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Aesthetics in the Ecotheology of Sallie McFague: A Critique and a Proposal for a Theological Aesthetics of Nature

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AESTHETICS IN THE ECOTHEOLOGY OF SALLIE MCFAGUE:
A CRITIQUE AND A PROPOSAL FOR A
THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS OF NATURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the

McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Mary-Paula Cancienne, RSM

May 2009

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Mary-Paula Cancienne, RSM

2009

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ABSTRACT

AESTHETICS IN THE ECOTHEOLOGY OF SALLIE MCFAGUE:
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May 2009

Dissertation Supervised by Marie Baird, Ph.D.

This dissertation focuses on the ecological theology of Sallie McFague, who, as part of her work, employs the use of aesthetics. This study recognizes her contribution and then seeks to build upon it.

In aim of this goal, a limited history of aesthetics in the Western tradition is surveyed and attention is given to three significant contemporary scholars in the field of aesthetics and nature/environment (Emily Brady, Allen Carlson, and Arnold Berleant). While this work intended to propose the rudiments of a *Theological Aesthetics of Nature*, we find that nature and culture are so intertwined that what is initially called for is a framework for a *Theological Aesthetics of the Environment* that supports approaching the environment of nature and culture with a sense of the unknown and with questions.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those individuals and communities who give their lives to new ideas in gratitude and service of the mystery we call creation. Among those who have inspired this work and to whom this writer is grateful are Sallie McFague, Shawn Copeland, the community of the Sisters of Mercy, and Elizabeth Martin Cancienne.

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Introduction

The earth's fragile habitats are imperiled and the list of causes is becoming increasingly familiar. Among these are a growing human population; unbridled economic growth; over consumption; urbanization; pollution; global warming; and the apparent lack of comprehension or denial by many people regarding how profoundly humans are impacting Earth's eco-systems. Yet, an increasing number of people have become aware that the power of humans to destroy Earth's fragile habitats is outstripping Earth's power to restore them.¹

Evidence of this shift in awareness can be seen in earlier efforts by some countries to reduce greenhouse gases, such as the "Kyoto Treaty," as well as by mounting agreement by professionals of diverse disciplines that humans are responsible for damage to Earth's environment.² In 2007 there was a document released by the United Nations in which a broad consensus of scientists from around the world claim with ninety percent certainty that humans are to blame for global warming.³ Almost weekly one can read of new data that supports this claim. It is no longer a question as to whether or not humans are causing harm to Earth's biosphere. Now the question concerns what we do about the situation.

¹Andrew C. Revkin, "Heat-Trapping Emissions Rise Globally," *The New York Times*, 27 September 2008, sec. A. For example, see globalcarbonproject.org.

²The Kyoto Treaty was negotiated in December of 1997 under which industrialized countries will reduce greenhouse gases by approximately 5.2% compared to 1990 levels. The United States and Australia have not signed on. The treaty was revised in 2002. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2233897.stm>> (12 March 2007).

³United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2007: Physical Science Basis: Summary for Policymakers*, February 2007, page 3. <<http://www.ipcc.ch/SPM2feb07.pdf>> (19 February 2007).

When scientists refer to the natural world or to “nature” they are usually speaking of the Earth’s biosphere—that part of the Earth and its atmosphere that is capable of supporting life and in which living organisms are found. However, today the human species performs multiple roles in Earth’s biosphere and within its many ecosystems, resulting in “nature” becoming an increasingly complex intermingling of humans, human constructed domains, and non-human species and their habitats and environments. “Nature” cannot be understood or approached as an objective reality, not by science, economics, or by any other disciplines. Rather, “nature” is a multifaceted social construct that has a significant role in a society’s culture. Also, religion(s), as an important element of a society’s culture, contributes its (their) own part in how “nature” as a multifaceted construct is viewed and valued. Often referring to it as “the creation,” religion is concerned with “nature,” both human and non-human. In the twenty-first century, however, nature’s religious and theological significance is more and more complicated by increasing human activity.

Many, including theologians, have responded to Earth’s increasingly threatened environment by helping us to see and grasp a more complex understanding of nature, and to understand our role and responsibility in caring for the health of Earth’s environment. One of these theologians is Sallie McFague.⁴

Over several decades McFague has developed a theological analysis and a response to an imperiled Earth. This emerges out of her examination of metaphor and images of God, where she ultimately makes the connection between how we envision God and how we understand and treat the Earth. As her investigations continue she

⁴Sallie McFague is Distinguished Theologian in Residence at the Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia. Prior to this she was Carpenter Professor of Theology at Vanderbilt Divinity School.

directs her attention toward understanding our failed sensibilities and relationships with the Earth. Her writings include God as friend in *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (1983), to various images in *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (1987), to a panentheistic exploration in *The Body of God: an Ecological Theology* (1993). She moves from an emphasis on metaphors of God to metaphors dealing with relational questions within the world as the body of God. Her 1997 book, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*, investigates our attitudes, sentiments, and mental constructs of nature.

McFague questions how we love nature, referring to the natural environment of Earth, especially as Christians. In *Super, Natural Christians* she writes: “Christian practice, loving God and neighbor *as subjects*, as worthy of our love in and for themselves, should be extended to nature.”⁵ She advocates for a “subject-subjects” model where we do not see nature as an object(s), but rather that we engage nature as individual and particular subjects.⁶

Each new book is a response to her previous one in that she addresses its shortcomings and tries to further her line of exploration. Thus, in her 2001 book, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*, she probes the issue of economics and North America’s consumerism, to the detriment of humanity and all of creation on the planet. Between writing *Super, Natural Christians* and *Life Abundant* McFague realizes that “We do not love nature or care for two-thirds of the world’s people if we who are 20 percent of the population use more than 80 percent of the world’s

⁵Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 1.

⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 3.

energy.”⁷ While McFague presses for a re-visioning of what the abundant life could mean within the world, metaphorically as the body of God, she does not bring forward work that she begins in *Super, Natural Christians* concerning aesthetics, which might be helpful in re-imagining the abundant life.

In *Super, Natural Christians*, while suggesting the use of writing as one way to explore experiences and to become aware and appreciative of the natural world (often referred to as “nature writing,” such as Annie Dillard’s essays), she says that science and aesthetics can help us to “pay attention” to nature as subjects in all of their particularity. Science “educates the eye,” asking us to become “apprentices” and “well informed friends.”⁸ Whereas the “aesthetic moment most basically is simply when one stops and looks at something for no reason other than interest in it. Aesthetic interest is absorption in the particular, the individual: *this* stone with these *particular* markings which feels *this* way in my hand right now at *this* moment.”⁹ Scientific information along with imagination enlivens us toward nature; such that, “aesthetic attention, arrested attention” makes us “see them.”¹⁰ We become focused directly on the other. Further, she writes:

‘Nature as subject’ initially shocks, but, hopefully, it also causes a nod of acknowledgment. Hence, the aesthetic rivets our attention on the other, but in a way that connects us to the other. In other words, an aesthetic response to another is neither subjective nor objective, neither focused only on the self or only on the other, but on the connection of the self to the other. But, and the ‘but’ is crucial here—on the other *as other*. The interest is, as with scientific attention, primarily on the other, not the self.¹¹

⁷Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xii.

⁸McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 135.

⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 135.

¹⁰McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 136.

¹¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 136.

Her concern is that we engage nature as individual subjects, subjects to which we are both similar and dissimilar. She claims that we do not have to objectify nature if what she names as the “loving eye” can be developed.¹²

The loving eye, then, is the eye of the second naiveté, educated so as to help us embrace intimacy while recognizing difference. This is the eye trained in detachment in order that its attachment will be objective, based on the reality of the other and not on its own wishes or fantasies. This is the eye bound to the other as in an apprentice to a skilled worker, listening to the other as does a foreigner in a new country. This is the eye that pays attention to the other so that the connections between knower and known, like the bond of friendship, will be based on the real subject in its real world.¹³

She focuses on “intimacy and distance,” with both an “affection and respect for difference.”¹⁴ The difficulty, of course, becomes how to do this, what to do when you are paying attention, and what to do next.

Throughout *Super, Natural Christians* McFague both uses and alludes to aesthetic themes. Sometimes she works with them directly, as with her comparison of the metaphors “landscape” and “maze,” for ways that we can think about nature.¹⁵ She prefers the image of a maze because, she contends, it does not lend itself to a single perspective. However, she does not make much of a case for “maze” and her points against using the metaphor “landscape” for nature lacks contemporary dialogue. In fact, she herself continues to use the metaphor “landscape.”¹⁶ The topic of “maze” never

¹²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 27, 28, 42, 43, 69, 77.

¹³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 116.

¹⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 116.

¹⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 67-70.

¹⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 107, 133, 165 “panorama.”

surfaces in *Life Abundant*. While spending most of her aesthetic attention on sight, she then advocates for touch as the primary experience of nature.¹⁷

McFague, like contemporary culture, does not have a hard and fast definition for aesthetics or for art. She understands aesthetics to be rooted in sense experience and values it as a way to sensitize our appreciation of creation. In general, McFague is to be commended for bringing aesthetics into theological dialogue with attitudes and praxis concerning nature. Yet, in *Super, Natural Christians* she does not go far enough, and in *Life Abundant* she engages economics and calls us to see and act in the world differently, but leaves aside aesthetics. After reflection and feedback regarding *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*, one has to wonder if McFague thought her approach in this particular book was too naïve. In her preface to *Life Abundant* she writes: “I realized love was not enough.”¹⁸

If this be the case, McFague is probably not alone when it comes to questioning how best to interject what some refer to as the “softer sciences” into academic and public discourse. A place at the table for theology, and I venture to say for disciplines such as aesthetics, can sometimes be difficult to obtain. However, in a contemporary world that is tied together so intensely with multi-media, especially visual media, and although aesthetics is more than visual experience, it would be gravely neglectful of theology to ignore the aesthetic role in a theology of nature for the twenty-first century.

While art, aesthetics, and beauty have been understood as very distinct activities, they have also been spoken of synonymously. As a way to enrich our investigation this

¹⁷McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 91-95.

¹⁸McFague, *Life Abundant*, xi.

dissertation will begin by considering selective understandings of art, beauty, and aesthetics historically in the Western tradition, then moving to more contemporary understandings of aesthetics and the environment.

Toward this aim, McFague's work provides a service in that she begins to explore a contemporary theology of nature that includes aesthetics in a way that is more than just an acknowledgement of possible contributions to be made by aesthetics. Thus, this dissertation will examine her most recent works and with a hermeneutics of suspicion postulate what is missing and, finally, consider how to build on her work.

According to McFague, a contemporary theology of nature must grapple with the fact that humanity is not only dependent on the natural world, but in an ironic fashion, "the very air, water, trees, soil, [and] forests on which we depend now depend on us to manage them *economically*, that is, for the long-term well-being of the whole household of planet Earth."¹⁹ As we increasingly become aware of our responsibilities to all of life on the planet, and not just to the growing human population, we realize the need for skills, methods, systems, and technology that could help us to conserve and preserve the natural world, as well as assist us in ethically planning and managing increasing dimensions of Earth's environment. As we do so, we need to continually ask how the natural world, humanity, and our social, constructed worlds could interact in better ways, in ways that are respectful of all of creation, or toward what McFague refers to as a re-imagined "abundant life." Obviously, this line of questioning is not abstract.

¹⁹McFague, *Life Abundant*, 102-103.

For example, it is estimated that beginning sometime in 2007 over half of the world's people were living in urban areas.²⁰ And, one of every three city residents in the world now live in slums.²¹ This migration to the world's cities and urban areas where so many people live in squalor illustrates our need to imagine, design, construct, and manage complex natural, and social environments, and to do so with humility, respect, foresight, care, and justice.

For the most part, in *Super, Natural Christians*, McFague focuses aesthetics primarily on personal and local experiences with the hope that these experiences will help train and guide one's actions in larger arenas. In *Life Abundant* she leaves this approach behind and, along with it, aesthetics. Instead, she approaches the world and nature through economics.

However, in 2008 McFague wrote yet another book, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*.²² In this text, written for a general audience, rather than an academic one, McFague distils and synthesizes her earlier material and focuses her major theological themes on global warming. McFague continues to be intently focused on the *poor*, which now includes the natural world. She reasserts her metaphor, *the world as the body of God*, but with particular attention to the global problem of climate change. She calls, once again, for a new vision of God, the world, and of humanity. Sustainability of the planet and justice for *all of creation* through an

²⁰Joan Lowry, "World City Dwellers to Outnumber Rural," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8 April 2002, World News Section. <<http://www.post-gazette.com/world/20020406urbanworld0408p2asp>> (11 October 2006).

²¹Eduardo Lopez Moreno and Rasna Warah, "The State of the World's Cities Report 2006-7: Urban and Slum Trends in the 21st Century," *UN Chronicle Online Edition*. <<http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2006/issue2/0206p24htm>> (29 October 2006).

²²Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, Theology, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2008).

ecological economic paradigm with a different vision of God and humankind, remain her mission.

Also, while McFague does not pursue aesthetics per se in her 2008 text, she does begin to use the term, *aesthetics*, in a way she has not previously done before. This indicates that as McFague prepares *A New Climate for Theology* she reviews her previous appreciation and use of aesthetics. Then, she massages her vision in light of global warming and her continued focus on sustainability, justice, and economics, as well as God, world, and anthropology. However, the topic of *aesthetics* is not her aim and, in fact, the term does not appear in the index of the book. Yet, her periodic use of the term in her 2008 text is telling and important for this study.

