

# 'Through your goodness we have these gifts to share'

## Ecology, humanity and eucharistic being

John Dunnill

Why is the natural world a problem for human beings? What is it about us that causes us to be ill at ease with the conditions of our existence? To what extent is this problem localised in perceptions of the human body, as the interface between humanity and 'nature'?

In this paper, I will examine the Christian doctrine of creation, to see what light, if any, it can shed on this problem and its solution, drawing on resources of scripture, theology and religious studies. In this task, I am encouraged by the impressive contemporary consensus of writers from very different traditions, the Greek Orthodox John Zizioulas and the Lutheran

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Jürgen Moltmann, in forging a renewed understanding of creation in the light of the Trinity. I will argue that what is needed, and what Christianity can offer, is a fundamentally different understanding of what being human is and might be: 'Man has to become a liturgical being before he can hope to overcome his ecological crisis.'<sup>1</sup> I shall try to show what becoming a 'liturgical being' might mean, and how it might help us and our world.

## **Wonder**

But we begin with wonder. It is the fount of religion, of science and of poetry. So before we turn to argument, I invite you to pause, and hear this poem by Thomas Hardy.<sup>2</sup>

### **Proud Songsters**

The thrushes sing as the sun is going,  
And the finches whistle in ones and pairs,  
And as it gets dark loud nightingales  
    In bushes  
Pipe, as they can when April wears,  
    As if all Time were theirs.

These are brand-new birds of twelve-months' growing,  
Which a year ago, or less than twain,  
No finches were, nor nightingales,  
    Nor thrushes,  
But only particles of grain,  
    And earth, and air, and rain.

There is cause for wonder here. How is it that these disparate elements –  
    particles of grain,  
    And earth, and air, and rain

– come together at all? How can these fragments of matter turn into the vibrant life of these small but loud and busy birds? Is it not extraordinary that dead matter can generate anything that lives, and that this life should manifest itself in so many extraordinarily variegated forms?

Or is your wonder touched with sadness, because the life that came so lately out of these random elements will soon be dissolved back into them? It is with these fragments that the poem ends, and as we re-read it

we discover that from the start ‘the sun is going,’ ‘it gets dark,’ ‘April wears [out?],’ so that even in the midst of the burst of loud life things are running down into darkness: does that bring something stronger than sadness, more like despair?

Do we reflect that, if that is all that birds are, so are we – no more than

particles of grain,  
And earth, and air, and rain

– bigger than finches, less obviously fragile, longer-living, yet in the end we all go the same way? Proud as we may be of what humanity has achieved and all that it means to be human (nightingales are not the only ‘proud songsters’), we are still part of the environment we live in, and subject to its laws. Part of our human ‘song’ is the scientist’s disciplined observation and explanation of phenomena, and if that does not begin from wonder and give rise to more wonder it will be sad stuff. But knowing about nature’s laws does not free us from them.

Is that, then, all there is? Nothing much, and then life, and then (from our perspective) nothing at all? The Bible’s psalmist shares Thomas Hardy’s realism about life and death, but comes to a different conclusion:

As for mortals, their days are like grass;  
they flourish like a flower of the field;  
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
and its place knows it no more.

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to  
everlasting  
on those who fear him,  
and his righteousness to children’s children.

(Psalm 103:15–17)

That ‘but’ is so important. Do we too find, beyond and behind these ‘particles,’ a presence that endures, that outlasts finches, humans, turtles, trees, even the stars, a presence beyond all observable lives and deaths, ‘in whom we live, and move, and have our being’ (Acts 17:28)? Can we say with Gerard Manley Hopkins:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil<sup>3</sup>

or with the psalmist

O Lord, our sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

(Psalm 8:1)?

In the biblical perspective which Christians share, the world is created by God, and all religion begins in some measure from wonder at that, and gives rise to more wonder, or it too will be sad stuff. It is the 'seed of religion'.<sup>4</sup> But there is more. To say that the world is 'created' is to say that it exists in a dependent relation to God, and so do we:

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;  
they flow between the hills,  
giving drink to every wild animal;  
the wild asses quench their thirst ...  
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle  
and plants for humans to use,  
to bring forth food from the earth  
and wine to gladden the human heart ...  
These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season

(Psalm 104:10–11, 14–15, 27).

