INTRODUCTION

'My kingdom is not of this world.'[1] Christ's response to Pilate has resounded through almost two millennia of Christian history, challenging theologians and preachers to identify the relationship between the material and the spiritual and to locate the boundary between the natural and the supernatural. As Robert Bartlett has recently demonstrated, the concept of the supernatural only really began to be developed in the high Middle Ages following Peter Lombard's glossing of the creation story and his distinction between seminal causes, which belong to nature, and those causes which are reserved to God alone, beyond nature rather than supernatural in his formulation.[2] This distinction was to have a profound effect on Scholastic thought in the following centuries, but for ordinary Christians the challenge was, and remains, that of discerning the meaning and purposes of their actions while on earth in the context of that heavenly destiny to which they believe themselves and all humanity to be called. Of course, the distinction between this world and the heavenly kingdom has never been as sharp as the words of Christ quoted above seemed to imply, but the contrasts remained profound. The most famous expression of the contrast between earthly and heavenly values is to be found in the words of the Sermon on the Mount, in which the normal structures of power were inverted: 'the meek shall inherit the earth' served to remind both the powerful and the powerless of the transitoriness of earthly fortune.[3] More recently, as technological progress has fostered higher standards of material prosperity in the developed world and enabled greater population growth in less developed countries, the relationship between the natural and the divine, the material and the spiritual, has been reconfigured.

[1] John 18: 36.

[2] Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2008), 6–7.

[3] Matt. 5: 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0424208400000449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

For many Christians the distinction has become irrelevant, and the care and conservation of the planet and its resources, both animate and inanimate, have become central to their understanding of their spiritual obligation. This draws on a long tradition of stewardship in Christian thinking, going back to the parables of Jesus; but it is also informed by non-Christian traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism, in which humanity and other living organisms are mutually interdependent, so that the natural world is to be preserved and protected in its own right, as well as by the ethical and political stance of secular pressure groups such as Greenpeace, which embrace both believers and non-believers in responding to issues related to global conservation. The essays in this volume attempt to place these current ecological concerns of Christians in historical perspective. In so doing they contribute both to historical scholarship and to the current debate on global issues.

They do this in a number of ways: by examining the varying understanding of creation itself which Christian thinkers and groups developed; by looking at the ways in which Christians sought to influence the divine plan through their own actions, whether by communal ritualistic practice or through individual supplication; by examining attempts to discern through natural events and surviving phenomena traces of the divine in the world; by interrogating the relationship between knowledge of this world, science and theological understanding; by recalling those attempts to create ideal societies here on earth, whether monastic, and thereby essentially withdrawn from society as exempla of the divine plan, or utopian and committed to setting out a model for living in this world for others to follow; and finally by recalling the importance of the theme of stewardship rather than ownership, use rather than possession, which runs through Christian history. These lines of inquiry are not independent of each other, and in many essays we can see two or more of these questions arising, but they do help us to organize our thoughts. The creation story itself provides us with the greatest and most fundamental of contradictions: what were we to make of this divine gift marred by human sinfulness? Which left the greater mark on the world? Did we live in a bountiful universe which God left us to improve and develop, as many of the Christian liturgical readings of whatever church or denomination reminded those who attended the weekly services, or was it, in the words of that famous

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0424208400000449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

medieval prayer to the Virgin, the *Salve Regina*, a 'vale of tears' in which humanity as 'poor banished children of Eve' were destined to 'mourn and weep'?[4]

Clearly the orthodox had alternative – and potentially conflicting – views of creation available to them in their liturgies and theologies, and Foot's evocation of the prayers and poems of holy men and women of the early Middle Ages amply demonstrates the ambivalence felt by Christians when they surveyed the world around them, with God as not only the 'author of all marvels' but also 'the terrible one' who could wreak vengeance on his sinful people by letting hail fall 'in malice against men'. In such uncertainty, what secured the world for God was sanctity, a status which individuals could achieve through obedience to God's purposes and which was recognized by the Church as witnessing to the divine in nature and to God's purposes for the world. As Gusakova's study of Anglo-Saxon hagiographies demonstrates, through their example and intercession individual saints helped to restore order to nature and overcome sin. In some cases this not only involved restoring nature but taming it, a fact which helps to explain the somewhat unexpected emphasis on hawking, a popular knightly pastime, in the miracle stories of Thomas Becket discussed by Oppitz-Trotman.

