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THE SPIRIT AS THE LIBERATOR OF NATURE

A review of Sigurd Bergmann, *Creation Set Free: The Spirit as Liberator of Nature*. Translated by Douglas Stott. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005. xvii + 388 pp. \$38.00 (paper). ISBN: 080282224X.

Although the sub-discipline of ecotheology has become an increasingly significant voice within constructive theology in the last generation, the results have been mixed. Since Lynn White published “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” in 1967, theologians have been quick to accept the basic premise of his argument, viz., that Christianity’s axiomatic stance that “nature has no reason for existence save to serve man”¹ is responsible for the ecological devastation of Western society. The *prima facie* appeal of the argument is simple and direct: a religion that grants the human viceroy status within the world under God, with the mandate to have dominion over the earth, encourages the exploitation and commodification of nature—its instrumentalization as the raw material of human production. The historical shortcomings of this sentiment are patent, and it takes no more than a reading of “The Question Concerning Technology” alone to trouble its confident narrative, after all, the secularization of the West and the advent of its ecological crisis historically coincide. Sigurd Bergmann is well aware of the shortcomings of White’s thesis, and is not uncritical of many trends within ecotheology, while sharing its basic concern (as do I): theology must respond quickly and compellingly in “offering constructive ways to overcome the ecological destruction generated by [the ecological] crisis” (1). The problem is that theology is not often attentive to the crisis itself, much less to the conversations of the scientific disciplines that do seek to redress it; and these ecological discourses for their part have not taken much notice of what the “understanding of God has for the interplay of organisms and their surroundings.” That is, theology might talk vaguely of “the body of God” and “postmodern science” in the hopes that a more rhetorically compelling imaginative construction of the divine might make us recycle more; and the environmental sciences might more or less blame Christian theology for getting us into this fix in the first place. But the two sides have not had a productive dialogue.

But Bergmann is not content simply to bring these two together as conversation partners; the book is grounded instead in a disquisition on the pneumatology of

¹ White’s essay originally appeared in *Science* 155:1203-7, and was reprinted in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, and Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1996), pgs. 184-93, from which I quote here. The above citation is from p. 193.

Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390). On the face of it, this move is not particularly surprising, since there is an established trend in the last thirty years or so that Cappadocian trinitarian theology, with its putative emphasis on the communality of the divine being, bears the panacea for many of the ills of modern theology, not least in providing the resources for a more robust pneumatology free of the christomonism and the reductionism of the Augustinian *vinculum* tradition in the West. The most obvious predecessor to Bergmann's work, Jürgen Moltmann (who provides a foreword to the text), has made quite a lot of this reading, writing at least three books² developing a "social trinitarianism" that underwrites a pneumatological vitalism wherein the life of the Trinity takes the life of creation into its communion of love, with the Spirit being the life-force and immanent vitality of all of nature and history.

So what does Bergmann have to contribute to the discussion? Quite a bit, as it turns out. Where Moltmann is notoriously cavalier with his historical inspirations, Bergmann is systematic and exhaustive; indeed, his exposition of Nazianzus' theology is near monograph length on its own. Further, he reads widely and critically within the fields of liberation theology, ecological and environmental science, ethics, patristic scholarship, and contemporary theology to advance an impressive and cogent synthesis of scholarship. Indeed, it would seem that in fact his purpose overall is actually methodological—perhaps the most significant lacuna in ecotheology—for his stated concern is developing a "contextual methodology...within the framework of a model of correlation between tradition and situation" (15). That is, Bergmann is seeking to develop a "contextual theology" that establishes a mutually critical correlative reading of traditional texts and of the contemporary situation in a way that immediately relativizes, and therefore illuminates both in a theologically generative manner: Nazianzus is allowed to speak afresh insofar as his text is interrogated from the perspectives of environmental science and contemporary constructive theological reflection; the latter disciplines are interpellated by a traditioned text and made to speak anew. Bergmann's concern is to give rigor to such reading practices, and it is just here that both the strength and the weakness of this book is located. The problem might be illuminated by citing a criticism Bergmann makes of Moltmann himself: "One wonders whether Moltmann has written both too much and too little about the Spirit...he wishes to incorporate apparently everything that has been said about the Holy Spirit, the result being that he both says too much and says it too unclearly" (255). Now, a more apt criticism of Moltmann might just be hard to find, but how is the engineer hoist by his own petard? For that, we must survey the argument of the book.

