Does God's Creation Hide or Disclose its Creator? A Conversation with Ramon Llull

Sarah Jane Boss

Nature's Sanctity

In the fifth century, the Pagan chronicler Zosimos bemoaned the reign of the Christian emperor Theodosius, protesting, amongst other things, that 'a threat hung over anyone . . . who simply gazed at the sky and worshipped the things that they beheld there'.[1]

A diametric contrast to the attitude of Zosimos was provided in the twentieth century by the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell. He was asked the following question: When you die, if you find yourself face to face with God after all, what will you say to him? To this, Russell replied, 'I shall ask him why he didn't leave more evidence of his existence.'

Between the Pagan, to whom the natural world was self-evidently divine, and the atheist to whom it offered no evidence of divinity whatever, there stand fifteen hundred years of Christianity. To what extent the Christianity of Western Europe has been responsible for the radical desanctification of nature in human practice is a topic that continues to be debated. But the situation that we now find ourselves in seems to be one in which the daily lives of most people, including most Christians, are conducted as though almost nothing is sacred. We live as though God is, as Bertrand Russell will by now have told his creator, more absent than evident in what Christians call the creation. Yet at the same time, there are significant numbers of people who implicitly contest this assumption. And here I am thinking in particular of nature conservationists, whose work is strongly directed to the protection of that which they seem to consider sacred.

Over the past century, the defence of wilderness, of animal and plant species and of wildlife habitats has been conducted under a variety of different defences: the scientific value of particular wildlife sites is one such defence – hence we have Sites of Special Scientific Interest; the aesthetic beauty of particular landscapes is another – giving rise to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty; and the attraction of wildlife and open spaces for tourism or leisure pursuits

[1] Zosimos: *New History* II:2, 33. Zosime: *Histoire Nouvelle* (ed. François Paschoud; Greek text/French trans.) Paris: Société d'Edition "Les Belles Lettres", 1979, p. 297.

© The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2004, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

yet another – and here we have nature reserves and protection from the National Trust, for example. Yet when people keep changing the content of an argument – in this case, between science, beauty, and leisure – whilst the goal of the argument remains essentially the same – that is, the conservation of wild plants and animals – it is likely to be because the protagonists' true concern or their deepest intention is not being expressed in any or all of these arguments. And a good case can be made for saying that the true motive for nature conservation is not science, beauty or tourism, but the belief that what we call 'nature' is holy. Yet, as is indicated by the plethora of other arguments advanced in support of nature conservation, the recognition of this sanctity cannot easily be articulated in the public forum.

Since 1991, a dispute has been underway concerning the future of Roineabhal, a mountain on the Hebridean island of Harris. A roadstone company sought permission to quarry there, and a public enquiry was held in 1994–95 to consider the arguments for and against the application. In 1999, the Inquiry recommended that permission to quarry be granted; but that recommendation was not accepted by the body with the relevant powers, the Scottish Executive, who refused to grant permission, on the grounds that they had a duty to protect an officially designated National Scenic Area. Since then, the roadstone company concerned has been pursuing an appeal against this decision.

At the Inquiry, the arguments against the quarry included evidence from three witnesses who argued for the sacred character of the land itself. Among these was the Edinburgh theologian Donald McLeod, who contended that 'theologically, the primary function of the creation is to serve as a revelation of God', which means that humanity has a responsibility to protect nature.[2] But the arguments concerning the sanctity of the land were skated over in the Inquiry's final report, apparently being considered subordinate to economic and cultural considerations. Kay Milton, an anthropologist commenting upon the Inquiry's findings, observes that, 'even if the decision makers had thought [the sacredness of the land] the most important issue, they could not have said so, because such views have no legitimacy in an arena constrained by the conventions of economic and scientific rationality'.[3]

This paper is concerned with creation as a revelation of God. I want to contend that it is in the nature of all created beings to reveal God to anyone who perceives them in the right way. That is to say, whether or not creation discloses its Creator depends

[2] Kay Milton: *Loving Nature: Towards an Ecology of Emotion*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 143.
[3] Kay Milton: *Loving Nature*, p. 144.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

entirely upon the spiritual condition of the one who is perceiving the creation.

