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Final Fulfilment: The Deification of Creation

If the great scientific discovery of the nineteenth century was Darwin's discovery of the evolution of life by means of natural selection, equally significant was the twentieth century discovery that our universe is not static but expanding dynamically. The universe itself is evolving. We now know that the observable universe began from an unthinkably small, hot and dense state 13.7 billion years ago, that bacterial life began on Earth about 3.8 billion years ago and that all the wonderfully diverse forms of life of our planet have evolved from this beginning.

In this chapter I will explore a theology of final fulfilment after Darwin and after Einstein and Hubble. For the purposes of this exploration, I will assume rather than argue for a position on the promise of redemption for human beings: that redemption in Christ involves the forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Spirit that makes us sons and daughters of God, transforms us in Christ, restores and renews in us the image of God, and is the promise and the beginning of our participation in resurrection life, in the communion of the Trinity; that ultimately our final salvation as human beings is about communion, our communion in the dynamic life of the triune God, with other human persons in the communion of saints, and in some way with the whole of God's creation.

The question I will take up is centred on the rest of creation: What does final fulfilment mean for non-human creatures? The focus will be on the way in which the wider creation can be thought to share in resurrection life. I will start from the assumption of Christian faith in the bodily and personal resurrection of humans and will ask how the rest of creation might be thought of as participating with humans in resurrection life. While I recognize, that there is much that is controversial about the resurrection of human beings, I will not address these issues here.

The guiding thought in this exploration is that in the incarnation God has embraced not just humanity, and not just the whole world of flesh, but the whole universe and all its dynamic history, and that this embrace constitutes an unbreakable promise. As Walter Kasper has put it: "God has accepted the whole world finally in Jesus Christ, and God is faithful, so the world and history will not simply vanish into nothingness, rather God will be its 'all in all' in the end (I Cor 15:28)" (Kasper, 1986, 378).

I will begin with what I take to be fundamental in this kind of discussion, an acknowledgment of what we do not know of God's future. Then, with this in place, I will take up the promise of hope for creation found in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's Letter to the Romans, and in patristic theology, exemplified in Maximus the Confessor. This will lead to an exploration of insights from Karl Rahner's theology of hope for the material universe. Then, in the final section, I will take up and explore hope for the animals, arguing that they too share in their own way in the final transformation and deification of all things.

We Hope for What we do not See: God as Absolute Future

At the end of the section from Romans that I will discuss below, Paul writes: "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it in patience" (Rom 8:24-5). Christian hope for the

resurrection of the body and a renewed creation is not something we can see or imagine, because what we see is the empirical reality that surrounds us and what we can imagine is based upon what we already experience. Again, according to Paul, God's transforming act in resurrection involves a radical change in bodily existence. What is sown in the grave as perishable, dishonoured, weak and physical will be raised as "imperishable," "in glory," "in power" and as a "spiritual body" (I Cor 15:44). As a risen body is beyond the grasp of our minds, so a universe transfigured in Christ is beyond imagining. We hope for what we do not see.

A critical Christian theology approaches discussions of God's future for our world with caution. It is all too aware of what we do not know. In fact, it insists, there are serious theological reasons that put limits on what we can claim to know. These reasons were articulated by Karl Rahner in a well-known article in the mid-twentieth century (Rahner, 1966, 323-46). In his work two fundamental principles can be found which can guide the interpretation of eschatological statements. The first is that *the future of our world in God remains radically hidden to us*. The Scriptures insist that God has not revealed the day when the end will come (Mk 13:32), and it is not simply the timing of the end that is hidden. The future has been announced and promised in Christ and his resurrection, but it is announced and promised precisely as hidden mystery. This future is nothing else than the coming towards us of the incomprehensible God. It is God who is our Absolute Future. The revelation of God's promise in Christ does not mean that what was unknown is now made known, clear and manageable. It is rather "the dawn and the approach of mystery as such" (330). Because the future is the coming of God, it always escapes our comprehension. It is always a mistake, then, to interpret biblical images in literal terms as something like an "eyewitness" account of what is to come.

The second principle is that *the future will be the fulfilment of the salvation in Christ that is already given to us*. It will be the fulfilment of what we experience in God's self-communication in Christ and in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Our knowledge of God's future is based upon what can be derived from what we experience in Christ and from what we can see as its fulfilment. We do not have supplementary knowledge of the eschatological future over and above what we have in the theology of Christ and of grace, but we can transpose these to their fulfilment. This means that all genuine theological knowledge of the future is an inner moment of the eschatological present.

For the Christian, who views the future as God's self-bestowal, the future is truly unknown and uncontrollable, and this is something that leaves a great deal of room for freedom, for hope and for trust. Of course, we are inescapably tied to our imaginations and images have their proper place in expressing religious ideas. But it is fundamental not to mistake the image for the reality. The image might be the great wedding feast, or Paul's angelic trumpet or Matthew's sheep and goats. But the reality that the images point to is based upon the experience we have of the grace of Christ already at work in us and drawing us into a future in God.

