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SOME PATIENT GOD COME DOWN TO WOO: BARTH, O'CONNOR, AND THE ANALOGY OF CREATION

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The great conceit of modernity is that it presumed to have resolved all myth and mystery. Modernist historiographies have told us that the myth of the flat earth was soundly defeated six-hundred years ago, thereby leading to the growth of presumption regarding humankind's ability to fathom all mystery.¹ Humanity's eyes had been opened as it perceived a newly spherical world. It became well known that the world is not flat, and therefore the old lie of perfectly horizontal horizons allowed for a new vision of the heights of human potential free from religious blindness. We had conquered the one myth, and now all myths must be uncovered like witches in an inquisition. Eventually this led to a growing gulf between 'the natural and the supernatural realms' in which it became more and more attractive to conceive of a watchmaker God, interested enough to create a world, but disinterested enough to remove himself from it.² In turn this gradually eroded our sense of perspective as the eye of reason became favored over the eye of faith. When liberal Protestant theology winked at Kantian subjectivism, one eye remained closed and half-blinded half of Christendom. Thus, since all things are flat when you look at them with only one eye, the victory of the spherical world was short-lived, and the Western world continued to stumble into—as T.S. Eliot put it—'an age which advances progressively backwards'.³

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical stands at odds with the biblical, and more specifically Pauline view. Indeed, Paul seems

¹ Among the most prominent popularizers of this reading of history was Andrew Dickson White in his famous *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology and Christendom*, 2 vols (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1922). Recent scholarship has shown that this historiographical narrative is heavily an innovation of the nineteenth century. See Jeffery Burton Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians* (New York: Praeger, 1991); Edward Grant, *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 342-44.

² Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 4.

³ T.S. Eliot, 'Choruses From "The Rock"', in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1971), p. 108.

particularly concerned to guard against it when he writes his epistle to the Romans. In the beginning of the letter, he opens his great argument by situating it in the context of all of creation. Paul describes how

[t]he wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people ... since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.... (Rom. 1.18-19)⁴

Paul's confidence in the clarity of the revelation as it is evident in creation is startling. In our age, we are not used to making the connection between mundane momentary encounters and the grand, specific claims of revelation. Where then, is such a view represented in this present era? Where are the theologians and poets who, with Paul, espouse a view of creation in which God is not distant or absent, but integrally and unavoidably involved?

It was in response to this problem that two figures from radically different corners of the Western world did their work. Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) could not have been situated more differently. Barth was a Swiss protestant theologian possessing refined German academic parlance, while O'Connor was a American author from rural Georgia who spoke with a considerable drawl.⁵ It is not at all likely that Barth knew anything of O'Connor, and O'Connor's exposure to Barth was favourable but limited.⁶ However, in spite of this,

⁴ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Apparently, when O'Connor was attempting to switch from a major in journalism to the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop, her Georgia accent was so thick that the representative from the department could not understand what she was asking. 'Embarrassed, I asked her to write down what she had just said on a pad. She wrote, "My name is Flannery O'Connor. I am not a journalist. Can I come to the Writer's Workshop?"...Like Keats who spoke Cockney but wrote the purest sounds in English, Flannery spoke a dialect beyond instant comprehension but on page her prose was imaginative, tough, alive...'. Paul Engle, quoted in Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1971), p. vii.

⁶ See Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 10, n.7. Wood continues, 'The list of her library books contains only Evangelical Theology, the lectures Barth gave on his single visit to America in 1962.' I have chosen to use O'Connor as an illustration of Barth's thought for two major reasons. First, there is an evi-

there is a remarkable coherence between the theologies of both figures. In a letter, O'Connor wrote that she liked 'Old Barth ... he throws the furniture around', and in her diocesan newspaper, she commended Barth to Catholic readers: 'There is little or nothing in this book that the Catholic cannot recognize as his own.'⁷

This article will argue that, in response to a significant portion of modernity which had unduly denied the active involvement of God within his creation, Barth and O'Connor presented a view of creation in which the common things of this world are infused with God's specific, active presence. To argue this, I will first briefly sketch the progression whereby modernity came to this radical division between the empirical and the theological. Second, I will look at how Barth and O'Connor conceived of God's involvement in creation. Third, since enlightenment thinkers—along with Barth and O'Connor—remain aware of a central conflict in the world, we will look at where Barth and O'Connor identify the locus of this conflict. I will conclude by suggesting that Barth and O'Connor's response to modernity may offer a way forward for those living with post-modernity.

