

# CHRISTIAN *THEORIA PHYSIKE*: ON LEARNING TO SEE CREATION

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“The world is a fallen world because it has fallen away from the awareness that God is all in all. The accumulation of this disregard for God is the original sin that blights the world. And even the religion of this fallen world cannot heal or redeem it, for it has accepted the reduction of God to an area called the ‘sacred’ (‘spiritual,’ ‘supernatural’)—as opposed to the world as ‘profane.’ It has accepted the all-embracing secularism which attempts to steal the world away from God.”<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the world’s widespread degradation and destruction, the question of how human beings *see* and understand the world has taken on particular urgency. In what way does the form and content of seeing, one’s *theoria*, relate to particular ways of being in the world, and thus join seeing to an *ethos* and an *askesis*? In this essay I argue that seeing is inevitably a hermeneutical exercise that is itself inspired, shaped, and directed by the priorities, protocols, and practices of various times and cultures. Enlisting the work of Charles Darwin as one example, I show how this process unfolds. I then develop, drawing primarily on the writings of Maximus the Confessor, what can be called a Christian manner of seeing the world *as creation*, a Christian *theoria physike* that is joined to an *ethos* and *askesis* that can contribute to the healing and celebration of the world.

## *The Hermeneutics of Seeing*

To “look” and to “see” are vastly different things. Though people may look at the same scene, what individuals see can vary considerably. This is because every viewer comes equipped with different perceptive faculties or habits of attention, and with varying desires, fears, questions, and agendas. To look inevitably presupposes a

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1963), 16.

perspective or point of view that is itself a reflection of one's physical *location* (am I close enough to see details but perhaps too close or too narrow, and therefore blind to the larger context?), one's *time* (how does "wilderness" look before and after Romantic poetic traditions that framed it as a therapeutic place of healing and recovery?), and one's *standing* within a culture (in what ways does my perspective reflect gender or class privilege or the dogmas of this or that school of thought?).

Though *looking* may presuppose little more than the sensory capacity for sight—a capacity which is itself open to various forms of modification and magnification given the various aids to looking reflected in eyeglasses, microscopes, telescopes, computer imaging, etc. — *seeing* presupposes what Hans-Georg Gadamer called a "hermeneutical consciousness." To see is to interpret, and to interpret is to put to practical use languages, concepts, and symbolic systems of varying kinds that enable us to sense the meaning of what we look at. Depending on who we are, each of us will notice or deem important what another may find irrelevant or uninteresting. To see, in other words, is to understand in particular sorts of ways what one is perceiving. Seeing entails that one has determined the significance and grasped, in some way, the intelligibility of what one is looking at.<sup>2</sup>

The discipline of hermeneutics teaches that there is no unmediated encounter with the world, because to be in a world is always already to be engaged in acts of interpretation that "open" the world as a place that can be more or less understood, more or less "successfully" engaged. Drawing on the work of his teacher Martin Heidegger, Gadamer argued that "understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviors of the subject but the mode of being of Dasein itself." Hermeneutics "denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world."<sup>3</sup> None of us exists in a neutral space. None of us simply "looks" at things, having no interest at all in what is observed (a completely disinterested looking would be like an unfocused camera lens that produces no discernable image at all). To be human is to position oneself in a world that signifies as meaningful or valuable in particular sorts of ways. From the moment we are born we are being educated, whether formally or not, to see, to focus, to evaluate, and thus also to engage our surroundings in the unique ways that we do.

How people have understood the world as a whole has varied greatly through time. Sticking simply to the ancient Greek philosophical context, when Democritus

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<sup>2</sup> Though I employ sight in this essay as the metaphor for understanding the world, it should be clear that other senses, like touch and smell and taste, should not be ignored, particularly since they often lead to a more embodied, practical, and intimate relationship with the world. In *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) I argue that taste, along with the embodied practices of food's production and consumption, open fresh lines of inquiry and sympathy as we move to understand where we are. To this can be added the important new collection of essays *Carnal Hermeneutics*, edited by Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) on the body as site of interpretation. The hegemony of sight in philosophical traditions of inquiry, and the distancing of self and world it often presupposes, is well-described by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994) and the collection *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993) edited by David Michael Levin.

<sup>3</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second edition (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xxx. For a wide-ranging discussion of the implications of hermeneutics for our understanding of the natural world see *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*, edited by Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

looked at the world he “saw” invisible, indivisible *atomoï* in perpetual, random motion. The various things that make up the world — things like trees, rivers, animals, rocks and such — were to him but the effect of various *atomoï* coming together. There is no force or intelligence directing their coming to be or their falling apart. Stuff simply happens! This picture of an atomist, pluralist world was in striking contrast to that of Anaxagoras, who believed that the various elements of the world share in each other and in the whole. No particular thing is finally cut off from any other thing because each has within itself a portion of everything else. Moreover, there is nothing that is accidental or random about this world because *Nous* or Mind permeates the whole, giving it the shape and form that it does. For Anaxagoras the world forms an ordered, intelligible whole, a *kosmos*.

Why these dramatically different ways of seeing the world? Is it that Anaxagoras’s picture (potentially) yields a more rational, regular, and reliable world in which people can say that whatever happens happens for a reason or perhaps as a witness to Fate? Or is it that a picture of the world is in some sense also a picture of ourselves, an understanding of the world that develops in response to how people hope or desire to see themselves positioned in particular sorts of ways, capable of achieving certain kinds of tasks?

Following Pierre Hadot, it is important to underscore that ancient philosophy, and the “science” it made possible, was first and foremost about the advocacy for a way of life and the disciplines that enabled its practitioners to live well (however that was conceived). *Theoria*, the way of seeing being recommended by a philosophical school, was inextricably connected to an *ethos* or way of being in the world. To the extent that one’s picture of the world did not serve to help people live better lives, one ceased being genuinely philosophical.<sup>4</sup> The whole point in serious contemplation of the world was to effect self-transformation, which meant that an *ethos* was accompanied by an *askesis*, a form of asceticism or personal discipline that aligned the life of the wisdom seeker with the truth of the world. *Theoria*, *ethos*, and *askesis* are inextricably intertwined.