Appropriate to Bergmann's methodological concerns, the book takes a kind of dialectical structure. Part I surveys the historical roots of ecological thinking, its challenge to theology, and the development of the concept of "nature" in

² Viz., *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); and *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

modernity. The scholarship here is wide-ranging and comprehensive, even remarkably succinct in a book that is generally not shy for its prolixity (the original German edition ran to well over 500 pages). Part II constitutes the heart of the text, an exposition of Gregory's trinitarian cosmology, oriented around the themes of sociality, movement, suffering, and Spirit. Bergmann discusses the theologian's orations and letters here in an erudite and comprehensive manner. The basic claim of the section revolves around the Spirit's role as inhabitant of nature in the trinitarian economy of salvation, a role connected to the joining of divine and human in the incarnation, together drawing divine and creation closer together in *theosis* as the Spirit elevates creation from evil and suffering into the community of the divine life. The christological point is important for Gregory, according to Bergmann; that is, cosmological pneumatology is cosmology as *soteriology*, a realization of the divine salvific purposes that immediately circumvents all over-hasty vitalist pantheisms to which ecotheology is so often subject. Part III then returns to the contemporary scene, with the fourth and fifth chapters performing the main correlational and constructive tasks that the book promises to deliver. Ch. 4, "Correlating the Interpretations of Late Antiquity and Late Modernity," brings Gregory into dialogue with a representative swath of ecotheologians (mainly John Cobb, Günter Altner, Moltmann, Christian Link, Gerhard Liedke, Ulrich Duchrow, and Sallie McFague).³ Bergmann's strategy here, which while systematic flirts with being unduly rebarbative and schematic, consists in treating the four categories named above – sociality, movement, suffering, and Spirit – in a six-stage dialectic alternating from modern thinkers to Gregory's thought and back in a tightening spiral. What this leaves Bergmann with is a set of questions that then gets taken up in the main constructive chapter that follows. Here he draws largely upon Per Frostin and Leonardo Boff to submit a perspective in which the interrelated components of nature themselves become "subjects" with a certain "preferential option:" liberation theology's "understanding of the presumed unity of human history" is broadened into an "ecological understanding of the presumed unity of the entire planet as a biosphere" (271). This advances notably beyond McFague's somewhat facile construal of nature as the "new poor" (to which the question must always be asked – are we already done with the "old poor"?) such that ecological systems thinking is broadened theologically so that the liberationist emphasis on sociality and solidarity includes ecosystems and the entire biosphere as exigent within the contextuality of theological reflection on liberative praxis. Ecology becomes a paradigm for construing the relational patterns of the Godhead itself. Finally, ch. 6 returns to methodological considerations so as to sum up Bergmann's proposed manner in which the spheres of ecology and theology in their mutual dialogue are broadened via a critical and correlative reading of the tradition. In addition, Bergmann sums up the thread of apophaticism that runs throughout the text with a proposed extension of the apophatic reticence on essence from the nature of God to the nature of *nature*.

³ One of the great strengths of this book is that brings a large set of figures writing in German into the literature of the anglophone ecotheological movement.

So why too much and too little? It rather depends, I suppose, on what one takes the overall performative intent of the text to be – if it is to lend rigor and credibility to ecotheological discourse by means of providing an exemplification of the manner in which traditional theological sources can be brought into generative, yet mutually critical, correlations with contemporary problem complexes, then certainly Bergmann succeeds at some level. But if it is to actually propose a theology that gives us a compelling cosmological pneumatology revealing nature itself to be in the process of liberation via the *oikonomia* of the triune community, then my assessment must be somewhat more muted.