PUTTING A WEDGE IN REALITY

A significant part of the problem can be traced to the dissolution of the link between the empirical and the ontological. During the Enlightenment, philosophers such as Immanuel Kant began to argue for a hard and fast division between the things of this world and the involvement of God.⁸ To philosophers like Kant, God might have created the world, but his continual involvement was at least irrelevant, and at most impos-

dent link between O'Connor and the work of Barth, suggesting that she was either directly influenced by him or came independently to similar conclusions, and second, because it seems that Barth's own view of creation resists abstraction, and thus finds credibility in being articulated literarily.

⁷ Flannery O'Connor, *The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and Brainard Cheney* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), p. 181; Quoted in Wood, p. 10 n.7.

⁸ Kant's metaphysic, described by some as 'transcendental idealism', fed naturally into Schleiermacher's de-emphasis on revelation as a means of authority, since it is something that originates necessarily outside of 'spatiotemporal appearances', and elevates subjective experience as the most credible basis for religion. Karl Ameriks, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. by Robert Audi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), s.v. 'Kant, Immanuel'. See also Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by J.M.D. Meiklejohn (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1934), p. 453.

sible. This posed a serious challenge to theologians of the day, frightening them with the prospect of a now obsolete religion. If miracles, revelation, and the incarnation could not be considered authoritative, what need was there for a Christian faith? The effort of Friedrich Schleiermacher was therefore commendable, but unfortunate for subsequent generations of Protestant thought. In response to the looming threat of an obsolete Christianity, he led a pious retreat into subjective faith, qualified only by a 'feeling of absolute dependence' on an ambiguously defined 'Deity'.⁹

By the twentieth century, this disbelief in the miraculous led theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann to contend with the very person of Christ, asking who Jesus could have been if miracles were now out of the question. Since 'modern science does not believe that the course of nature can be interrupted or, so to speak, perforated, by supernatural powers', it must be asked who Christ actually was if not a miracle-working son-of-God.¹⁰ Like Schleiermacher, Bultmann's intention to develop an *apologia* for the relevance of Christian faith was commendable, but at too high of a cost. To dichotomize the natural and the supernatural was to silence the whole canon of revelation, that is, the books of creation and scripture. What is more, by silencing the canon, such a view left man and creation standing at odds with a distant and mysterious god, rendering him incapable of interpreting the acts of creation which seem ambivalent to him. For Kant, Schleiermacher, and Bultmann, if a fissure is identified, it is between God and his creation, not between man and God. In the end, the modern world was left with an irrelevant, impotent Christ who was incapable of pacifying an increasingly violent world.

It was providential, then, that in the first half of the twentieth century, the tide began to change. Many theologians were becoming aware of what Jean Daniélou referred to as the, 'rupture between theology and life'.¹¹ For Barth, this 'rupture' was intolerable, and he came to argue for a view of creation which sought a more direct link between the physical world and theology. This ultimately led him to describe the relationship between creation and its Creator as 'analogy'.¹² For Barth, creation was 'the external

⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), p. 17.

¹⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 15.

¹¹ Quoted in Boersma, p. 2.

¹² Quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. by Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 165. In using this term, Barth seems to be adapting Aquinas's idea of the 'analogy' in which 'the matter of the heavenly bodies and of the elements is not the same, except by analogy, in so far as they agree in the character

ground of the covenant'— the necessary condition for the entire redemptive narrative of Scripture.¹³ In the same way that creation was created as the 'external ground of the covenant', it also granted creation its eschatology, the final end-goal of all of creation—which is grace, as it is embodied in Jesus Christ. Balthasar described Barth's view of grace in creation as being like a 'magnet' toward which all created things are oriented. Thus, the spiritual and the physical are not two separate spheres, but integrally joined by way of analogy, climaxing toward a divinely orchestrated gracious end.