It is clear that this ancient manner of characterizing philosophy has not been universally upheld. Though more contemporary philosophical pictures of the world may not immediately or obviously be in service of what is believed to be a better *askesis* or way of life, it is nonetheless apparent that people are encouraged to see and understand the world in ways that serve some interest or goal, even if that goal is not explicitly stated or reflected upon. *What* people are asked to see, the *modes* and the *tools* they are given to look at it, the *categories* and frames they are provided to organize what they see, and the *significance* they are supposed to discern as a result of their looking — all these are more or less established before and while they take their various looks. Hadot observes: “University philosophy therefore remains in the same position it occupied in the Middle Ages: it is still a servant, sometimes of theology, sometimes of science. In any case, it always serves the imperatives of the overall organization of education, or, in the contemporary period, of scientific research. The choice of professors, course topics, and exams is always subject to ‘objective’ criteria which are political or financial, and unfortunately all too often foreign to

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Hadot. *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 172–233. Put succinctly, “in antiquity it was the philosopher’s choice of a way of life which conditioned and determined the fundamental tendencies of his philosophical discourse” (272–273).

philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> What we see, in other words, is not only an exhibition of the *Zeitgeist* shaping our imaginations and our desires. It is also always already a feature of the institutions, professional protocols, personalities, streams of financial funding, and packaging of data that open whatever point of view we happen to occupy.<sup>6</sup> How much, we should ask, is a desire for prediction and control a root impetus behind today’s various productions of knowledge?

My point is not to say that we see whatever we want. It is, rather, to note that the *theoria* that enables us to make sense of what we are looking at always develops within an *ethos* and an *askesis* that opens, directs, and disciplines our access to the world. It would be naïve to think that we could evaluate what others are telling us about the world without also attending to the *ethos* and *askesis* (consciously or unconsciously) at work in their looking. To see what I mean, it is helpful to look at the process of seeing as it happened in the work of Charles Darwin.

### *Learning from Darwin*

In his autobiography Darwin tells us that the “gloomy parson” Thomas Robert Malthus’s essay on population played a decisive role in his own work because it gave him the categories that enabled what he looked at to come into a more compelling focus:

Fifteen months after I had begun my systematic inquiry, I happened to read for amusement Malthus on Population, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on, from long continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favorable variations would tend to be preserved and unfavorable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here I had at last got a theory by which to work.<sup>7</sup>

Here we can observe how Malthus gave Darwin the optics or interpretive lens by which to see the world as signifying in particular sorts of ways. Darwin had been looking at the world for a long while, but he had not yet found the interpretive framework that enabled him to make satisfactory sense of what he was looking at. Malthus gave him the hermeneutical framework he longed for. His *theoria* enabled Darwin to see things of all sorts as waged in competitive struggle and war so that they might increase themselves in the face of scarce and diminishing resources. As Darwin would write in *The Descent of Man*, all organic beings expend effort to increase their numbers. These populations, much like the human populations Malthus described, increase geometrically, and in places that cannot keep up with

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>6</sup> For a rigorous and wide-ranging examination of the various modes whereby truth conditions are established and legitimated, see Bruno Latour’s *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Latour delineates the many values and modalities people have employed to experience and understand “reality,” and shows how the scientific, social, and economic framings of “experience” overlap and come apart to make possible the regional ontologies that make our worlds meaningful.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Conor Cunningham’s *Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 9–10.

such rapid levels of increase. "Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive; there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life. It is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdom."<sup>8</sup>

Darwin's seeing of the world is saturated with an *ethos* of scarcity that also reflects an *askesis* of unremitting struggle and competition. It yields a vision of the world famously described by the poet Tennyson as nature "red in tooth and claw." To look at any organic being is to see a drive to grow and reproduce itself. If such a being is to survive it must adapt to changing circumstances or die because it is only the "fit" beings, those who can best utilize the place they are in to improve reproductive potential, that can thrive.<sup>9</sup>

As a way of seeing the world, a Malthusian/Darwinian *theoria* clearly has considerable explanatory power. A lens focused on the struggle for survival brings multiple elements of the world into focus. Moreover, his insight into creatures embedded within and in continuity with other creatures in their places is, in my view, essential. It would be naïve, however, to think that Darwin's account of the world is "objective" or "comprehensive" in any straightforward meaning of the terms, or that it brings everything into focus. What does his *theoria* leave out of view and out of consideration, and what might it prevent lookers from seeing? Why should we think that species self-interest is the power at work in natural selection, particularly if we begin to unpack the complexity of terms like "self" and "interest" and "select"? Why put the focus on competition among individuals rather than cooperation among groups? Why assume scarcity in a world that might also be characterized by great abundance? Why believe that the drive to live is a drive primarily to "survive" rather than "thrive" or "delight"? These are just some of the questions we can ask about the kind of seeing that follows from a Darwinian framework. This way of seeing, as valuable as it is, is not the only way of seeing. It is worth noting that among indigenous peoples, peoples whose livelihood depended on detailed and careful observation, it is common to find them picturing a world governed by kinship and generosity rather than competition and scarcity.

It is important to consider carefully Darwin's vision of the world because several of his key concepts—fitness, scarcity, survival of the fittest—have made their way into the diverse disciplines of today's education. Darwin is invoked not only to describe what we might call the natural world. He has also given the basic tools by which social worlds are described and explained and (sometimes) justified, which is to say that in Darwinism we now find a philosophical picture or *theoria* of the world that is in service to an *ethos* or particular way of being in the world. Numerous scholars, for instance, have noted that Darwin's picture of ecology is strikingly similar to Adam Smith's picture of economy: both presuppose a vision of things in which individuals operate in ways to maximize self-interest. Both assume processes in

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to stress that Darwin made room for concepts of cooperation and community in his work, and that more recent evolutionary theory has developed these themes in very important ways. See especially *Evolution, Games, and God: The Principle of Cooperation*, edited by Martin A. Nowak and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) for an excellent overview and development of these themes. I focus here on the themes of struggle and survival because these are the ones that have most captured the imaginations of lay people.

which weakness is eliminated to make room for the strong. Both assume a picture of individuals fearful of not getting enough.

It would be a mistake to dismiss Darwin's scientific observations. As a *theoria* for understanding how species adapt and evolve through time it has tremendous explanatory power. But it would also be a mistake not to note the narrowness of what might be called its moral vision. Marilynne Robinson, for instance, observes: "That human beings should be thought of as better or worse animals, and human well-being as a product of culling, is a willful exclusion of context, which seems to me to have remained as a stable feature of Darwinist thought. There is a worldview implicit in the theory which is too small and rigid to accommodate anything remotely like the world."<sup>10</sup> What is missing is a world that makes room for the soul.<sup>11</sup> What is missing is a world in which charity—the very virtue that would enable us to see and address the misery of the weak—has much force.