For Rahner, the absolute future is nothing else than God's self-bestowal. This is the consummation of the divine action of creation and redemption, a fulfilment promised and initiated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Christianity proclaims that the becoming of the universe will end, not in emptiness, but in the divine self-bestowal. Moreover, this absolute future is already at work within history. It is already the divine creative power at

work in all things, the Creator Spirit immanent in every aspect of creation, bringing the universe to its fulfilment. The absolute future, this divine self-bestowal, has found its explicit and irreversible expression in Jesus. His resurrection is both the promise and the beginning of the absolute future, the transformation of human beings and the whole of the universe in Christ. Absolute future is another name for God. This absolute future not only comes towards us as the future of our world, but is also “the sustaining ground of the dynamism towards the future” (Rahner, 1969, 62). This is the God who is the absolutely incomprehensible mystery of love from which creation comes and to which it is directed.

Hope for the Whole Creation in the New Testament: Romans 8:18-25

For some Christians, the concept of salvation is centred on the individual human person, and sometimes simply on the individual human soul. The biblical notion, by contrast is of resurrection of the body, the coming of the Reign of God, communion with others in the life of the Trinity, and the transformation of the whole creation. In the Bible, human beings are understood in relationship with each other and in relation to the wider creation. The biblical narrative begins with God creating all the diverse creatures of our universe and declaring them to be good. After the terrible destruction caused by human sin, God makes a solemn covenant not only with Noah and his family, but with every living creature and declares that the sign of this covenant with every creature of flesh will be the rainbow (Gen 9:16). The Bible concludes with a vision of a new heaven and new earth, a transformed world, a place where God dwell with God’s people, a place of healing and life, where the leaves of the tree of life, growing alongside the river of life, are for “the healing of nations” (Rev 22:2).

Biblical hope is for a forgiven and renewed humanity within a transformed creation. It finds expression in the famous image of the peaceable animals, where the wolf lives with the lamb, the lion eats straw like an ox, and children play safely near snakes and God proclaims: “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:6-9). This promise occurs in a series of prophetic texts (Is 43:19-21; 55:12-13, Ez 34:25-31, Hos 2:18; Zc 8:12; Mic 4:4) and appears in the divine commitment to create “new heavens and a new earth” (Is 65:17; 66:22).

The New Testament sees the resurrection of Jesus as involving the whole creation. Jesus risen from the dead, is the Wisdom and Word of God, the one in whom all things are created and sustained (I Cor 8:6; Heb 1:2-3; Jn 1:1-14). He is the one in whom all things are to be redeemed, recapitulated and reconciled (Rom 8:18-25; Col 1:15-20; Eph 1:9-10; 20-23). The risen Christ is the beginning of the new creation, the promised new heavens and new earth (II Pt 3:13; Rev 21:1-5; 22:13). In this new creation, every creature of earth, sky and sea will sing praise to the Lamb who has redeemed the whole creation (Rev 5:13-14). Each of these texts contributes an important element to an overall understanding of the divine promise in relation to the whole creation. I will take up just one of them, Paul’s reflection on suffering and the promise of God in chapter 8 of Romans:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has

been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom 8:18-23)

In exploring this text, I will gather up insights from three specialist New Testament scholars. The Pauline authority, Joseph Fitzmyer, points out that in this text Paul is clearly thinking of redemption (*apolytrōsis*) in Christ as applying not only to human beings, but also to the whole creation:

It is no longer considered from an anthropological point of view; it is now recast in cosmic terms. Human bodies that are said to await such redemption (8:23) are merely part of the entire material creation, which is itself groaning in travail until such redemption occurs. For the Christ-event is expected to affect not only human beings, but all material or physical creation as well (Fitzmyer, 1993, 507).

Creation is held in bondage to sin, decay and death and in this it shares the lot of humanity, but it also shares with humanity the hope of redemption. The word Paul uses for decay (*phthora*), Fitzmyer tells us, “denotes not only perishability and putrefaction, but also powerlessness, lack of beauty, vitality and strength that characterizes creation’s present condition” (509). The freedom of creation from this bondage will occur in and with the glorification of the sons and daughters of God. Fitzmyer points out that Paul is here talking about the fulfilment of the biblical promise of “new heavens and a new earth” found in Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22 (505).

Australian Pauline scholar, Brendan Byrne, sees this passage from Romans as one of “the most singular and evocative” texts in the whole of Paul’s work (Byrne, 1996, 255). What is distinctive, he says, is the way in which it includes the whole of non-human creation within the sweep of salvation alongside human beings. Byrne carefully analyses the meaning of the word creation (*ktisis*) as Paul uses it here. He establishes that “it refers to the entire non-human world which the biblical creation stories present as the essential context for human life” (255). Byrne goes on to show that Paul presupposes a Jewish tradition that sees non-human creation as intimately bound up with the fate of human beings. This tradition goes back to the creation story (Gen 3:17-19). Creation and humanity are understood as sharing a “common fate” in the prophetic literature of the Bible, particularly in the texts I have mentioned above (255-7). Paul builds on this “common fate” tradition, proclaiming that non-human creation will share with human beings in the final restoration of all things in Christ, which will involve a cosmic renewal. Paul’s point is that the sufferings of the present are small price to pay for the glory coming. As Byrne notes, Paul does not minimize the suffering of the present, but sets in a wider framework, one that looks beyond the present to “the full realization of God’s design for human beings and their world” (257).