Not everyone could achieve sanctity, and for ordinary Christians the liturgy and public formularies were an important aid to the overcoming of sin, especially when the natural world appeared threatening. Two early modern cases are discussed here: on sea voyages in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries both English Protestant and Breton Catholic seafarers invoked the Almighty to assist them in their perilous labours, and in the labours of childbirth Italian women of the sixteenth century had a trust in the biblical plant, the Rose of Jericho (Ecclesiasticus 24: 13–14), as a birthing aid. Despite opposition from clerical and medical authority, faith in the efficacy of the rose could be found surviving in parts of Italy into the 1970s. Survival in this case can be attributed to unofficial folkloric belief, but in Protestant Britain commemoration of, and thanksgiving for, divine favour continued to have official support

[4] The *Salve Regina* quickly became one of the most popular intercessions to the Virgin, and was later incorporated into the Tridentine service of Benediction.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0424208400000449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

into the later twentieth century. Special occasions of public fasting and thanksgiving for divine assistance in facing both natural and man-made disasters were called for and endorsed by ecclesiastical and secular authority and remained a feature of public life in Britain until after the Second World War. But it was not always danger or disaster which produced liturgical forms. Rowe's account of the medieval blessings of trees in order to make them fruitful produced liturgical forms in which the prayers alluded directly to the Genesis story in their concern to 'cast out the ancient enemy and the snares of the first sin', thereby linking the abundance of nature with Christ's redemptive sacrifice. If it was orthodox to see the fruits of nature as part of God's bounty, it took heretics to develop the bleakest view of creation, such that even some of their supporters rejected it or were uncomfortable with it. This was especially true of those thirteenth-century Cathars discussed by Biller. They denied that any growth or fertility in the natural world was attributable to divine action, asserting that all could be explained in materialist terms and needed no Creator to initiate those seminal causes identified by Lombard. The world in which these Cathars lived, or at least its natural features, was not God-given.

This was, of course, an extreme view, and Christians continued, and in some cases continue, to seek for evidence of divine traces in this world, or to ask God and the heavenly hosts to intercede in daily life. Traces of the divine presence on earth are not confined to Christian traditions, but within Christianity they are found everywhere. Some, of course, were seen as sources of divine power of universal importance; such was the cave at Subiaco where Benedict of Nursia lived prior to his calling together the community which became the foundation of western monasticism. As Bolton shows, six centuries later Pope Innocent III sought to exploit this site to bring together eastern and western Christianity and to link them to the Jewish Scriptures by reference to Elijah's cave. Jerusalem and the Holy Land were even more important as sites of universal divine power, but as Kostick demonstrates, these were, and remain, heavily contested sites which could, and still can, appeal to the darker side of Christian devotion, the contested claims to the city making Jerusalem the site of some of the bleaker episodes in relations between Christians and members of the other Abrahamic

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faiths. Elsewhere the divine significance of particular places was more local in character.

As is well known, Irish Catholics populated their local landscapes with topographical references to local saints and sites of miraculous occurrences, thus linking, as Gillespie says, their local and particular environment to a wider cosmic order embracing both heaven and earth. And this use of the natural world was also deployed in the missionary environment, as Ditchfield points out in his study of the Jesuits in the Americas, where traditional stories and local flora and fauna were employed to link the lives of native peoples to the Christian cosmic order, most notably through the use of the 'passion flower' used by missionaries in Latin America to explain the Crucifixion and the redemption which it secured, much as St Patrick was said to have used the shamrock to introduce the native Irish to the mystery of the Trinity. Such 'devotional landscapes' or natural signs of heavenly grace were less obviously attractive to Protestant reformers but, as Walsham shows, the pre-Reformation tradition of the sacred footprint survived the Protestant Reformation in England, despite the best efforts of many preachers to eradicate such traces of idolatry. In the religiously contested region of early modern Lancashire, both Protestants and Catholics published competing versions of a strange indentation in the wall of Brindle parish church for their own polemical purposes. Later on, during the revival associated with the early Methodists, such phenomena, in which preachers and others appeared to have left physical imprints on the landscape or buildings where they had been forced to minister to their flocks, became part of the stories surrounding John Wesley and other Methodist preachers.