This brief look at Darwin helps us see that *theoria*, indeed the whole production of reason, is never innocent. *Theoria* is never far removed from an *ethos*, and that means our looking is invariably in service of or in response to particular concerns, anxieties, ambitions or desires, i.e., every *theoria* recommends and grows out of an *askesis* or way of being in the world. Though people might think that their reasoning is clear, logical, persuasive, perhaps even comprehensive, the history of humanity's attempts at reasoning shows that our efforts to clarify the world often have the effect of distorting, dissimulating, even brutalizing it. Idolatrous seeing is an ever-present temptation.<sup>12</sup> It is important to remember that the long march of western philosophical and scientific development has led to the imperial conquest of the world's continents, the genocide of many of its indigenous populations, and the systematic plundering, pollution, and degradation of the world's habitats. Never before in the history of humanity have we been able to look upon the earth with such precision and breadth. Never before have we witnessed so much degradation that is the result of how we see.

We are, in short, in the midst of a crisis of seeing. The faith once given to philosophers has been transferred to technicians and economists who, it is commonly believed, will present the world "truly," and give the means by which to live conveniently and comfortably within it. But even this faith is wavering as people sense various forms of environmental catastrophe threatening the viability of the very world scientists and technicians are helping create. To be sure, scientists and philosophers have given us a great number of gifts in the forms of engineering, medicine, and education, but it would be naïve to ignore that today's research institutions and machinery are leading us to the extinction of human life.<sup>13</sup> Our doom may not come

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<sup>10</sup> Marilynne Robinson. "Darwinism," in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998), 46–47.

<sup>11</sup> Robinson develops this theme in *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness From the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). Here Robinson defends the human mind as more than a material mechanism and as having the ability to, among other things, reflect morally about the world. We need to be able to affirm that "the strangeness of reality consistently exceeds the expectation of science, and that the assumptions of science, however tried and rational, are very inclined to encourage false expectations" (*Absence of Mind*, 124).

<sup>12</sup> I develop the character of idolatrous seeing in *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> This point is made in the work of scientists like Martin Rees, James Lovelock, and Lynn Margulis, and also the Union of Concerned Scientists. The philosopher of science Jean-Pierre Dupuy addresses

about in one great cataclysmic event. It may take the form of an inexorable and mostly unnoticed “slow violence” that systematically undermines the health of all life.<sup>14</sup> Or it may be the remote-controlled, tele-murder violence that is “without hatred” that governs today’s military operations.<sup>15</sup> However understood, it seems that we are in need of a new *theoria*, a new way of seeing the world that might better enable people to cherish the world and live more faithfully within it.

### *A Christian Way of Seeing?*

Is there something like a uniquely Christian way of looking at the world? When followers of Christ look at the world, what do they see, and therefore also understand to be there? Put slightly differently, how does the *askesis* or discipline of Christian living—living that is patterned after Christ’s own way of being in the world—give rise to a *theoria* that opens and focuses the world in new ways, enabling people to determine significance and meaning in fresh ways?

One way to begin is to say that Christians see the world to be God’s *creation*. It is the work of God’s hands and the expression of God’s love and delight (one can wonder if the parson Malthus had any inkling of this). But this can only be a beginning because what is needed is a rigorous development of what it means to say that we live in a created world, and then also a description of the manner by which this kind of seeing becomes possible. Recalling that *theoria* is always accompanied by an *ethos*, what ways of being in the world are prerequisite to seeing the world *as creation* rather than, perhaps, one of the many expressions of the world *as nature*?

It is important to ask this question because many Christians assume that there is little difference between a world interpreted as creation and a world interpreted as nature. The world is what it is, with the key difference being that for Christians nature has its origin in God. In other words, the natural world becomes a created world the moment God is positioned at the beginning as the One who got it all going. God put in place the natural laws that keep the world functioning in the regular patterns that it does. Every once in a while, however, God is thought to intervene in a special way by interrupting, suspending, or perhaps even abrogating, natural laws so as to produce a miracle.

This more or less deist characterization of creation is a profound mistake. Why? Because it does not at all reflect a biblical understanding of the world as the material place in which God’s love is continually at work nurturing, healing, reconciling, and liberating creatures into the fullness of their being. As the Psalmist puts it, God

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misplaced faith in science in *The Mark of the Sacred* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), and argues that a rediscovery of the sacred character of the world, and along with that an acknowledgment of the limits of human reasoning and the need for self-limitation, are essential to a viable future.

<sup>14</sup>See the work of Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup>In *Hiroshima ist überall (Hiroshima is Everywhere)* Günther Anders says, “The fantastic character of the situation quite simply takes one’s breath away. At the very moment when the world becomes apocalyptic, and this owing to our own fault, it presents the image...of a paradise inhabited by murderers without malice and victims without hatred. Nowhere is there any trace of malice, there is only rubble...No war in history will have been more devoid of hatred than the war by tele-murder that is to come...[T]his absence of hatred will be the most inhuman absence of hatred that has ever existed; absence of hatred and absence of scruples will henceforth be one and the same” (quoted in *The Mark of the Sacred*, 194).

continuously and intimately faces the world, breathes upon it, because without God's animating Spirit the whole of life collapses into dust (Ps. 104:27-30). Focusing exclusively on origins ignores the fact that in scripture creation is as much about the salvation and the final consummation of things as it is about their beginning: protology, in other words, is inseparable from eschatology. More fundamentally, however, is the fact that a deist characterization of the world has no room for creation understood as the action of the Triune God. Creation, rather than being a single event that happened a long time ago, signifies God's ongoing involvement in an economy and ecology that joins creaturely life with the life of God.<sup>16</sup> As such, the doctrine of creation is about the *character* of the world, about the way things now are and how they could be if they were fully participating in God's rule. Though it clearly matters that God is understood to be the One who creates "in the beginning," what is of utmost importance is the realization that the world is the place where God is daily at work inspiring and nurturing all life into the fullness of its being. Creation thus names a moral and spiritual topography of creatures called to be responsive to each other and to their Creator.<sup>17</sup>

Equally important, this deist rendering ignores the fact that Christian theologians from early on advocated a Christian *theoria physike* or manner of seeing that enabled people to perceive the world as the place where God is intimately at work (in doing so they adapted and modified ancient philosophical forms of *theoria physike* that did not share the biblical understanding of the world as God's creation).<sup>18</sup> But to engage in this form of *theoria* it was essential that people practice the *askesis* that purifies seeing of the passions that distort the world and reduce it to the satisfaction of human desires. Put most directly, to see the world in a Christian manner is to see everything as God sees it. It was considered important for Christians to develop this way of seeing so that the world could be engaged faithfully and in a manner that brought healing to creatures and honor to God.