The God whose majesty fills the heavens is met in the gushing winter stream, the clumps of wild grass springing up where the cattle graze, the flourishing of grape and grain, received as gift. Just contemplating the cosmos, creation and the power that underlies it, we find ourselves drawn to go beyond wondering and admiring, to enter into relationship with the One whose life-giving presence we discern in these created things, to be received by faith. Beyond wonder there is gratitude and praise:

I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;  
I will sing praise to my God while I have my being  
(Psalm 104:33).

## **Embodied praise**

If human beings experience their life as a gift, and a gift renewed every day with sun and rain and crops, so that life's good things are always perceived as more than the sum of their own skill and luck (although these may also play a part), it is natural that a very common response should take the form of praise and thanks. Expressions of these impulses are found in almost every culture, including song, dance, ritual, prayer and the dedication of time, money and obedience – all understood as responses to the giver, whoever or whatever is called 'God'.

Daniel Hardy and David Ford have commented on the 'strange logic' of praise, which 'perfects perfection':

When we find something of quality and express our appreciation, that very expression adds something to the situation. This is even more so in the case of a person. To recognise worth and to respond to it with praise is to create a new relationship. This new mutual delight is itself something of worth, an enhancement of what was already valued.<sup>5</sup>

Praise, like poetry, is therefore more than merely decorative. It adds to the world's substance. But can it, at the same time, be both 'natural' and 'strange'?

None of this is strictly necessary ... There is no law of praise, and perfection would not be perfect if it had to require praise for its completion. Yet the odd fact is that in this way perfection itself can be perfected, and the more perfect it is the more wonderfully it evokes new forms of perfection. The logic is that of overflow, of freedom, of generosity.<sup>6</sup>

It is true that the impulse to praise, which I have called 'natural', does not appear to be natural in our Western culture, where it conflicts with the demand for utility. For what is the use of praising? Just as science has been evacuated of the wonder in which it began and turned into a means for the production of better appliances and medicines, so praise has been rendered vacuous in our world. Its basis in a sense of dependence conflicts with the human desire for achievement; its 'logic of overflow' appears absurd in a world ruled by the economics of scarcity. Yet, paradoxically, its opposite, the subordination

of all values to material 'utility', is also praise of a kind – inappropriate and even idolatrous praise of what is set up as a substitute for God.

Certainly, to many cultures, past and present, and mostly far more familiar with actual scarcity than we are, it has not seemed absurd to live by praise, and its companion, thanks – which 'shares the same strange logic. Just as praise perfects perfection, so thanks completes what is completed'.<sup>7</sup>

I take for illustration the part played by praise and thanks in the religion of Israel, as seen in the laws, narratives and poetry of the Old Testament. At the heart of Israel's religion was the Temple, a place which existed for the offering of gifts to the giver, within that same logic of overflow which is so alien to our culture. The principle was that of the tithe or first-fruits offering – the part given back to God, burnt on the altar in an act of thanksgiving, to sanctify the whole. These gifts were of many sorts, but always they consisted of the food that formed part of the normal diet – grain, wine or oil, or, on special occasions, meat. And what was being offered was always cooked, not raw: not olives by themselves, but crushed into oil; not grain, but flour baked into a cake, or treated with oil; not grapes, but grapes processed into wine; or an animal processed 'by fire'.<sup>8</sup> So what was offered back was not merely the material of the harvest and the herd, it was the product of human ingenuity and human work, of the community organisation required for fattening calves and crushing olives and of the raising of crops through clearing land, ploughing and reaping. The human capacity to shape and improve nature was being recognised as a divine gift and offered back to God along with its products.

Small-scale offerings of simple agricultural products must have been most people's offerings most of the time, just as bread and oil must have been most people's almost unvarying diet. But a key element of popular Israelite religion was the sacred meat-meal, the *zebach shelamim*, the offering which brings *shalom* (peace, wholeness, well-being). The Authorised Version of the Bible calls it 'peace-offering', a term which is now misleading; a better translation is 'sacrifice of well-being' or 'communion sacrifice'.<sup>9</sup> In this special and costly rite, the worshippers would take an animal from the flock or herd and present it before God. Apart from the blood and fat portions, which were offered 'by fire' on the altar, the rest of the meat would be taken by the worshippers, then cooked and shared, in a feast which might last for days, accompanied by drinking and dancing. God is praised with lips, limbs and liver. Whether observed as part of the religious calendar, or prompted by

some special need, it was an occasion for mending relationships within the community as well as with the deity. Both the altar-sacrifice and the feasting must be understood to be parts of a single whole, and we should not make a division between what we might call 'religious' and 'social' parts of the one event.<sup>10</sup> In structure the rite is similar to a feast shared with an honoured guest, who is given the best portions while everyone else shares the meal.<sup>11</sup> God is present at the feast as that honoured guest, who has received the fat portions of an animal, burnt on the altar, while the rest is boiled and consumed communally in the vicinity of the temple.