The argument of this paper will draw upon the work of the thirteenth-century Mallorcan theologian Ramon Llull. The advantage of Llull's work is that it is very, very different from anything that is being considered by modern theologians. Because we live in a society in which the possible holiness of a thing is not perceived to be of public importance, a society in which most people live – and are more or less forced to live – as though nothing is sacred, we cannot start to think properly about the question of God's hiddenness or revelation in the creation if we start from the dominant assumptions of the culture that we inhabit. The culture has judged the issue in advance. So it is only if we are willing to take into account world-views that are radically different from the dominant ones of our own age that we can get any reasonable perspective on this question. And it will require a vision as different and as bold as Llull's to give articulation to the concerns of those, such as Donald McLeod, who believe that what we call 'nature' does indeed reveal God.

Ramon Llull

Ramon Llull was born in Mallorca, in the city now known as Palma, in 1232.[4] This was several years after the expulsion of the Moors from the island by armies from Catalonia, and Ramon's father was a Catalan nobleman who had arrived there with the conquerors. Ramon was attached to the court of the King of Mallorca, and in the late 1250s became seneschal to the prince who was later King James II. Ramon was married and had two children, and also had many love affairs. All this changed, however, as a consequence of a sequence of apparitions of Christ hanging on the Cross. The same vision of the Crucifixion kept returning to Ramon on consecutive nights, until he took the image seriously, and realised that God was calling him to leave the world for the service of Christ. Having resolved to do this, Ramon made provision for the support of his wife and children, and set himself to fulfil his service of Christ through the undertaking of three tasks. The first of these tasks was to convert the Saracens to Christianity, even if this entailed his own martyrdom; the second was to write 'a book, the best in the world, against the errors of unbelievers; and the third was to persuade rich and powerful Christians to establish monasteries in which 'the languages of the Saracens and other unbelievers (*infeels*)' would be taught, so there would always be plenty of people properly equipped

[4] A biography and English trans. of the *Vita Coetanea* of Llull is given in Anthony Bonner (ed. and trans.): *Doctor Illuminatus: A Ramon Llull Reader*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 1–44.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

to go out and preach the Catholic faith to the native speakers of those languages. To these ends, Ramon studied 'a little' Latin, and bought himself a Saracen slave, from whom he learnt Arabic – the language of Jews, as well as Muslims, in Catalonia. Ramon wrote copiously in Catalan, Arabic and Latin.

Nine years after he had begun his studies and his book-writing, that is, in about 1274, Ramon went away from his home for a time to contemplate God. He made his retreat on Mount Randa, on the island of Mallorca, and while he was on the mountain, according to his own account, he received a divine illumination, in which he was shown the form and method for writing the book that he wished to write against the errors of the unbelievers. The book that Ramon wrote as a result of these directions was the *Ars generalis*, the General Art, which was the first of several versions of the Art which, together with his other projects, he spent the rest of his life promoting. Ramon travelled frequently, including visiting the pope, going to lecture at the University of Paris, and, at the age of seventy-five, spending six months in a jail in Tunis, where he had been preaching Christianity to Muslims. He wrote a huge number of books, and died in 1316, aged eighty-three or eighty-four.

In almost everything that Ramon wrote, there is a cosmic aspect to his thought. One of his earliest works is the *Book of Contemplation on God*. The word 'contemplation' is one that he uses quite frequently, and apparently without much precision. But it is always connected to the idea of knowing and loving God. Ramon's most recent biographer, Amador Vega, presents 'knowing and loving' as the leitmotif of Ramon's work.[5]

We have seen that Ramon's first memorable experience of conversion focused on the Crucifixion, and in the *Book of Contemplation*, the Crucifixion is associated both with contemplation and with imagery drawn from the cosmos. Addressing God, he writes:

> Just as you have created the sun in the middle of the firmament to lighten and warm the earth, so you have wished to put the holy cross in the earth, to give light to the blind and to warm the heart of Catholics.[6]

According to Ramon, Christ was crucified in the middle of the earth, and the cross is the greatest object of contemplation. In the end, the sole object of contemplation is, in the words of Vega, 'the Son or humbled humanity of God, across the solar star in the centre of the universe'.