How is it possible for people to see the world this way, especially given the assumption that people are creatures and not the Creator? The answer: people can learn to see as God sees insofar as they become disciples of Jesus Christ and submit to the power of the Holy Spirit that enables them to participate in Jesus' *ethos*, his ways of being in the world.

Among early Christians it became a bedrock position that God bridged the chasm between Creator and creation in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The eternal divine life and order, what we might also call the patterns of relating to others and the ways of sensing the significance and value of things, took up residence in the person

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<sup>16</sup> Paul M. Blowers makes this point in a magisterial way in *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Denis Edwards's essay "Where on Earth is God? Exploring an Ecological Theology of the Trinity in the Tradition of Athanasius," in *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology*, edited by Ernst M. Conradie, Sigurd Bergmann, Celia Deane-Drummond, and Denis Edwards (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> I developed this position in *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> It was a general principle among ancient Greek philosophers that the task of thought was to bring the thinker into union with what is. A properly ordered soul is at its best when it is in harmonious alignment with the order of the world. Joshua Lollar describes Greek *theoria physike* in detail in Part I of *To See Into the Life of Things: The Contemplation of Nature in Maximus the Confessor* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013).



Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>19</sup> The Prologue to John's gospel gave this memorable expression by describing Jesus as the divine, creating Word or *Logos*: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:3-4). John's gospel, however, was hardly unique in this regard. The early Christian hymn in Colossians spoke similarly of Christ: "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" (Colossians 1:15-17). In the letter to the Hebrews Jesus is described as God's Son, the one who is "heir of all things" and the one "through whom he also created the worlds" (Hebrews 1:2). And in the first letter to the Corinthians Paul describes Jesus Christ as the one Lord "through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Corinthians 8:6).

Passages like this make it abundantly clear that the earliest Christian communities understood creation in a decidedly Christological way. Jesus' body and life were understood to be the incarnation of the very life that God is, a life that creates and loves and nurtures and heals and reconciles all things that it touches. Jesus shows definitively that for God to create is also for God to redeem. He shows that for God to create is to make room for others so that they can live into the fullness of their lives. Sean McDonough summarizes it this way:

The mighty works of Jesus, his proclamation of the kingdom of God, and the climatic events of the crucifixion and resurrection, clearly marked him as the definitive agent of God's redemptive purposes. But these mighty works could scarcely be divorced from God's creative acts. The memories of Jesus preserved in the gospels depict a man who brings order to the threatening chaotic waters, creates life out of death, and restores people to their proper place in God's world.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus is not simply a moral teacher. In his embodied life and way of being, in the various ministries he performs, he heals and restores creatures so that they can live the abundant life God has wanted them to live all along. His miracles, rather than being an interruption of the laws of nature, are acts of liberation that free people from the destructive bondages of demon-possession, hunger, illness, alienation, and death. Jesus is the complete, embodied realization of life's possibility as a way of love. To see him is to see the divine love that created the heavens and the earth. To participate in his life is to take on his point of view, and thus see everything in a completely new way. As Paul would put it, to be in Christ means that we no longer see others from a human point of view: "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Bauckham has developed this theme in a detailed way in *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2.

To proclaim Jesus as creator was thus both to open up a new understanding of the world as the place of God's ongoing, redemptive work, and to open a new way of seeing the world as his followers adopted his ways of relating to fellow creatures in the modes of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste as they ministered to those around. Jesus, in other words, became for Christians the hermeneutical key that enabled his followers to see everything in terms of a new framework of significance and meaning. To be formed by him was to see every creature and everything in a new light.

*Theoria Physike in Maximus the Confessor*

The originality and the wide-reaching implications of the biblical insight that in Jesus Christ a new way of seeing the world came into being took many years to develop. One particularly important place, however, was in monastic and mystical traditions that stressed and taught ascetical disciplines as a way to share in the divine life and the divine way of seeing all of reality. For the purposes of this essay I will focus on the seventh-century Byzantine monk Maximus the Confessor because it is in him that we find Christian *theoria* developed in a rigorous and fruitful manner. Though Maximus did not have today's environmental concerns in mind, his writings can be constructively appropriated to illuminate our situation in fresh and compelling ways.

At the center of Maximus' thought is the conviction that in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ the complete meaning of humanity and the world reaches its fulfillment, because in him we see the union of the divine and human nature (and, given the view of humanity being a microcosm of the world, the union of God with the whole world). Maximus says that with Jesus "a wholly new way of being (*kainoterou tropou*) human appeared. God has made us like himself, and allowed us to participate in the very things that are most characteristic of his goodness."<sup>21</sup> Christ is the center of the universe and the gate through which true and complete life moves because in him we find the definitive expression of the eternal love that is life's beginning, sustenance, and end. "All of Maximus' thinking about the created world comes under the economy of the incarnation of the Word, which is the entrance of the God beyond being into being."<sup>22</sup>

For Maximus it was of utmost importance that the union of natures in Christ did not amount to the overwhelming or obliteration of the human by the divine. Rather, the incarnation manifests *perichoresis*, the union and mutual interpenetration of each nature, but also the maintenance of each nature's uniqueness. The distinct natures, in other words, are always respected. But in their coming together a new mode of life or being becomes possible. Lars Thunberg provides a helpful analogy for thinking this dynamic coming together: "It is a union which can be characterized as similar to that between fire and iron. Iron glows in fire but remains what it is in itself. In one and the same hypostasis iron and fire are found together, but the piece of iron effects exactly that which is in accordance with its own nature—as well as that which belongs to both—i.e., it glows, but in a way that is proper to

<sup>21</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 7," in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, translated by Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 70.

<sup>22</sup> Joshua Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 262.

iron alone.”<sup>23</sup> Union without confusion, interpenetration yet distinctness — these are each important to remember because the path of salvation or *theosis*/deification means that creatureliness is never denied or destroyed. Rather, what happens is that human life, the way of being unique to human creatureliness, is lifted up into the divine life where it then realizes its full potential. Because Jesus is at once fully human and fully divine he can lead people into the perfect realization of their humanity.