In the conviviality of the feast and the offering of praise with the voice and the body, human social life and language too are put at the service of God. So while the psalmist extols God for providing running water for the wild asses and grass for the cattle, what is celebrated here is not just the fruits of 'nature' but the products of the physical economy, including all those features of human skill and culture which separate humans from animals. By offering domesticated animals, humans give thanks to God who has also, in the past, domesticated them:

O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker!  
For he is our God,  
and we are the people of his pasture  
and the sheep of his hand.

(Psalm 95:6–7)

### **Eucharistic being**

In the Christian perspective, the world is created: that is, it exists in a state of dependence on God, who is the ground of all being. All life flows out of God and into God. This is true of all mineral, vegetable and animal beings, with which humanity exists in a web of created relationships, and survives through a continual exchange of life at the biological level. This exchange is operating when plants draw energy from soil and sun, energy which can nourish animal life when consumed, and which in turn creates milk, eggs and flesh that can nourish other animal lives, including human lives. For some animals, and certainly for humans, this biological exchange of life is replicated at the higher levels of social and spiritual being. The Israelite communion offering is one expression (mirrored in many other cultures,

ancient and modern) of a participatory understanding of human being as enmeshed in a created order.

If the physical world mediates a relationship to its creator, addressed as landlord or as guest, it is appropriate that praise should be not only vocal but bodily, involved in dancing, and in eating and drinking, and it is natural that a special significance attaches to the meat-meal and the animal death which that requires.

The act of animal sacrifice is so foreign to us that it is hard not to think about it in simplified and distorted ways. One distortion is to focus on the death and loss involved, rather than on any perceived gain, because for us a 'sacrifice' is simply loss, something that must be 'given up' in order to achieve some higher goal. We, in our high-consumption, wasteful culture, can hardly recognise the true cost of a meat-meal in a subsistence economy where food is scarce and domestic animals highly valued for their work and company as well as their meat. Yet the sense that it is necessary to give thanks for such an event, paradoxical as that sounds, accepts that humans are animals too, and affirms the possibility of praising God for a life lived in face of death.

Another distortion is to idealise sacrifice for its spontaneous and paradisaical quality. We need to hear Moltmann's caution that this way of being in relation to God exists necessarily in a state of imperfection:

In the unmarred pristine condition of the world there was a direct, general and perfect knowledge of God. But under the conditions of human sin and corrupted nature, this now only exists in rudimentary form ... [as] a recollection of the primordial knowledge of God.<sup>12</sup>

For this reason there were other modes of sacrifice, sin offerings, that existed to restore the relationship with God when it was broken. These too point to the fundamentally theological character of life before God, and to the possibility of perfection. When God is intentionally invited to participate in the human economy, humans are raising their lives at every level into the divine sphere.

Nor should we adopt the opposite distortion of so over-emphasising the sin-offering that we think of every sacrifice as an act of penitence, or even as a kind of punishment. The focus in Leviticus on purification for sins encourages this, and the application of sacrificial language to the death of



Christ confirms the association of penitence and death, by which, in medieval developments, the Eucharist came to be understood in an expiatory way, as if it were a sin-offering. But sacrifice, though it involves a death, is a communal ritual offering, not a punishment, and not every sacrifice is an offering for sin.