The logic of this association between the humanity of God and the cosmos lies in part in Ramon's belief that the human person is a microcosm. The doctrine of the human person as microcosm is

[5] Amador Vega: *Ramon Llull y el Secreto de la Vida*, Madrid: Ediciones Siruela, 2002
[6] Quoted in Vega: *Ramon Llull*, p. 65.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

an ancient one,[7] which remained popular until the seventeenth century.[8] It holds that the cosmos, or the universe, is in some way contained or reflected in miniature in each man or woman. Hildegard of Bingen, for example, writing of the creation of the world, exclaims, 'O man, behold the man! For human beings hold together within themselves heaven and earth and other things created, and are one form; and within them everything is concealed.'[9] Thus, for example, the human being may be understood to consist of both material and spiritual aspects, unlike, say, rocks, which are matter, or angels, who are spirits. The various parts of the human body, and their arrangement, are often seen as analogous to the various parts and specific ordering of the universe. Hildegard writes of the five planets (all the planets that were then known to humanity): 'as a human's five senses hold the body together, so too these five planets hold the sun together and are its ornament'.[10] Conversely, the cosmos is typically understood to be a living organism. So the heart, upon which human life depends, may be seen as the sun of the human body, since the sun gives life to the world, and the sun in turn may be viewed as the heart of the known universe.

Moreover, the correspondence between the human person and the cosmos is one of substance, as well as of likeness. Thus, Hildegard writes,

> In the way that the elements . . . hold the world together so they are also the fastening of the human body. Their perfusion and operating in human beings is apportioned in such a way that they are held together. This is similar to the way the elements perfuse the world and affect it. Fire, air, water, and earth are present in human beings, who consist of them. For they have warmth from fire, breath from air, blood from water, and flesh from earth.[11]

In the understanding of the human person as microcosm, then, it is implicitly assumed that there is a solidarity between humanity and other aspects of the natural world. Humanity, the earth and the stars are bound together by visible and invisible ties. So Ramon Llull, amongst others, could argue that when God united himself to one man, Jesus of Nazareth, he was simultaneously uniting himself to the whole cosmos. Indeed, he could argue that it was precisely in order to

[7] M.R. Wright: *Cosmology in Antiquity*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 56–74.

[8] Amos Funkenstein: *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 28.

[9] Hildegard of Bingen: *On Natural Philosophy and Medicine: Selections from* Cause et Cure (trans. Margaret Berger), Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1999, p. 24 (trans. amended). An overview of Hildegard's understanding of the relationship between the cosmos and microcosm is given in Sabina Flanagan: *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, pp. 141–157.

[10] Hildegard: *Natural Philosophy*, p. 29.

[11] Hildegard: *Natural Philosophy*, p. 36.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

sanctify and glorify the whole universe that God the Creator chose a human being, rather than some other creature, to be the subject of his paradoxical identity with the creation.[12] So the human being has a uniquely important place in this account of the Incarnation, but it is an importance which renders the human condition in some sense subservient to the welfare of creation as a whole, since the unique constitution of the human person as microcosm means that, in addition to the task of allowing God to accomplish our own salvation, men and women also have to assist all other creatures in their attainment of perfection.

Although the earth is a less noble creature than a human being, and may be put to the service of humanity, Ramon says that the earth is shamed, or dishonoured, by the fact that there are human beings on it who do not know their creator.[13] Our duty of stewardship towards the earth is inseparable from our service to our Maker and is intrinsic to our very nature. Furthermore, it is by knowing and loving the creation that we can come to know and love its maker.

Ramon's enthusiasm for the process of coming to know God through knowing the creation is closely tied to his intention of converting unbelievers. When addressing Muslims and Jews, Ramon was dealing with monotheists, who to that extent shared common ground with Christians; but at the same time, they objected strongly to Christianity because of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, which they considered to be incompatible with monotheistic belief. So it was to these doctrines that Ramon devoted the greatest attention. He realised that he could not use arguments that appealed to authoritative texts, such as the Bible or statements of Church councils, since their authoritative status was often not recognised by the other religions, and even where it was, the different religions had their own conventions governing the interpretation of any given text. So Ramon decided instead to base his arguments purely on reason. Harvey Hames, in a study of Llull's relationship with Judaism, writes:

> Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa contra gentiles* based on reason not authority, but he only strove to achieve a position compatible with faith using reason. He did not seek, indeed, he did not think it possible to demonstrate the Christian articles of faith. . . . Llull, however, believed that, in opposition to the scholastics and theologians of Paris, it was possible by 'necessary reasons . . .' to prove conclusively the articles of the Christian faith.[14]

[12] Raymundus Lulius: *Libro de la Concepcion Virginal* (Latin text/Spanish trans. by Alonzo de Zepada), Brussels: Baltasar Vivien, 1664.

[13] Vega: *Ramon Llull*, p. 58.