Jesus Christ, in other words, is the perfect mediator between heaven and earth, Creator and creature. In him we see the truth and the meaning of all created being. As followers of Christ and members of his body, Christians are called to play a mediating role in the created world, a role that helps fellow-creatures move into the fullness of their life in God. They are, as Paul put it, to be “ministers of reconciliation” in the world (2 Corinthians 5:18). To do this, however, requires that Christians learn to see the world rightly. They need the proper *theoria*. For Maximus, having the proper *theoria* means learning to see the divine *Logos* in the *logoi* of all created things. If Christ, as the scriptures attest, is the one through whom and in whom and for whom all things come to exist, if it is indeed the case that all things hold together through him, then he is the *Logos* that is present to each thing, informing its own *logos* or way of being. What the scriptures reveal is that Jesus’ way of being, his *Logos*, is the way of love, the way of self-offering service to others.

*Logos* is a Greek term notoriously difficult to pin down because of its wide usage in ancient philosophical and spiritual contexts. As employed by Maximus it is fairly clear that it refers to something like the dynamic principle of order and coherence that enables a thing to be and become the unique thing that it is. Each thing, whether alive or not, is the realization of particular capacities. The extent to which a thing is prevented from achieving its potential is also the extent to which it can be said that its *logos* is being derailed, distorted or denied. What is striking about Maximus’s vision is that his Christological development of the divine *Logos* as present to every created *logos* allows us to say that love, the way of being revealed by Jesus as always-for-others, is the principle of intelligibility at work within all things. Things are never simply the outworking of some abstract or static idea because deep within each created thing we find God’s creative, dynamic love at work, bringing it into and then sustaining it in being.

At the heart of Maximus’ creation theology we find an extended treatment of how God creates each creature with a unique *logos*, enabling it to be the unique creature that it is. Christ is the eternal *Logos* continually and intimately present to each particular created *logos* as the power leading it into ever greater communion, until finally complete communion is attained when God is all in all. No creature, however, is complete in itself. All creatures, we can say, are created to be in relationship with each other because they are the material expression of a triune love in perichoretic relationship. Creatures most fully become themselves by being in nurturing relationship with others. At the same time, the webs of creation are strengthened insofar as each creature is strong and best able to contribute to the health of the whole.

God, as he alone knew how, completed the primary principles (*logoi*) of creatures and the universal essences of beings once for all. Yet he is still at work, not only

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<sup>23</sup> Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, second edition (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1995), 30.

preserving these creatures in their very existence (*to einai*) but effecting the formation, progress, and sustenance of the individual parts that are potential within them. Even now in his providence he is bringing about the assimilation of particulars to universals until he might unite creatures' own voluntary inclination to the more universal natural principle of rational being through the movement of these particular creatures toward well-being (*to eu einai*), and make them harmonious and uniformly moving in relation to one another and to the whole universe. In this way there shall be no intentional divergence between universals and particulars. Rather, one and the same principle shall be observable throughout the universe, admitting of no differentiation by the individual modes according to which created beings are predicated, and displaying the grace of God effective to deify the universe. . . The Father approves this work, the Son properly carries it out, and the Holy Spirit essentially completes both the Father's approval of it and the Son's execution of it, in order that the God in Trinity might be *through all and in all things* (Eph 4:6), contemplated as the whole reality proportionately in each individual creature as it is deemed worthy by grace, and in the universe altogether, just as the soul naturally indwells both the whole of the body and each individual part without diminishing itself.<sup>24</sup>

This is a breathtaking vision in which not only humanity but the whole of the created world is invited to participate in the divine life of love and celebration because it is only in God that created things can be properly known and seen for what they truly are: material expressions of love.<sup>25</sup> The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ means, "Man is made God by divinization and God is made man by hominization. For the Word of God and God wills always and in all things to accomplish the mystery of his embodiment."<sup>26</sup> To be formed by Christ means that our seeing of things is also, always, to see the love of God that is at work in them, leading them into the fullness of life that is their unique possibility.

There is in Maximus the profound realization that each creature in its very physicality is the intimate expression of God's love. In *Ambigua* 46, for instance, Maximus refers to God as the Sun that shines the divine rays of light and life on each creature so that in its growth and coming to ripeness God's wisdom and providence are revealed. "For Maximus, God the Word has sown the seeds of His own goodness in beings and He 'shines' upon them like the sun to make them grow."<sup>27</sup> This means that materiality, as such, is not something to be despised because the created world, no less than scripture, is God's means of self-revelation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Maximus the Confessor, "Ad Thalassium 2," in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 99-101.

<sup>25</sup> Joshua Lollar gives beautiful expression to this vision when he says "God is moved by His love for creation and this motion is realized in the Dionysian outpouring of Goodness to beings and Its return, which is the very outpouring and return of God from Himself to Himself; hence the language of 'self-motion (*autokinesis*).' Everything that exists just is the 'motion' of God proceeding from Himself and returning to Himself" (*To See Into the Life of Things*, 283-284).

<sup>26</sup> Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguuum 7," 60.

<sup>27</sup> Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 319.

<sup>28</sup> "Scripture and world are equally *revelation* in that they are equally the clothing of the Word and reveal Him in the same way as His Flesh. Everything, when seen in its proper light, allows for the manifestation of the Divinity of the Son of God and is understood to be His incarnation" (*Ibid.*, 257).

All attempts that denigrate materiality as the realm to be abandoned or left behind would amount to a rejection of the incarnation of God in Jesus and a denial that Jesus is to be affirmed as fully human and fully divine. Thunberg says, “the presence of the Logos in the *logoi* is always seen as a kind of incarnation—a parallel to the incarnation in the historical Jesus—and thus an act of divine condescension.”<sup>29</sup>

It is important to pause to notice the radical character of Maximus’s vision. For a number of mystical theologians (especially those heavily influenced by Platonic traditions), as well as numerous theologians through the ages, the highest achievement Christian life has required is that embodiment and physicality must finally be left behind to achieve union with God. We might say that these theologians have lost their nerve before the radicality of the incarnation. Maximus rejects this approach because, to put it simply, Jesus did not have to abandon human embodiment to fully express the divine life. He did not have to shun creatureliness to be the Creator because he fully realized both within himself in a mysterious union that affirmed mutual indwelling and unconfused distinctness. The logical outcome of this position is that creation cannot ever be denigrated or despised. Being the material manifestation of the divine *logos* of love, creation is the home of God (cf. Revelation 21-22 where we are told that the everlasting home of God is among mortals).

