is the story of God-with-us, of God entering into the heart of creation. In today's world there is an urgent need to understand this story in the context of another story, the story of the universe. How does this story of Jesus relate to the story of our universe and to the story of life on Earth?

One thing that can be said immediately is that Jesus himself delighted in God's creation. The Gospels reveal the love that Jesus had for the natural world. His intimacy with nature is evident from his parables. The images come from the whole of life: the beauty of wild flowers, the growth of trees from tiny seeds, crops of grain, bread rising, a woman sweeping a floor looking for what was lost, children playing games, the relationship between a shepherd and the sheep, the birds of the air, foxes and their lairs and the generosity of a parent to a wayward child. The parables reflect a close observation and delight in the natural world as the place of God. The God of Jesus is the God who cares for every sparrow that falls to the ground (Matt 10:29).

Our Christian commitment to creation is taken to another dimension by reflection on Jesus as the Word made flesh, as the human face of God in our midst. If we are to do justice to this claim of Christian faith we have to consider the Christ event from two perspectives - from *below* and from *above*. Considering the Christ event from below, above all in the context of the story of the universe, will involve not only beginning from his humanity, but from all that allows that humanity to exist. It will involve the story of life on Earth and the story of the universe. Like us, Jesus is the product of biological evolution. Like us, he is made from stardust. The carbon in the blood that runs through his veins comes from a 10 billion year process of nuclear reactions in

6. Ruth Page, *God and the Web of Creation* (London: SCM, 1996), 71.

several generations of star. Like us, Jesus is inter-related to all other creatures in the one global community. In his evolutionary Christology, Karl Rahner sees Jesus as the self-transcendence of the whole process of the evolving universe into God. Creation is self-transcendent in the emergence of life and in the emergence of the human. Rahner sees human beings as creation come to consciousness. They are the self-transcendence of creation, in that they are instances of creation that are capable of responding to God in love. According to Rahner, in Jesus' complete yes to God we find the radical and unique self-transcendence of the whole of creation into God.⁷

The Christian community also needs to tell the story of Jesus from above – as a story that begins from God, a story that describes God's self-giving to us in Jesus. One of the ways that early Christians found to do this was through the traditional Jewish figure of Wisdom. In the Wisdom literature of the Bible, God's self-communication is imaged as the *Wisdom Woman*. Wisdom is with God in creation, a co-creator with God, delighting in all God's creatures (Prov 8:22-31; Sir 24:3-7; Wis 7:25-8:1). But Wisdom desired to share more intimately with creation. She makes her home among us, prepares a great feast and invited all to come and eat at her table and to drink of her wine (Prov 9:1-6). While some Jewish believers saw Wisdom come among us in terms of the Torah, early Christians saw Jesus as the Wisdom of God in our midst. Paul tells us that Christ crucified is the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24, 30). In the opening chapter of John's Gospel Jesus is understood in Wisdom categories, but the language uses is not that of Wisdom but of the Word:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being...He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him...And the Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:1-14).

The Word through whom all things are created is made flesh in Jesus. The use of the word 'flesh' is important. It can suggest not just involvement with humanity, but also with the whole interconnected web of living creatures – with all flesh.⁸ Earlier, I referred to Paul's idea in Romans that all of creation is groaning in the pains of giving birth, (1:22), awaiting the coming of salvation in Christ. In Ephesians, too, we are told that all things will be gathered up and transformed in Christ (1:9-10). In Colossians, the role of the cosmic Christ is fully spelt out in terms of all things being *created* in Christ and of all things being *reconciled* in him:

7. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 178-203.

8. On this see the argument made by Duncan Reid in his 'Enfleshing the Human' in *Earth Revealing – Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, ed. Denis Edwards (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), 69-83.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

In these texts, salvation in Christ is understood as involved with *all things*. It is not restricted to human beings. It involves all things in the universe, including all the cosmic powers. Christ's death and resurrection is understood as the beginning of the transformation of the whole of creation. In Revelation, we are told that Christ Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end (Revelation 22:13). These words are used at every Easter Vigil. Easter is a celebration of the whole of creation. All is enlightened and transformed in the risen Christ. As we pray in the Easter Preface, the 'the joy of the resurrection renews the whole world.'