[14] Harvey Hames: *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, p. 191.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

What Ramon means by 'reason', therefore, is necessarily somewhat different from what the scholastics mean by 'reason'. For whilst the truth about God always ultimately transcends human reason, and whilst God may grant us spiritual perceptions that reason cannot comprehend, Ramon's reasoning is always conducted within an entirely sacred framework. So you could say that faith transcends reason, but reason is not given any measure of corresponding independence or freedom from faith. Reason, in Ramon's writing, is governed more or less explicitly, at every point, by the intention to love and to know God. That consideration is never temporarily bracketed out: it is always in the main text.

Ramon's 'necessary reasons' derive from his conviction that the nature of God – and indeed, God's own presence – can be encountered at every point in the creation; this means that the proper contemplation of creatures leads one to knowledge of God. Creation is, exactly, the revelation of God. If I do not perceive God in creation, then that is a consequence of the Fall, and I should seek God's help in trying to gain a true vision of the world that I inhabit. God is hidden only because I am blindfolded. On Ramon's argument, if Jews or Muslims pay proper attention to God's creation, then they will be brought to see the Trinitarian nature of the God who made it.

Perhaps because the human person is a microcosm, the proper contemplation of the creation – the process of coming to knowledge of God – requires that the contemplator should first live a holy life. Knowledge of God in the world then goes hand in hand with knowledge of God in one's own soul. By this method, one comes to see the unity of all things in God. This shows that, most of the time, we are lost in the multiplicity of things – we are captivated by the variety that exists in creation. And our being caught up in multiplicity means that we have lost sight of the underlying unity, a unity that is established in the being of the one God, who is the true being of all creatures.[15] You do not know the world aright – as Thomas Traherne might say – until you know the unity that is the source, the sustenance, and the final end of every difference.

Not only does the contemplator gain a perception of the unity of things in God but, in the words of Vega, the world itself

> newly appears as a conjunction of parts, none of which is fixed, because its true being is in another, just as that of this other is in the first. The quest of searching for essential being is distinguished throughout by this constant abandoning of what is one's own.[16]

When one perceives the true being of one thing in another, then what one perceives is the created image of the relationships between

[15] Vega: *Ramon Llull*, p. 60.
[16] Amador Vega: *Ramon Llull*, p. 62.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the persons of the Trinity, each of whom has their true being in the other. But the full realisation of the mystery by which one thing exists in another is given in the Incarnation, whereby Creator and creature exist each in the other. These truths – of the ultimate unity of things, and of the true being of one thing in the other – can be seen in creation; and since creation is in the likeness of the Creator, these truths must give us more than an inkling of the nature of God.

The Solidarity of Things with One Another

To understand Ramon's method of argument, it will be helpful at this point to give attention to the work of the French sociologist, David Le Breton. Le Breton works in the sociology of medicine, and argues that many moral dilemmas in modern medicine are generated by our contemporary understanding of the human person, and in particular, medical practitioners' understanding of the relationship of the body to the person. Le Breton contrasts this understanding, with those of earlier centuries and other cultures.

In the year 1543, Andrew Vesalius published his work *De humani corporis fabrica*, 'Concerning the fabric of the human body', a work which, with hindsight, is judged to be of crucial importance in the development of the study of human anatomy. It consists of 700 pages, with 300 engravings showing dissections of the human body. According to Le Breton, Vesalius's work marks a cardinal point in the transformation of European attitudes to the human body and to the world which the body inhabits.[17] Le Breton argues that the body – and especially the human body – as the concept is currently employed, is a concomitant or component part of modern individualism, and did not exist in quite this way in other cultures before they were subject to European influence, or, indeed, in Mediaeval Europe before the rise of individualism in the fifteenth century. The body, as it is now understood, is something possessed by an apparently immaterial subject or actor, the 'I'. Thus, we say, 'I *have* a body.' The body is treated – most notably, in modern medicine – as though it is distinct from the person to whom it belongs; and the body in turn is the principle of separation between one person and another. It is managed in such a way as to maintain boundaries between individuals. For example, modern people are very guarded about whom they touch and who may stand close to them. Le Breton argues that in most other cultures, bodily parts and flesh are perceived as being points of union or continuity with other people and with other aspects of the physical world. In many cultures, it is normal for

[17] David Le Breton: *Anthropologie du Corps et Modernité*, Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1990

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

people conducting a conversation to take hold of one another whilst they are talking.

The notion that human beings are connected to their physical surroundings may be expressed in quite sophisticated terms. We have already seen the European example of the microcosm, and Le Breton cites examples from African cultures also.[18] In this kind of view of the human person, physical and spiritual elements are always integrated, and in some cases are inseparable or even indistinguishable.

