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Abstract:

The worldview of a large part of Christianity, and perhaps western civilization, was formed in no small part by the narrative structuring bequeathed by Christianity and subsequent interpretations of that tradition. This narration defined the world and humankind’s place in it as one of alienation from a past perfection, seen in terms of a “fall” away from a state of grace. In this rendering of the Christian story humankind is fallen and nature is seen by many as inherently in a state of decay.

The gravity created by this narrative has made for some difficulty in the science-theology discussion, in no small part because of an inability to see the processes of life in the cosmos as inherently redemptive. The natural order is conceived of as an aimless meandering away from a primal state of perfection. How are we to understand the energies at play in the cosmos as the work of a benevolent Creator?

Other interpretations of existence found within the Christian tradition allow us wisdom to understand the world science is interpreting for us as one being shaped and formed by the God who is immersed within the created order, nourishing it with possibility and even hope. Specifically, the legacy of Irenaeus of Lyons who understands the primal beginnings of the natural world in far different ways than the dominant tradition of Christianity offers us fresh perspective.

In *Against Heresies* he argues that we were formed with the potential to become accustomed to God and God to become accustomed to us. This is why vast amounts of time are needed, so that God and the human can become accustomed to one another. This perspective offers us a different narrative than the familiar one given us by Augustine, but it is one that fits profoundly with both a scientific understanding of the world and Christian belief.

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Paper Text:

**The Space Between:
Ancient Wisdom for a Scientific World**

Jeffrey C. Pugh

Most persons are not consciously aware of the ways in which the mental landscape we exist within has been the result of thousands of years of enculturation and narrative structuring. A significant part of this structuring has been bequeathed to us through long and complex processes that result in certain interpretive trajectories that define God and God's action in the world. Depending on the reading, these interpretations are how Christians form their understandings of the world.

One of the marks of the age in which we live is one of self-consciousness about how these narratives came to exist and the power behind them to shape our deepest selves. They function the strongest when society accepts them as so inherently true that they should not even be questioned. In this way they have acquired the status of what are called "metanarratives." These are stories that structure worldviews and legitimate the social arrangements of any society. Almost all the world's religions have metanarratives that serve as social locators for the population that believes them. You want to know what the nature of human beings is? Look at the narrative of a culture and its accepted interpretation and you are told this. If you want to know where we came from and what our origins are, consult the stories you were told growing up. Most religions offer creation accounts that will answer these questions for those who believe and accept the worldview contained within these stories.

Of course, one of the other marks of contemporary consciousness is a profound suspicion of the power these narratives exercise to shape us. When a localized story claims an overarching legitimation for all cultures and societies the question is asked if the story being told claims more than it should. Even more, the stories themselves and their interpretations are seen as human construals, written from a particular place and time, offering their own view of reality. Cloaked with the appeal to universality, metanarratives claim a totality that simply cannot include the entire world.

In this way these narratives act to construct what Peter Berger has called "the sacred canopy." This canopy is the umbrella of justifications we use to order a society on the basis of what we believe to be the case about ultimate realities and our place in the world. The stories we tell unconsciously shape us, our behaviors, our very identities in the world. The power of narratives to shape us can be seen in the fact that they do not have to be entirely religious in nature, they can also be secular. Democracy and Capitalism are only two of the narratives that shape us in the current world. Science has its own narrative constructions as well. Call these narratives by any name, it still amounts to the same thing, an interpretation of the world that we use to guide our way through it.

These narrative constructions in the Christian religion are often formed from the interpretations that persons receive from the Scriptures of the Christian faith. They stand as examples of how we place ourselves in the world and often function as that authority which functions to shape us, our identities, and our cultures. In this way the Bible and its interpreters have constructed for the western world a vast storehouse of ideas, beliefs, and

truths that serve as our map for understanding who we are and the world in which we exist.

If Christian faith is going to engage science in interpretations of the world, it is going to have to find a new way of narrating human, indeed, cosmic existence. I propose that one way forward for the discussion between theology and science is to revisit the unconscious acceptance of a certain interpretive grid, established over thousands of years, that prevents many in the non-academic world from seeing the enormous potential science holds to open us to mystery. That the way forward rests in antiquity should not surprise us.