Such misunderstandings are natural, since animal sacrifice is no longer part of our culture, but what they all miss is the central dynamic of offering to God what is God's own, in celebration of God's blessings: 'Thine own of thine own we offer unto thee.'<sup>13</sup> For the Eucharist was in origin (and in name) a meal of thanksgiving for the achieved possibility of entering joyfully into God's presence through Jesus. That this Christian *zabach* with bread and wine contains a necessary backward look to the cross should not outweigh the awareness that it is a celebration, occurring in knowledge of the resurrection and in anticipation of eschatological fulfilment: 'As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The New Testament contains no reference to Christian sin-offerings, since the death of Christ is understood as the one final sacrifice for sin (John 1:29; Romans 3:25; Hebrew 9:11–15; 1 Peter 1:18–19; 1 John 2:2). Yet the spirit of sacrificial thanksgiving fills the New Testament. Believers are commanded to give thanks for

foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer. (1 Timothy 4:3–5)

In their worship they are urged to offer the 'sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name' (Hebrews 13:15) and to 'present [their] bodies as a living sacrifice' (Romans 12:1). The faith of gentiles is 'a libation and offering' to God (Philippians 2:17). Acts of discipleship and ministry are 'a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.' (Philippians 4:18)

In the celebration of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper, memorial and reconciliation are enfolded in the festal communion made possible in the new covenant relationship with God. Bread and wine, symbols of all human food and work in the created order, are taken up now into a higher order. A very early liturgy proclaims:

Almighty Ruler, you have created all things for the sake of your name. You have given humankind meat and drink for their enjoyment, so that they might praise you, but to us you have graciously given spiritual meat and drink, and eternal life through your Servant [Jesus].<sup>14</sup>

At Jesus' last supper, by identification with his saving death, these natural elements were given specific meaning as his body, his blood: signs of his self-offering to God for the life of the world. Just as the covenant at Sinai was inaugurated with a communal *zebach* and with the sign of blood (Exodus 24:5–8), so Christians share in their new covenanted identity in Christ through the sharing of the bread and the cup (1 Corinthians 10:16–17). As these are given and received sacramentally, and in company, they embody the self-presentation to God of the worshipper as a whole person, body and spirit, ready to be transformed through participation in God's new and eschatological order opened up for us by Christ.

### **In the ecological crisis<sup>15</sup>**

How might this help us to act effectively in the current crisis? In a recent lecture, Rowan Williams criticises the concept of 'development' for imposing on non-Western cultures a supposedly universal but in fact reduced and economically driven definition of human being. He argues that it is better to speak of the aims of aid as 'economic liberation' from the conditions of poverty. This allows us to recognise that the cultures of what are called 'underdeveloped' or 'developing' nations may demand our respect for presenting other and often deeper understandings of humanity, especially as these arise from their intrinsic religious traditions.<sup>16</sup> The 'West' has much to give, and much to learn. At the level of understanding, too, there needs to be an exchange of life.

Insofar as the ecological crisis has been generated by an economically-driven model of human domination of nature, it will not be solved by the deployment of technical expertise or managerial skill, even disguised under the biblical metaphor of 'stewardship'.<sup>17</sup> As Zizioulas says, what is needed is a fundamentally different understanding of what human being is and might be: 'Man has to become a liturgical being before he can hope to overcome his ecological crisis'.<sup>18</sup>

The ecological crisis is not simply about an objective 'scarcity'; it is about the way human beings understand themselves in relation to the natural order, including their fellow humans, other living beings and God. The attempt to live in separation from God manifests itself in greed and many other disorders, which largely create the scarcity we complain about. In our complaining, we may now blame the God we don't believe in for not making a cosmos better suited to our tastes and needs. In Western thought it is assumed that soul and body are somehow separate, as if we think human beings (uniquely?) stand outside the web of created being. If we imagine that we are angels, spiritual beings, we may believe that bodies are evil since they get between us and God. But the doctrine of creation insists that matter is good and God is to be found in and through matter. What obstructs our passage to God is not matter but our sin-generated denial of our created status, which consigns us to illusion and unreality.

Duncan Reid has shown how, in Christian understanding, God too needs to be thought of as not separate from creation, nor of course contained in it, but existing in relation to it. The doctrine of the Trinity enables us to think of God in more than one dimension: as the primordial mystery we call 'Father', infinitely different from us in kind; also as Spirit poured out in creation and always present, sustaining and renewing; and as present once, definitively, in the person of Jesus the Christ whose death and resurrection life we are invited to share. The God who is known in the world is the God who participates in his own creation and calls us into a participatory knowledge of himself through createdness, in body, mind and soul.<sup>19</sup>

The natural order is therefore 'iconographic'. It represents to us the One who has created it and invites us into the place of recognition and response. This presents us with a vision and a challenge. John Zizioulas argues that effective action to solve the ecological crisis will not be brought about by imposing ethical requirements on ourselves or other people, or by means of treaties or sanctions, but only by the creation of an ethos, a culture in which a truly eucharistic way of being can subsist.<sup>20</sup> We need to practise the formation of a 'eucharistic self'.<sup>21</sup>