Divine traces in the landscape may have been problematic to Protestants, but from the start both Calvinists and Lutherans emphasized the importance of the natural world in revealing the glory of God, although, for Calvinists especially, it remained very much secondary to the Word of God in Scripture. The papers of Willis on Elizabethan England and Spicer on seventeenth-century Scotland reveal the tensions inherent in this juxtaposition of the 'book of nature' and the Word of God. In Elizabethan England music, and especially harmony, was generally recognized as tangible proof of the divine in nature, but the power of such 'music of the spheres' was problematic, for it could be seductive as well as instructive, and had to be firmly subordinated to Scripture

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if it was to direct its hearers to divine truth. As well as revealing the divine in the world, nature was part of God's plan for humanity, and the resources of the earth were, for Calvinists especially, a God-given gift over which humanity had dominion, a circumstance which carried with it, as Spicer recalls, the responsibility to develop and improve its abundance. In the religiously contested and economically expanding context of South Lanarkshire in the 1690s, the use of open spaces for worship by the miners caused problems for a Kirk which, whilst wanting to deny the 'holiness' of any one particular place for worship, deeming it a remnant of popish superstition, feared the growth of that same superstition from unregulated worship in the landscape.

Leadhills represented peculiar circumstances; more generally the 'book of nature', which was to be read alongside Scripture, had a long and honourable place in both Catholic and Protestant traditions as an aid to understanding the divine will, encapsulated well in William Blake's frequently quoted couplet: 'to see a world in a grain of sand / and a heaven in a wild flower'.[5] Mention of Blake leads naturally to the Romantic poets, whose positive responses to nature had a major influence on all Christian denominations.[6] Thus, within the British experience, we can see both the grandeur of the natural world in the mountains of the Alps as central to the devotional writing of the later nineteenth-century Evangelical, Frances Ridley Havergal (with the snow on the Jungfrau recalling the psalmist's prayer to be 'washed whiter than snow') and also the miniaturist beauty of flowers being deployed as spiritual comfort and as a means of bringing the gospel to the sick and hospitalized through the evangelical Bible Flower Mission, which distributed bouquets and small garlands throughout the cities of Britain. This evangelical engagement with nature and the natural world carried on into the mid-twentieth century in the work of the Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield. Formed in the Methodist tradition, even after he had left it theologically Butterfield remained

[5] W. Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence' I, stanza 1, in *William Blake, the Complete Poems*, ed. W. H. Stevenson, 2nd edn (London, 1989), 589.

[6] See, for example, D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), 80–81; for Coleridge, see Peter J. Kitson, 'Coleridge's *Lectures, 1795; On Politics and Religion*' and Pamela Edwards, 'Coleridge on Politics and Religion', both in F. Burwick, ed., *The Oxford Handbook to Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford, 2009), 127–43, 235–54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0424208400000449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

absorbed by what he thought of as the God-given beauty of the natural world, and Bentley's analysis of his unpublished notebooks reveal a man caught in the tension between the legitimate scientific analysis of the universe as an object of empirical study and the wonder of the world he beheld; 'I stood still and held my breath as I watched the moon not far above the willows ... I tried to see it as something still, something which stood steadfast while time speeds ahead'. Similar wonder at both the great vistas of open countryside and the contemplation of the intricate structure of small plants and organisms had been expressed by a Victorian clergyman, John Christopher Atkinson, half a century earlier. Each provided him with spiritual sustenance and an understanding of God's purposes, and in considering the structure of plants he was also led to contemplate the relationship between scientific knowledge and theological understanding.