N.T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham, says of this same text: “The greatest Pauline picture of the future world is Romans 8:19-25” (Wright, 2006, 75). He has no doubt that transformation of the whole creation in Christ is fundamental to Paul’s vision. He writes:

Creation as we know it bears witness to God’s power and glory (Rom 1:19-20), but also to the present state of futility to which it has become enslaved. But this slavery, like all slaveries in the

Bible, is then given its Exodus, its moment of release, when God does for the whole cosmos what he did for Jesus at Easter. This is the vision that is so big, so dazzling, that many even devout readers of Paul have blinked, rubbed their eyes, and ignored it, hurrying on to the more “personal” application in the following paragraph (75).

But, Wright insists, this is where Paul’s whole argument of the justice of God comes to one of its great climaxes. Wright sees Romans 8 as the deepest New Testament answer to the “problem of evil,” to the question of God’s justice. Paul is declaring that “the renewal of creation, the birth of the new world from the labouring womb of the old, will demonstrate that God is in the right” (75).

Paul’s image of creation groaning in giving birth to new creation can find new meaning in a new context. It may be that the context of Paul’s thought was the apocalyptic expectation of cosmic turmoil that would precede the final victory of God (Byrne, *Romans*, 256). But Paul’s reflection also seems shaped by what he saw in the natural world around him. His image functions anew in the context of an understanding of the world shaped by evolutionary biology, a world of fertility, generativity and wonderful creativity, but also of struggle and suffering and death. The metaphor of birthing is at the origin of the word “nature.” In the world of nature as understood in evolutionary terms, suffering and death seem to be the shadow side of prolific creativity (Rolston, 1999, 30-7).

The Earth has given birth to bacteria, trilobites, dinosaurs, mammals and human persons with their immensely complex brains. It has been a labour that has brought forth staggeringly diverse and complex forms of life, but in a process that has been very costly. In the Pauline vision, it has not yet reached its completion and fulfilment. It will not be fulfilled until it shares with human beings in God’s final redemption and transformation of all things. Creation groans still as something even more radically new is being born. With the information we have today, I imagine that Paul would see God at work in this whole process of the evolution of our universe over the last 13.7 billion years and the evolution of life on Earth over the last 3.8 billion years, and that he would see God in Christ as promising a future not just for human beings but for the whole labouring creation, when God will bring it all to redemption and fulfilment.

Hope for the Universe in Patristic Tradition: Maximus the Confessor

In patristic writers like Irenaeus, creation and redemption are held together. They form one story of what God has done for us through the Word and in the Spirit. The whole history of history is taken up and recapitulated in Christ. For Irenaeus, the visible universe is destined to be restored and to share in glorification with the human community saved by Christ. Athanasius could speak of *creation* being deified in the Spirit through the Word of God. He writes of the Holy Spirit: “In him, then, the Logos glorifies creation, and deifying it and adopting it brings it to the Father” (*First Letter to Serapion*, 1.25). Athanasius sees non-human creation participates in some way with human beings in glory, deification and adoption. This theology has been the common heritage of the Eastern Christian tradition, and much of the Western, although it has seldom received sustained theological attention.

This tradition finds influential expression in the thought of Maximus the Confessor (580-662). For Maximus, the incarnate Word of God restores the unity of the whole creation and brings it to God. Originally, God had called humans to be the bond of union in all the divisions and

the different aspects of cosmic reality. The human was meant to be a “microcosm” (a little universe), mediating and uniting the extremes of the cosmos, drawing the created order into harmony within itself and into union with God (Louth, 1996, 73). Because of the fall, human beings have failed in this function, but in the incarnation, God unites and recapitulates all things in the Word made flesh.

Maximus sees God as creating the universe of creatures with the Incarnation in mind. The Incarnation is “the end for whose sake all things exist” (*Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 60). All things are created in the eternal Word. Maximus plays on the relationship in Greek between the *Logos*, the eternal Word of God, and the *logoi*. The *logoi* are the fundamental meanings of individual creatures in their diversity. The *logoi* represent the distinct ways that different created entities participate in the *Logos* of God. All are brought into unity and right relationship in Christ, the *Logos* made flesh:

By his own initiative, he joins together the natural ruptures in all of the natural universe, and brings to fulfilment the universal meanings (*logoi*) of individual things, by which the unification of the divided is realized. He reveals and carries out the great will of God his Father, “summing up all things in himself, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10), since all were created in him (*Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 60, trans. Daley, 2004, 171).