Furthermore, after examining McFague's work, this dissertation will propose that approaching nature through theological aesthetics, especially one that is attentive to contemporary understandings of nature and aesthetics, could be one way of supporting critical appreciation and engagement of a twenty-first century environment.²³ Some basic reasons include the following: 1) aesthetics has both personal and corporate characteristics; 2) aesthetics involves appreciation and creativity; 3) aesthetics is not outside diverse, complex understandings of nature, but integral to how humanity perceives nature and culture and to how humanity participates in shaping the overall environmental reality; 4) the role or place of aesthetics only grows as humanity has increasing responsibility in determining the shape and quality of a complicated

²³A search was done to see if anyone has written on Sallie McFague and her use of aesthetics concerning nature. While several dissertations and theses concerning McFague's work have been written, this search reveals that none have focused on this material. However, it did show that in 1997 a dissertation called "Ecofeminism in a Postmodern Landscape: The Body of God, Gaia, and the Cyborg," was written by Rita Marie Lester at Northwestern University, under the guidance of Rosemary Radford Ruether. It included in its bibliography McFague's 1997 book, *Super, Natural Christians*. But the author does not reference McFague's 1997 text in her writing, nor does she reference it in her notes.

environment on a planet with limitations. This dissertation aims to show that a contemporary conversation that includes aesthetics, theology, and nature, spurred by McFague and with the help of others, could make a positive contribution in terms of how we perceive, understand, and approach the environment of an imperiled Earth.

Moreover, as we struggle to understand the gifts and limits of the natural world, we also wrestle with our own human limitations, sometimes failing to acknowledge that we even have them. These can sometimes include our failure to understand and acknowledge when our preferred customs, practices, pleasures, economies, and ideologies are contributing to the devastation of the Earth's environment. The questions become: How are we to be creative? How do we contribute in shaping and constructing viable, healthy, social, ecological environments? How do we balance and integrate our responsibility for life on this planet amidst Earth's limitations, our own limitations, and calls for justice? How do we participate in on-going creation?

In light of such questions, Earth's emerging reality requires of theology a more purposeful understanding of humanity's capacity for participation in and responsibility for a world that is never static or fixed, but is dynamic and evolving. *Nature*, in these times, includes a strikingly cultural, social, urbanizing, ecological environment.²⁴

Thus, because of the inseparability of our constructed reality from the natural world on a planet that does have limitations, and because humanity has increasing determination regarding the future quality, shape, and health of Earth's environment, this

²⁴Allen Carlson, "Environmental Aesthetics," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 541-555. Carlson's "environmental aesthetics" incorporates the natural world and the humanly constructed world, including art.

dissertation will argue that, to some degree, we are already engaging in a complex environment through aesthetics, whether or not we name it as such. However, a twenty-first century aesthetics of nature that is inseparable from the humanly constructed environment is not about a static “picture” mentality, reminiscent of an appreciation for emotionally stimulating, grand picturesque landscapes, nor about an aesthetic formalism. Rather, this understanding of aesthetics while supporting awareness and appreciation, also promotes our participation in the health, design, and function of non-static dynamic environments where a broader understanding of nature envisions an on-going, evolving, complex environment. Most importantly, today’s theological aesthetics must be concerned with a beauty that speaks of humility, justice, care, and of responsible actions fostering life both now and into the future.

The use of aesthetics is not necessarily positive. To be so a theological aesthetics of nature must speak to what McFague describes as prophetic and sacramental approaches to nature; that is, to the glory of God to be found in all of creation’s particularity, and of our desire to be “fully alive” in the midst of this “glory.”²⁵ A theological aesthetics of nature would have to assist us in both appreciating how God’s “glory” overflows into and amidst nature, including its natural, constructed, and social realities, and how we are called and challenged to use our creative capacities to care for and to participate well in on-going creation. It would have to encourage sensitivity for deep beauty, a beauty known to be possible, no matter how fleeting, but also experienced as missing. It would have to nurture our capacity to weep and to act for each other, all kinds of *others*.

²⁵McFague, *Life Abundant*, 3, 201-202.

One way this study will work to further McFague's efforts will be to engage with scholars who are writing specifically in the area of aesthetics and nature. Particular writers to be highlighted are Allen Carlson, Emily Brady, and Arnold Berleant. Carlson advocates for an aesthetic understanding that involves common sense and science.²⁶ He attempts to perceive and appreciate nature for what it is. This view gives science a central role in an aesthetics of nature.²⁷ However, there are some who take exception to Carlson and his insistence on the need for science to be so central in an aesthetics of nature.

Brady, for instance, values appreciating nature as it presents itself, but she does not believe that scientific information is necessary in order to do this. Rather, she places in high regard the role of the imagination for how we appreciate nature.²⁸ And, while Berleant is more accepting of Carlson's opinion, he emphasizes that the melding of the natural environment and the human results in nothing less than a "social aesthetics."²⁹ These authors will both agree and challenge positions argued by McFague.

This dissertation will, in the end, attempt to build on McFague's work by pursuing a way to bring theological and secular views on aesthetics and nature, in light of the overall environment, into dialogue. The purpose of this aim is to support a deeper appreciation of the natural world and to encourage greater responsibility for how we act

²⁶Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 6-7, 11-13.

²⁷Allen Carlson, "Environmental Aesthetics," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 548-551. Also, Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

²⁸Allen Carlson, "Budd and Brady on the Aesthetics of Nature," *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 55, no. 218 (January 2005): 106-107.

²⁹Arnold Berleant, "Getting Along Beautifully: Ideas for Social Aesthetics," in *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing), 147-161.

creatively in the shaping of the environment that is an increasingly complex integration of nature and culture.

Anticipated Contribution

As the human population anticipates nine billion people by 2050,³⁰ the role of humans in shaping the global environment will only expand. How we engage, perceive, appreciate, and respond to a twenty-first century environment presently marked with increasing tensions, will significantly contribute to determining what kind of world we, and those after us, live in. While there is a body of literature concerning aesthetics and nature, there are minimal writings on theological aesthetics and nature, especially concerning contemporary understandings of aesthetics and nature. McFague's writings, while not providing a systematic approach to aesthetics, do provide significant and focused material where aesthetics and ecotheology are engaged within a Christian tradition. Thus, McFague's writings will be analyzed in terms of how they contribute to the development of a theological aesthetics of a twenty-first century nature/environment.

A contemporary theological aesthetics that realizes the manifold dimensions of nature might be able to assist us with apprehending and appreciating the interrelatedness of creation, as well as its multiplicities, paradoxes, and challenges. And it may encourage us to contribute ethically in its evolution. A contemporary theological aesthetics may also have something to offer late modernity/post-modernity in terms of re-dimensioning how we see and experience the world, as opposed to what is sometimes described as a flatness of experience, resulting from more exclusively cognitive approaches.

³⁰United Nations, 2005. < <http://esa.un.org/unpp/p2k0data.asp> > (13 January, 2007). This estimate is based on a medium variant. But this increase in population could happen as early as 2030. Earth's human population is presently just over 6.5 billion.

A dissertation and book search show no comparable studies of this topic to date. It is a hope that this dissertation will call attention to the need for aesthetics in theology regarding nature and the overall environment. Also, it is hoped that it will contribute to the growing awareness of the importance of perceiving, understanding, and engaging the overall environment in ways that support the flourishing of life, justice, and peace.

To carry out the aims of this dissertation, the methodology will be to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to Sallie McFague's ecological theology. This hermeneutical strategy will encompass her attention to aesthetics in her theology. The second major move will be to compare and contrast her understandings of aesthetics and its role in her ecological theology with selected scholars who focus on aesthetics and nature. The final major hermeneutical strategy will be constructive, culminating in a proposed initial framework for a theological aesthetics of nature/environment.

Chapter one will provide selective information regarding the ancient Greek use of aesthetics, followed by theology and aesthetics, and, lastly, aesthetics and nature. It will help locate this dissertation within a historical conversation and set a context for this study as a whole.

Chapter two's task will be to describe the trajectory of Sallie McFague's theology with particular attention to her treatment of metaphor and how it operates in her writings on nature. It will examine where and how aesthetics plays a part in McFague's writings, whether or not named as such. Next, the task will be to understand McFague's overt contributions to a theological aesthetics of nature, especially in her later texts.

Chapter three will examine three major voices from the discipline of aesthetics: Emily Brady, Allen Carlson, and Arnold Berleant. The guiding questions will be: What

contributions can they make to a theological aesthetics of nature? In what ways do they improve or challenge McFague's writings? How is theological aesthetics enhanced by contemporary understandings of nature and aesthetics offered by Brady, Carlson, and Berleant?

Chapter four will describe an initial framework for a contemporary theological aesthetics of the environment that includes nature and culture. Building on the work of Sallie McFague and others, and by raising questions for further study, this dissertation intends to encourage a vision of life that is sustainable and just for *all* of creation.

Chapter One

What is Aesthetics in Relation to Theology and Nature?

To assess critically Sallie McFague's aesthetic treatment of nature and to propose an initial framework for a theological aesthetics of nature/environment, it will be necessary to understand historical meanings and relationships between aesthetics, nature, and theology. Thus, this chapter will examine the terms "aesthetics" and "nature," drawing from select ideas and writings representative of positions that have influenced Western understandings. Although this chapter will not supply a comprehensive treatment of aesthetics and nature, it will provide a limited survey of the evolution of these terms and a cadre of their meanings, drawing on primary and secondary sources.

Initially we will examine aesthetics starting with ancient Greek philosophies, particularly their most influential thinkers, Plato and Aristotle. Here we see that questions and values concerning measurement and harmony, reason and the ideal, imitation and ethics, come into play regarding how we perceive beauty, the proper "nature" of things, and the responsibility of humans to use their creativity well. Next, we move from an early Hebrew sense of beauty that is closely connected to God's "glory" and with living righteously, to a representative sampling of Christian ideas on beauty and aesthetics that, among other things, recalls Plato's idea of splendor. This chapter will conclude with an exploration of aesthetics and nature, pointing out how a hierarchy of realms led us to favor the spiritual realm, or the world of ideas, over and against the natural world.

This survey is important for several reasons. First, it can provide information regarding the roots of some of our assumptions about the terms. Second, it may help to highlight limited understandings concerning some of our assumptions about aesthetics, nature, and theology. Third, it may provide some point of view that needs to be re-claimed as part of the ongoing dialogue regarding aesthetics, nature, and theology.

A. Aesthetics and the Ancient Greeks

The meaning of aesthetics, and its related terms, has evolved over time and continues to do so. As we examine its evolution, it will be useful to notice how aesthetics treats subject and object; relationships; repose and dynamism; perception and interpretation; creativity; value; reason and emotion; imagination; ethics; and the material world. Although aesthetics is more than about beauty, beauty remains especially important to aesthetics.

Historically, beauty was often associated with measurement and justice, showing concern for moderation, symmetry, and harmony.¹ Greek art often focused on an ephemeral ideal of the human body, but, as such, there was no perfect prototype to copy. Thus, they composed by way of a synthesis of excellent examples of certain parts of living bodies. They created a “synthesis that became the vehicle for the expression of a psychophysical Beauty that harmonized body and soul.”² Examining Greek sculpture Umberto Eco writes: “This Beauty finds its finest expression in static forms, in which a

¹Umberto Eco, ed., *History of Beauty* (New York: Rizzoli, 2004), 37. Eco is President of the Scuola Superiore di Studi Umanistici, University of Bologna. He has written and lectured extensively on subjects related to aesthetics, semiotics, linguistics, and morality. The volume being cited is an historical investigation and commentary on the meaning of beauty by Eco in which he breaks down his study by periods and topics and chooses excerpts from original writings from those significant periods. His commentary and selection of excerpts is accompanied by illustrations of art works that help to communicate the meaning of beauty for those times. The capitalization of “Beauty” is Eco’s.

²Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, 45.

fragment of action or movement finds equilibrium and repose, and for which simplicity of expression is more suitable than a wealth of detail.”³

The ancient Greeks explored the connections between beauty, virtue, measurement, reason, the making of things, the imagination, and the senses. However, Eco referring to classical Greek thought writes:

[W]e can talk of an early understanding of Beauty, but it was a Beauty bound up with the various arts that conveyed it, devoid of any unitary stature: in paeans Beauty is expressed as the harmony of the cosmos, in poetry it is expressed as that enchantment that makes men rejoice, in sculpture as the appropriate measure and symmetry of its elements, and in rhetoric as the right phonetic rhythm.⁴

Beauty, aesthetics, and art, inclusive of various crafts and technical skills, have at times been understood as synonymous terms, somewhat related terms, as well as distinctly different terms. However, in ancient times aesthetics and beauty were in close proximity to one another and held in far more esteem than was art, craft making, and the technical skills. This kind of early diminishment of the arts and earthy materiality can be found in Plato’s writings.

1. Plato (429-347 B.C.E.)

The philosopher Plato can be understood as focusing primarily on two main concepts of beauty. His first is described as “harmony and proportion between the parts,” and the second as “splendor.”⁵ His understandings of harmony, proportion, and splendor are found imbedded throughout his writings and they help give guidance for how things could be as one aspires toward what he considers the spiritual, ideal Forms. Plato, centuries later, will be called a moralist; that is, one who believes if something has a

³Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, 45.

⁴Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, 41.

⁵Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, 49.

moral flaw then it has an aesthetic flaw as well.⁶ In their introduction to Plato's texts, Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns write:

Among the arts, the highest is that of the divine maker (the Demiurgos) who composed the universe as an imitation of Ideas or unchanging Forms. Like him, the statesman, most exalted of human makers, envisages the human community according to the Ideas of justice, the good, courage, temperance, and the beautiful.⁷

In light of the Forms being expressed in material reality, Plato contends that there is a divine maker and there are human makers as well.

In Plato's *Sophist* the stranger says that the "products of nature, as they are called, are works of divine art, as things made out of them by man are works of human art. Accordingly, there will be two kinds of production: one human, the other divine" (265e).⁸ He further states that the divine produces originals as well as "the image that in every case accompanies it" (266c). The stranger explains:

-*Stranger*: I suppose that we, and the other animals, and the elements out of which things are made—fire, water, and the like—are known by us to be each and all the creation and work of God.

-*Theaetetus*: True.

-*Stranger*: And there are images of them, which are not them, but which correspond to them; and these are also the creation of a wonderful skill.

-*Theaetetus*: What are they?