The Hebrew Scriptures teach that Adam is made from the soil of the Earth. This is, amongst other things, an assertion of humanity's solidarity and continuity with the rest of the physical world. We are of the same stuff as this earth and all that grows on it. So our materiality is what joins us to other beings, not what separates us.

A more secular example of the way in which people have understood themselves to be in continuity with the world around them may be found in folk stories which tell of humans being turned to stone, or into animals and fairy-folk. These indicate an understanding of the human person whereby the boundaries between the human and the non-human are perceived to be weak or permeable. The base matter which once constituted a prince may equally well constitute a frog: it is the form that is inconstant, not the substance. Indeed, material substance is precisely what princes and frogs have in common with one another.[19]

At the same time as the human person is seen to be in continuity with the rest of the cosmos, moreover, there is a shared identity between the human person and the person's flesh. Le Breton contends that the identity of the flesh with the person is seen in the cults of saints. Marks found on a saint's bodily organs may be taken to reveal his or her sanctity of soul. Likewise, touching the relics of a holy man or woman places one in the very presence of the saint. A relic is not just a memento or keepsake. It is not even that the part merely stands for the whole: the part actually incarnates the whole.

Thus, in this worldview and its accompanying practices, body and soul are one person; furthermore, that one person shares a solidarity of substance or of likeness with the rest of creation; and all these things are sanctified by their Creator and Redeemer.

Under these circumstances, then, it is not surprising that for hundreds of years the Catholic Church tried to forbid the anatomical dissection of human bodies, or permitted it only under the strictest ecclesiastical supervision. That supervision would include the saying of prayers for the repose of the soul of the person being dissected, and the

[18] Le Breton: *Anthropologie du Corps*, pp. 22–28.

[19] For a detailed and intelligent discussion of European tales of metamorphosis, see Caroline Walker-Bynum: *Metamorphosis and Identity*, New York: Zone Books, 2001.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

reassembly of the person's bodily parts for a funeral Mass and burial. The anatomist and his assistant had to be present at the requiem Mass. The Church's strictures were an attempt to respect the integrity of body and soul, the sanctity of the human person, and the place of the human person within the created order. The human person is destined for resurrection and immortality, not for the cold steel of the anatomist's knife. And, we might note, the non-scientific dissection of the saint is in some way the exception that proves the rule.

The older conventions eventually came to be disrupted and undermined with those social changes that led some people to start thinking of themselves as 'individuals', that is, individuated beings cut off from the society which they inhabited, from the natural world, and even from their own bodies. And this is a development which Le Breton associates also with the split between 'learned' culture, which fostered individualism, and 'popular' culture, which in some cases still retains a more ancient understanding of the human person and their place in the cosmos.

What the learned Vesalius did was, in effect, to take the human body out of the social and natural environment in which it had lived, as though it were unconnected to the earth or to other human beings, placing it on a profane dissection table, and then to handle it as dead matter unconnected to a human soul. And is this not what modern people frequently mean when we use the word 'body': a collection of organs co-ordinated with one another by mechanical and chemical processes? It is bereft of social, ecological or sacred significance.

In the light of this discussion, let us ask a question that has been puzzled over for many centuries: is the Holy Grail a primary relic or a secondary one? There is some ambiguity as to the vessel's precise identity. It may be that which Christ used at the Last Supper, when he instituted the sacrament of the eucharist; or it may be the goblet in which Christ's blood was collected after he was pierced through the side as he hung on the Cross. Either way, the Grail is the vessel which carried the blood of the Lord. According to the normal rules, this would seem to indicate that it is a secondary relic. That is to say, it is not itself a *part* of the holy person – in this case Christ – which it would have to be to count as a primary relic, but only something that has had close contact with him. So why is there any unclarity about the Grail's status? Well, to answer that we can turn to the twelfth-century romance *The Quest of the Holy Grail*,[20] in which the knights of King Arthur go in search of the Grail. Commentators on *The Quest* have noted that in the narrative, the act of coming into the presence of the Grail is treated as though it is the same thing as coming into the presence of Christ himself. To be allowed to see the

[20] *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (trans. P.M. Matarasso), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Grail is to be allowed to enter the presence of the Lord.[21] This is surely because the Lord's previous presence in the Grail has imparted to it something of himself. So from this point of view, the vessel's physical boundary no longer counts because its sacred occupant has, simply by being there, infused it with his continuing presence.