Jesus Christ, the *Logos* of God, unites in himself the *logoi*, the fundamental meanings of each created being, and brings all to unity and healing. In the Word made flesh all the ancient polarizations of creation are overcome. Christ unites human beings with himself, so that we bear his image, and share his role with regard to the rest of creation: “With us and through us he encompasses the whole creation through its intermediaries and the extremities through their own parts” (*Ambigua* 41, trans. Louth, 1996, 160). The transfiguration of Christ is an important symbol of the transformation of creation in Christ. Not only Jesus, but his garments, are transfigured, and these garments become a symbol of the whole creation that shares in Christ’s transfiguration. Human beings renewed in Christ, participate in his transfiguration, and participate in the transformation and healing of the whole cosmos.

These themes of the transformation and deification of creation appear in the work of contemporary Orthodox theologians. Dumitru Staniloae, for example, says that the material universe, like humankind, “is destined for transfiguration, through the power of the risen body of Christ” (Staniloae, 1970, 211). Paul Evdokimov writes that the second coming of Christ, the *Parousia*, “coincides with the transformation of nature and it will be visible not within history but beyond it” (Evdokimov, 2001, 26). Vladimir Lossky says that “Divine love always pursues the same end: the deification of men, and by them, of the whole universe” (Lossky, 1978, 110). Boris Bobrinskoy speaks of the importance of “a deification that is both personal and cosmic” (Bobrinskoy, 1999, 5). Hope for the universe is not foreign to the Western tradition and is enshrined in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (pars. 1046-50). The Council affirms the final consummation and transformation of the universe, and points out how little we know of them: “We know neither the moment of the consummation of the earth and of humanity, nor the way in which the universe will be transformed.” But in this new creation, we will find again the fruits of our being, our action and our history, “cleansed this time from sin, illuminated and

transfigured, when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal kingdom” (Flannery, 1996, 204-5).

The Deification of the Universe (Karl Rahner)

Cosmologists tell us that the observable universe is made up of something like a hundred billion galaxies. It is expanding and evolving. We can trace its history back to the first second of its existence, about 13.7 billion years ago, when it was extremely small, dense and hot. As the galaxies move away from one another, the rate of expansion seems to be increasing. There are two scientific scenarios for the future of the universe. Either it will stop expanding at some point in the future, then begin to collapse back into an extremely small, dense and hot state, or it will continue to expand and cool forever. The present view of many cosmologists is that the universe is destined to expand forever, becoming less energetic and incapable of supporting life. Clearly, all carbon-based life is destined for extinction. In about five billion years our Sun will become a red giant, engulfing the orbit of Earth and Mars, and eventually become a white dwarf star. In 40-50 billion years star formation will have ended in our galaxy and in others (Russell, 2008, 300-1).

This is a bleak scenario of the future. What does it leave Christian hope? How can the predictions that science makes about the future be reconciled with the promise of new creation? Karl Rahner sees the resurrection of the crucified as not only the promise but also the beginning of the deification of the world itself. He insists that what has occurred in Jesus, as part of the physical, biological and human world, is *ontologically* “the embryonically final beginning of the glorification and divinization of the *whole* reality” (Rahner, 1966, 128). In this section, I will explore further this idea of the deification of material universe against the background of the scientific picture of endless dissipation. This will involve a consideration of the mysterious nature of matter itself, its radical transformation in new creation and the real continuity between the universe that we are part of today and God’s new creation.

What Does it Mean to Speak of the Deification of Matter?

In the biblical and patristic traditions, the material universe was seen as God’s good creation and destined to share with human beings in God’s final fulfilment when Christ comes again. Often the focus was on the human. But the human being was seen as necessarily bodily and as interconnected with a non-human world. Final fulfilment of human beings was understood as involving a new relationship with the triune God, with the human community and with the wider creation. In my view this tradition is a precious resource for contemporary theology. In the light of more recent understanding of the history of the universe and of life on our planet, and confronted by twenty-first century ecological issues, the theological meaning of non-human creation and its future in God needs to be raised today in a less anthropocentric way.

In exploring this issue, it is worth noting that we do not know much about matter. William Stoeger has pointed out that while we think of the spiritual as being mysterious, we tend to think we understand matter. Common sense suggests that the world of matter is more or less straight forward. But in this case common sense misleads us. Matter itself is mysterious. The more we know about general relativity, particle physics, quantum mechanics, the origins of matter in the early universe and the nucleosynthesis of elements in stars, the more counter-intuitive and mysterious matter becomes. And we are far from understanding the

relationship between the ever-changing matter that makes up our bodies and our personal and interpersonal "I". The mysterious nature of matter, as well as all that we mean by spirit, suggests that we might well be open to a future for matter and spirit that exceeds anything we can imagine at present.