-*Stranger*:: The appearances which spring up of themselves in sleep or by day, such as a shadow when darkness arises in a fire, or the reflection which is

⁶Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 248. Emily Brady is vice-president of the *International Society for Environmental Ethics*, associate editor of the journal, *Environmental Values*, and a professor at the University of Edinburgh. <<http://www.geos.ed.ac.uk/homes/ebrady/>> (17 February 2008).

⁷Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 4.

⁸Plato, "Sophist," trans. F.M. Cornford, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 1013. All further excerpts from Plato's writings will be from this volume, except where otherwise noted. Numbers in parentheses indicate paragraph citation markings.

produced when the light in bright and smooth objects meets on their surface with an external light and creates a perception the opposite of our ordinary sight.⁹
Sophist (266b)

Plato hints of a rich mythic belief system that operates even as his writings begin to give voice to a different kind of rationality. He reasons that the divine and human makers each produce “originals” and “images” (266a-d). Production, here, is defined as “any power that can bring into existence what did not exist before” (265b).

While assigning to both the divine and to humans the capacity to produce, or to make “originals” as well as “images,” or what he in addition calls “actual things” and “likenesses” (266d),¹⁰ Plato says that there are two different kinds of human art, the productive and the acquisitive (265a).¹¹ But, it is by way of productive art that we come to imitation (265a-b), for within the human production of images he distinguishes between the production of “likenesses” and “semblances” (264c, 266d). Plato does not trust semblances because he thinks they are deceptive.

Certain of the fact that there can be false images, just as there can be false statements; Plato surmises in the *Sophist* that there can exist “an art of deception” (264d). Accordingly, within dubious “semblances,” there are two kinds (267a). One is a semblance that is made with tools, and another, focusing on the whirly-ness of the sophist, happens when “someone uses his person or voice to counterfeit.” This Plato calls “mimicry” (267a).

⁹Plato, “Sophist,” trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, eds. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 47.

¹⁰cf. Plato, “Sophist,” trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, 47. In Jowett’s translation he uses the words “originals” and “images,” but also “things themselves” and “likenesses.”

¹¹“Acquisitive” refers to “hunting” and other such skills (*Sophist* 265a).

Mimicry, itself, has two forms. The first shows some degree of knowledge, the second example does not. The first he calls “mimicry by acquaintance” and the second, “guided by opinion,” he calls “conceit mimicry” (267d-e).

Because Plato holds in contrast the ideal, spiritual, and unchanging Forms over against imperfect material reality, there exists a substantial dualism in his philosophy. This mode of thinking further pervades his thoughts on mimesis. Plato has greater regard for what is original, and for that which has most knowledge of the original, as opposed to that which is not original or at a distance from it.

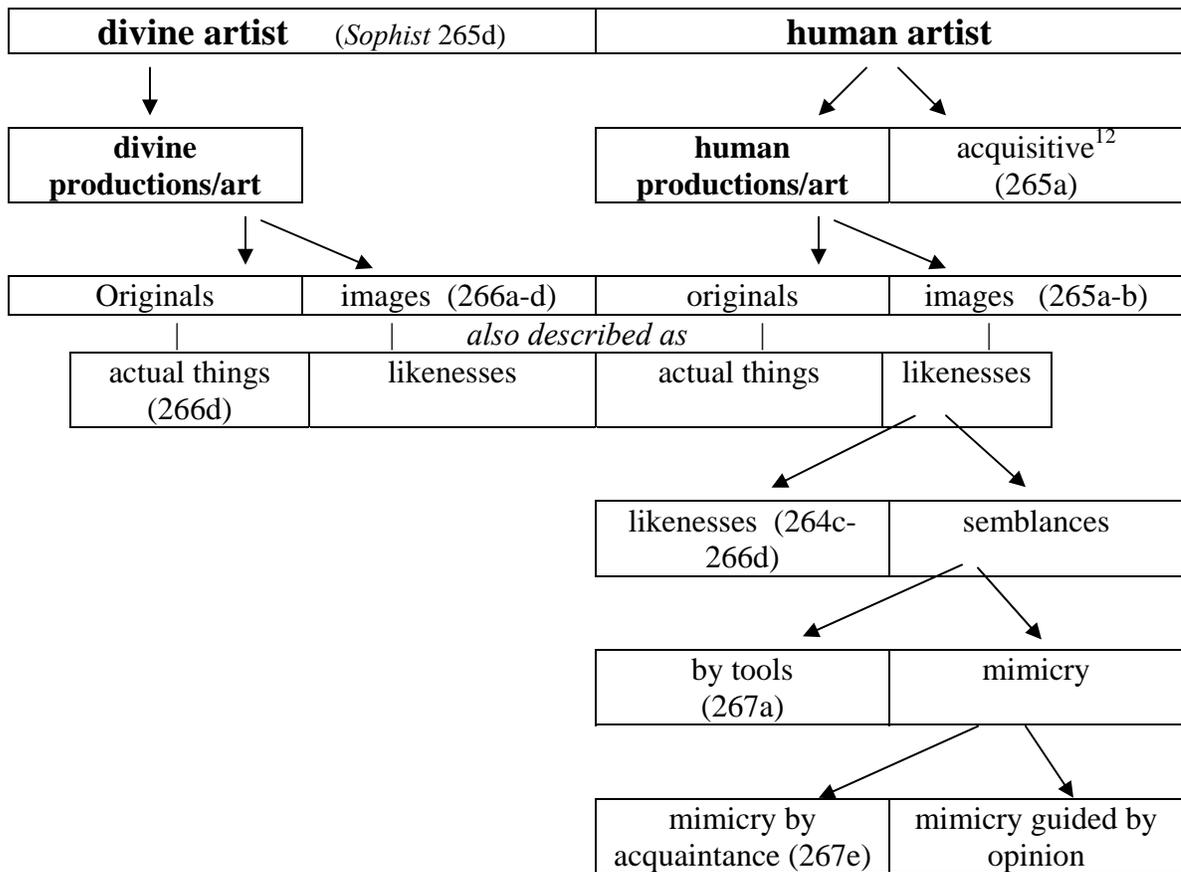


Figure 1. Plato: Divine and human art—originals and images, to mimicry¹³

¹²“Acquisitive” refers to “hunting” and other such skills (*Sophist* 265a).

Plato is fearful of distortions. While he maneuvers over evermore minutia he advocates, though in different ways, for openness to the Forms, certainly the virtuous Forms. Thus, in *Phaedrus*, he tells how the soul will journey differently on earth depending on how much it has seen:

In her first birth she shall not be planted in any brute beast, but the soul that hath seen the most of being shall enter into the human babe that shall grow into the seeker after wisdom or beauty, a follower of the Muses and a lover; the next, having seen less, shall dwell in a king that abides by law, or a warrior and ruler; the third in a statesman, a man of business, or a trader; the fourth in an athlete, or physical trainer, or physician; the fifth shall have the life of a prophet or a Mystery priest; to the sixth that of a poet or other imitative artist shall be fittingly given; the seventh shall live in an artisan or farmer; the eighth in a Sophist or demagogue; the ninth in a tyrant.

Now in all these incarnations he who lives righteously has a better lot for his portion, and he who lives unrighteously a worse.¹⁴

Phaedrus (248d-e)

The closer you are to having seen what is most important, the greater the distance you are from semblance and tyranny, as well as from soil and dirt. And, although he values the statesman, who is the major builder, he unflinchingly asserts the value of the spiritual realm over material reality. Again, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates says:

Beauty it was ours to see in all its brightness in those days when, amidst that happy company, we beheld with our eyes that blessed vision, ourselves in the train of Zeus, others following some other god; then were we all initiated into that mystery which is rightly accounted blessed beyond all others; whole and unblemished were we that did celebrate it, untouched by the evil that awaited us in days to come; whole and unblemished likewise, free from all alloy, steadfast and blissful were the spectacles on which we gazed in the moment of final revelation; pure was the light that shone around us, and pure were we, without taint of that

¹³Figure 1 by Mary-Paula Cancienne. cf. Plato's *Sophist*. Also, Measurement has two forms: The first concerns relation to an other, and the second concerns a standard (*Statesman* 238d).

¹⁴Plato, "Phaedrus," trans. R Hackforth, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 495.

prison house which now we are encompassed withal, and call a body, fast bound therein as an oyster in its shell.¹⁵ *Phaedrus* (250b-c)

In soul's earthly existence, then, there "dwells no luster" (250b). For Plato, splendor remains at a distance.

With splendor muted, what is required is a commitment to the "art of measurement," which has two forms: the first involving relation to another, and the second concerning a standard (*Statesman* 283d).¹⁶ Measurement refers to a just right tempo, length, rhythm, shape, emotion, action, and is determined in relation to all elements involved. Further, measurement is determined according to ideal criteria. Proper measurement involves negotiated realities, following along the lines of ideal Forms. But Plato, himself, did not originate the idea of order and beauty according to measure. Pythagoras, (c. 570-495 B.C.E.) who left no writings, but instead a league of Pythagorians, emphasized order's importance in beauty. Eco points out:

Pythagoras (who in the course of his travels probably came into contact with the mathematical reflections of the Egyptians) was the first to maintain that the origin of all things lay in numbers. The Pythagoreans had a sort of holy dread of the infinite and of that which cannot be reduced to a limit, and so they looked to numbers for the rule capable of limiting reality, of giving it order and comprehensibility. Pythagoras marks the birth of an aesthetico-mathematical view of the universe: all things exist because they are ordered and they are ordered because they are the realization of mathematical laws, which are at once a condition of existence and of Beauty.¹⁷

Interestingly, Pythagoras supposedly believed that harmony consisted of odds and evens, males and females, opposites, conflicts where there is only one side that is in fact

¹⁵Plato, "Phaedrus," trans. R Hackforth, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 496-497.

¹⁶Plato, "Statesman," trans. J.B. Skemp, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 1050.

¹⁷Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, 61.

“good or beautiful; the elements placed in opposition to them represent error, evil, and disharmony.”¹⁸ However, it was Heraclitus (c. 500 B.C.E.) who questioned this view and offered something surprisingly different. According to Eco, Heraclitus suggested:

[I]f the universe contains opposites, elements that appear to be incompatible, like unity and multiplicity, love and hate, peace and war, calm and movement, harmony between these opposites cannot be realized by annulling one of them, but by leaving both to exist in a state of continuous tension. Harmony is not the absence of but the equilibrium between opposites.¹⁹

Heraclitus taught that beauty is not limited to perceptibility and sensibility. He even taught that the “harmonious Beauty of the world manifests itself as random flux.”²⁰

However, regarding Plato, we see that he incorporates into his thinking a concern for measurement with the belief that there is something more than the physical ability to measure, or to see and to hear. He suggests the soul’s ability to see with the “mind’s eye.”²¹

Writing in the fifth and fourth century B.C.E., Plato writes in the *Symposium* of the wise woman Diotima and of her lesson to Socrates on love and beauty. Diotima says that if life is ever worth living it is when one has “attained” the “vision of the very soul of beauty” (211d).²² In Plato’s text Socrates recounts Diotima saying:

[I]f it were given to man to gaze on beauty’s very self—unsullied, unalloyed, and freed from the mortal taint that haunts the frailer loveliness of flesh and blood—if, I say, it were given to man to see the heavenly beauty face to face, would you call *his*, she asked me, an unenviable life, whose eyes had been opened to the vision, and who had gazed upon it in true contemplation until it had become his own forever?

¹⁸Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, 72.

¹⁹Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, 72.

²⁰Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, 56.

²¹Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, 41.

²²Plato, “Symposium,” trans. Michael Joyce in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 563.

And remember, she said, that it is only when he discerns beauty itself through what makes it visible that a man will be quickened with the true, and not the seeming, virtue—for it is virtue’s self that quickens him, not virtue’s semblance. And when he has brought forth and reared this perfect virtue, he shall be called the friend of god, and if ever it is given to man to put on immortality, it shall be given. *Symposium* (211e-212a)²³

According to Christopher Janaway writing on Plato’s aesthetics, “the ideal lover is portrayed as ascending through a hierarchy of love-objects—first the beautiful body of a particular human beloved, then all beautiful bodies equally, then the beauty of souls, then that of laws, customs and ideas—and ending as a lover of wisdom or philosopher.”²⁴

Again, Diotima explains to Socrates:

Starting from individual beauties, the quest for the universal beauty must find him ever mounting the heavenly ladder, stepping from rung to rung—that is, from one to two, and from two to *every* lovely body, from bodily beauty to the beauty of institutions, from institutions to learning, and from learning in general to special lore that pertains to nothing but the beautiful itself—until at last he comes to know what beauty is. *Symposium* (211c)²⁵

Where Plato advocates for a wide horizon on the one hand, at least for the likes of Socrates, for the more plebian sort he would prefer that their horizon be proscribed. His concern is that those who are not philosophers will involve themselves, and others, in thoughts and actions that are not guided by reason.²⁶ The imagination should not run wild. Instead, beauty entails not only measurement and standard, but it partakes of rationality as well.

²³Plato, “Symposium,” trans. Michael Joyce in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 563.

²⁴Christopher Janaway, “Plato,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2002), 9.

²⁵Plato, “Symposium,” trans. Michael Joyce in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 562-563.

²⁶Janaway, “Plato,” 3-4, 6.

One may ask, how do reason and emotions affect our desires, perceptions, interpretations, and creations, be they concerning our relationships, artifacts, laws, institutions, or other kinds of human design? How do we balance the cognitive and rational with imagination and emotion in terms of perception, appreciation, and creativity?