Now, when we think about beings participating in one another, or sharing an identity, there is a philosophical difference between asserting that such participation occurs amongst created beings – such as humanity and the cosmos – and asserting that such participation occurs between God and a creature – such as Christ and the Grail. If we can assert that distinct creatures, including human beings, can share an identity, then this does imply that the modern concept of the individual is mistaken. In the case of God, however, who has no limitations or boundaries of any kind, there is no logical objection to believing both that human beings, or chalices, are primarily discrete individuals, and that God may participate in, and sanctify, them in an extraordinary manner. However, Le Breton makes a comment that is extremely pertinent to this point. He observes that in the creation of the modern Western understanding,

> the individual marks himself off from those who are like him. Simultaneously, the withdrawal, then the abandonment of the theological vision of nature leads the individual to think of the world which surrounds him as a pure, indifferent form: an ontologically empty form which only the human craftsman now has the authority to fashion. . . . The individuation of humanity goes hand in hand with the desacralisation of nature.[22]

It is as though our ability to sense the sacred – our ability to sense God's presence in things – goes hand in hand with our having a more general awareness of the participation of beings in one another by identity. If we cannot perceive some fundamental continuity within the material order, then we cannot perceive the unity of spirit and matter, and neither can we perceive the unity of God with God's creatures. We either treat the world as essentially made up of component parts, or else we treat it as essentially consisting of common properties; and if we do the former, then we shall have great difficulty in understanding how God can be bound in to the creation.

Ramon Llull provides us with a theological account of why this should be the case. The unity of things and their mutual participation in one another are aspects of their being made in the image of God, who is both one and triune. So by reflecting upon this commonality of being in creation, we come to see something of the nature of the

[21] Anne Marie D'Arcy: *Wisdom and the Grail: The Image of the Vessel in the "Queste Del Saint Graal" and Malory's "Tale of Sankgreal"*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000, pp. 80–81, n.36.

[22] Le Breton: *Anthropologie du Corps*, p. 46.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Creator. Conversely, if we ignore or deny this aspect of the creation, then we have no means of approaching the God who made it.

Moreover, the doctrines of the Trinity and salvation through the Incarnation seem to be premissed upon some notion of the mutual participation or solidarity of things.

Cyril of Alexandria (d.444), one of the greatest exponents of the theology of the Incarnation, teaches that the Word of God was conceived in Mary's womb in order to consecrate the human race from our very beginnings – that because God himself has been conceived in a woman's body, all human conception may now be sanctified.[23] And because the immortal God united himself to human flesh even in death, he accomplished 'the incorruptibility and imperishability of the flesh..., first of all in his own body', as we see in his resurrection from the dead, but also for the whole human race. For by uniting himself to human death in Christ, God who is immortal overcame death itself and thus enabled all flesh to be 'set...beyond death and corruption'.[24] 'In short, he took what was ours to be his very own so that we might have all that was his.'[25] So when the Word of God became incarnate in the Virgin Mary, he united himself not simply to the one man Jesus of Nazareth, who is uniquely both God and human, but, by extension, to the whole human race, and even to the rest of creation, and thereby redeemed it. Indeed, this teaching is integral to the Christology and soteriology of the early Christian teachers. In the fourth century, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, 'That which has not been assumed cannot be restored; it is what is united with God that is saved.'[26] If God did not really take upon himself the human condition in Christ's saving work, then that work has not really saved humanity.

For modern people, there may appear to be a metaphysical problem here. For, as I have already observed, we tend to think of human beings primarily as 'individuals', that is, as essentially separate from one another; which means that it is not clear how God's union with any one human being extends to incorporate others. Why should God's taking flesh of Mary and becoming human in Jesus of Nazareth necessarily entail some sort of union with other men and women? The early Christian writers do not explain how this occurs; and the reason why they do not explain it is that they start off with a different anthropology from ours. They simply take it for granted that there is a solidarity amongst humanity. If there is not, take note,

[23] 'Third Letter of Cyril to Nestorius', from the documents of the Council of Ephesus (431), in Norman P. Tanner SJ (ed.): *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London: Sheed & Ward, and Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1990, vol. 1, p. 58.

[24] St. Cyril of Alexandria: *On the Unity of Christ* (trans. John Anthony McGuckin), Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995, p. 57.

[25] St. Cyril: *Unity*, p. 59.