Karl Rahner insists that matter really does matter to God. God created a universe of creatures as an act of self-bestowing love, always intending to embrace the material world in the incarnation and to bring it to its fulfilment in Christ. Some Christians have seen the material world as a kind of stage for the drama of salvation, a stage that will have no further use in eternal life. Rahner insists, by contrast, that matter is not something to be cast aside as a transitory part of the journey of the spirit. It has been carried from the beginning by God's self-bestowing love. We know that our universe began from a tiny, dense, and extremely hot state and has been expanding every since, allowing galaxies to form, stars to ignite, and planets like Earth to form. This whole process, and every aspect of it, has been carried by the triune God, present, in love, to ever part of it. Every emergent aspect of the universe is sustained by the Source of All, created in the Word and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Rahner speaks of this self-bestowal in love as "the most immanent element in every creature." Therefore he can say: "It is not mere pious lyricism when Dante regards even the sun and the other planets as being moved by that love which is God himself as he who bestows himself" (Rahner, 1973, 289). In terms of contemporary cosmology, we would say that the innermost principle of the movement of the galaxies and their stars, the innermost principle of the expanding and evolving universe, is God present in self-bestowing love.

Because of God's creation of a material universe in self-giving love, because of the incarnation, and because of the resurrection, God and matter go together. As Creator, God has been intimately engaged with the material universe at every point. God has become flesh, and become matter in the incarnation. In the risen Christ, part of the material universe is already taken into God as pledge and beginning of the fulfilment of material creation in God. By speaking of the deification of the material universe, what is being claimed is that the universe will reach its own proper fulfilment in being taken up in God's self-giving love. This is to be distinguished from the interpersonal fulfilment offered to human beings. It is the fulfilment of matter precisely as matter. While it is distinguished from the deifying interpersonal fulfilment of human beings, it is profoundly interconnected with it.

All of this means that Christians are, or perhaps ought to be, "the most sublime of materialists." We cannot think of our fulfillment without thinking of the fulfilment of the material universe and we cannot conceive of the risen Christ except as existing forever in the state of incarnation. This means that "as materialists we are more crassly materialist than those who call themselves so" (Rahner, 1971, 183). We recognize that matter will last forever, and be glorified forever.

Radical Transformation

Rahner couples his claim that matter has an eternal destiny with the insistence that matter will undergo a radical transformation, "the depths of which we can only sense with fear and trembling in that process which we experience as our death" (Rahner, 1971, 183). If, as Rahner claims, the only way we can get a sense of the radical nature of the final transformation is by analogy with our own deaths, clearly this new creation is not simply an outcome of the ongoing evolution of the universe or of human progress. I find this an important insight. It

can be taken further in relationship to the death of Christ. The real basis for understanding the radical nature of the transformation of the universe is the transformation that occurs in the crucified Jesus, just as the reality of the continuity between Jesus who was crucified and the risen Christ indicates the continuity between this universe and new creation.

New creation transcends and transfigures the old. As Paul Evdokimov points out, that the day of the coming of Christ cannot be numbered with other days; "The hand of God seizes the closed circle of empirical time and lifts it to a higher horizon, a different dimension. This 'day' closes historical time but does not itself belong to time. It cannot be found on our calendars and for this reason we cannot predict it" (Evdokimov, 2001, 25). Time, space and matter will reach their fulfilment and find their future in the boundless life of God. We have no information from the Scriptures or any other source about the nature of this deification of our universe - only the promise given in Christ and his resurrection of a future in God.

Jürgen Moltmann has been strong in his insistence that only a radical act of God can bring healing and redemption to the whole creation. We will not be redeemed by evolutionary processes. Salvation can come only from a universal transformation of this present world, of the kind described in Revelation, where God says: "See, I am making all things new" (21:5). This means, according to Moltmann, that "everything created, everything that was here, is here, and will be here" is to be made new. The new, eternal creation is to be the new creation of this world that we know (Moltmann in Ellis, 2002, 261). Richard Bauckham has also vigorously criticized the importing of Enlightenment optimism and views of historical and evolutionary progress into eschatology (Bauckham, in Bockmuehl, 2001, 271-3). I think that Moltmann and Bauckham are right when they claim that final salvation cannot come from more of the same, but only from a radical act of God that transforms the whole creation from beginning to end by taking it eternally into the divine life of the Trinity.

New creation depends upon a transforming act of God, as radical as the act by which God raised Jesus from dead. I think that this theological insight can shed some light on the problem I have described concerning the difference between biblical hope and the current scientific picture of the future of the universe as expanding endlessly, becoming cold and lifeless. The problem is based in part on an assumption that the universe can be thought of evolving seamlessly towards new creation. If the theological idea of God's final transformation of creation is presumed to *coincide* with the far distant future of the universe, there is obviously a problem reconciling theological eschatology and scientific predictions. But there is no need to make this assumption. Theologically, we have a promise that the universe will be transformed and find its culmination in God. Theology has no information about when or how this will be. The theological claim is not that the universe will evolve into a perfect state at the end and that this will then coincide with the divine act that makes all things new. If God's act is a radical one, if the best analogy for this kind of transformation is what happens in death, above all the death of Christ, then the divine act of making the whole universe new does not depend on the universe gradually evolving towards perfection.