Reflecting on Plato's thoughts on creativity, Janaway writes: "All love desires some kind of offspring. The highest form of love catches hold of a superior object and produces a superior offspring," as explained by Diotima in the *Symposium* (211e-212a).²⁷ He recalls in the *Republic* how Plato favors the makings of the philosopher. Janaway writes: "While the poet makes only images, and understands only images, the philosopher, who strives for and encounters the eternal unchanging Beauty, can bring genuine goods into the world because he understands what virtue is."²⁸ However, with the aide of the muses the poet can exhibit a kind of brilliant madness.²⁹

Of course, it is not just poetry that receives Plato's scrutiny, the plastic arts, those that use tools, receive his scrutiny as well (*Sophist* 267a).³⁰ In the following important passage from the *Republic*, Socrates ponders other potential threats:

Is it, then, only the poets that we must supervise and compel to embody in their poems the semblance of the good character or else not write poetry among us, or must we keep watch over the other craftsmen, and forbid them to represent the evil disposition, the licentious, the illiberal, the graceless, either in the likeness of living creatures or in buildings or in any other product of their art, on penalty, if unable to obey, of being forbidden to practice their art among us, that our guardians may not be bred among symbols of evil, as it were in a pasturage of poisonous herbs, lest grazing

²⁷Janaway, "Plato," 9-10.

²⁸Janaway, "Plato," 10.

²⁹Janaway, "Plato," 11. See Plato's *Ion* (534a-b).

³⁰Plato, "Sophist," Francis Macdonald Cornford in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 1015.

freely and cropping from many such day by day they little by little and all
unawares accumulate and build up a huge mass of evil in their own souls.
Republic (401b-c)³¹

Creativity for the thrill and sake of creativity does not hold sway with Plato. But in
Phaedrus he is a bit more favorably disposed to the artist's path.

Herein, Socrates even “praises ‘madness,’ explicitly including the state of mind
in which good poets compose, ‘a Bacchic frenzy’ without which there is no true
poetry.”³² James A. Martin says that an artist's talents can be considered a “gift
(*charisma*) or an inspiration unique to the artist's ‘genius’.”³³ But this “gift” can be
dangerous, going too far in either of two directions:

Unordered variety threatened to induce Dionysian chaos, unvaried form
threatened to produce Apollonian deadness (to borrow a contrast later
celebrated by Nietzsche). Thus was born that ‘classical formalism’ that
would inform Kant's concept of beauty and would constitute, for Hegel
and others, the norms of the highest achievements of art in the spiritual life
of humankind.³⁴

Plato realized both the constructive and the unruly dimensions of creativity.

Generally, however, one could easily perceive Plato's efforts as oppositional to the arts;
yet, it is important to note the means by which Plato confronts and engages his audience.
Janaway contends that while Plato is working to steer his culture in a different direction,

³¹Plato, “Republic,” trans. Paul Shorey in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and
Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 646.

³²Janaway, “Plato,” 11.

³³James Alfred Martin, *Beauty and Holiness: The Dialogue between Aesthetics and Religion* (Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 1990), 13. Martin taught at Union Theological Seminary where he was a
Danforth Professor of Religion, and he was Professor Emeritus of Philosophy of Religion at Columbia
University. He died in 2007. The relationship of aesthetics and religion, or beauty and holiness, played a
central role in his investigations. This particular work draws attention to how certain cultures have
understood beauty as rooted in morality, where for others, beauty itself speaks of virtue. Contemporary
cultures can be seen to wrestle with certain assumptions and distinctions. Questions regarding nature are
not excluded from these tensions.

³⁴Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 13.

he also employs that culture's very practices, its poetic craft, in order to do so.³⁵ In addition, while Plato might prefer that those involved in crafting, teaching, and persuading be guided by philosophers who are more familiar and committed to truth, beauty, and goodness, he calls more than just philosophers to the task of reason:

[W]e must look for those craftsmen who by the happy gift of nature are capable of following the trail of true beauty and grace, that our young men, dwelling as it were in a salubrious region, may receive benefit from all things about them, whence the influence that emanates from works of beauty may waft itself to eye or ear like a breeze that brings for wholesome places health, and so from earliest childhood insensibly guide them to likeness, to friendship, to harmony with beautiful reason.

Republic (401c-d)³⁶

But perhaps it is Diotima in the *Symposium* who gives us the clearest indication of the beauty to which Plato longs:

It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshiper as it is to every other.

Nor will his vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is—but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of it in such sort that, however much the parts may wax and wane, it will be neither more nor less, but still the same inviolable whole.

Symposium (211a-b)³⁷

According to Martin, Plato relied upon mathematical and geometrical models, such as the triangle, as a way to speak about the eternal Forms whose images in the temporal world change. However, no perfect version or model exists; yet, we “must

³⁵Janaway, “Plato,” 12-13.

³⁶Plato, “Republic,” trans. Paul Shorey in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 646.

³⁷Plato, “Symposium,” trans. Michael Joyce in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 562.

look” to these if we are to “achieve the goals of truly human life.”³⁸ Martin contends that Plato’s search is not passive:

It is infused and motivated by an active process that is in many respects like that of artistic creation; indeed, it is the basic drive underlying that and all other forms of creation. It is *eros*, or love. Artistic creation is good if and only to the extent that it takes its ordered place in the more fundamental work of love in relation to its ultimate object.³⁹

This “ultimate” is the good, it is excellence in everyway.⁴⁰ More so, “the highest and most powerful reflection of that total excellence or perfection which is the Good is the Beautiful.” And this “Beauty” is the “chief propaedeutic to the Good.”⁴¹ That is, it offers by its loveliness an invitation to the good and a place for learning to begin.

Moreover, Eco asserts that for Plato, “Beauty has an autonomous existence, distinct from the physical medium.” Therefore, the “sight of the senses must be overcome by intellectual sight, which requires a knowledge of the dialectical arts, in other words philosophy.”⁴² Yet, there needs to be a connection between the abstract spiritual world and the material world.

Thus, while beauty is eternal and unchanging and it is not rooted in the physical world, the physical world does partake in it, even though its participation does not affect ultimate beauty. Further, to know beauty we are to “discern beauty itself through what

³⁸Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 14

³⁹Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 14.

⁴⁰Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 14.

⁴¹Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 14.

⁴²Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, 50.

makes it visible” (*Symposium* 212a).⁴³ Plato assigns to “divinity the work of the *demiurgos*: the work of incarnating eternal forms in temporal formations.”⁴⁴

Beauty is associated with the highest of spiritual values, but human production can participate in beauty as long as imitation and deception are minimized; that is, as long as semblance is curtailed. Not all images are bad or deceitful. Even God creates, and according to Plato, even creates images (*Sophist* 266a, c).⁴⁵ While Plato gives greatest value to spiritual Forms and secondary status to material reality, he exhorts human makers to create well, avoid what is not real, and to use reasoning to create acceptable things and likenesses. Yet, is there an attitude to be found in Plato’s writings that in spite of wanting to generate a model social state, paradoxically fosters a dismissive attitude toward the material world for a mythic world, and thereby complicates even a practical, humble, earthly project? However, in Plato’s favor, is the diminished condition of the natural world brought about in great measure because of the toll of human products, too often made without regard for deep moral considerations that would include their impact upon the natural world?

Plato did not come to his ideas in isolation. He was immersed in the dialogue of his time that included stories, teachings, and writings bequeathed by his culture’s ancestors, along with challenging dialogue with his peers and students. His ideas remain in academic conversation because they cannot be easily plummeted, summarized, or

⁴³Plato, “Symposium,” trans. Michael Joyce in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 563.

⁴⁴Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 12.

⁴⁵Plato, “Sophist,” trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 1013-1014.

dismissed. Also, as teachings rightly called “classic,” they have been an important part of Western thinking.

The ideas that he wrestled with include questions pertaining to beauty and creativity; namely, to what do we aspire, how is society to train its young, and how do we create and build? Plato’s understanding of beauty speaks of the ideal Forms, and those of us involved with the makings of anything are encouraged to strive in their direction, but Plato did not trust that we always would.

While recognizing the gulf between Plato’s understandings of the natural sciences and today’s tensions around the topics of metaphysics and dualism, we can still say that Plato did significantly grasp the dynamism found in creative activities and their capacity to influence and shape human minds, culture, and society. Further, within this awareness he realized the power of beauty. One of his students, Aristotle, knew this also, but saw things differently.

2. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.)

Both Plato and Aristotle have deep desires for knowledge and truth, and deep concerns for the good of society. But where Plato is more focused on universals, Aristotle asks to what end is something created.⁴⁶ Aristotle, “recognizes the importance of forms, but he believes that forms are to be perceived only as materialized. Therefore, both matter and form are irreducible ingredients of things in the world.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶C.D.C. Reeve, *Introduction*,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 2001), xv-xvi.

⁴⁷Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 15.

With Aristotle, we find someone who positions himself more closely with the ordinary,⁴⁸ perhaps indicative of “his biologist’s observant mind.”⁴⁹ For Aristotle, knowledge starts with the senses.⁵⁰ Concerning anything, Martin points out that Aristotle would raise four questions: *from what did it come; of what is it made; what is it; and for what is it made?* For Aristotle, the world itself is “seen as an initiating-forming-of-material for a purpose.”⁵¹ The four questions reflect Aristotle’s four forms of causality: efficient, material, formal, and teleological.

Aristotle’s vision of reality leads him to an understanding of mimesis different from Plato’s. Where Plato is suspicious of tragic plays and poetry because of their mimetic, imitative characteristics, Aristotle views in mimesis a legitimate way to educate because humans, from early childhood, learn by imitation.⁵² But, Aristotle does not “take the poet’s mimetic activity to suffice for the presentation of general truths.”⁵³ Pappas makes the point that Aristotle is concerned with how poets construct or make their work. It should not be overdone. Nicholas Pappas writes:

Aristotle ... says that too much plot-making busy-work can lead to unbelievable and inferior plays (*Poetics* 1454b1). Construction does not invariably yield aesthetic value. He says that poets are not at liberty to change too many details of a traditional story (*ibid.*: 1453b22). Again the

⁴⁸Nicholas Pappas, “Aristotle,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2002), 21.

⁴⁹Pappas, “Aristotle,” 15.

⁵⁰Aristotle, “*Metaphysica*,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. W. D. Ross (New York: Random House, 2001), page 689 (Bk. A (1) para. 980a-980b). All further excerpts will be from this edition.

⁵¹Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 15.

⁵²Aristotle, “*Poetics*,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. Ingram Bywater (New York: Random House, 2001), 1457-1458 (citation 1448b 5). All further excerpts will be from this edition.

⁵³Pappas, “Aristotle,” 22.

poet's activity becomes secondary matter in the presentation of a good story, and the story itself rises to eclipse it.⁵⁴

But how does the story "itself" rise? This inquiry is indicative of general teleological questions that we notice with both Plato and Aristotle. However, where Plato focuses on activity that reaches toward the ideal, Aristotle includes in his corpus questions concerning to what end is something made; that is, as in his four questions, he wants to know what is already present within the creature that would tilt it toward its *telos*. Even in his *Poetics* one can find hints of his attentiveness to this topic. Pappas states:

[Aristotle] says that tragic poets typically *do not* invent their plots (*Poetics* 1451b15). Thus the merits of good plots must derive from some source besides their having been consciously made up. They have an intrinsically subsisting value—so that even an adherent of the active-mimesis view speaks of artistry as 'regulated by the teleological realization of form in matter.'⁵⁵

Aristotle holds that there is already present, such as in a creature, an inherent function toward a particular end.⁵⁶ This approach lends itself to greater relationship between creature and its goal, as opposed to Plato's approach which leaves more of a gap between creature and the ideal. Also, Aristotle does not necessarily pit science and the imagination against each other. Speaking of Aristotle, Martin writes:

To vivify that world through the imaginative makings (*poiesis*) of humans is to enhance the quality of human life. In both processes—those of the intellect in science and those of the imagination in the poetic arts—there are three desiderata: (1) integrity, or unity, because the intellect is pleased in the fullness of being, 'the joy of knowing,' (2) proportion, or harmony, because the intellect joys in order and consonance; and (3) clarity, or

⁵⁴Pappas, "Aristotle," 22.

⁵⁵Pappas, "Aristotle," 22. Quoting S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (with a new introduction) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 60.

⁵⁶C.D.C. Reeve, *Introduction*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 2001), xv-xvi.

radiance, because the intellect joys in that light which causes intelligence to 'see.' Analogous exemplifications of integrity or unity, proportion or harmony, and clarity or radiance, characterize well-made works of art.⁵⁷

However, because of Aristotle's particular analytical and teleological understandings and because of his openness to imitation, imitation has to be understood as distinct from Plato's thoughts, whether concerning tragic plays, character building, a painting, a seed, or the structuring of the social order.

Pappas asserts that Aristotle does not accept as the focus of tragedy its actors and their imitation of others or the emotional stirring that goes on in order to affect audiences; rather, its focus is the development of plot by way of the actions of the players.⁵⁸ Aristotle advocates for an understanding of mimesis where action upon action is key.⁵⁹ Mimesis is not passive; rather, it is described as actions that connect, following along an issue and forming a plot, and where "the end is everywhere the chief thing" (*Poetics* 1450a 15-20).

According to Aristotle, there is in a creature an inherent function toward a particular end. It seems analogous to a play about life where it is action upon action, forming a plot to reveal its end or purpose. Within a tragedy, in fact, there are three elements that serve its unity: "plot, time, and place."⁶⁰ Aristotle advocates for particularity in tragic plot, while Plato focuses more generally on types of characters, with a keen leeriness toward imitative, subjective characters.⁶¹

⁵⁷Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 16.

⁵⁸Pappas, "Aristotle," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2002), 20.

⁵⁹Pappas, "Aristotle," 21.

⁶⁰Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 16.

⁶¹Pappas, "Aristotle," 22.