God is intimately present to each creature as the source of its life, but not in such a way as to prevent creatures from being themselves. “A God who himself exists in a self-communicating manner, in Trinity, engages in conversation with his creatures, one by one and all together, and they in turn exist in order to converse with him their own existence, to be themselves and with each other, in his own life. He moves right inside their being to give it its very own mind, voice and life, to bring the finite beyond its finitude and into his life of eternity.”<sup>30</sup> Following Tsakiridou’s formulation, there is a dialogical relationship between God and creatures such that in being open to another and for another the fullness of life is approached. There is in this account an understanding of God’s creative love (which is meant to find expression throughout the entire universe) as fundamentally an expression of hospitality: God creates the space and all the sources of nurture for creatures to come into his life and be strengthened to live the life they are uniquely prepared to enact.

Beginning with Irenaeus, theologians expressed a fondness for the Pauline teaching in Ephesians 1:10 that in Christ all things will be recapitulated. Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection were taken to be the expression of the divine economy of life that was the clue to the meaning and purpose of the whole universe. Several themes are at work in this complex idea of recapitulation, including: unification between God and creation and within creation; the constant reiteration of God’s gracious initiative in the world; the redemption and rectification of all forms of disobedience and disruption and alienation that impede life; the perfection and fulfillment of life; the inauguration of new life in Christ; the cosmic, all-encompassing sweep of God’s saving activity; the ontological change in creaturely being made possible by the incarnation of God in Christ; Christ’s work of revealing the unknowable God; and Christ’s work of transforming human morality and love.<sup>31</sup> Maximus moves within this tradition, but highlights how

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<sup>29</sup> Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 76.

<sup>30</sup> C. A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Person in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and the Aesthetics of the Christian Image* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 176.

<sup>31</sup> Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 87–89.

things being recapitulated in Christ entail their participation in the divine life. Speaking of Jesus, Maximus writes in *Ambiguum* 7:

This same Logos, whose goodness is revealed and multiplied in all the things that have their origin in him, with the degree of beauty appropriate to each being, *recapitulates all things in himself* (Eph 1:10). Through this Logos there came to be both being and continuing to be, for from him the things that were made came to be in a certain way and for a certain reason, and by continuing to be and by moving, they participate in God. For all things, in that they came to be from God, participate proportionally in God, whether by intellect, by reason, by sense perception, by vital motion, or by some habitual fitness. . .<sup>32</sup>

No particular thing could exist if it did not participate in God because God is the source of all life. But not all things participate in the same way. Each thing is the expression of its own distinct *logos*, which means that it has a unique principle of being, its own way of being in the world. The *logos* of a tree, for instance, is to give physical and dynamic expression to all the characteristics that enable a tree to be the thing that it is: sink down roots and absorb nutrient energy, transform sunlight into carbon, grow and produce seed, etc. The *logos* of a worm clearly differs because it does not have the powers of photosynthesis or carbon production. Even so it gives expression in its own life to a *logos* that enables it to be the unique thing that it is. Neither tree nor worm can be said to be insignificant in the eyes of God because each of these creatures expresses a *logos* that is always already in communication with the divine *Logos* who is Jesus Christ. Being in such communication they are also being directed toward each other to find the possibility of harmonious life realized in him. Maximus concludes:

We are speechless before the sublime teaching about the Logos, for he cannot be expressed in words or conceived in thought. . .nevertheless we affirm that the one Logos is many *logoi* and the many *logoi* are One. Because the One goes forth out of goodness into individual being, creating and preserving them, the One is many. Moreover the many are directed toward the One and are providentially guided in that direction. It is as though they were drawn to an all-powerful center that had built into it the beginnings of the lines that go out from it and that gather them all together. In this way the many are one.<sup>33</sup>

Maximus gives us a breath-taking vision of the expansiveness of God's love in which every creature participates and to which every creature gives witness when it realizes the life God has given it. In our looking at things we cannot ever simply look at the surface, because deep within them there is the power of divine love at work. Tsakiridou gives this summary:

Reaching out to each and every creature, this love, whose source is the Trinitarian life, defines Maximus' vision of a resurrected universe in which 'the unique

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<sup>32</sup> Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 7," 55.

<sup>33</sup> Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 7," 57.

divine power will manifest itself in all things in a vivid and active presence (*enarge te kai energon parousian*) proportioned to each one (*analogos ekasto*).<sup>34</sup> Here, *energeia* describes the diverse (open) and binding communion (*enoseos synterouses desmon*) between creation and God in which beings shine with ‘dignity and splendor’ (*kat’euprepeian kai doxan*). . . . creatures emerge as the vibrant and self-contained recipients of a hypostatic redemption by means of which they can (now) truly belong to themselves—because they finally belong (actively, communicatively) to God and to each other.<sup>34</sup>

### Christian Askesis

So far we have been describing Maximus’s vision of the world in which each creature gives expression to a *logos*, what we might also call the principle of intelligibility and order that makes it the unique thing that it is.<sup>35</sup> No *logos*, however, is self-subsisting or self-originating. It has its origin, sustenance, and end in the divine *Logos* who is Jesus Christ, which is to say that creaturely *logoi* exist only because of the will of God that desires and loves them into being. Creatures achieve the fullness of their being when they maximally participate in the divine *Logos* that is the meaning of the whole universe. In other words, the truth of each particular creature is realized when its *logos* is in harmonious alignment with the *Logos* that holds the universe together.

But some creatures, owing to their freedom, can be in more or less alignment with the *Logos*, which means that they can in refusing Christ also be out of alignment with their own *logos* (because, recalling the scriptures, Christ is the one in, through, and for whom all things are created). Maximus is clear that we can only understand things and ourselves in a Godly way when the movements of our entire life—the movement of our minds, the ordering of our affections, the practices of our bodies—are brought into conformity with Christ: a Christian *theoria* needs a Christian *askesis*.<sup>36</sup> Christian discipleship is the key to the right ordering of ourselves and the right ordering of our vision so that we can see each other and everything as God sees it. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God entered and “maintained the *logos* of creaturely origin while also wisely restoring humanity’s means of existing to its true *logos*.”<sup>37</sup> God does not alter human nature by making it something else. Rather, God in Christ changes “the mode and domain of action proper to their nature.”<sup>38</sup> God does not desire creatures to be something else. God only ever asks creatures to be themselves fully, a capacity which has become clouded and distorted because of sin. This means that as Christ leads people into the truth of their humanity he also at the

<sup>34</sup> Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 182.

<sup>35</sup> Maximus writes, “all created things are defined, in their essence and in their way of developing, by their own *logoi* and by the *logoi* of the beings that provide their external content. Through these *logoi* they find their defining limits” (“Ambiguum 7,” 57).