In Christianity one of the most well known major plot lines narrates a world created in a state of perfection which becomes fallen because the human creature misused the freedom bestowed on it by the Creator. As a result of this estrangement from the Divine the human being has suffered an exile that has tainted both the human and the natural order. Original perfection rests in a past we can never recover. This tradition lent itself to interpretations of the world that viewed the meanderings of nature as futile attempts to return to a perfection resting in Eden. In the natural order the creation is subject to decay in the disordering of the cosmos and the notions of chaotic systems and entropy are manifestations of a straying away from original perfection. In the patristic tradition the disordering of the cosmos needed the redemption of God to reestablish its original perfection. It becomes difficult to reconcile the contemporary understandings of physical systems offered by science with this particular narrative rendering.

It is hard to deny the appeal of this story. It is so embedded within the Christian consciousness that a different interpretation becomes impossible to entertain. It is our paradigmatic sacred canopy. We understand the very heart of existence in relation to a story of fall and estrangement from God. We intuit that whatever sin is, there is an ontological dimension of disorder that takes us beyond the category of moral acts alone. We have to account for the very processes that bring death into the picture. We also have to own up to the failure of the human creature to live into and honor what it knows to be the best of who we are.

Is there a way we can understand the depths of the cunning destruction we find in the realm of natural systems and see it with the lens of hope? Is there something in the Christian tradition that might offer revelation to us about God's relationship with the world that leads us to something different than decay and destruction?

This possibility comes to us through a much earlier voice than Augustine, who has exercised so much formative influence on Christian consciousness. A reading of Irenaeus of Lyons might offer us a way of seeing our lives in God that holds the promise of hope in a world of physical systems and emergence moving toward a future replete with possibility. Very little is known of Irenaeus's life, though he heard Polycarp preach and eventually contested the Valentinian Gnostics and their intricate spirituality, leading to the writing of *Against Heresies* (hereafter referred to as *AH*). There is no evidence that he lived longer than 198, although there is an uncertain tradition that he lived until 202-03.

In Irenaeus we find an interpretation of the Christian story that leads to somewhat different territory than we are accustoming to occupying. While it is sometimes difficult to see much coherence in his thought, it centered itself around God and Scripture. Irenaeus's reading of the Scriptures was colored, however, by the fact that the biblical

canon was still very much in a state of flux when he was writing. For him only God is; everything else is in a state of becoming. This becoming in the accepted telling of the Christian story is the reason for pessimism because this becoming is oriented to corruption and not completion. In Augustine's mind, even given human rationality and the vestiges of the Trinity found within the created order, the movement in the creation is still away from the Creator's intent.

However, for Irenaeus, the very creatureliness of the human being means that it is in its nature to become and change. Humanity was created with the possibility of an unending progression and development toward God. Our very nature is oriented to growth and development. "For He formed him for growth and increase," and we receive "advance and increasement towards God." (AH, IV.11.2.).

In responding to his opponents he was provoked by their excessive spirituality, which, like all Gnosticism, negated the very physical, material aspects of life as being capable of bearing the reality of God to us. Irenaeus, in contrast, rooted his theology of redemption within human existence, in no small measure as seen by his depiction of humanity as the mud people, formed from the mud by the hands of God (AH, V.14.2). In his reading, Adam is the modeling of God's creative energies, formed from the mud and breathed upon by the spirit.

Augustine read this story in a far different way and ultimately rooted the power of the story in the past. This reality entails helplessness on our part to change the consequences of the original transgression. The unfolding of the cosmos in history and time finds its meaning wrapped up in this primal neglect of God's command. Christ becomes the intervention of God into human history, discontinuous with the past, not in the natural order. This creates a bifurcation tree all on its own. Thus, for Augustine (as with Paul), one path leads to Adam and death, and the other leads to Christ and life.

Irenaeus's understanding is somewhat different. We do have the freedom to choose our path. Though there is always going to be discontinuity between God and humanity, there is not the total sense of separation, for the economy of God is the history of humankind, indeed, the whole cosmos. Adam was not created perfect, but created in the image of God. The mud creature was intended to come into the likeness of God at the end of a process of development. The fulfillment of this development in the economy of God means that we, and by extension, all of life, are still a work in progress. The image of God found in the beginning of existence was intended to be the start of a process of growing into God, and even more, a part of the divinization of the world.