Why is this significant? Because with Aristotle we find a more specific inclusion of a horizontal perspective; that is, of an earthly reality. In tragedy it is more than just the characters, there is a broader contextuality that connects players and events. Plato, on the other hand, is more interested in a transcendent reality, in higher Forms. His focus is on characters and their relation to the Forms. However, while agreeing with Plato that “perfect happiness is found in contemplative activity,”⁶² Aristotle exemplifies someone who is genuinely absorbed in analyzing what is before him. For example, Aristotle writes:

[T]o be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude. Beauty is a matter of size and order, and therefore impossible either (1) in a very minute creature, since our perception becomes indistinct as it approaches instantaneity; or (2) in a creature of vast size—one, say, 1,000 miles long—as in that case, instead of the object being seen all at once, the unity and wholeness of it is lost to the beholder. Just in the same way, then, as a beautiful whole made up of parts, or a beautiful living creature, must be of some size, but a size to be taken in by the eye, so a story or Plot must be of some length, but of a length to be taken in by the memory. *Poetics* (1450b 20 – 1451a 5)

Nevertheless, John S. Marshall contends that we cannot deduce from the *Poetics* a theory of aesthetics for Aristotle, but rather take from the *Poetics* his thoughts on tragedy.⁶³ However, his idea of *plot*, or becoming, surfaces in other places, such as in his *Physics*.

Herein, as he refers to form and matter related to nature, he writes: “The form indeed is ‘nature’ rather than the matter; for a thing is more properly said to be what it is when it has attained to fulfillment than when it exists potentially.” That is: “Not into that

⁶²Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 16.

⁶³John S. Marshall, “Art and Aesthetic in Aristotle,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 12, no.2 (1953): 238.

from which it arose but into that to which it tends. The shape then is nature.”⁶⁴ So, while “‘nature’ has two senses, the form and the matter,”⁶⁵ it is form that speaks to nature’s attributes or the characteristics that are required for it to act as itself, toward its end, over and above its material composition and measurement.

In addition, Aristotle, as evidenced in the *Poetics*, believes that imitation of various forms is, in fact, a legitimate way to learn and to teach. Nevertheless, imitation in tragedy needs to be accompanied with high moral expectations of those involved, the characters are to be of a certain dignity, its plot is to have “moral significance,” and the story itself should be of a high moral value.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Pappas contends that Aristotle never cedes all universal territory to Plato. He claims that while the “objects of mimesis are not universals, they can still bring about a mimesis that *presents* universals.”⁶⁷ In fact, Aristotle claims that “art arises when from many notions gained by experience one universal judgment about a class of objects is produced.”⁶⁸

Thus, the ordinary can speak voluminously, as in tragic plays, but it should not be overdone or overworked. To avoid such excess, a bit of temperance and prudence is recommended. Aristotle’s suggestions could have implications for our broader discussion of nature if, in fact, we live in what some are referring to as a “cultural

⁶⁴Aristotle, “Physics,” trans. R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 2001), Book II, chapter 1, 193b, 5, 15.

⁶⁵Aristotle, “Physics,” trans. R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Book II, chapter 2, 194a, 10.

⁶⁶Pappas, “Aristotle,” 23.

⁶⁷Pappas, “Aristotle,” 23.

⁶⁸Aristotle, “Metaphysica,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. W. D. Ross (New York: Random House, 2001), page 689 (Bk. A (1) para. 981a).

landscape” where our human makings can be judged excessive, resulting in deleterious consequences.⁶⁹

Aristotle asserts that while the good and the beautiful may be related they are, in fact, different, because the “former always implies conduct as its subject, while the beautiful is found also in motionless things.” More so, the “chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree.”⁷⁰

Aristotle continued to probe using the tools of his day. Nonetheless, after all examination is complete, and if all were taken away, what would be left? For Aristotle, it is that activity which brings “perfect happiness,” contemplation of God.⁷¹ Martin explains:

What is the contemplative activity of God? Briefly, in his metaphysics Aristotle employed the concept of *theos* as the focal principle of being. God is that ‘unmoved mover’ which is the goal, and therefore the source, of all motion. In a metaphysic that envisions all of reality in terms of potentiality moving to actuality, God is Pure Act. And God’s activity is “thinking on thinking.”⁷²

Generally speaking, from this study of Aristotle we recognize the significance of the following concerning aesthetics and nature: ordinary sense experience; potentiality in creation; action upon action leading to a plot in time and place; *theos* as telos; imitation as a legitimate way of learning, teaching, and creating; the importance of method in examination and analysis; measurement; and the need to avoid excess.

⁶⁹Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 70, 169. Brady uses the term “cultural landscape.”

⁷⁰Aristotle, “Metaphysics,” trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 2001), (1078a-b), 893.

⁷¹Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 16. See Aristotle’s, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1101-1107).

⁷²Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 16-17. See Aristotle’s, *Metaphysics*.

As Aristotle insatiably studied the world around him, one wonders if he was more confident in humanity's ability to create well than was Plato? Although Aristotle did not have what we might call a full aesthetic philosophy, his thoughts, like those mentioned, have contributed to our thinking on aesthetics and the natural world, whether we have understood his ideas correctly or not. However, it is important to remember that both Plato and Aristotle have contributed to our view of the natural world as being somehow less significant than the *spiritual* realm, or the world of ideas.

B. Aesthetics and Theology

The external and sensual dimensions of religion are features of theological aesthetics, which we use to speak of and support different lived theologies, often by way of analogy and symbol. Yet, the term, "theological aesthetics," is difficult to define.

Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen says that a definitive definition of theological aesthetics is "neither possible nor necessary." Yet, she does venture to say that it is "concerned with questions about God and issues in theology in the light of and perceived through sense knowledge (sensation, feeling, imagination), through beauty, and the arts."⁷³ She asserts that because of a diversity of media today theological aesthetics "would generally imply a broad, inclusive term rather than a narrow concept, especially as it includes the dialogue between theology and the arts, rather than being limited to a theology of beauty."⁷⁴ As Thiessen describes it, contemporary theological aesthetics participates in interdisciplinary dialogue during fragmented times as part of a "quest for a more unified, holistic

⁷³Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 1. Thiessen says she is paraphrasing a definition by Richard Viadesau.

⁷⁴Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 1.

worldview and a sense of order,” but where beauty is not necessarily the basic concern.⁷⁵ She claims that aesthetics is pertinent to all areas of theology.⁷⁶

Historically, the relation of art to beauty and to the gods/God, or to the Forms, has been a serious question. We know that for some Greeks the making of art carried moral significance, and art and its artists could be suspect. In a similar but different fashion the ancient Hebrews also mistrusted art and craft making. It seems humans make images and then they worship them, causing havoc in their relationship with the One God. A defilement takes place, which brings upon them calamity and disorder, as in famines and plagues, or an enemy’s sword. The importance of order, versus chaos, involves serving the right God and living righteously.

Inheritors both of the Hebrew and Greek traditions, Christians were suspicious of images also, eventually erupting in a period known as the Iconoclasm. Questions arise: How does aesthetics evolve in the Christian era, and how is the natural world and the constructed world viewed and appreciated in the midst of Christianity?

This section will, in a broad fashion, examine different periods in Christian theology for its use of aesthetics. It will begin with Scripture, followed by a sampling of ideas and theological texts about and from the first millennium, and then the second. Our goal in this section is to grasp some understanding of the uses of aesthetics in Christianity over the centuries and to see how these are both helpful and troublesome for a contemporary theological aesthetics of nature/environment.

⁷⁵Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 4.

⁷⁶Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 4.

1. Scripture, Image, Form, and Vision

Thiessen, writing in regard to Western thought, asserts that there have been “two interrelated threads that have been primary in theological aesthetics through the ages, namely, the beauty and vision of God and the theology of the image.”⁷⁷ Further, she states:

[D]espite the radical changes brought about through Enlightenment rationalism, the longing for the vision of God has remained a theme for theologians to this day, even if for some only in passing. Already in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, the importance of not just hearing the word of God but the desire to *see* God is attested to by various writers.⁷⁸

Pope Benedict XVI writes that the most important deed that Moses did was not to perform miracles, nor to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, but to have spoken with “God as a friend” (Exod 33:11, 17).⁷⁹ In the midst of his relationship with God, Moses implores God that he be allowed to see God’s face (Exod 33:17-23). This desire for intimacy with the Holy, spoken of analogously, is a yearning not particular to Moses alone.

This longing to see God speaks of a familiar yearning for intimacy with the divine in the Hebrew Scriptures, but only Moses is blessed with a kind of intimate proximity. Nonetheless, even the first creation story speaks of a special closeness with God. It says that humans are made in the “likeness” and “image” of God (Gen. 1:26-27).

While the Greeks were interested in various kinds of knowledge and know-how, it is with *poiesis*, that “special kind of ‘making,’” where we find at least one example of

⁷⁷Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 4.

⁷⁸Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 4.

⁷⁹Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 4.

common ground between the Greek and Hebrew traditions, and with Christianity as well.⁸⁰ Martin investigating the relationship between religion and aesthetics writes:

The distinction between *poiesis* and other forms of know-how, seen as a matter of kind and not simply of degree, would in later centuries become one of the bases for distinguishing the ‘fine’ arts from the other arts. *Poiesis* was seen by the Greeks to be both more important and more problematic than other forms of art understood as *techē*. Its importance would be symbolized by the choice of *poiesis* as the term for the divine ‘making’ portrayed in Genesis, in the definitive translation of the Hebraic scriptures into Greek. This was consonant with the traditional Greek admiration of the poet—an admiration shared... by the Hebrews.⁸¹

Within the Book of Genesis there are two mythic accounts of creation and a third new beginning story if you understand the story of Noah and the flood (Gen. 6-9) as a sort of remaking of creation. More particularly, in Genesis 1 we find not only the mythic dimension of storytelling, but a sense of poetry and ritual as well.

The translation found in the *Jewish Study Bible* of the initial few lines in Genesis reads: “When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, ‘Let there be light’”(JSB Gen 1:1-3). The first creation story in Genesis is an emblematic account, which must have satisfied the priestly writer(s) and editors, as a grand and appropriate way to begin putting together stories representative of the Hebrew faith journey. It starts with a story of the cosmos, telling how all was a void and without form, but when God did begin to create and to form heaven and earth—God did it well.⁸²

⁸⁰Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 12.

⁸¹Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 12.

⁸²See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-I, Q’s 44-49 “Treatise on Creation” and Q’s 65-74 “Treatise on the Work of the Six Days.”

It tells a story that stresses the goodness of creation and of creation's orderliness. It gives a religious analogy about how things should be. It provides a mythic, symbolic teaching for later generations to engage and measure themselves against. In this pointedly placed account God's words speak light and life into existence and form, and humans are spoken into special form. They, male and female, are spoken into life as the "likeness" (Gen 1:26), and "image" of God (Gen 1:26, 27). But while each dimension of creation is declared to be good, and all of creation is declared very good, only the Sabbath is called holy (Gen 2:3). Marc Zvi Brettler writes:

The conclusion of this myth, however, describes the Sabbath in a manner that even surpasses humankind—only the Sabbath is "declared holy" (Gen. 2:3). Holiness is especially important within the Priestly system, in which the Holy Sabbath plays a leading role (see especially Exod. 31:12-17). Thus, in offering these evaluations, the first creation story highlights the importance of both humankind and the Sabbath.⁸³

Brettler makes note that "creation" usually refers to the "formation of physical objects," but in this case it also refers to an institution or an abstract concept: such that, creation and creativity involve more than the realm of concrete objects and the senses. Similar non-physical creations can be recognized in the Mesopotamian myth where Enuma Elish "narrates the creation of kingship and of the institutions surrounding the worship of the god Marduk."⁸⁴

Following upon the mythic cosmic story is the second Genesis creation story of the first man and woman, who disobey God. Generally speaking, these stories together tell us that a certain order has been terribly disturbed by humans.

⁸³Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Jewish Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 44.

⁸⁴Brettler, *How to Read the Jewish Bible*, endnote #19, 295.

Genesis 1 tells how the cosmos is ordered and how humans are to know their place in this arrangement. They are to be reflections of the Creator. They are to keep God as their focus, central in all of creation. The relationship with the holy, as inferred by the holiness of the Sabbath, is the measure. However, final editors of the Hebrew Bible knew that human beings had a checkered history when it came to honoring God and living righteously, which involves taking care of the widow, the orphan, the stranger... and the natural world.

Genesis 1: 26-28, which directs *man* to subdue and have dominion over the earth (or master or lord over), has been interpreted over the centuries in ways now seen as problematic. Yet, if we read this passage within the context of needing to be in overall right relationship with God there can be heard a certain call for humans to be responsible for where and how they live. In the second creation story relationships become *disordered* when humans turn their eyes from the Creator and disobey God, taking and devouring what was not meant for their use and pleasure. Interpretations of Genesis 1:26-28 will inevitably be troublesome when God is not understood as the pervasive and central organizing relationship from which all other relationships are ordered and interpreted.

When Genesis 1:26-28 is interpreted outside of the broader context of right relationship with God, it is particularly difficult to read it as leading to anything other than *man's lording over* nature, fueling a misalignment of relationships and misuse of power and responsibility. Disobedience to God usually means some degree of idolatry, which causes chaos.

Scripture tells how human eyes can turn toward other gods, whom we craft into material forms and images that we then worship. Or, even, how we arrogantly and foolishly become enamored with our own human splendor. Either way, the Hebrew Bible tells how humans often fail to give due glory to their maker and sustainer, which can lead to a contentious relationship with God.⁸⁵ There was, according to Martin, “always a sense of the demonic possibilities in beauty.”⁸⁶ Beauty, in fact, could become idolatrous. The suspicion of such “would also be part of the legacy of Biblical religion to its inheriting traditions in the West.”⁸⁷

However, the ancient Israelite God does forgive, although not necessarily without consequences, and sometimes with rather severe and bloody ones at that. Yet, as the books of the Hebrew Bible come together they describe a history of a people with their God, and how they came to know and to deepen their relationship with their God. While it is a relationship that often struggles, it tells of a God who is committed to a covenant with them, eventually to be understood as a relationship with all of creation, such as we see in the story of Noah where God promises never again to wage such destruction upon creation (Gen. 8:21-22).

In light of their relationship with God the Hebrew people are focused on the “beauty of holiness.”⁸⁸ They desire to be close to a God whom they believe is holy. Herein, we find a certain kind of “glory” resonating with the Hebrew heart (1 Chr. 16:23-36, Ps. 29).