<sup>36</sup> Maximus believes that in the paradise of the Garden of Eden something like a proper *theoria physike* obtained. With the Fall humans lost the ability to see each thing in terms of its reference and grounding in God. Adam’s great mistake was to try to know the world by sensation alone rather than in terms of the divine love at work within them.

<sup>37</sup> Maximus the Confessor, “Ambiguum 42,” in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 82.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

same time leads them into a position to understand the truth of the world. Discipleship is what enables people to see each thing as the creature of God that it is, and to discern how and to what extent creatures are being prevented from realizing the fullness of the divine love that is at work within them.

Maximus makes an important distinction between the *logos* of being and the *logos* of well-being. Following Thunberg's useful summary, the *logos* of being "denotes the created existence of a thing as founded in God's will that it should be, it is the principle of its coming to be and implies a participation in God as being." The *logos* of well-being, however, "expresses participation in God as good and is the principle of motion in each being, i.e., *logos* regulating moral action and will."<sup>39</sup> The distinction much resembles the difference between being made in the *image* of God, something all people receive by virtue of their created life, but yet needing to move into the *likeness* of God, an achievement through the exercise of the virtues as taught by Christ. To achieve the likeness of God is to complete and perfect the image of God.

With the sin of Adam human freedom changed from good to evil. Evil is a misuse of freedom so that people fail to direct their energies in ways that are in alignment with God's will for things. Jesus is the New Adam who reverses the movement from evil to good. The movement from evil to good, which is also a movement from corruption to incorruption, goes by the name of deification because it is the creature's appropriate, proportionate participation in the life of God. Our becoming God is not the result of our own effort. It is always only ever a gift of God's grace and God's loving invitation to lead people to their true end in him. "We shall become that which in no way results from our natural ability, since our human nature has no faculty for grasping what transcends nature. For nothing created is by nature capable of inducing deification, since it is incapable of comprehending God. Intrinsically it is only by the grace of God that deification is bestowed proportionately on created beings."<sup>40</sup>

Maximus describes divinization or *theosis* as a process in which our spirit—the animating power of our life—is wholly given over to God's Spirit. "God becomes to the soul (and through the soul to the body) what the soul is to the body, as God alone knows, so that the soul receives changelessness and the body immortality; hence the whole man, as the object of divine action, is divinized by being made God by the grace of God who became man. He remains wholly man in soul and body by nature, and becomes wholly God in body and soul by grace..."<sup>41</sup> Without this process of growing into the likeness of God the virtues that enable people to see in a Godly way are impossible. With this realization the link between *theoria* and the proper *ethos* is established. To see the world as God's creation people must become creatures who live in Christ (recalling Paul's admonition to live by and exhibit the fruit of the Spirit [Galatians 5:22-25] and his succinct formulation that in baptism's crucifixion with Jesus "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" [Galatians

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<sup>39</sup> Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 74. To these two Maximus also adds the *logos* of eternal well-being, a state realized in the eschaton when God is all in all. In *Ambiguum* 42 he correlates these three *logoi* to three births: the birth of body, the birth of baptism, and the birth of resurrection (Maximus the Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 88–89).

<sup>40</sup> Maximus the Confessor, "Ad Thalassium 22," in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 118.

<sup>41</sup> Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 7," 63.



2:20]). Living in Christ is the action that enables people to see the divine *Logos* at work in each creaturely *logos*.

To live in Christ we must first look to Christ to see what he does and what he accomplishes because it is in his action that we discern how he sees all that he meets. The gospels reveal Jesus to us as above all the one who is for others. Upon meeting another person Jesus sees first and foremost a child and a gift from God. What he most desires is that each creature be liberated to live the life that God has given it. His ministries of forgiveness, healing, exorcism, feeding, companionship, and reconciliation demonstrate that we live in a world where people are in bondage to forces of violence and hatred, illness and hunger, alienation and isolation. Jesus comes to free humanity from these forces so that all creatures can experience the love of God.<sup>42</sup> Jesus reveals that the goal of life is communion with each other and with God. In this communion life the relationships between creatures and God are fully healed so that each creature achieves what John called abundant life. Put in its most succinct formulation, we could say that Jesus reveals the truth of life as the movement of love.<sup>43</sup> His life from beginning to end, from crucifixion to resurrection, demonstrates the nature and the aims of divine love. This means that to achieve something like a Christian *theoria physike*, Christians must practice the Christian *askesis* Jesus reveals in his own life. To love like Jesus is to perceive and engage the world the way that he did.

In an arresting passage that links the movement of Christ's own life with the life of the whole world, Maximus says,

The mystery of the Incarnation of the Word bears the power (*dynamis*) of all the hidden meanings and figures of Scripture as well as the knowledge of visible and intelligible creatures (*ktismaton*). The one who knows the mystery of the cross and the tomb knows the principles of these creatures. And the one who has been initiated into the ineffable power of the Resurrection knows the purpose (*skopon*) for which God originally made all things (*ta panta*).<sup>44</sup>

Here Maximus shows that a proper *theoria* requires of the believer an immersion into the history of God's economy as it is communicated through the scriptures and the world, God's two books. We cannot know the significance of what we see apart from the sacred drama that is revealed through the Word of God, nor can we know the purpose of things apart from Christ. The eternal *Logos* acts like the interpretive lens that allows us to see the *logoi* of created things as signifying God's blessing and God's love.

Maximus then adds that for us to see this way our hearts and minds must go through a crucifixion experience because it is there that the purification of the ego occurs so that we can see things in the light of God's love rather than the distorting, dissimulating clouds of our own self-serving passions.

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<sup>42</sup> In Romans 8 Paul argues that Christ's liberating work extends to the whole of creation so that every creature will know the love of God.

<sup>43</sup> I have developed this theme in *Way of Love: Recovering the Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2016).

<sup>44</sup> Maximus as quoted in C. A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 179.

All visible things (*phainomena*) need a cross, that is, a capacity that restrains the affection for them on the part of those who are sensibly attracted to them. And all intelligible things demand a tomb, that is, the complete immobility of those who are intellectually inclined toward them. For when natural activity and movement are removed along with the inclination for all these things, the Logos who is alone self-existent, reappears as though he were rising from the dead, circumscribing everything that originates from him. . . .<sup>45</sup>

In a manner reminiscent of Paul's description of baptism as the believer's old self being crucified with Christ so that he or she might also be resurrected into newness of life (Romans 6:3-14), Maximus is describing a process in which our vision and our understanding are cleansed and our priorities reoriented so that the life we live is now in conformity with the life God has intended all along. Living this cruciform life, a life in which love directs us to seek the good of others rather than pleasures for ourselves, we come to see everything in God. We come to see that each thing is the unique expression of God's love and exists for no other reason than to give glory to God as the giver and nurturer of its life. The essential task is to learn to love properly, for it is in the mode of love that the human presence on earth becomes one that heals and reconciles all things in their individual being and in their life together.