It is fundamental to remember that the resurrection of the crucified was not dependant on any obvious movement towards completion or perfection in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus' mission was interrupted by what seemed totally catastrophic. The resurrection was the transformation of a brutal execution and a disastrous end to Jesus' ministry into unpredictable new life. The resurrection was a radical overturning of the rejection and savage violence and apparent failure of Jesus' mission. Yet, at a deeper level, Christians have come to

see that God's act of raising Jesus up was also in fact in profound *continuity* with Jesus' life lived in love and with his death as the most radical expression of this love.

Real Continuity

While I agreed above with Moltmann and Bauckham about the radical transformation involved in new creation, I want to affirm more strongly than they do the *continuity* between this creation we experience and God's new act. I find this continuity expressed in Rahner's notion of self-transcendence. He holds that God gives to creatures themselves the capacity for the new. Because of God's creative and redeeming presence *to creatures they can become something they were not*. When matter comes to life on Earth, when life becomes self-conscious and personal, this occurs through God enabling creation to transcend itself and become something new. Above all when one of us in the human and creaturely community, Jesus of Nazareth, is so radically open to God, so one with God, that we rightly see him as God-with-us, then we can say that in this person creation transcends itself into God. Jesus then is both God's self-communication to creation and creation's self-transcendence into God.

Rahner argues that something similar happens when the whole creation is finally taken up into God. All that constitutes our cosmic, social and personal history, the emergence of the universe, the evolution of life on Earth and our human history, will be taken up and find fulfilment in the life of God. On the one hand, the coming Reign of God will not simply be the outcome of the evolution of cosmic history and it will not be simply the result of the history that is planned and accomplished by humans. On the other hand, it will not simply come upon creation as an act of God from outside. It will be the deed of God, but this deed of God is to be understood as the *self-transcendence* of history, both cosmic and personal.

In cosmic terms this suggests that the coming of God will fulfil rather than overturn the laws and processes at work in the history of our universe and the evolution of life on Earth. In the last chapter I referred to an important insight from Robert John Russell: He argues that the new creation is not to be seen as replacement of the old, or as a new creation *ex nihilo*. Rather, God must have created the universe "such that is it transformable" (Russell, 2008, 308). God created a universe with precisely those characteristics that are needed as preconditions for God's act of new creation. These conditions and characteristics of the present creation are created in such a way that they can be transformed in new creation. It seems to me that what Russell is describing here is an important part of what Rahner means when he speaks of God's action occurring in and through the self-transcendence of our cosmic and evolutionary history.

This self-transcendence in new creation is also a matter of great importance for our human actions. This theology gives ultimate importance to our actions and acts of love. They will have a place in God's future. Rahner points out that there is a dialectical tension between two statements, both of which are true: On the one hand, human history will endure and, on the other hand, it will be radically transformed. The tension between them is fundamental, because it "maintains in us an openness to the future while still according a radical importance to the present." Our own history and our own acts contribute to God's future. History is not left behind but "passes into the definitive consummation of God" (Rahner, 1973, 270). Our own efforts, our ecological commitments, our struggles for justice, our work for peace, our acts of love, our failures, our own moments of quiet prayer, our sufferings, all have final meaning.

Our history, and our own personal story, matter to God. The Word of God has entered into history for our salvation. History is embraced by God in the Christ-event and human history is taken into God in the resurrection. It has eternal meaning to God. Our stories have final significance, as taken up into God and transformed in Christ. This is what it means for God to transform the world in redeeming, deifying love. This is the ultimate meaning of the divine self-bestowal that finds expression in creation, redemption and final fulfilment.

Hope for the Animals

In chapter 5 of the book of Revelation, the angels, with the four living creatures who represent creation and with the elders, all sing a hymn of praise to the Lamb who has been slain. Then every creature, without exception joins in:

Then I heard every creature in heaven,
and on earth
and under the earth
and in the sea,
and all that is in them, singing,
"To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
Be blessing and honour and glory and might
forever and ever!" (Rev 5:13)

In this vision, every creature in all four realms of sky, ground, underground and sea, unite in a song of praise, celebrating redemption in the Lamb who was slaughtered. The animals, the birds, the insects and the worms and all the other underground creatures are participants in the joy of the new creation.

How are we to understand this text? While the post-biblical tradition has found ways to affirm that new creation in Christ involves hope not only for human beings but for the universe itself, it has not often dealt in an explicit way with hope for other animals. Implicitly, of course, Paul's words about suffering creation can be taken as involving the living, biological world. Can we make a more explicit claim? I propose that we can. As always, such a claim needs to be prefaced by acknowledging how little information we have about the nature of the life of the new creation. We know very little. What we can know is the God revealed to us in Jesus and the promise given to our world in his resurrection. This, I will propose, allows us to say some important things about hope for the other animals: that each is known and loved by God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, redeemed by Christ, abides forever in the living memory of God, and participates in resurrection life in a way beyond imagining.