Atkinson had, of course, read Darwin, and the great debate which publication of the *Origin of Species* reopened about the relationship between scientific knowledge and theological understanding is necessarily one of the major themes of the volume. But the relationship between scientific knowledge, or reason, and theology has a history as long as the Christian tradition. As Rosenberg's paper demonstrates, Augustine's later work on the creation story, produced a conception of the world which was contingent, rational and capable of being understood; a product of the Creator and maintained by his providence, it was nevertheless wholly distinct from its Creator and knowable to human reason. This represents a shift from Augustine's earlier view of the catastrophic nature of the Fall, and was to be influential in the development of early modern scientific thought, influencing Galileo among others. Early modern scholars, both Catholic and Protestant, sought rational proofs or demonstrations of the existence of God. On the eve of the Galilean revolution the Hungarian Cardinal Pázmány produced an account of a geocentric universe ordered for the benefit of mankind in his *Kalauz*, a volume based essentially on patristic sources and sharing many concerns – but also some significant differences – with Calvin's account of nature. Each thought that the world existed essentially for the benefit of humankind, but agreed that such authority over nature brought with it responsibilities, though it is to be questioned whether Calvin would have followed Pázmány's description (following

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Macrobius) of the world as God's temple, in which humanity should live like priests in a church. Over a century after Pázmány published his study, Thomas Newton, later Bishop of Bristol, declared at the outset of his Boyle Lectures in 1756: '[T]here is nothing inconsistent in science and religion'. The Boyle Lectures, founded by the celebrated scientist and studied here by Ingram, were delivered annually from 1692 with the aim of proving the truth of the Christian religion against notorious infidels. In the early years this was usually done by the application of Newtonian principles (Isaac's) and some formulation of the argument from design, as the quotation from Thomas Newton suggests, but, as Ingram's article indicates, from the 1750s there was something of a retreat from dependence on this argument from deductive reason to a historically based analysis in which nature and natural events were viewed as examples of God's care for his world, especially in the context of miracles and prophecy. In this analysis God continually accommodated providence to humanity's historical condition, and in this way the mysterious became knowable.

In the early nineteenth century new parts of the globe also became knowable to the Christian old world and were settled by its peoples. The landscape of the Australian colonies provided challenges from the local fossil record for those clergyman-geologists who moved from Europe to work there. Gladwin's paper examines two key figures here, demonstrating the tight bond which existed between Evangelicalism and science, though that bond was at that time usually deployed to harmonize science and religion in support of Mosaic cosmogony. Publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* challenged that harmonious relationship. The famous confrontation between Samuel Wilberforce and Thomas Huxley has produced a caricature of the conflict between science and religion which has come down to the present in the recent works of Richard Dawkins and others[7] but, as some essays here suggest, the picture was more complex than that. If for Wilberforce nature was 'a parable of grace, and grace an interpreter of nature', this

[7] See, for example, Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London, 2006) and the debate which it has generated, both in the press and academic circles; for a theologian's response to Dawkins, see especially Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God* (London, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0424208400000449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was a view shared by many clerics, Atkinson included, whose views tended to the Darwinian without removing a Creator from the account. And Darwin's own relationship with the Church remained pluralistic; although publicly not attending its services, he continued, as White shows, to support the work of the Established Church in his home parish and was active in its pastoral work, at least for as long as it served the whole community. From the 1870s however the contributions of the Darwin family to the parish church dropped off and from 1880 Charles was actively supporting the work of a young Brethren evangelist by renting to him what later became known as the Gospel Room, which remained a home of nonconformist worship for more than half a century. What attracted Darwin to this young preacher was his pastoral work in improving the behaviour of the locality, especially in respect of drunkenness, and it is to this pastoral mission that we now turn.