⁸⁵An example would be Ezek 16:15-20.

⁸⁶Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 11.

⁸⁷Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 11.

⁸⁸Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 9-11.

Glory was sometimes “perceived as a *reflection* of the transcendent (1 Kgs. 8:11); or it was an otherworldly brilliance.”⁸⁹ But Martin writes that in the Hebraic tradition there was “early resistance to understanding a theophony as in any sense compromising the otherness or transcendence—the holiness ... of the divine.”⁹⁰ Martin continues:

Glory ... was a concept intermediate between the divine transcendence and those manifestations of divine immanence that, in other cultures and other times, would be the focus of aesthetic interpretation. Here again, however, for Israel the natural and the historical are intertwined, and it is the triumph of the divine purpose in history that eventuates in a full experience of the divine glory in the whole earth.⁹¹

But glory was itself rather morally neutral until the time of the prophetic tradition: “Assimilated to the concept of holiness, it would apply to a ‘holy people’ obedient to God’s ‘holy will’.”⁹² The prophetic tradition was followed by the priestly tradition. Moreover, in “the messianic tradition there was a merging of the priestly and prophetic strands in the figure of divine glory who, in bringing the historical process to fulfillment, would at the same time bring all of creation into participation in the divine glory.”⁹³ Life was not departmentalized.

However, according to Christians, while the first creation account speaks of the goodness of creation, the second indicates a defilement of its order through sin. Humans and all of creation become, in some sense, mis-ordered. The human is no longer a reflection of God as it was intended or, at the very least, it has become a muddled one.

⁸⁹Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 10.

⁹⁰Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 10.

⁹¹Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 10.

⁹²Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 10.

⁹³Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 10-11.

These issues will effect how humans come to perceive nature. If creation is defiled and disordered, is it also in need of redemption in some way? Is it evil because of its materiality? What will be important for Christians in their effort to regain that lost sense of order? Will they seek order/right relationships or control? How will nature fare in light of their quest? As humans long for the *face of God* where do we search? Are glimmers of the holy more likely to be found in Christian sacraments, human virtue, human makings, or in the natural world?

2. The First Millennium

While many have yearned to see the face of God, in the Gospel of John it states: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (*NRSV* John 1:18). In reading Scripture, Benedict XVI affirms a discriminating use of the historical critical method, but stresses an overall Christian canonical reading of the Bible. That is, he encourages a reading that understands the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scripture as a unity, claiming this method is “not linear, and it is often dramatic.” He writes:

[W]hen you watch it unfold in light of Jesus Christ, you can see it moving in a single overall direction; you can see that the Old and New Testaments belong together. This Christological hermeneutic, which sees Jesus Christ as the key to the whole and learns from him how to understand the Bible as a unity, presupposes a prior act of faith. It cannot be the conclusion of a purely historical method. But this act of faith is based upon reason—historical reason—and so makes it possible to see the internal unity of Scripture. By the same token, it enables us to understand anew the individual elements that have shaped it, without robbing them of their historical originality.⁹⁴

Benedict’s perspective on the reading of Scripture is interesting for this study because the unity that he describes would be similar in fashion to how earlier Christian

⁹⁴Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xix.

exegetes would read Scripture and compose their thoughts. It speaks to an overt desire to synchronize and unify the Hebrew prophecies with Christian Testament writings that were written in Greek. According to Benedict, the desire in the Hebrew Bible to “see” God gets carried over into the New Testament and is met with the response of the Incarnation. Again, Benedict writes:

Israel is allowed to hope for a new Moses, who has yet to appear, but who will be raised up at the appropriate hour. And the characteristic of this ‘prophet’ will be that he converses with God face-to-face, as a friend does with a friend. His distinguishing note will be his immediate relation with God, which enables him to communicate God’s will and word firsthand and unadulterated. And that is the saving intervention which Israel—indeed, the whole of humanity—is waiting for.⁹⁵

The Incarnation of God gives *form* to the desire to see God, to be close to God. And the voice, visions, and dreams of God, called theophanies, give way to the gift of God’s own in human material flesh. According to some interpretations, Jesus Christ as Image of God *fulfills* earlier desires and prophecies found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Eternal becomes Image/Form in human flesh. The Image is not a semblance.⁹⁶ Paradoxically, something new comes into being, but also, it is the perfect Image of God through which humanity and all of creation, with grace, is to be re-ordered or reconciled (Rom 3:25-26, 5:15-6:4, 8:19-23, 2 Cor 5:16-19, Col 1:15, Col 3:10). With a canonical reading of Scripture, Christian New Testament writers do not take Jesus’ life story and insert him into the earlier Hebrew prophecies; rather, Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection flow as a fulfillment of the past, and even of the future.

⁹⁵Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 4-5.

⁹⁶In English versions of the New Testament the word “image” appears an estimated 13 times not including the Book of Revelation. The word “form” appears an estimated 11 times.

According to Benedict, and somewhat reminiscent of Aristotle, reading Scripture as a unity “is a process in which the word gradually unfolds its inner potentialities, already somehow present like seeds, but needing the challenge of new situations, new experiences and new sufferings, in order to open up.”⁹⁷ Hebrew texts are read with “new eyes in new contexts.” They “evolve in continuity with their original sense, tacitly corrected and given added depth and breadth of meaning.”⁹⁸ It “emerges from within the heart of a living subject—the pilgrim People of God—and lives within this same subject.”⁹⁹ Benedict continues:

The connection with the subject we call “People of God” is vital for Scripture. On one hand, this book—Scripture—is the measure that comes from God, the power directing the people. On the other hand, though, Scripture lives precisely within this people, even as this people transcends itself in Scripture.¹⁰⁰

With Jesus Christ, and Scripture, there is a new *measure* for how we are to understand the world and live our lives. However, this *unity* and *measure*, as presented in a canonical reading, are vulnerable to critique.

More conservative canonical readings of Scripture can be seen as overly homogenous, synthesizing, and dismissive of Jewish perspectives, as well as other diverse voices of interpretation, especially the voices of women. However, for this study it is important to note how certain aesthetic characteristics are being used and valued in theology. Connecting aesthetic language to God language has ancient roots, and in Christianity it takes on a particular flavor.

⁹⁷Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xix.

⁹⁸Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xviii-xix.

⁹⁹Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xx.

¹⁰⁰Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xxi.

An explicit example of a text that uses multiple aesthetic elements and that connects through symbolism with Hebrew Scriptures is the story of the Transfiguration in which Jesus is portrayed as the new Moses. It incorporates sound, vision, and brilliance and is found in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-10, Luke 9:28-36).

This story of radiance that centers upon a lowly Jew can be seen in contrast to Octavian, the Roman deified leader. The glory of Jesus was to be understood differently, as of a different ilk. Jesus' radiance reflected a supreme beauty, truth, and goodness:

For the early Christians beauty, truth, unity and goodness in the world are always seen as signs of divine revelation, of God's beauty, truth, unity and goodness. Beauty is objective, and always also has to do with spiritual and moral purification. The good, the true and the beautiful cannot be thought of apart from one another, as God in Godself is supreme beauty, goodness and truth.¹⁰¹

Still, as we see in the second century writings of Irenaeus (130-200 C.E.), God is perceived as quite transcendent and distant from creation. Speaking against the Gnostics who are said to possess and display "a portrait of Christ along with images of Greek philosophers," Irenaeus explains that this is grossly incorrect;¹⁰² God is far too removed for such a portrait to be possible:

[God] is at a great remove from human emotions and passions; He is unified, not composite, without diversity of members, completely similar and equal to himself, since he is all Mind, all Spirit, all Mentality, all Thought, all Word, all Hearing, All Eye, all Light, and entirely the source of every good thing.¹⁰³

Yet, Christ is understood to be the bridge between the visible world and the invisible and while he remains an image, he shows forth a true image of God, which is

¹⁰¹Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 12-13.

¹⁰²Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 16.

¹⁰³Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*. Quoted in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics*, 16. She cites *The Early Church Fathers, Irenaeus of Lyons*, eds. Robert Grant, London, New York, Routledge, 1997, Book 2, Ch. 13, para. 3, p.109.

also an image of himself.¹⁰⁴ Though God's grace is always paramount, humans are to work at resembling the Incarnate One, which we must assume means more than male physicality.

In fact, the spiritual quest for *resemblance*, or human salvation, can often focus primarily on a spiritual quest. Yet, does this keep our eyes turned toward the beyond, encouraging us to lose sight of the gift of earthly creation in all of its variety?

Even so, God's glory is often referred to in terms of earthly metaphors. While Christ is described in the New Testament and in later writings analogously with the use of many metaphors, one exceptional one is that of *light*.¹⁰⁵ Eco recalls that Plotinus (c. 205-270), the Neo-Platonist, wondered why we ascribe beauty to color and to sunlight even though their brilliance has nothing to do with symmetry of their parts.¹⁰⁶

Plotinus resolves that just as fire shines like an idea, "light that shines out over matter can only be attributed to the reflection of the One from which it emanates. God is therefore identified with the splendor of a sort of luminous current that permeates the entire universe."¹⁰⁷

Analysis of nature continues to lead to insights and analogies for use in theological questions and propositions, which only grow in their complexity. Even the geometric and aesthetic form of the trinity provides rich symbolic material for early Christians to incorporate, prompting questions related to God's dynamism and

¹⁰⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*. Found in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics*, 17-18. She credits, *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, vol. 9, eds. James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1869, Book 5, Ch. 16, para 2, p. 544.

¹⁰⁵E.g., Mathew 2:1-12 and John 1:1-14.

¹⁰⁶Eco, *History of Beauty*, 102.

¹⁰⁷Eco, *History of Beauty*, 102.

relationality.¹⁰⁸ In particular, Augustine must be acknowledged for some of his classic writings on beauty. Thiessen comments:

Augustine, in particular, emphasizes in Platonic fashion how beauty includes symmetry, proportion and order. Chaos cannot be beautiful. Beauty relates to the cosmos. The individual parts of the cosmos are beautiful and make up its total beauty. Beauty is something that attracts and something we love.¹⁰⁹

Though much of Augustine's writings on beauty were lost,¹¹⁰ we still find his thoughts on this topic in several places. In his text, *The Book of Psalms*, Augustine expresses how at each stage of Christ's life the Incarnate Word is beautiful. But perhaps his most remembered text on beauty is, indeed, from his *Confessions*. Here he writes:

Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours. *Confessions* (Bk 10, Ch 27, para 38)¹¹¹

Augustine recognizes that creation is good, but understands that human focus can become mired and stuck in material reality and comfort. Instead, the soul must adjust to God in order to "see" God. One must live, study, and pray well if one wishes to glimpse the

¹⁰⁸*Oxford Concise Companion to Classical Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 587. It was Theophilus of Antioch (c. 180 C.E.) who first used the term "Trinity" in its Greek formation for Christians. But more pointedly, Hillary of Poitiers (c. 315-367 C. E.) writes a treatise called *The Trinity* and Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.) writes his famous treatise *On the Trinity*.

¹⁰⁹Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 12-13.

¹¹⁰Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), (Bk 4, Ch13, para 20), 65.

¹¹¹Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, 201. Note #25 by Chadwick, on the same page, says: "Augustine's Latin in this chapter is a work of high art, with rhymes and poetic rhythms not reproducible in translation. He is fusing imagery from the Song of Solomon with Neoplatonic reflection on Platos's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, and simultaneously summarizing the central themes of the *Confessions*."

beauty related to God.¹¹² For Augustine, there is an emphasis on right living in this world, and on spiritual transcendence as well.¹¹³

Augustine understands that God's creation is not like human makings; after all, "God's art proceeds *ex nihilo*."¹¹⁴ More so, although he would have been influenced by Platonic notions of the dangers of mimesis, he asserts the "import of human art as symbolic of the higher meaning of God's art: that is, as exceeding mimesis."¹¹⁵

Throughout early Christian texts we find themes of right living and purification accompanied with grace as a way to approach beauty; that is, the spiritual beauty of God, which is incomprehensible. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-395 C.E.) contends that even though our descriptions of spiritual beauty are inadequate, we should not exclude our human efforts from trying to grasp in earthly form some understanding of it.¹¹⁶ He writes:

How could anyone by means of those things which we grasp by perception alone come to know that which is the altogether invisible, the formless, the sizeless, as far as bodily perception goes? And yet one should not, for this reason, despair of his desire simply because these things seem to be beyond his grasp. Indeed, the treatise has shown that, in proportion to the greatness of what is sought after, it is necessary to elevate the mind in thought and to lift it to the level of what we are seeking, so that we are not

¹¹²Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 29. See Augustine's *Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil*.

¹¹³Augustine is influenced by Ambrose who emphasizes light and splendor, sanctification and illumination. Fire is the consuming sign of the Godhead, which improves, as in gold, and consumes, as in sin. See his work, *Holy Spirit*.

¹¹⁴Joseph Margolis, "Medieval Aesthetics," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2005), 32. See 2 Maccabees 7:28 and John 1:3.

¹¹⁵Margolis, "Medieval Aesthetics," 32.

¹¹⁶A number of original sources on beauty were provided to this reader by Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., in *Theological Aesthetics* and by Umberto Eco in *History of Beauty*. Some of these this paper will suggest in a footnote; such as, see also Basil, *On Psalm 29*, and John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* (Homily 12).

excluded entirely from participation in the good. *On Virginit*y (para. 10, 36-38)¹¹⁷

More so, Basil (c. 330-379 C.E.) says that we are born beautiful “according to nature,” although “dead by sin.” Therefore, we “must have regard of beauty, in order that the Bridegroom” will receive us “without a spot.”¹¹⁸

Furthering these ideas is Pseudo-Dionysius, who was earlier believed to be Dionysius the Areopagite of Acts 17:34, but now is believed to have lived in the fifth or sixth century.¹¹⁹ According to Thiessen, Pseudo-Dionysius was the “first theologian to present what might be called a theological aesthetics, dealing in particular with the idea of the beautiful.”¹²⁰

Pseudo-Dionysius writes that God has no name that can do God justice. Yet, we continue to call God by many names, including the “Good and the Beautiful,”¹²¹ where beauty is even the “same as the Good.”¹²² More so, although God is nameless,¹²³ God is the *essence* for those who have being:

God is not some kind of being. No. But in a way that is simple and indefinable he gathers into himself and anticipates every existence.... He was not. He will not be. He did not come to be. He is not in the midst of becoming. He will not come to be. No. He is not. Rather, he is the

¹¹⁷Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginit*y. Quoted in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics*, 25. She credits, “*The Fathers of the Church, Gregory of Nyssa, Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 1967.”