The risen Christ even in his humanity is now fully united with the Creator Spirit, empowering and transforming the whole universe from within. This is why Teilhard de Chardin thought of the risen Christ as the Omega Point for the whole of creation. He saw the risen Christ already existing and operating at the heart of the universe.⁹ Rahner says of Jesus: 'When his body was shattered in death, Christ was poured out over the cosmos.'¹⁰ Not only in his divinity but also in his humanity Christ now is united with the whole universe as the beginning of its transfiguration. He sees the risen Christ as the beginning and pledge of the transformation of the universe.¹¹

All creatures have a profound relationship with the resurrected Christ. We cannot pretend to have a clear picture about the future of all things in God. But what it is clear is the promise that all things will be renewed. God remains the incomprehensible one and the future of all things in God, including our own future, is beyond our comprehension. But it does involve the material universe and its living creatures. As Karl Rahner says this makes us the most sublime of materialists. We cannot think of a future for ourselves in God without thinking of the future of all God's creatures.¹²

Other creatures share with us in Christ. In this sense, we have a relationship of kinship with them. This is what St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint for ecology, celebrated in his life and in his Canticle. He sang of the Sun,

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9. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Collins, 1955), 319.
 10. Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York Herder and Herder, 1961), 66.
 11. Karl Rahner, 'Resurrection' in *Sacramentum Mundi* 5 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 333; 'Dogmatic Questions on Easter' in *Theological Investigations* 4 (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 129.
 12. Karl Rahner, 'The Festival of the Future of the World', in *Theological Investigations* 7 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 183.

the Moon, the stars, the wind, the water, and fire as brothers and sisters, and of 'our sister, Mother Earth who nourishes and governs us, and produces different fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.' Other species are interconnected with us before God. In their own distinctiveness they too are loved by God. We human beings are called not only to 'cultivate and care for' other creatures (Genesis 2:15), but also to respect them as having their own value before God, and to know that we are with them in the kinship of God's creatures.

God as Communion

The doctrine of the Trinity is the heart of Christian faith. Although the word 'Trinity' was not used until late in the second century, the doctrine had its origin in the experience of the first Christians.¹³ They were convinced that Jesus had come from God. He was the human face of God in the world. God was truly with them in Jesus. With Jesus gone from their sight, the disciples of Jesus experienced the presence and action of the Spirit of God in their community life and in the transforming love of God poured out in their own hearts (Rom 5:5). They were convinced that this Spirit really was the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God. Implicit in their experience is a conviction about God. *The conviction is two-fold* – God is given to us in Jesus and in the Spirit.

Central to this early Christian experience was the idea that the both Jesus and the Spirit are sent to us from the one who is the Source of All Being, the one that Jesus called *Abba*. Word and Spirit come from the Source of All. It seemed apparent to the Christian community that this structure of God's self-communication faithfully represents something of the truth of who God is. Gradually they began to articulate the conviction that the Word and the Spirit are fully divine, sharing equally and mutually in the communion of the one divine nature with the Source of All. God then, is not thought of as a solitary individual, but as a dynamic Communion in love. God's unity is that of a Communion beyond all human imagining.

In this theological vision, God exists only as relational. Being-in-mutual-relations is understood as who God is. The mutual indwelling described in John's Gospel is at the heart of the divine life – 'On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me and I in you' (14:20). The Greek word *perichoresis*, meaning an encircling embrace, would later be used to describe this way of being with one another in profound intimacy. It points to a relationship in which individuality flourishes. In the divine life, the distinctiveness of the individual persons is not lost or lessened by being in relation. The distinction of the divine persons emerges precisely in and through the unthinkable intimate Communion of the Three.

This suggests something about human personhood. In many post-Enlightenment systems of thought, the human person has been understood as a self-conscious *individual*. A theology of God as Communion suggests,

13. Theophilus of Antioch (died c. 180) first used the word '*trias*' of God in his *To Autolytus* 2, 15 (ANF 2:101).

against all individualistic concepts of the person, that to be a person is to be essentially oriented towards communion. It suggests that it is being-in-representation to others that makes us who we are. The divine life of equal and mutual relations can give us insight into human life. It can also work the other way. It can also suggest that our experiences of love for others can give us a little glimpse into the life of God. Long ago the theologian Richard of St. Victor (died 1173) argued that friendship is the most precious and most important of human experiences. He pointed out that nothing we know is more profound or more beautiful than going out of oneself in genuine love for another. This helped him to approach the doctrine of the Trinity. He saw it as reasonable to think that such self-transcending love would be found in God. He thought of our best experiences of authentic friendship and mutual love as pointing to the mutual love at the heart of all things.

But it is not only human life that is relational. In different ways *all* things seem to be constituted by relationships. Science points to patterns of relationships everywhere. When science looks at any thing at all, whether it be a proton, a galaxy, a cell or the most complex thing we know, the human brain, it finds patterns of relationships. First there is the inter-relationship between *the components* that make up an entity and then there is the relationship between the entity and *its wider environment*. So a carbon atom in my body is constituted as part of a molecule, which forms part of a cell, which belongs to an organ of my body. I am part of a family, a human society and a community of inter-related living creatures on Earth. The earth community depends upon and is inter-related with the Sun, the Milky Way Galaxy, and the whole universe.¹⁴

At every level things are constituted from components yet not reducible to them. The cosmologist William Stoeger insists that it is a *universal* feature of the world revealed by the natural and social sciences that entities are constituted by relationships.¹⁵ At every level from fundamental particles to atoms, molecules, cells and the brain itself, one level of reality is nested upon another. At every level, this nested organization is realized through the inter-relationships between the components, together with the whole-part

14. Arthur Peacocke tells us that the natural sciences give us a picture of the world as a complex hierarchy, in which there is a series of levels of organization of matter in which each member in the series is a *whole* constituted of *parts* that precede it in the series. He provides an example, expressed (incompletely) in the sequence: 'atom — molecule — macromolecule — subcellular organelle — cell — multicellular functioning organ — whole living organism — populations of living organisms — ecosystems — the biosphere.' Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming — Natural, Divine and Human* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 38.