READING A SMALL HISTORY IN A UNIVERSAL LIGHT

There are at least two implications to Barth's view of creation. First is that God possesses an inevitable and unavoidable immanence. '[I]n virtue of its nature [as the creation of God], it is radically incapable of serving any other purpose, but placed from the very first at the disposal of His grace.'¹⁴ Creation possesses 'no independent teleology.'¹⁵ Since creation is the product of a God with particular qualities and goals, it resembles his purposes in a ubiquitous manner. It is not accidental or arbitrary, but highly intentional and instrumental for bringing about God's purposes. In the words of Paul, '*All things work together [panta synergei] for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*' (Rom. 8:28, italics mine). The empirical world is not alienated from God in the same way that humans are. Indeed, it was 'subjected to futility' as a result of human sin (Rom. 8:20; see also Gen. 3:17), but for Barth, God still utilizes it as a vital means of revelation, in concert with the revelation of his Son. This represents a significant expansion of Calvin's description of the way in which God uses creation:

[S]ince we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings.¹⁶

of potency'. Presumably, this means that there is a semblance between 'the heavenly bodies' and 'the elements' while each possesses its own ontology (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, Q.66 Art. 2).

¹³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Study edn (London: T & T Clark, 2009), III.1, p. 96.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press,

For Barth, God does not merely condescend. Instead, he places himself, as it were, directly in the downcast sightline of his purblind creatures.

Within the work of O'Connor, this idea of God's immanence is pervasive, and seen in her use of natural elements situated within a highly regionalized setting. As an American writer from the Deep South, this was 'not a matter of so-called local color', but the use of a specific region was vital because it relates to, 'those qualities that endure regardless of what passes, because they are related to the truth. It lies very deep. In its entirety, it is known only to God...'.¹⁷ In other words, the minutiae of a particular place matter because they are related to the things of eternity. A careful balance is struck here between God's pervasive presence in his world and our ability to discern how he is present. It remains essentially a *mystery*.¹⁸ The task then, for the artist and theologian alike, is to read 'a small history in a universal light'.¹⁹ Thus, in her story, 'The River', the common sight of a slow-moving, muddy river is imbued with sacramental meaning. An itinerant Protestant preacher performing baptisms declares it to be, 'the rich red river of Jesus' Blood'. He continues,

All rivers flow from that one River and go back to it like it was the ocean sea and if you believe, you can lay your pain in that River and get rid of it because that's the River that was made to carry sin. It's a river full of pain itself, pain itself, moving toward the Kingdom of Christ, to be washed away, slow, you people, slow as this here old red water river round my feet.²⁰

In the mouth of a common preacher, O'Connor voices a view of nature that is profoundly tied to the theological. Life and theology are inextricably linked. Here, a counterpart to Barth's 'analogy' is seen in the relation between the common things of creation—a river—and the eternal reality of the atonement.²¹

2001), IV.xiv.3.

¹⁷ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), pp. 57-8.

¹⁸ O'Connor advocates what she calls 'anagogical vision' which she defines as 'the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or situation'. She goes on to liken this interpretive method to the three-level medieval model of scriptural interpretation. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 'The River' in *Collected Works* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988), p. 162.

²¹ Barth, quoted in Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 165.

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL BULL

This brings us to the second implication of Barth's view of creation. For him, the two realities of creation and God are related supremely in the person of Christ. Balthasar describes Barth's understanding of this relationship as an hourglass, 'whose two contiguous vessels (God and the creature) met at the narrow passage at the centre (Jesus Christ)'.²² By emphasizing the person of Christ as the *telos* of all of creation, Barth avoids the danger of pantheistic spirituality. Revelation remains primary, but as Hans Boersma puts it 'at the same time, the gift of supernatural revelation through Christ made it legitimate to turn the hourglass upside down, so that nature, too, made its genuine contribution, in and through Christ'.²³ Jesus Christ is both the beginning and the goal of creation, and is therefore fulfilled in him.²⁴ Thus, where many have stopped at a vague notion of the existence of God, conceding the existence of a 'deity' but hesitating to ascribe anything specific to it, Barth describes a creation which cannot be fully understood apart from the particular person of Jesus Christ, the nexus between the creature and God.²⁵