¹¹⁸Basil, *On Psalm 29 (Homily 29)*. Quoted in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics*, 23. She credits, *The Fathers of the Church, Saint Basil, Exegetic Homilies*, trans. Agnes Clare Way, CDP, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963.” (See para. 5 and 6, p. 220-222.)

¹¹⁹Paul Rorem, “Foreword,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 1.

¹²⁰Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 33.

¹²¹Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 55, (596A-B). All the following quotes from P-D will be from this 1987 translated collection.

¹²²Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 77, (704B).

¹²³Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 56, (596C).

essence of being for the things which have being.

Divine Names (817D)¹²⁴

Indeed, everything participates in God and “none among beings falls away.”¹²⁵

More so, beauty “bids” all of creation to itself and “gathers everything into itself.”¹²⁶

However, while God gathers all, we also yearn for God.

While we know that people have yearned for God, for the face of God, Pseudo-Dionysius says that yearning and *real* yearning are distinguishable. One is for God and the other involves “partial, physical, and divided yearning”; that is, yearning for an “empty image or, rather, a lapse from real yearning.”¹²⁷ He thinks that humans struggle, but are “unable to grasp the simplicity of the one divine yearning...”¹²⁸ He writes:

The fact is that men are unable to grasp the simplicity of the one divine yearning, and, hence, the term is quite offensive to most of them. So it is left to the divine Wisdom to lift them and to raise them up to a knowledge of what yearning really is, after which they no longer take offense.... To those listening properly to the divine things the name “love” is used by the sacred writers in divine revelation with the exact same meaning as the term “yearning.” What is signified is a capacity to effect a unity, an alliance, and a particular commingling in the Beautiful and the Good. It is a capacity which preexists through the Beautiful and the Good. It binds the things of the same order in a mutually regarding union. It moves the superior to provide for the subordinate, and it stirs the subordinate in a return toward the superior.

Divine Names (709C-D)¹²⁹

Dionysius shows forth love and yearning in terms of a connection with the good and the beautiful. This yearning “binds,” “moves,” and “stirs” us toward and within a “comingling” of the good and the beautiful.

¹²⁴Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 98 .

¹²⁵Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 98-99, (820A).

¹²⁶Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 76, (701C-D). See Luke 13:31-35.

¹²⁷Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 81, (709C).

¹²⁸Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 81, (709C)

¹²⁹Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 81.

The Greek theologian Maximus the Confessor (c.580—622) moves in a somewhat different direction than does Dionysius when he turns his attention to the natural world. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, who did a substantial study of the Greek theologian, Maximus is particularly positive toward the natural world:

While Origen considers Scripture as alone supremely normative, Maximus accepts also the natural world, contemplated in the light of revelation, as a source of wisdom. Perfect knowledge—the knowledge of the believing Christian and even the knowledge of the mystic—is gleaned from both “books” together.... The wise person stands in the midst of the world’s realities as in an inexhaustible treasury of knowledge. No being leaves him untouched; everything provides food for his intellectual nourishment.¹³⁰

But what helps facilitate the yearning and union that Dionysius describes or a stance toward all of reality that Maximus describes in his writings? For one way we turn to what Thiessen describes as the theology of the image, or the *writing* of icons.

The making of images, whether representational or symbolic, has a complicated history. Christianity’s inheritance from the ancient Greeks includes both an attraction and a suspicion of images, but for the ancient Hebrews the making of images is more clearly troublesome, even if the Hebrews tolerated some degree of it themselves.¹³¹ The Law said no graven images were to be made, not even a likeness, not of heaven or of earth (Ex. 20:4). But adding to these sentiments Luke writes in the Book of Acts that God does not live in buildings or shrines made by humans (Acts 17:24).¹³² The focus for Christianity is Christ himself.

¹³⁰Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 61-62. Originally published in German in 1941.

¹³¹Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 84.

¹³²Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 84.

Christ is the Image of the invisible and unchanging God, which also means that Christ is also unchanging.¹³³ When someone requested a representation of Christ it was deemed absurd. Why? Eusebius, who lived in the third and fourth century, “could not imagine that anyone would be interested in an image of that countenance,” meaning the impermanent bodily material form of Jesus.¹³⁴ This would not be a true image of Christ who was indeed the *True Image*, which a representation of his body’s form would not be.¹³⁵ However, there was something that was, and that was the Eucharist, it having become truly a type of his being.¹³⁶ Therefore, believers were not to make and craft images. There was fear that use of icons would be the same as worshiping dead wood or stone.

Basically, those that argued against images “put their opposition to images of Christ in the form of a disjunctive syllogism.”¹³⁷ If you painted icons and said that they represented Christ’s divine and human natures then you were claiming the ability to depict the incomprehensible, but if you claimed only to be portraying the humanity of Christ, then you were dividing his single person.¹³⁸ However: “Underlying these aspersions on the artistic portrayal of Jesus Christ appears to have been a deep-seated

¹³³Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 1.

¹³⁴Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 86.

¹³⁵Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 86.

¹³⁶Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 86-87.

¹³⁷Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 87.

¹³⁸Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 87.

aversion to the material and physical aspects of his person.”¹³⁹ Focusing the gaze on his humanity diverted from a greater focus on the Transcendent.¹⁴⁰

Those defending icons did agree with the Iconoclasts that Jesus Christ is the Image of God, and that he is the “True Image,” the Image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). However, Christ was the “one who had been made human, and thus physical and material, by his incarnation and birth from the Virgin Mary, and therefore a Christian icon was not an idol but an image of the Image: such was in essence the case for a Christian art.”¹⁴¹

Part of the argument asked who invented images. It was John of Damascus (c. 655-c.750) who responded it was God: “*God was the first and the original image-maker of the universe.*”¹⁴²

In Christianity the long, destructive and bloody battle over whether religious representations were permissible was resolved when approval of the use of images was received at Nicaea in 787 C.E., the Seventh Ecumenical Council, with final confirmation coming in 843 C.E. Tensions surrounded the question of whether or not icons themselves harbored grace and religious energies. St. John of Damascus, an *essentialist*, argued that they did. But St. Theodore the Studite, a *non-essentialist*, argued that they did not. St. Theodore’s position won the day, which took the fiery wind out of the sails of the Iconoclasts:

¹³⁹Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 88.

¹⁴⁰Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 88. Concerning “spirit and truth,” Pelikan refers to John 4:24, and suggest we see Origen, *On First Principles* 1.1.4.

¹⁴¹Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 88.

¹⁴²Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 89. Italics are Pelican’s and he quotes John of Damascus, *On the Images*, 3.26.

For him the icon did not belong to the sacramental realm. The material substance of the sacraments received its sanctifying force by an instrumental grace (in baptism, water sanctified a person by the force of the Holy Spirit). The icon did not give a person substantial participation in Christ as did the eucharistic bread which *is* the body of Christ. The icon allowed the participation in Christ by its relation to the hypostasis (person) of Christ, and this participation was of an intentional nature. Thus the icon must be recognized as the image of a definite person and must carry his name. The icon was an intentional, deliberate communion with the person represented.¹⁴³

For St. Theodore the icon was like an emperor's seal impressed in matter. The seal remained to itself separate from the impression in the icon. Ultimately, it was Christ deified body that was represented by the icon. However, according to Bissera V. Pentcheva, the "icon performed through its materiality."¹⁴⁴

For example, with the engagement of the senses through such activities as the flickering of candles and the rising of incense, there is a kind of vacillation between the appearance of presence, and then its absence. The "icon thus goes through a process of becoming, changing, and performing before the faithful."¹⁴⁵ People are "then led to project their whiling psychological state and sensual experience... back onto the object to make the icon appear alive."¹⁴⁶ In its non-essentialists understanding, the icon "has received the imprint of the divine form,"¹⁴⁷ impressed now with a tension:

The definition of the icon as absence has paradoxically heightened the materiality of this object. A tension lurks on the icon's surface between absence and presence, a tension that will be resolved in the icon's performance (*mimesis*): the way it plays the appearances before the

¹⁴³Egon Sendler, *The Icon: Image of the Invisible, Elements of Theology, Aesthetics and Technique*, trans. Steven Bigham. (Redondo Beach, Calif.: Oakwood Publications, 1988), 46.

¹⁴⁴Bissera V. Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon," *The Art Bulletin* LXXXVIII, no. 4 (December 2006): 631. Pentcheva has been Assistant Professor of Art History at Stanford University.

¹⁴⁵Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon," 631.

¹⁴⁶Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon," 631-632.

¹⁴⁷Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon," 632.

faithful. In contrast to our Western notion of mimesis as the imitation of form, Byzantium *mimesis* is the imitation of presence. The icon is just an imprint of form, but it simulates divine essence through the interaction of its imprinted surface with the changing ambience.¹⁴⁸

Relief icons were made to recede, but later icons were created on a “flat surface of the wood and surrounded by a raised silver-gilt or enameled cover, which floods the eye with its radiance and shimmer.”¹⁴⁹ The eye could be thought of as acting in two ways. It could either touch or be touched.¹⁵⁰ As icons began to be mostly painted, they employed three main materials: egg (animal), wood (plant), and gold (mineral).

In general, because the icon carries only the “visible characteristics” and not its “essence,” the icon “becomes the imprint of absence on matter. This object is thus set to simulate presence (essence) through appearance.”¹⁵¹ The prototype is said to impress its image upon the memory of the iconographer, who then impresses this image into matter and form. It is a double imprint creative process.¹⁵²

Because the Council ruled that Jesus was both God and human and that his material reality, though now deified, could be represented, this meant that saintly men and women could be represented with images as well. More so, icons could be venerated, which was not the same as worshipping idols. Icons, made by human hands, like Scripture, impart the Word and are meant to teach and to draw us to the Holy.

¹⁴⁸Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” 632.

¹⁴⁹Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” 631.

¹⁵⁰Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” 631.

¹⁵¹Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” 634.

¹⁵²Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” 634.

While the Church's Tradition recognizes the "Incarnate Word and Holy Spirit" as the "twofold condition of the fullness of the Revelation,"¹⁵³ within the Orthodox tradition the ongoing primary "outward" elements are Scripture, the Councils and Fathers, Liturgy, the Canons, and Icons.¹⁵⁴ And within Scripture itself are both the oral and written traditions, each standing as an implied communication of the Spirit.¹⁵⁵

Held within this marked distinguishing of Scripture into written and oral forms in the East are icons.¹⁵⁶ They are understood to be *written* expressions within the tradition. Reading icons is not like analyzing a work of art, or reading Scripture, or reading the *Book of Nature*, but it does entail familiar cultural skills through which people understand various genres of telling stories, teaching, sharing wisdom, and the passing on of a faith tradition through the use of images.

The icon is "not a simple art, serving to illustrate the Holy Scriptures, but a complete correspondence of the one to the other, and therefore attributes to the icon the same dogmatic, liturgic and educational significance as it does to the Holy Scripture."¹⁵⁷ Leonid Ouspensky says that Christianity is a "revelation" of both the Word of God and the Image of God, "in which His Likeness is revealed."¹⁵⁸ The icon is a "likeness not of an animate but of a deified prototype." It is an image "not of corruptible flesh, but of

¹⁵³Vladimir Lossky, "Tradition and Traditions," in *The Meaning of Icons*, by Leonard Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, trans. by G.E.H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky, (Crestwood, New York, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983),16. (Text first published in 1952.)

¹⁵⁴Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church: New Edition* (London/New York: Penguin, revised 1993, 1997), 206. He is known as Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia and has been professor at Oxford.

¹⁵⁵Lossky, "Tradition and Traditions," 16.

¹⁵⁶Lossky, "Tradition and Traditions," 12.

¹⁵⁷Leonid Ouspensky, "The Meaning and Language of Icons," in *The Meaning of Icons*, edited by Leonard Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, trans. by G.E.H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky, (Crestwood, New York, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983), 30. Text first published in 1952.

¹⁵⁸Ouspensky, "The Meaning and Language of Icons," 35.

flesh transfigured, radiant with Divine light. It is Beauty and Glory, represented by material means and visible in the icon to physical eyes.”¹⁵⁹ And, this beauty and glory, which is somehow made present by means of the icon, is active:

This recognition of the image as making reality present carries over into the attempt to see in all human beings the image of God in which they are created and to honour Him there, and into striving to purify God’s image in ourselves, so that the radiance of God’s love is felt by those with whom we have to do. Delight in beauty, in the liturgy, in the icons, is not something merely aesthetic, but something tested in ascetic struggle. This beauty purifies and draws out a passionate love for God and his whole creation.”¹⁶⁰

Timothy Ware says the Iconoclasts, who resisted all material images of the divine, failed to understand that by dismissing all representations of God they also failed to accept the teachings of the Incarnation:

They fell, as so many puritans have done, into a kind of dualism. Regarding matter as a defilement, they wanted a religion freed from all contact with what is material; for they thought that what is spiritual must be non-material. But this is to betray the Incarnation, by allowing no place to Christ’s humanity, to His body; it is to forget that our body as well as our soul must be saved and transfigured.... It was not merely a controversy about religious art, but about the Incarnation, about human salvation, about the salvation of the entire material cosmos.¹⁶¹

More so, the basis of an icon’s beauty does not rest in its capacity to be visually pleasing, or pretty, but rather in how it works and what purpose it serves. Ouspensky writes:

On the plane of human creative work, beauty is the crowning given by God, the seal of the conformity of the image to its prototype, of the symbol to what it represents, that is, to the Kingdom of the Spirit. The beauty of an icon is the beauty of the acquired likeness to God and so its value lies not in its being beautiful in itself, in its appearance as a beautiful object, but in the fact that it depicts Beauty.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹Ouspensky, “The Meaning and Language of Icons,” 36.