Creating such an ethos means making concrete choices about food, work and politics under the rubric of thanksgiving, not in liturgy alone but in action. It involves acknowledging that humanity is not merely involved in creation, but has a representative role in relation to the created order, a role we may call priestly if we model our understanding of humanity, not

on Adam's failure but on Christ's act of self-offering. If humanity can claim any special quality that sets us apart (whether we think of that as reason, or self-consciousness, or creativity, or love) those things are given us to give back to God through using them for the widest possible good of the whole. Taking responsibility for the offering of the cosmos, directed not at our own need but at the widest good, fulfils that special role and enters into the blessing God desires to give:

As God's gifts, all his creatures are fundamentally eucharistic beings also; but the human being is able – and designated – to express the praise of all created things before God.<sup>22</sup>

So, though the bushes are loud with song, '[humanity's] thanksgiving ... looses the dumb tongue of nature.'<sup>23</sup>

### Questions for discussion

1. According to this essay, the ancient Israelite communion offering expressed 'a participatory understanding of human being as en-meshed in a created order'. How did it do this? How could we express such an understanding now?
2. What do you understand by the term 'eucharistic being', (or 'liturgical being')? Is this an effective way of describing the Christian way of thinking and living?
3. In the context of an ecological crisis, how might 'eucharistic being' express itself in concrete choices about food, work and politics?

### Notes

1. John D Zizioulas, 'Preserving God's Creation 1', [www.resourcesforchristiantheology.org/?p=130](http://www.resourcesforchristiantheology.org/?p=130), accessed 14 November 2009, p. 2.
2. John and Eirian Wain (eds), *The New Wessex Selection of Thomas Hardy's Poetry*, Macmillan, London, 1978, p. 206.

3. WH Gardner and NH Mackenzie (eds), *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1967, p. 66.
4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ET Library of the Christian Classics XX, JT McNeill (ed.), Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1960, I. 4, p. 47.
5. Daniel W Hardy and David F Ford, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1984, p. 6.
6. Hardy and Ford, *Jubilate*, p. 7.
7. Hardy and Ford, *Jubilate*, p. 7.
8. Leviticus 2:1–7, 14–15; 3:3.
9. The regulations are set out in Leviticus 3 and 7:11–18, although, characteristically, being written from the point of view of the priesthood, the text minimises the most distinctive feature of this sacrifice – the communal meal which followed the offering of blood and fat on the altar. Compare Genesis 31:34; 1 Samuel 1:3, 9; 2:13–14.
10. ‘There were ... two dimensions to a sacrifice ... Together these parallel acts made the sacrifice complete.’ Baruch Levine, *Leviticus*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1989, p. 11 (on Leviticus 2:10).
11. See Alfred Marx, ‘Familiarité et transcendance – La fonction du sacrifice d’après l’Ancien Testament’, in A Schenker, (ed.), *Studien zu Opfer und Kult im Alten Testament*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1992, pp. 1–12. Compare the special treatment of Benjamin in Genesis 44:26–34.
12. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An ecological doctrine of creation*, SCM Press, London, 1985, p. 57.
13. From the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, cited by John D Zizioulas, ‘Preserving God’s Creation 3’, [www.resourcesforchristiantheology.org/?p=132](http://www.resourcesforchristiantheology.org/?p=132), accessed 14 November 2009, p.7; compare John D Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1985, pp. 59–60.
14. *The Didache* 10:3 (author’s translation). For the whole text, see Maxwell Staniforth (trans.), *Early Christian Writings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, pp. 225–237.
15. See the discussion in the chapter which shares this title, in Moltmann, *God in Creation*, pp. 20–52.
16. Rowan Williams, ‘New Perspectives in Faith and Development’, [www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2009/11/13/ACNS4667](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2009/11/13/ACNS4667), accessed 14 November 2009.

17. John D Zizioulas, 'Proprietors or Priests of Creation', <http://www.rsesymposia.org/themedia/File/1151679350-Pergamon.pdf>, accessed 14 November 2009, p. 2.
18. Zizioulas, 'Preserving God's Creation 1', p. 2.
19. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, pp. 94–98.
20. Zizioulas 'Preserving God's Creation 3', p. 7.
21. David F Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 137–165.
22. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 71.
23. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 71.