1. Individual animals are known and loved by God. In the Gospel of Matthew, we find Jesus calling his disciples to radical trust in God's providence, and pointing to God's care for each single sparrow: "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father" (Mt 10:29). The Wisdom of Solomon tells us that God creates each creature out of love. Animals, birds and insects exist because God loves them. They are called forth and held in existence only out of love (Wis 11:24-26). The biblical God is a God of tenderness and compassion for all creatures. I think it is helpful to reflect on our own capacity as human beings to relate to other animals. We have the capacity for feeling with them, of feeling empathy with their pain, and joy in their well-being and vitality. This, surely, can give us a glimpse into the Creator's

feeling for living things. We are right to think that our human experience of compassion for other creatures is but the palest reflection of the divine compassion for animals. The God of Jesus is a God of radical compassion, a compassion that has no boundaries. Such a God can be thought of as knowing each creature's experience, delighting in each, suffering with each and embracing each in love.

2. *The Creator Spirit is interiorly present to each creature enabling it to exist and to act.* It is the presence of God in the Spirit that confers existence on each animal. As Thomas Aquinas says, nothing is more interior to an entity than its existence and this means that God's presence and creative action is what is most interior to all things. In the language of the Bible, the Spirit breathes life into all things of flesh. They have life only because of the Breath of God: "If he should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together, and all mortals return to dust" (Job 34:14-15). Psalm 104, the great celebration of God's creation, sings of the heavens, the earth, the living creatures of the land and sky, and the sea with all its life forms small and great and sees them all as held in being by God's Spirit: "When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground" (Ps 104:27-30). The Spirit is creatively present to every creature, dwelling in each, surrounding it with love, holding it in a community of creation and accompanying it in its life and in its death.

3. *Animals participate in some way in redemption in Christ.* When Revelation envisions all living creatures, "in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea," singing praise to the One sitting on the throne and the Lamb who had been slain, it is clear that all these creatures are thought of as sharing in some way in the redemption brought about by the crucified and risen Christ. When Paul speaks of the groaning of creation, and sees it as awaiting its participation in redemption, it seems that the suffering creation he has in mind includes nonhuman biological life. When Colossians and Ephesians insist that "all things" in the cosmos are recapitulated (Eph 1:10) and reconciled (Col 1:20) in Christ, it would seem that "all things" would include not only the material creation, the cosmic powers and human beings, but also other animals.

While the Christian tradition has not often reflected carefully on the redemption of animals, the Eastern theology of redemption and deification through incarnation is a theology cast in the widest possible terms, those of God and the whole creation. God embraces and takes to God's self the whole creation in the incarnation. In a particular way God embraces flesh, not just human flesh, but all the flesh that is so intimately connected with it. In taking flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, God becomes part of the history of biological evolution of life on Earth, with the whole web of life and all that supports it. This suggests that God's redemptive act in the incarnation may be seen as taking the whole world of flesh into the divine life, in the new creation and the deification of all things in Christ. But the question remains: What does it mean to speak of other animals participating with us in the new creation?

4. *Each animal abides forever in the living memory of God.* In Luke's version of the saying about the sparrow, Jesus states that not one sparrow is "forgotten before God" (Lk 12:6). It is held eternally in the divine memory. This concept of the divine memory provides the basis for an approach to the final redemption of other living creatures. The biblical and liturgical

concept of memory offers an important resource. In the liturgy of the church, we remember the wonderful things God has done in creation and redemption. When we celebrate the Eucharist in memory (*anamnēsis*) of Jesus, we are dealing with a remembrance that not only brings to mind the past, but acts powerfully in the present and anticipates an eschatological future. This experience of living memory may provide a pale analogy for God's redemptive memory. What is being suggested here is that God can be thought of not only as present with each creature in the Spirit, loving it and conferring on it existence and the capacity to act, but also as inscribing it eternally in the living memory and experience of divine trinitarian life. For the bible, while our memory of God is a fundamental requirement, it is God's remembrance that is primary. God remembers God's covenant with us forever (Ps 105:8). Human beings pray that God will hold them in the divine memory (Job 7:7; 10:9; 14:13; Ps 78:39). Humans exist because God remembers them and holds them in provident care (Ps 8:4). Alexander Schmemmann writes of this biblical concept:

Memory refers to the attentiveness of God to his creation, the power of divine providential love through which God "holds" the world and *gives it life*, so that life itself can be termed abiding in the memory of God, and death the falling out of this memory. In other words, memory, like everything else in God, is *real*, it is that life that he grants, that God "*remembers*"; it is the eternal overcoming of the "nothing" out of which God called us into "his wonderful light" (Schmemmann, 1988, 125).

In this view, it is the divine memory that enables creatures to be and to interact. It is powerfully and wonderfully creative. To be held in the divine memory it to be continually created "*ex nihilo*," to be enabled to exist, to find food and water and to reproduce. The divine memory creates. It makes things live. It enables a diverse world of creatures to evolve on our planet. In response to God's creative remembrance, humans are the creatures who are particularly called to remember God. This is the human gift and responsibility: the human person is one who "comprehends the world as God's world, receives it from God and raises it up to God" (Schmemmann, 1988, 125). In response to God who keeps the whole of creation in mind, and brings it to life, the human being is called to remember the Creator and thus enter more fully into the life bestowed on them. The human remembrance of God is "the reception of this life-creating gift, the constant *acquisition* of and increase in life" (126).