One could say that learning to love properly is the heart of the Christian task because, as Maximus and numerous spiritual writers have insisted, improper self-love, what ascetic writers call life according to the passions, so easily gets in the way. Improper self-love is reflected in a lustful or pornographic relationship with things, a relationship in which things signify or matter primarily in terms of what they can do for us. When in a lustful relationship with another the integrity of that other, and thus also the course of life that would fulfill it, is denied because its life is now made to serve my own.<sup>46</sup> This is why a life lived according to the passions—traditionally seven in number: gluttony, unchastity, avarice, anger, dejection, listlessness, and pride—leads to the tyranny of creatures and the degradation of the whole created world.<sup>47</sup> Life lived according to the passions renders Christian *theoria* impossible. It is only love for others that enables people to see the world and its creatures as God does.

Maximus describes the passions as an irrational attachment to the body. It is important to stress that Maximus does not reject or despise bodies in and of themselves. This he could not do since each body is the material manifestation of God's love. "It is not the body itself, nor the senses nor the possible faculties themselves which are evil, but only their wrong use. . . . Self-love is defined as love for the body, not because the body is linked with evil, but because attachment to the body

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<sup>45</sup> Here following the translation of Maximus by Blowers in *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 362.

<sup>46</sup> Tsakiridou gives the following helpful summary: "When creatures are perceived spiritually or in a God-loving manner (*theophilos*), they are seen in their true nature and subsistence, as his living (incarnating) works. When, by contrast, they are perceived from the standpoint of desire or self-love (*philautia*), this vital, animating reality in them disappears and the mind imposes its own self-serving and distorted reasons . . . on things . . . The passions obscure the inherent divinity and sanctity of creation and it is therefore in their activities rather than in the things themselves that evil arises" (*Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 183).

<sup>47</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, one of the last century's leading interpreters of Maximus, gives a useful account of the passions in *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2003).

prevents man's entire attachment to his divine end."<sup>48</sup> When our focus and attention rests on the material body alone we forget both the *logos* that is interior to that thing directing it to its fulfillment, and we forget the divine *Logos* in which it participates and that is leading it to its eternal well-being in God, because what has become most important is how that thing can be made to serve our end. A passionate embrace of the world, we could say, is invariably a superficial and a destructive looking at others because it does not see God's love of creatures everywhere at work.<sup>49</sup> Things are degraded and destroyed because their movement, rather than contributing to the flowering of God's whole creation, has been channeled to suit the narrow aim of human ambition.

This account shows that asceticism, the *askesis* that informs the *ethos* that makes possible a Christian *theoria physike*, has nothing to do with the denial or denigration of the material world. Genuine asceticism leads to the purification and intensification of Christ-like love that leads to the world's healing and reconciliation. It leads to the sentiment of St. Isaac the Syrian, another seventh-century monk, who said in response to the question, "What is a compassionate heart?"

It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists. At the recollection and at the sight of them such a person's eyes overflow with tears owing to the vehemence of the compassion which grips his heart; as a result of his deep mercy his heart shrinks and he cannot bear to hear or look on any injury or the slightest suffering of anything in creation.

This is why he constantly offers up prayers full of tears, even for the irrational animals and for the enemies of truth, even for those who harm him, so that they might be protected and find mercy.

He even prays for the reptiles as a result of the great compassion which is poured out beyond measure—after the likeness of God—in his heart.<sup>50</sup>

The passions are irrational (*alogos*), which means that they work contrary to the divine *Logos* that is constantly present to each creature leading it into the fullness of its own life and its life together with everything else. As disciples of Jesus Christ and as members of his body, Christians have the high calling to become agents of the Holy Spirit's work of healing and celebration. When human hearts are inspired by Jesus Christ, then his divine *Logos* takes hold of our own *logos* so that it shares in the mediating work that is the work of the incarnation: "Things that are by nature separated from one another return to a unity as they converge together in one human being. When this happens God will be *all in all* (1 Cor 15:28), permeating all things

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<sup>48</sup> Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 247–248.

<sup>49</sup> Maximus does allow for "good passion" insofar as it has been made captive in obedience to Christ ("Ad Thalassium 1" in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 98).

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in by Bruce Foltz in *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 163. For a magisterial treatment of how monastic ascetic traditions can be an aid to the healing of earth, see Douglas E. Christie's *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). In this book Christie puts the wisdom of the ancient desert spiritual traditions, above all Evagrius of Pontus, in conversation with more recent environmental writers to yield a deeply compelling account of *theoria physike*.

and at the same time giving independent existence to all things in himself. Then no existing thing will wander aimlessly or be deprived of God's presence."<sup>51</sup>

We can now appreciate that *theoria physike* as it is described by Maximus gives rise to a striking vision of the world as the material expression of God's love. It is an iconic account of the world that presupposes an *ethos* and an *askesis* in which human passions are purified so that each creature can be met and seen to be the unique gift that it is. What emerges is an account of the world as holy and as a dynamic witness to an incomprehensible and always fresh love. It is a world in which there is considerable good work to do.

The Maximian universe is one of relationship and activity where things submit to God's acting lovingly through their being—both internally, in their unique natures, and externally in their existence and in the distinct ways in which they relate to other beings and to themselves. Maximus does not tire of repeating that this cosmic movement allows each being to be itself in the fullest sense possible: nothing about the existence of even the smallest being is insignificant or bereft of dignity.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 7, 66. Just as in Christ the unity and difference of natures is maintained, so too in creation. Each member of creation is distinct but is now brought into a mutuality of relationship that strengthens each one and the whole. Christ reveals that it is not difference but division that is the problem besetting our world. The work of humanity, inspired and patterned as it is on Christ, is to honor difference but reconcile division (see the discussion of Thunberg in *Microcosm and Mediator*, 65, and Maximus's account of how Jesus mediates and heals division in *Ambiguum* 41 in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* [London: Routledge, 1996], 155–162).

<sup>52</sup> Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 186. I would like to thank Michael Gulker of the Colossian Forum for convening, and also James K. A. Smith and William Cavanaugh for leading, a group of scholars to research themes relating to the meaning of creation and the Fall. This essay grew out of that work and was made better by the comments of forum participants.