O'Connor utilized a similar principle in her short story 'Greenleaf'. Here, a rather mundane natural element—a common bull—is used christologically. He is constantly present, steadily chewing the grass, and watching the unregenerately selfish Mrs. May, 'like some patient god come down to woo her'.²⁶ The climactic redemptive scene has the Bull charging her, tenderly goring her 'like a wild tormented lover', while 'One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip.... [S]he had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable.'²⁷ In step with Barth, O'Connor has not hesitated to fill a nat-

²² Quoted in Boersma, p. 5; See also Balthasar, p. 197.

²³ Boersma, p. 5.

²⁴ See Barth, p. 231.

²⁵ It should be noted here that while Barth identifies the person of Christ as essential to an understanding of creation, it remains unclear how this is the case. This stands in some tension with the work of scholars such as N.T. Wright who have made it their aim to understand the significance of Christ as a Jew living in first century Palestine (although Wright does make considerable effort to explicate the contemporary relevance of a close reading of the cultural context of Jesus); e.g. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 467-76. See also Lucien Legrand, *The Bible on Culture: Belonging or Dissenting* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 71-112.

²⁶ O'Connor, 'Greenleaf' in *Collected Works*, p. 501.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 523.

ural event, as unusual as it may be, with specific christological content. She does this in a way that is more than mere hyperbole or metaphor. If the christological meaning were removed or downplayed in the story, the resolution would have disappeared, and it would become a mere morality tale. However, as it is, the story is saved by inserting this moment of grace, saturated with the particulars of a christological reality. It is the God of Hosea as a jealous lover reclaiming what is His in Mrs. May. Because God took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, thereby situating himself in the hardened particulars of time, body, and place, the bull is able to act christologically (although perhaps unbeknownst to itself) by interrupting Mrs. May's existence with the corresponding hardened particulars of divinity. The incarnation of Christ gives new meaning to an otherwise irrelevant, violent event, and it becomes Mrs. May's redemption. The bull is now able to make 'its genuine contribution, in and through Christ'.²⁸ By doing this, O'Connor takes Barth's christologically focused creation and plants it within a provincial setting, thereby showing Christ's presence—with all of his redemptive attributes—in a setting far-removed from the dust of Palestine.

HEALING THE FISSURE

A problem remains, however. It is fine to argue that God remains actively involved in every part of creation in specific ways, but this does not get at the heart of the issue. Whereas modernity had tended to locate a gap between God and his creation, Barth and O'Connor both locate this in the fissure between God and man. As we have already seen, because Barth portrays creation as not possessing any 'independent teleology' and because God is himself the single sovereign over all creation, 'He does not have to do with the subject of another nor a lord in his own right, but with His own property, with the work of His will and achievement... the creature is destined, prepared and equipped to be a partner of this covenant.'²⁹ Humans then, are unique as the only creature (with the possible exception of angels) who have rebelled against this exclusive authority, and are now embroiled in a conflict between, 'its Creator on God's side,' and 'its own God-given nature on its own'.³⁰ Elsewhere, Barth writes, 'Only in error and falsehood, and to its own hurt, can [the creature] become untrue to its origin in the Word of God.'³¹ Thus, even though the creature operates under the delusion that there is another authority which can be appealed

²⁸ Boersma, p. 5.

²⁹ Barth, *CD*, III.1, p. 93, 95-6;

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, *CD*, III.1, p. 110.

to, there is only one end which all things must serve. There is, as it were, only one source of gravity, to which all things eventually must either settle or come crashing down. Because of this, the healing must begin at the level of the conflict between God and man, not God and all of creation. And so Barth locates the incarnation as a second act of creation.³²