Based on the faithful love of God revealed in Christ, it can be said that God will not forget any creature that God loves and creates. Each is inscribed eternally in the divine life. The sparrow that falls to the ground is not abandoned, but is gathered up and brought to redemptive new life in Christ, in whom "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom 8:21). The sparrow that falls to the ground is among the "all things" that are reconciled (Col 1:20), recapitulated (Eph 1:10) and made new (Rev 21:5) in the risen Christ. The shared life of God can be thought of as involving the holding and treasuring of every creature of every time in the living present of the Trinity. In the Communion of Saints, we can be thought of as coming to share the divine delight in each creature. The Communion of Saints would, then, open up as the communion of all creation. The capacity we already have to treasure all that makes up the history of life offers a hint of what might be possible to God. Again, our memory, even our liturgical remembering, can only be a poor analogy for the

divine capacity to hold all things and make them live in the eternal memory of the triune God.

In the incarnational theology being suggested here, each sparrow is known and loved by God, participates in redemption in Christ, and is eternally held and treasured in the life of the Trinity. The creatures that spring from the abundance of divine Communion find redemption in being taken up eternally into this Communion in a way that we cannot fully articulate. John Haught speaks of the whole of creation as being redeemed by being taken up into the enduring divine experience of the world. He says that everything in creation, “all the suffering and tragedy as well as the emergence of new life and intense beauty” is being *saved* by “being taken eternally into God’s feeling for the world” (Haught, 2000, 43). Individual creatures abide permanently within the everlasting compassion of God.

In this proposal, individual creatures are taken up into the living experience of the Trinity, and are celebrated, respected and honoured in the divine Communion and in the Communion of Saints. I have already pointed out that we know very little about the *how* of our risen life in Christ, and we know less about that of other creatures. We hope for what is beyond our capacity to imagine because our hope is in the God who remains always incomprehensible mystery. We hope for what we do not see (Rom 8:24) and cannot imagine, the transformation of the whole creation in Christ. What we know is the promise of God given in the resurrection of the Word made flesh. We can hope that, in our participation in the Communion of Saints, we will also participate in God’s delight in other animals within the abundance of creation that reaches its fulfilment in God. In particular we may hope that the relationship we have with particular creatures, such as a beloved dog, does not end with death, but is taken into eternal life.

5. *There is reason to hope that animals participate in resurrection life in Christ.* I have been proposing that each animal is known and loved by God, is the dwelling place of the Creator Spirit, participates in redemption in Christ, and abides forever in the living memory of God. Can more be said? I think it can. I think it can be said that animals will reach their redemptive fulfilment in Christ. They will not only be remembered and treasured, but remembered in such a way as to be called into new life. We do not have an imaginative picture of the new creation. Any imaginative picture we can form that is based on our present experience will quickly prove inadequate. But this is true, as well, for the resurrection of human beings. We can imagine the resuscitation of a corpse, but we cannot imagine the radical transformation of resurrection. The fact that resurrection life is beyond imagination does not mean that it is not real. Our imaginations are of limited use, and do not function well in dealing with God, who is the absolute future and the power of new life. Of course, they are also inadequate for dealing with quantum physics and with cosmology. What is real can be beyond our imaginations and our concepts.

The basis for hope is not our imagination but the God revealed in Jesus. As I pointed out earlier, we need a negative theology of the future. We need to know what we do not know. What we have is hope based on our experience of God with us in Jesus and in the Spirit. As Elizabeth Johnson has said, our hope is not based upon information about the future but on “the character of God” revealed in the Christ-event (Johnson, 1998, 201). What I am proposing is that we can think that, based on the character of God revealed in the Christ-event, individual animals and birds will participate in some way in risen life. They will find their

fulfilment in God. The God of resurrection life is a God who brings individual creatures in their own distinctiveness *in some way* into the eternal dynamic life of the divine Communion. In Revelation the one sitting on the throne says: “Behold I make all things new” (Rev 21:5). I am proposing that this “all things” includes other animals. It is clear that God will respect the particular nature that is specific to each creature. What is appropriate fulfillment for a human being may not be appropriate to a crab, a mosquito or a bacterium. It is important to remember that great theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure saw the diversity of creatures as expressing the boundless abundance of the divine goodness. There is every reason to hope that the diverse range of creatures that spring from the abundance of this divine Communion will find redemption in being taken up eternally into this divine Communion in ways that are appropriate to each. Because God relates to each creature on its own terms, final fulfillment will fit the nature of each creature. With this in mind, I think it can be said that individual creatures will find their proper redemption in the divine Communion in a way that we cannot fully imagine or articulate.

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