15. He understands constitutive relationships as 'those interactions among components and with the larger context which jointly effect the composition of a given system and establish its functional characteristic within the larger whole of which it is a part, and thereby enable it to manifest the particular properties and behaviour it does.' See William R. Stoeger, 'The Mind-Brain Problem, the Laws of Nature, and Constitutive Relationships,' in *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy, Theo C. Meyering and Michael Arbib (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999), 136-37.

relationships that determine the distribution and collective function of components.¹⁶

The theological insight that God's being is Communion can provide a basis for a vision of the fundamental reality of the universe as relational. Science tells us that each creature exists in a nested pattern of constitutive relations. Theology grounds this in the trinitarian relationships of mutual love. There is an infinite difference between created being-in-relation and the divine communion. But what continuous creation means is that created being-in-relation always springs from the divine Persons-in-Relation.

How can we think of the relationship between God and the world? Some of the imaginative pictures are clearly inadequate – including the idea of a God who lives in the heavens, and the idea of God as an entity alongside the universe who intervenes in it at certain times. A more appropriate image, even though it remains a limited analogy, is that of the divine Trinity as the 'place' of the unfolding of the universe. In this view all things are thought of as *in* God. In this kind of theology the Spirit can be thought of as 'making space' within the dynamism of the divine shared life for a world of creatures. A relational universe evolves within the relational life of God.

The theology of the Trinity offers a view of God as a Communion. It is this Communion that makes things be and become. Everything comes from this Communion and depends upon it at every moment. The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that God is not to be thought of as a solitary individual, but as a Communion in love. God's very being is relational. Not only human persons, but all creatures in their highly differentiated ways, are radically inter-relational and at the same time possess their own individual integrity. All participate in the life of trinitarian Communion, and are in their own way limited creaturely reflections of this divine Communion.

This means that the wonderful inter-relatedness that ecologists find in the biosphere on Earth, and the inter-relatedness that science discovers at all levels from quantum physics to cosmology, is all sustained at every moment by a God who is Persons-in-Communion. This gives unthinkable depth to the importance of ecological inter-relationships. It gives us Christians the best of reasons for being concerned for the well being of all creatures in our global community.

Conclusion

Christians believe that the Creator Spirit has been immanent in creation from the very beginning, empowering the evolution of the universe and all its creatures, accompanying each creature in love and promising it is future in God. They see Jesus as the self-transcendence of the evolving universe into God and as God's self-giving to the universe of creatures. They see a relational universe, with all its wonderfully diverse creatures, as existing within the embrace of the divine Communion in love.

16. William R. Stoeger, 'The Mind-Brain Problem,' 139.

They see creation as the self-expression of the Blessed Trinity. They believe that God delights in all the creatures of the Earth (Proverbs 8:30-31) and finds the whole of creation good (Genesis 1:31). The great theologians of the church have seen the diversity of creatures as expressing the abundance of God. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, says that because God's goodness could not be represented adequately by any one creature, God produced many and diverse creatures so that, 'what was wanting to one in the manifestation of divine goodness, might be supplied by another.'¹⁷ St. Bonaventure sees diverse creatures as *works of art* produced by the Wisdom of God. He sees the universe as 'like a book reflecting, representing and describing its maker, the Trinity.'¹⁸

Bonaventure sees each creature as a sign or expression of the trinitarian God. Creatures reflect the divine as the one light breaks up into different colours as it come through a stained glass window: 'As a ray of light entering through a window is coloured in different ways according to the different colours of the various parts, so the divine ray shines forth in each and every creature in different ways and in different properties.'¹⁹

Great theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure would be appalled at the ruthless destruction of species in the modern era. They would agree with contemporary thinker Thomas Berry when he states that this amounts to a wilful destruction of modes of God's self-expression.²⁰ Creation leads us to God. It leads us to praise. The exuberance of creation represents the infinite fecundity of God. Love and respect for the diversity of creatures is a form of worship of the God in whom we, along with all other things, 'live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

17. *Summa Theologiae*, I. 47.1.

18. *Breviloquium*, 2.12.

19. *Hexaemeron*, 13.14.

20. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988), 11.