For here's the rub: one of the problems haunting ecotheology, a problem that is merely the localized symptom of a larger issue that attends upon many praxis-oriented theologies, is the basic question as to exactly how such a given theological model or image provides liberatory power. That is, *how* does the Holy Spirit "liberate nature?" The answer inevitably is proffered in positing of some kind of analogy between the life of God and the life of the world, usually via a species of pneumatology or panentheism – theological constructions that allow a theologian to think together God and world constitutively. Hence, the question can be sharpened thus: if we *can* draw some kind of connection between a supposed "divine sociality" and an "ecological sociality" of the natural world, what is the nature of the analogy that obtains between these spheres that underwrites a liberatory ecological praxis? If nature participates in the "triune ecology" such that nature itself is constituted by *koinonia*, what is the nature of that participation? Does Gregory's divine communality and cosmological pneumatology merely constitute an imaginative construal that provides a re-descriptive poetics for our understanding of nature – one among many images to be chosen more or less on their pragmatic utility? The question is not idle, for, after all, we do not need trinitarian theology to tell us that nature is a web of interdependent connections; Bergmann's first chapter is rather effective in showing the emergence of various forms of such systems thinking in the ecological sciences that do quite well without the term *perichoresis*.

To be fair, this is a set of questions Bergmann himself puts to his contemporary interlocutors at several points, most pointedly to Moltmann: "how are we to understand the correspondence in Moltmann's model between the perichoretic understanding of God and the ecological understanding of nature? I cannot see that Moltmann does more than establish an undifferentiated analogy between the two" (223). The problem here has to do with Gregory's apophaticism, on the one hand, and Moltmann's overconfidence in describing the ("social") essence of God, on the other. That is, while the Cappadocian tradition, drawing upon middle Platonism as well as the influence of Origen, and looking forward to the definitive formulation by Pseudo-Dionysius, rigorously refused to overstep the epistemological boundaries of created being such that one could speak of God's essence unequivocally, Moltmann "does not distinguish between God's communal form and that of the world, giving the impression that the two might indeed be completely congruent" (199). While the word of dread *du jour*

(univocity) is not raised, the underlying problem is thoroughly understood by Bergmann: that is, in the proposition *deus sive natura*, it takes very little parsimony to eliminate the first term altogether as superfluous. As he says ironically, apropos of McFague's remythologized "Stoic pantheism," Gregory confronted and overcame the very same metaphysical position that contemporary theologians are now lending Christian legitimacy (196-7) – an ultimately undifferentiated pantheism that, by making the Spirit coterminous with "life" (Cobb), leaves nature finally to itself.

Even Moltmann sees this, which is why, while positing the Spirit as the principle of evolution, he rather inconsistently then describes Christ as the *redeemer* of evolution (to which Bergmann, rightly perplexed, asks, are we to understand Christ's and the Spirit's work in *contradiction* to one another?). That is, the pneumatological indwelling of creation, the work of the Spirit as "Lord and giver of life," must be economic and soteriological in some manner distinct from the work of creation. Otherwise we are left with the rather uncomfortable proposition of the "slaughter bench of *natura*" being part of the divine life – unacceptable, so far as I know, to virtually everyone but the process theologians.