From the time of Paul, Christians have sought to organize their worldly existence in line with the divine plan, and this has sometimes led them to build communities founded on their understanding of specific biblical precepts. The social dimension of the gospel had, of course, always been part of Christian living and it has its contemporary expression in the huge variety of Christian aid and welfare agencies, both local and global, which are prompted by a desire, if not to bring about the kingdom of God on earth, at least to alleviate the injustices and inequities which are the consequences of fallible and corrupt human agency. As we can see from White's article and that by Sheils, from the mid-nineteenth century the work of the Church in assisting social and civil improvement became increasingly valued by clergy and non-believers alike, but it is to specific experiments in creating Christian societies separated from a fallen world that Clark draws our attention. The impetus to share a common life originated in the apostolic Church, was given formal structure within monasticism during the Middle Ages, and has been carried through to the modern world in a variety of utopian experiments in which edification, in both its material and spiritual senses, provided the foundations on which these communities thrived, or failed to do so. Recent work on these communitarian experiments has shifted the focus from their charismatic leadership to the experience of the members, demonstrating, as Clark

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shows, that although they were premised on what were to their founders the immutable precepts of Scripture, it was adaptability rather than stasis which became the hallmark of successful Christian communitarian living.

If these communities represent one aspect of the attempt in Christian living to come to terms with modernity, the question of stewardship represents another. Of course the question of the right stewardship of earthly and human resources is not just a modern preoccupation but goes back to the parable of the talents.[8] During the Middle Ages, as Swanson shows in his discussion of tithes, God's bounty required of humanity an acknowledgment of its true purposes, which in theoretical terms involved some contribution to the economy of *caritas* which underpinned medieval Christianity. This was achieved through tithing, a fact often overlooked in the discussions of historians who focus on the significance of tithes for confrontation between laity and clergy. If tithing stressed reciprocity, we can see from Spicer's paper that growth and development were also regarded as important responsibilities in the early modern world; the subsequent success of western Christianity in this respect and the global dominance of the West in other respects has led some to believe that development has become exploitation, or something close to it. As the richer countries use up an ever-increasing proportion of the earth's resources and the gap between rich and poor widens, the emphasis has moved away from development towards conservation and protection, be it of the ice cap or the rainforest, and it is this shift which lies at the heart of the recent growth of ecotheology.

This frames the paper with which our volume ends. Scott's paper asks us to consider what the natural world might represent to theologians at a time when global pressures threaten the future existence of our planet as we know it. It reviews recent ecological theology, identifying it with other strands of liberation theology concerned with questions of social justice or those about sexuality and identity, placing it firmly in the modern or postmodern world. Notwithstanding their current importance, these questions have been the traditional concerns of Christians since the time of the

[8] Matt. 25: 14–30; Luke 19: 12–28.

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apostles; who am I, how do I relate to those about me and to the world in which I live, and (above all) how do my answers inform my relationship with God? What lessons does contemplation of the natural world hold for my understanding of God's purposes and my own place in creation, and how should I respond? Globalization and the dramatic effects of the exploitation of the natural resources of the planet and the atmosphere which encloses it have added urgency to these questions, such that, as Scott indicates, it seems legitimate for some theologians to ask what it might mean for our understanding of theology and of humanity's place in the world to contemplate a continuing planet without humankind.

This is a bleak question with which to end this introduction, and it is right to remember that the natural world has often been contested space for Christians, to be embraced as God's bounty or to be despised as the consequence of humanity's turning away from God. For most, of course, nature occupied a space somewhere between these extremes, and the essays in this volume testify both to the variety of responses which the churches, Christian congregations and individual believers have made to those questions, and to the continuities which crossed both denominational and temporal boundaries. As technological advances add urgency to those questions it is hoped that this volume will help to provide some historical and theological perspective on current concerns about our stewardship of the planet. It seems appropriate to leave the last word with a Christian thinker and poet who himself wrestled with the consequences of modernity and technological innovation towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins:

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
> It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
> And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
> And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
> Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
>
> And for all this, nature is never spent;
> There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
> And though the last lights of the black West went

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Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.[9]

William Sheils
University of York

[9] 'God's Grandeur', in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. N. H. Mackenzie (Oxford, 1990), 139.

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