Change and development constitute the underlying reality of God, but this process of change is not oriented to the nothingness of decay; it has a purpose, for we needed vast amounts of time to become accustomed to bearing the life of God, which is what we were created for. As Eric Osborn translates in his work, *Irenaeus of Lyons*: "Humankind needed to grow accustomed to bearing divinity and God needed to grow accustomed to dwelling in humankind" (AH, III 20.2). This is an amazing thought to entertain in an age of science. The vast amount of time we have been developing has been time for God and us to make habitation with one another.

The disruption of this development came with our refusal to exercise the same patience God showed in allowing time to work this out. According to Irenaeus we grasped for this similitude to God too quickly. Adam reached for that which, while his destiny, was his in God's time and intention. Sin is shown in the desire to take one's

development into one's hands, outside of God's own timing. If we allow God to fashion us according to God's creative desire, allowing ourselves to maintain the "moisture" in the mud where we will have softness of heart, we will be shaped to completion in God's own timing. "If, then, you are God's workmanship, await the hand of your Maker whose *creation is being carried out.*" (AH, IV. 39.2-3, emphasis mine).

We have a destiny and that destiny is to become the image and likeness of God. In the ongoing process of accustoming, the mud creature and the creation itself are not a finished product, but the very means by which God is continually creating. Humankind was not created perfect, but was necessarily imperfect from the beginning with the potential to grow to perfection, which entails our transformation by the glory of God (AH, IV. 38.3-40).

In this model Jesus becomes the manifestation of a new and revived humanity that will find its consummation in the future. Christ stands as the corrected humanity, accustomed to God in the fullest sense, patient, not grasping after Godhood. The incarnation marks a new stage in this process because in Christ we have a soul and body willing to embrace God's spirit to the fullest. What was lost becomes secure in Jesus of Nazareth, who was "The Word of God who dwelt in man, and became the Son of Man that He might accustom man to receive God and God to dwell in man, according to the good pleasure of the Father." (AH, III. 20.2).

Not without the tension of fallenness, there is more an anticipation of the new that is to come, the completion of the creation where the processes of development are the means by which God makes all things new. All of this is a unified piece, unbroken even by our refusal to accept our true identity or accept with patience God's own timing. Profoundly trinitarian, this movement of the spirit is the reality of God that nourishes the growth toward completion because creation and redemption alike are manifestations of the Creator and Redeemer, mediated the creature through the Holy Spirit.

This entire process is oriented to one goal, the notion of the great exchange. God becomes human in Christ that we might become divine. This occurs in the unfolding processes of a world that is coming to be. We are in ceaseless motion towards God, though we do resist. It may well be that here we have a new map of territory that would be fruitful to explore in articulating faith for the present day. As Eric Osborn in his book on Irenaeus writes, "His account of the incarnation and human nature, of church and tradition, of history and salvation and the forces of renewal illuminates the wonder of human development. His sense of human evolution has made Christianity more credible in a scientific age." (Osborn, 86). While I would want to be careful about justifying Christian faith in terms of its credibility with contemporary thought, I also think we must take it into account when we are interpreting the faith for the current age.

Thus we have two stories to consider as we reflect upon how we discern and interpret what is taking place in the world. The one story takes us to the tragedy of all existence where perfection was lost and the garden rests in the inaccessible past, shut off to us in exile by the cherubim with flaming swords. The other story leads us to a future. It too speaks of loss, but at our own hands. We were created to grow into God, to become home for the glory, even though we came from mud. We have lost this sense of destiny and have become lost and are without direction, but there is hope. The hope of our lives rests in the future, the incarnation being the first step where we find that humanity is capable of carrying God.

But this is not a future of desolation and anxiety. Irenaeus explores a space between God and humanity that speaks to something mysterious about the universe. The time spent in God and humanity becoming accustomed to each other reveals that the heart of God is learned in no other way than by time and change. Our willingness to be patient and allow ourselves to become accustomed to God often occurs within our response to change, loss, and pain. This is the way of the universe in all its manifestations. We are directed not to the final cataclysm of almighty power, but suffering love. The accustoming of ourselves to God is a process that is ever ongoing and ever drawing us toward the heart of grace.