[26] J.N.D. Kelly: *Early Christian Doctrines*, London: A. & C. Black, 1977, p. 297.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

then the Incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus makes no difference to the rest of us. This solidarity is extended also to other creatures, as we have seen in the example of the microcosm. The full doctrine of the Incarnation, then, actually requires us not to see the world as composed of individuated beings, but to see the beings in the world as existing in some sort of ontological solidarity with one another.

With regard to the Trinity: although the doctrine does not logically presuppose this participative view of the created world, it is hard to imagine what sort of thing the doctrine is saying if we do not hold such a view.

Supposing the relics of a saint have been distributed amongst three different churches around Europe. A traditional believer will hold that the saint is wholly present in all these places: in her hand bones, which are in the care of the first church, in Bologna; in her skull, which is carefully preserved in the second church, in Cologne; and in the rest of her mortal remains, which are in the care of the third church, in Bourges. Now, if I believe the saint to be present in all three of the places in which her relics are kept, then although I have not got an exact analogy for the Blessed Trinity, I can at least start to imagine what sort of thing the doctrine is saying.

If I also do Ramon's exercise in contemplation, and I perceive that the true being of each thing is in another, then I am set firmly on the path towards some understanding of God's trinitarian nature.

If, on the other hand, I think the world is composed of individuals, then I have not got a starting point at which to begin to consider this mystery.

God in Nature

To return, then, to the logic of Ramon Llull's argument: We should note a principle that Ramon enunciates in a disputation he had with Muslim scholars. Ramon says, 'most praiseworthy is that faith in God which places the greatest concordance or agreement between God, who is the highest and first cause, and His effect'.[27] This gives a clear rationale for Ramon's conviction that the creation must exhibit characteristics of the Creator. But this whole line of argument is probably premissed upon a widely held belief that all things are in some way in solidarity with one another. Since all creatures come from God, they must have something in common with God; but that 'something' cannot be a common *substance*, since the creation is, as Ramon insists, made out of nothing (*ex nihilo*/*de no res*). The commonality between creation and God must therefore be one of

[27] *Vita Coetanea* 26, in Bonner: *Doctor Illuminatus*, p. 28.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

likeness. There remain between the two the differences between time and eternity, space and infinity, and others that we have not even imagined, but these do not undermine the principle of concordance.

Ramon argues for a particular mechanism, or mystery, by which God creates the world and is present in it. I have already referred to the Lullian Art, which he reworked over the years in a number of different forms. The Art is a highly involved system of what might best be termed 'meditation exercises', whereby it is supposed to be possible to permutate the symbols of every quality or attribute in the world in such a way as to find the true answer to any question. It was this system that was given to Ramon in the revelation on Mount Randa. The Art focuses fundamentally upon what are called the Dignities of God (*Dignitates Dei*). The eminent Llull scholar, Anthony Bonner, wrote:

> No Muslim or Jew . . . could disagree that God is one, that He is the first cause of all things, that He is good, great, eternal, and so forth. It was these latter divine attributes that Llull made into one of the cornerstones of his system. He called them properties, virtues, reasons, perfections, or, most often, dignities.[28]

In the *Ars brevis*, the short form of the art, the list of dignities is given as: goodness, greatness, eternity, power, wisdom, will, virtue, truth and glory.[29]

One of the greatest students of Ramon's work, a century and a half later, was Nicholas of Cusa. Nicholas says, 'The first foundation of the Art is that everything God created and made, He created and made in the likeness of His dignities.' In the *Tractate on Astronomy* (which is what we would call 'astrology'), Ramon says that the dignities are impressed upon creatures as a seal makes its impression upon wax.[30] The seal is not itself changed, but the wax is moulded into its likeness. All corporeal beings are made up of the four elements – fire, air, water and earth – and these are each made in the likeness of God's Dignities. But – if I have understood this correctly – the Dignities are then impressed upon every subsequent stage of formation as well.

In late Mediaeval fashion, one of Ramon's favourite images is that of the ladder, or stairway. The ladder that he refers to most frequently is the *scala naturae*, which is literally the 'ladder of nature', but is usually rendered in English by the coy translation, the 'ladder of being'. This has God as its topmost rung, with the lowest levels of

[28] Bonner: *Doctor Illuminatus*, p. 50.

[29] *Ars Brevis*, Part I, Table 3, in Bonner: *Doctor Illuminatus*, pp. 289–364, at p. 299.