Creation then, not only 'promises, proclaims, and prophesies the covenant,' but, 'prefigures, and ... anticipates it, without being identical to it'.³³ Thus, in Genesis 1-2, we are not merely looking for 'Jesus Christ as the goal, but Jesus Christ as the beginning', as the solution to the rupture between God and man, and so the rupture between 'theology and life'.³⁴ This ultimately leads Barth to advocate a view of all of creation in which, by way of analogy (as opposed to directly), all of creation is intrinsically related to the person of Christ, who divinely heals the rift between God and man.³⁵

In O'Connor, the conflict between God and man is likewise seen as the primary issue, bearing consequence in man's alienation from creation. Self-righteous characters who presume they are right with God by virtue of their sensibility appear frequently. A prominent example is that of Ruby Turpin in 'Revelation'. Throughout the story, which takes place in a doctor's office waiting room (itself evocative of a kind of eschatological purgatory), Turpin is portrayed as an essentially decent person, free of the vices that afflict the less scrupulous. In fact, Turpin herself is fond of expounding on her decency in relation to other people.

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white trash; then above them were the homeowners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she

³² This also seems to be the point which John makes by deliberately alluding to the Genesis account in the opening lines of his gospel; see John 1:1-18.

³³ Barth, *CD*, III.1, p. 232. It is at this point that Barth appears to espouse something like the natural theology he famously rejected. However, he may actually avoid such an ironic error by insisting so tenaciously on the preeminence of Christ. Whereas natural theologies might allow for a 'bottom-up' view of revelation, in which it becomes possible to know God through creation without reference to Christ, Barth sees this an impossibility. Creation bears an essential testimony of God, but it only fully occurs in Jesus Christ. In addition to being the end and goal of creation, Jesus also serves as a kind of interpreter of it, without whom the creation would finally remain incomprehensible and arbitrary.

³⁴ *Ibid.*; Jean Daniélou quoted in Boersma, p. 2.

³⁵ See Barth, *CD*, III.1, p. 232.

and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud.... Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.³⁶

Like Barth, O'Connor understood that the essence of sin lay not in one's lack of moral decency, but in the tyrannical hunger to be 'his own source and standard, the first and the last, the object of a *diligere propters eipsum* [loving on account of its very self]'.³⁷ To do this is to deny one's own creatureliness. In spite of her decency, Turpin's reconstruction of reality cannot help caving in on itself, ending with everyone, herself included, 'crammed together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven'. The most telling scene comes in the end as Turpin finds herself alienated from creation surrounding her as she finally notices the 'invisible cricket choruses', singing in unison with, 'the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah'.³⁸ As the redemptive work of God continues all around her, she finally comes to realize that both creation and the Creator are working for one thing, the redemption of depraved humanity.

CONCLUSION

In our own day, the solution to our partial blindness might be in further developing such a view as Barth and O'Connor's. Whether modernity continues to blind one eye, or postmodernity desperately and reactively clenches both eyes shut—irascibly insisting that specific knowledge of God is arrogance—both writers point to a compelling solution. Where the strength of their view was in insisting that the spiritual still mattered to the age of Bultmann (not to mention Russell, Dewey, *et al*), their value in our own day might be in the insistence that true spirituality is not the vague 'feeling of absolute dependence,' but is found in the calloused feet of a God who joined sinew to bone to flesh in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.³⁹ It may be that by speaking of a creation that is set up with one

³⁶ O'Connor, 'Revelation', in *Collected Stories*, p. 636.

³⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV.1, p. 421.

³⁸ O'Connor, 'Revelation' in *Collected Stories*, p. 654.

³⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. by John Oman (Louisville Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p. 106.

purpose in mind—the redemptive covenant work of God—and that such a creation is fulfilled supremely in the person of Christ, the infirm eyes may begin to see, and we might begin to develop vision that is deeper and more honest than we had thought possible.

It may take the Word spitting into the earthy mud and caking it into our eyes that we will begin to see that the world is not merely a flat, empirical reality, nor is it a treacherous, superstitious place, haunted at every turn by fickle and ethereal spiritualities, but it is the very external basis of the covenant. With both eyes open, we will begin to perceive how every molecule is bent on the purpose of the Father, and our blinding sin purged of its ignorance and pride. This is to do more justice to the person and work of Jesus Christ, 'for from him and through him and for him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen' (Romans 11:36).