The exchanges of divinity and humanity that Irenaeus and others explore direct us to the space not of power or knowledge, but of suffering love. It is in our embrace of others, our willingness to become present to them, to fight for them, to see the commonality of all life that allows us to grow into God. And in the willingness to grow into God we find the possibility of something new emerging into the world, the possibility of authentic communion with divine life.

The accustoming of ourselves to God is a process that is ever ongoing and ever drawing us toward the heart of grace, if we have the sensitivity to it. This movement is never without suffering, and thus we should consider that at the heart of the universe in all its manifestations, suffering patient love maintains itself in a continual calling of creation to become. The creature and creation respond to the invitation to communion in such a way that the life of God itself becomes richer and more deeply textured within our awareness of the true reality.

We are the ones who draw the grace of God closer to the world. Not being defined by the ways in which the world presently constitutes itself, the creation is the place where the future of God rests. In the Irenaean model of God's creative intention for the world we find the resources for thinking about the scientific understanding of physical systems as a manifestation of God's ongoing presence in life. In this way the future is not oriented to apocalypse necessarily, for the future holds the potential of the arrival of something new.

Irenaeus believed that the space between God and humankind is a space not of exile, but of promise and potential. He envisioned a future that would result in the greater manifestation of God's life in the world and an intensification of God's presence in life. In this way salvation is not so much being saved *from* our sins (though this is a crucially necessary element) as it is being saved *for* God. We were not created to escape earthly life, but to make the presence of God a reality in it. The life we experience all around us can be interpreted as a world growing away from God, lost in its rebellion, and awaiting the final day, or it can be viewed as a world growing toward God, even as God grows toward to the world.

This is especially hard to see in a world poised on the knife's edge of annihilation, and in love with its own destruction. The times between the already and not yet are times of peril and promise. We may be brought to the stark realization that the human community may not survive, but we are called nonetheless to an unremitting, unceasing proclamation of an alternative vision of God's relationship with the world.

Seen from the perspective of faith, this vision proclaims that nature's present indeterminacies can be understood as vehicles of promise. Nature is unfinished because it has a future and that future is defined by promise. God nourishes the world by offering

numerous possibilities to it in order that it continues its journey to the future. Promise and potential mark the created order as much as chaos and disorder do.

Perhaps we have to take leave of those stories that we have lived by that interpret the world in terms of its deficiency rather than as a space of potential and promise. We certainly must not opt for the reductionism of chemistry, genetics, or environment as the sole interpretative space of life in its varied forms. Science though does not have to be seen through the reductive lens. It does open us to many wonders about the processes of a world coming to be.

The narration of Christianity has led to a certain understanding of the physical systems present in the cosmos to be seen in less than world affirming ways. Christianity needs to reconsider its interpretations of the past as a perfection lost and the future as a wandering away from home. If the past is a promise we have forgotten, the future is an adventure we are moving toward. That Christian faith seems not to live into this vision can be profoundly discouraging. This is the place where narratives exercise such a structuring influence on us, because we just accept them as the truth. In this way our identities are so shaped by them we cannot envision another way to understand ourselves in the world. Not believing that God seeks to make the world divine, we do not see our lives as carrying the potential to manifest the reality of God in the world.

Irenaeus offers us a vision of God and humanity that offers more hope and promise because our willingness to allow God to inhabit our lives and form our consciousness and spirit enlarges the space for God's own presence to make a home in the world. This is where the new creation takes root and is also the ground on which we position ourselves and our science as responsible to the creation. Promise and potential do not of necessity mean perfection, and the world provides ample testimony that we live in estrangement from our destiny.

Jesus offers us the vision of the future that God intends and the picture he paints is richly textured. This is where the vision of Irenaeus offers us insight. We are called to horizons of hope, shared by all life. In the midst of great darkness the Christian story calls us to incarnate the very presence of God in a world coming to be. It invites us to manifest in our very lives the promise of reconciliation and peace. In this present fragility and struggle we can become defined by visions of the natural world that are captive to particular interpretations of biblical texts, or we can see that in the midst of this present uncertainty God is the future coming towards us, seeking to draw us and the world into God's heart of grace. This constitutes a different reading of Christian narratives, but it is one that speaks to scientific interpretations and offers us resources for addressing contemporary existence.

Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*, pp.315-567 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973.

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