[30] Ramon Llull: *Tractat d'Astronomia*, Nova Edició de les Obres de Ramon Llull, Volum V (ed. Lola Badia), Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2002, pp. 185–186. A discussion of this work can be found in Frances A. Yates: 'The Art of Ramon Lull: An Approach to it through Lull's Theory of the Elements', in *Lull and Bruno: Collected Essays* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, pp. 9–77.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

creation, such as the elemental, at the bottom, and other creatures distributed at the intervening stages. Another, similar, ladder that Ramon discusses is the ladder of understanding. This has eight grades on it. In ascending order, they are: rock/stone, fire, plant, animal, humanity, heaven, angel, and God. The human intellect should move up and down this ladder, amongst the different stages, and at every stage perceive the likeness of the Dignities of God.

Now, you may be tempted to say, 'Surely God should not be included in the ladder at all?' Everything else on the scale is a creature, but God is the Creator, and therefore of a completely different order of being. This, I suspect, is why the Latin *scala naturae* has been rendered in English 'ladder of being', rather than 'ladder of nature'. The inclusion of God under the heading 'nature' seems to be a mistake. Yet Llull was not the first author to do this.

Some scholars have argued that Llull's thought was influenced by that of John Scotus Erigena, the great Irish theologian of the ninth century.[31] Erigena's remarkable work, *On the Division of Nature*, discusses the character of the created world and its relationship to God. John begins by saying that *Nature* is the general term for all things that exist, and he sees nature as divided into four basic species, according to four differences. The differences are between that which is 'creating and not created', that which is 'created and creating', that which is 'created and not creating', and that which is 'neither creating nor created'. The first category, that which is '*creating and not created*', refers to God, the source of all things. The second category, that which is *created and creating*, consists of what John calls the 'Primordial Causes'. These are 'creations' directly from God, by which the world is made and sustained, and which subsist in Christ. Llull's Dignities seem to be very like Erigena's Primordial Causes. The third category, that which is *created and not creating*, corresponds to what Christians would ordinarily call the creation, or the universe, both material and spiritual. The fourth category, that which is *neither creating nor created*, is God's own self as the end to which all things tend and in whom they have their fulfilment. The first and fourth of John's categories of Nature thus refer to God, the origin and end of the universe. So God is included within the general term 'Nature'.[32] John explains this surprising move by making it plain that the inclusion of God under the heading of Nature does not mean that God is included within creation. On the contrary, God is, as John's

[31] Most notably, Frances Yates, 'Ramon Lull and John Scotus Erigena', in *Lull and Bruno*, pp. 78–125.

[32] Iohannis Scottus Eriugena: *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)* I, ed. I.P. Sheldon-Williams. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968, pp. 36–39.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

four differences spell out, uncreated. However, God is placed within the analytical category of Nature because,

> he is the Beginning of all things and is inseparable from every universe that he has created and (is that) without which it cannot subsist. For in him are all things immutably and essentially; and he is the Division [the beginning] and Collection [the end] of the universal creature, and Genus and Species and Whole and Part although he is neither genus nor species nor whole nor part of anything, but all these are from him and in him and to him.[33]

This implies that if we consider any aspect of 'nature' without constantly taking account of its place in relation to the God who is its origin, its destiny and its entire sustenance, then we simply fail to understand nature's true character.

Ramon places God at the top of his ladder, and not outside it, because, if we do not include God on the scale of nature, then we are in danger of forgetting that it is in God that all things have their beginning and their end and that there is nowhere where God is not. Indeed, the exclusion of God from humanity's consideration of the natural world may be one of the very things that has led us to abuse and destroy it.

Nature's wildness, its transcendent power, derives quite precisely from its origin and subsistence in God, who is indeed beyond any human power – who is entirely wild in the sense of being completely uncontrollable by human agency. This is surely one of the respects in which Nature is a revelation of God.

In any moment at which we look at a creature and fail to see the likeness of God, we are failing to see that creature as it truly is, and at the same time are failing to see the God who made it. As Nicholas of Cusa teaches, 'God is not creation; but in creation, God is not other than creation.'[34]

[33] Eriugena: *Periphyseon*, III (1981), pp. 30–33.

[34] Nicholas of Cusa: *On God as Not-Other: A translation and an Appraisal of* De li Non Aliud (Latin text, with English trans. and notes by Jasper Hopkins), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979, p. 1118: 'I might say that God is none of the visible things, since He is their cause and creator. And I might say that in the sky He is not other than the sky.'

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00006.x Published online by Cambridge University Press