For it is precisely *from* this slaughter bench that Bergmann understands the Spirit to liberate nature. That is, for him God takes upon Godself the suffering, not just of the evils of history, but of nature itself in the incarnation, and thereby liberates it. The complicated reception of the Hellenistic categories of divine immutability and *apatheia* makes all the difference, for Gregory's reluctance to speak of the essence of God means that the suffering of God has to be something enacted within the economy, something taken onto God in the incarnation. That is, to speak of an indwelling of creation is to speak of God's actions, not God's essence. Gregory is content with paradox at this point – that which cannot suffer suffers in Christ. What Bergmann then wants to understand by this is that we can and must legitimately say that the Spirit, as the one who dwells "in and with another," likewise suffers with the victims of nature and history, but by entering into their sufferings moves them closer to God. The manner of the indwelling is precisely the manner of the co-suffering. Again, Bergmann is at pains to distinguish this from many modern thinkers who don't thus qualify but outright reject the notion of the *apatheia*: Moltmann, again, in his happiness to transgress all apophatic boundaries is willing to speak of God's essential *patheia*: God is essentially defined by God's capacity to suffer. As with Cobb, McFague, and Matthew Fox, the upshot is that "by identifying the pain of the world as God's pain, they in fact move it into God's being, thereby unintentionally also weakening the depth of historical suffering" (240); in other words, if God constitutively co-suffers by virtue of an ontological identity or immediacy of immanence with the world process, then the salvific uniqueness of Christ's suffering is utterly denatured. Again, the failure to speak apophatically, which means the failure to properly think the analogy between the divine trinity and the created world it indwells, is the failure to think the possibility of the liberation of nature. For it is not the case that apophaticism merely leaves the question of God's passibility indeterminate, but rather that it is the linguistic recoil before the recognition that God's actuality overdetermines predications

appropriate to created processes; to speak so tritely of God's *patheia* vitiates the very condition of possibility of nature's redemption (as Bergmann rightly notes, the currently-verboden notion of transcendence, rightly understood, is integral to the question).

If Bergmann sees this (and I am simply recapping a line of his argument), then what is the nature of my complaint? It is twofold: first, there is the formal issue of the sheer bulk of Bergmann's argument, the "too little and too much" alluded to above. The book is frankly tiresome at many points—true to its nature as a dissertation, Bergmann repeatedly surveys the literature exhaustively on any given point, but the problem is that the book practically groans under the weight of its need to be comprehensive, and it is far too easy to lose the course of the argument. Bergmann could have saved his readers quite a lot of superfluous labor by working his very helpful method of correlation into a constructive position that brought Nazianzus into dialogue with contemporary thinkers in a more organic and less schematic fashion than the fully six-stage dialogue form that stretches the fourth chapter out to nearly a hundred pages. The irony of this problem is that at crucial points far too *little* is said. This is most problematic in the exposition of Gregory's thought, when three of the four subjects (sociality, movement, suffering, Spirit) suffer from significant equivocations. For example, Bergmann follows 20th century form in attributing a doctrine of God's community or sociality to the Cappadocians, and to Nazianzus in particular. While a Moltmann will take this to be a "social Trinity," Bergmann is too careful a reader to allow this, but he never quite explains what it means to be one God in three hypostases for Gregory, or what the epithet "community" or "sociality" means. He is aware that the Greeks locate the divine unity, *not* in some abstract shared love or communion, but rather in the monarchy of the Father. Bergmann cites Gregory's 42nd *Oration* to the effect that the unity of the Godhead is constituted by a "common will and power,"⁴ but evidently fails to notice that a *common* will which is an identical possession of the Father's will by Son and Spirit is not a *community* of wills. That is, if God's being is to be defined by sociality such that creation itself can participate ecologically in this sociality without at the same time devolving the triune life into the quasi-tritheism of Moltmann's social trinitarianism, Bergmann has neglected some important explanatory work. A similar problem inheres with the discussion of divine suffering: although the author is careful, indeed scrupulous, to critique a notion of God's *essential* suffering, and to emphasize that the divine suffering has to be a christological-pneumatological *economic* category, he nonetheless fails to explain just what it means for the divine to suffer.

Yet it is precisely this suffering, and this is the second problem, that Bergmann takes to be redemptive; hence it is difficult to understand exactly what his counterproposal is to Moltmann, McFague, Cobb, and the like. His diagnosis of the problem is certainly apt, and there is no question that he has read Gregory

⁴ In Gregory's words: "And the union is the Father from Whom and to Whom the order of Persons runs its course...so as to be possessed, without distinction of time, of will, or of power."

correctly on the point of the latter's apophaticism, unlike many who enlist the Cappadocians for a theological agenda such that this brilliant trio of thinkers have, sadly, become close to historical ciphers in much contemporary discourse. A reticence to speak of the divine essence is rather exactly what allowed the Fathers to hold together the mystery of the incarnation and pneumatological inspiration as a mystery of *salvation*, but this has to do with the nature of God's being (or for our ontotheo-phobic times, the nature of the God without being) itself and not simply the pluralism of knowledge. The latter seems to be the move that allows Bergmann to extend the principle of apophaticism to the being of nature—that the necessary and theory-bound multi-perspectivalism of the sciences means that nature has to be understood contextually and therefore with an apophatic reserve regarding its whole—but this would be to *precisely* evacuate his critique of Moltmann et al. That is, if cosmology is indeed to be soteriology, then nature cannot stand under the rubric of apophaticism, otherwise, are we not back with *deus sive natura*?

Bergmann is quite evidently reluctant to take up the question of grace. More than once (106, 166) he cites Gregory's 31st *Oration* as saying that the Spirit's guidance occurs through nature rather than grace,⁵ but if he is to avoid the Stoic pantheism that Gregory wishes to grace is exactly how the Spirit's work must be understood. Bergmann's failure to see this is disappointing, particularly in light of the fact that virtually all the pieces are in place in this text to posit a truly compelling ecotheology, and a cogent presentation of a "triune ecology." The promise, as I see it, has to do with his development of Gregory's notion of "movement." Easily the most obscure of the ideas treated in this book, it nonetheless seems to me to be the most important. By "movement" Bergmann understands a kind of dynamism and actuality to the divine life that the Spirit participates in and imparts to the creation; as the co-agent of a dynamic "synergism" with creation, the Spirit elevates nature to the divine. For Bergmann, this means that time and space themselves are immanent aspects of the Spirit's motion, such that *place* is transparent to the Spirit's inhabitation. This is so because for Gregory "movement" is an ethical and qualitative character of the divine dynamism, so that to participate in the Spirit's "movement" is to adumbrate a kind of topological ecology of the Spirit: "theology examines the ecology of a place as a *symbol* of the inhabitation of the Spirit, interpreting the various social constructions characterizing this place from the perspective of how the various subjects may perceive its holiness" (305). The ecological emphasis on

⁵ Bergmann is not always careful to cite Gregory's text, and some of his references seem to support his points only obliquely; in this case, the closest statement I can find of Gregory's in 31.29 is the following: "The Spirit indeed effects all these things, filling the universe with his being, sustaining the universe...It is his nature, not his given function, to be good, to be righteous, and to be in command." It strikes me that this is not at all making the point Bergmann takes it to be. At issue is the Spirit's *essence* as identical to his goodness and righteousness and lordship, as not given by adoption as if he were a created being. The point, therefore, bears upon consubstantiality, not a mode of divine operation. Translation from *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory Nazianzen*, trans. Lionel Wickham and Frederick Williams (New York: E. J. Brill, 1991).

interconnected modes of spatiality then becomes an ethical question, finally, one of divinization—for if the meaning of “place” is that it is a sacred space of the Spirit’s inhabitation, to participate in that movement of elevation is to be deified.

But Bergmann’s refusal to take up the question of grace *just here* means that he has failed to go beyond the trap he so rightly sees much of ecotheology bound to. In fact, it is entirely possible that this is a problem of his source—the question of nature and grace never arose for the East in the manner in which it did for the West (where language of “synergism” became so problematic). But it is the theoretical question that has to be asked at this point, and it shows itself as a *pneumatological* question, one that furthermore bears upon questions of subjectivity. That is, if participation in the divine movement is finally one of ethical participation in the Spirit, it is necessarily one of grace—it is necessarily a question of *charity*—and this is finally what theology can bring to the ecological question. What this theology of “the Spirit as the liberator of nature” might need to be complemented with, then, is an ecological pneumatology according to the *City of God*, or Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium Mentis ad Deum*. Nevertheless, Bergmann’s book, though it fails to take up just the point that could develop it most compellingly, remains an impressive and important work that represents, in my consideration, one of the best works to date that thinks together pneumatology and ecology.

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