¹⁶⁰Andrew Louth, “Byzantine Christianity and Greek Orthodoxy,” in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity*, ed. Ken Perry et. al. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 100.

¹⁶¹Ware, *The Orthodox Church: New Edition*, 33.

¹⁶²Ouspensky, “The Meaning and Language of Icons,” 35.

Icons “depict” the Word of God; they teach and draw one toward transformation. They are a “means to an end,” for the “beauty of the visible world lies not in the transitory splendour of its present state, but in the very meaning of its existence, in its coming transfiguration laid down in it as a possibility to be realized.”¹⁶³

However, concerning the one standing before the icon, “as iron is not transformed into fire but remains iron,” when one is “transfigured” you become “spiritualized and illumined,” with the caveat that “nothing” in you is “destroyed or taken away.”¹⁶⁴ Thus it can be said:

[T]hat a saint is more truly a man than is a sinner, since, by reassuming likeness to God, he achieves the original purpose of his being, is clothed in the incorruptible Beauty of the Kingdom of God, in the creation of which he participates with life. Therefore, beauty itself ... is not a beauty belonging to the creature, but an attribute of the Kingdom of God where God is all in all.”¹⁶⁵

Icons, in concert with other elements of Orthodoxy, signify less focus on philosophical tenets and invite greater focus on an association with God, but from within a material world, even though material is not of itself ultimate beauty. Tomas Spidlik writes:

Having become Christians, Hellenized peoples were deeply conscious of their cosmic vocation—not a matter of inserting oneself into a universal harmony, but rather of actively co-operating to re-establish this beauty, spoiled by sin. By vocation, the Christian must work at the perfection and the deification of the world, through ascetic purification which precedes cosmic joy.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³Ouspensky, “The Meaning and Language of Icons,” 35.

¹⁶⁴Ouspensky, “The Meaning and Language of Icons,” 35.

¹⁶⁵Ouspensky, “The Meaning and Language of Icons,” 35.

¹⁶⁶Tomas Spidlik, “Spiritual Theology,” in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity*, ed. Ken Parry et. al. (Oxford/Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001), 457.

While the transcendence of God is closely guarded in the East and the West, it has been more associated with the East. Thus, it is interesting to find that the icon of the East deals very specifically with materiality as a means to help humans gaze upon the prototype who is Christ, as well as on those who have followed Christ in exemplary fashion, so as to model our lives on theirs.

However, over time and gradually, icons began to change. A “dogmatic element began to dominate and determine the whole composition.”¹⁶⁷ Increased use of imagination and conceptualization began to challenge the traditional canon concerning the writing of icons and the place and use of Scripture in them. Iconographers began to interpret more freely than some thought appropriate. Where as the transcendent God had been rarely portrayed, except minimally, as with the use of color for light or with a symbol of a hand *written* into the icon from above, gradually, God the Father and the entire Trinity were being directly depicted.¹⁶⁸

This shift departed from the earlier tradition. There could be found icons that “lacked the direct link with the mystery of the incarnation.”¹⁶⁹ While this did take centuries, it eventually resulted in actions being taken by those in authority, such as the Councils in Moscow in the sixteenth century who issued prohibitions regarding certain kinds of icons. But “under the influence of classical studies and rationalistic philosophy coming from the West, people were much too fascinated by these new ideas to be happy

¹⁶⁷Sendler, *The Icon*, 74.

¹⁶⁸Sendler, *The Icon*, 75.

¹⁶⁹Sendler, *The Icon*, 75.

with the simplicity of ancient forms.”¹⁷⁰ There was an increase of boldness in terms of a willingness to represent the invisible God,¹⁷¹ and most poignantly in the West.

Overlooking the centuries when the icon debates took place, Jaroslav Pelikan makes an interesting observation as he considers beauty and people’s vision of the Divine. He contends that of the triad, Beauty, Truth, and Goodness, it took Beauty “by far the longest time to evolve,”¹⁷² and that it was helped along by the tensions and debates over icons. He writes:

As the iconoclasts say with great clarity, the Beautiful was (and is) the most subtle and the most dangerous of the triad: the dangers of identifying the Holy with the True (intellectualism) and with the Good (moralism) have manifested themselves repeatedly in the history of Judaism and of Christianity, but it is noteworthy that both the Second Commandment itself and the message of the Hebrew prophets singled out the identification of the Holy with the Beautiful as the special temptation to sin. The formulation of an aesthetic that came to terms with the reality of this temptation called for philosophical and theological sophistication. In addition, of course, there had to have been an inspiration for religious art, an inspiration of more than a flatly didactic sort, before there could be any such aesthetic justification; and a sophisticated philosophical-theological challenge to religious art was necessary before any sophisticated defenses of it was possible.¹⁷³

In both the East and the West there is a curiosity that is beaconing beyond the status quo. And although we continue to find aesthetic themes such as harmony, measure, unity, and spiritual aspirations continuing, we also observe differences and variety erupting more broadly.

While what has been covered in the first millennium is only a small sampling of ideas found during its centuries, this part of section two on aesthetics and theology has

¹⁷⁰Sendler, *The Icon*, 75.

¹⁷¹Sendler, *The Icon*, 74.

¹⁷²Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 93.

¹⁷³Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 94.

highlighted several facets related to aesthetics and theology. Some of what has been shown includes recognition of similarities and dissimilarities with Greek and Hebrew thinking on beauty; how beauty connects to holiness; how there is both an attraction and unease with images; the significance of measurement and harmony; and a particular contribution of Christian understanding that rest upon the belief that the Incarnation of the Word is the true and unchanging image after which humans are called to model themselves. This *Image* is itself the link between God and creation and is often described in terms of splendor and light. Mimesis is not just associated with static imitation, but with the seeming performance of the Holy's presence, followed by its absence.

Material matter in the style of icons, by way of grace and the iconographer, are impressed with a form that is empty. There is the belief that beauty must involve purification, asceticism, and grace, for while there is earthly beauty, ultimate beauty is spiritual. In addition, the activity of the icon speaks to an invitation that calls people to participate with the Holy and to accept as their vocation participation in the deification of the world.

This part of our study has demonstrated that matter has been both vilified and called beautiful and good. God uses material matter to speak of Divine Mystery, to reflect God's glory, to invite people to the *Good*, but God's ultimate transcendence remains guarded in both the East and the West.

3. The Second Millennium

Our goal in this section is to locate a few discernable voices and ideas concerning aesthetics and theology in the second millennium that could inform our overall project.

That is, we are searching for ideas on aesthetics and theology that may have influenced how we perceive and appreciate the natural and constructed world.

Where we noted a shift in iconography beginning to take place near the close of the first millennium we also find a shift happening in the West with regard to theological concerns. Scholastic writers are beginning to focus not only on faith, but on the integration of reason and faith. Writing on contemplation in his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) considers the connection between beauty and reason:

[B]eauty... consists in a certain clarity and due proportion. Now each of these is found radically in the reason; because both the light that makes beauty seen, and the establishing of due proportion among things belong to reason. Hence since the contemplative life consists in an act of the reason, there is beauty in it by its very nature and essence; wherefore it is written (Wis. viii. 2) of the contemplation of wisdom: *I became a lover of her wisdom.*

On the other hand, beauty is in the moral virtues by participation, in so far as they participate in the order of reason; and especially is it in temperance, which restrains the concupiscences which especially darken the light of reason. (ST 2, 2, Q 180, 2ae)¹⁷⁴

Thomas maintains the practice of connecting beauty with morality, as well as connecting it to reason, contemplation, and wisdom.

However, when it comes to morality and nature, Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) teaches a special sensitivity for all of creation. One of the most treasured writings by Francis is his *Canticle of Brother Sun*, which was written near his death. The canticle is in praise of the Most High by one who is at “peace and in harmony with all the elements of creation and the whole cosmos.”¹⁷⁵ Francis views all the elements of creation as

¹⁷⁴Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), 1932.

¹⁷⁵J.A. Wayne Hellmann, “The Spirituality of the Franciscans,” in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, eds. Jill Raitt, Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (Crossroad: New York, 1988), 36.

brothers and sisters and through them the Lord is praised. In his canticle he claims a kind of *likeness* between creation and the Creator.

However, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) turns the tables a bit when he uses the analogy of the face to refer to the beauty of God and tells how God looks at each of us. It is God's vision that makes it possible for creation to exist. We in turn see God's face as if God is of our own species; that is, each species projects its own face.¹⁷⁶

Akin to Pseudo-Dionysius, other writers, like Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1327), *The Cloud of Unknowing*,¹⁷⁷ and John of the Cross (1452-1491), turn their attention to apophatic spirituality and theology, an approach which includes a negation of all sense experience and judgment, including that of beauty. However, the negation is never, in the larger context, found to be without a cataphatic dimension as well. While the human mind cannot name who God is in God's totality, neither can there be a negation of what was said about God unless there is something to negate. These authors will enrich conversations on questions of God, asserting earthly metaphors and analogies of God, and then acknowledging that our assertions always fall short of fully naming Divine Mystery.

In the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries we find writers, such as Julian of Norwich (c.1342-c.1413) and Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), describing their insights and visions with intricate storytelling and imagination and with a heightened

¹⁷⁶Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*. Quoted in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 98-103. Thiessen credits: *The Classics of Western Spirituality, Nicholas of Cusa, Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. and ed. H. Lawrence Bond (New York, Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1997). (Ch. 6., para. 17-21, pp. 242-4)." In the twentieth century Emmanuel Levinas writes how the face calls us to ethical action. Jean-Luc Marion, in the twentieth and early twenty-first century, expands on the meaning of the *icon* and the *gaze*. In their works, both writers question metaphysical assumptions.

¹⁷⁷An anonymous Christian apophatic writing from Russia believed to have been written in the 14th century.

understanding of emotional and spiritual development. However, it also appears that Teresa's experience was slighted by some because imaginative visions were understood as less superior than those of the intellect.¹⁷⁸

Another example of someone who adds something particular to the conversation is Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuits. Ignatius develops a method of discernment that focuses on how the living God is working and moving in a person's ordinary life. His aim is to recognize God in all aspects of creation. In his *Spiritual Exercises* he writes:

[O]ur very desire to name God our Lord carries with it greater respect and reverence than desire to name a creature.... The perfect [persons], through constant contemplation and enlightenment of their understanding, more readily consider, meditate, and contemplate God our Lord as being present in every creature by his essence, presence, and power.

(*SE*, first week, 39)¹⁷⁹

With Ignatius we find a heightened desire to recognize the Spirit of God among us and dwelling within us day-to-day, while still maintaining the distinction between God and creatures. There remains the need to aspire toward God and to follow *God's will*.

During the Medieval period religious attitudes worked to keep God as the center of attention, as they reflected on how humanity is made in the image and likeness of God (particularly men).¹⁸⁰ But Renaissance minds were turning more humanistic. Thus, while they were rediscovering Classical times, they "restored man to the centre of

¹⁷⁸Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 146.

¹⁷⁹Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. George E. Ganss. (Institute of Jesuit Sources: St. Louis, 1992), 36.

¹⁸⁰Jorge J. E. Garcia, "Medieval Philosophy," in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, eds. Nicholas Bunnin and E. P. Tsui-James (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 621.

attention particularly in the philosophy of Plato.”¹⁸¹ For example, the work of the artist Michelangelo was all about the human body.¹⁸²

Michelangelo was a sculptor first, and a painter second. His work in the Sistine Chapel depicts figures that are classically sculptured. The God portrayed lives on as God the Father, the old white man with the long white beard who floats in the air.

Turning to the natural world, Michelangelo “creates the sun and moon as geometrical abstractions.”¹⁸³ In one sense, because he was a humanist, “he was the quintessential painter of the new art,” and because he refused to “put the world into his paintings means that a large part of reality [or creation] is missing.”¹⁸⁴

Regarding Michelangelo’s work in the Sistine Chapel, it is important to notice that the image of “God the Father” is boldly depicted with no hesitation, contrary to historical religious reservations. Second, God’s image is portrayed in the *holy of holies*, the very place where popes are chosen to accept the *keys* to the kingdom first believed to have been passed to St. Peter. Third, God’s semblance is made visible in the center of the Church’s structural might, insinuating a special intimacy with the divine. Fourth, nature is only minimally represented. Finally, the image of *man* is central.

While there was great acclaim over Michelangelo’s masterful accomplishment it was not necessarily a benign enterprise. Bernard Lamarche-Vidal comments on Michelangelo and the golden age:

Michelangelo’s enemies were not wrong; his work shows a retreat of investment from the legal dispositions of the religious discourses on the

¹⁸¹Garcia, “Medieval Philosophy,” 621.

¹⁸²Paul Johnson, *Art: A New History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), 281.

¹⁸³Johnson, *Art, A New History*, 281.

¹⁸⁴Johnson, *Art, A New History*, 281.

pictorial codes toward new values sustained by the liberal classes, which are values of pleasure.¹⁸⁵

Pope Julius II's determination for mammoth projects, including the painting of the Sistine Chapel, speaks of a very real struggle that the institutional Church was having in asserting its authority as a *unity* of the temporal and spiritual realms.¹⁸⁶ The apex of this connection between two worlds was the Church, now under increasing threat. When Michelangelo completed the project in 1512, major troubles for the Roman Church were just over the horizon, including, but not restricted to, Martin Luther.

In 1517, Martin Luther (1483-1546) displayed his "Ninety-five theses," which came to be recognized as the beginning of the German Reformation. Concerning religious art, Luther was not totally against such representation; he simply did not think it was necessary.¹⁸⁷ If it helped people's faith to deepen and they avoided worshipping images, then he could tolerate them,¹⁸⁸ but some of those that followed Luther were adamantly opposed to religious images, statuary, and such. They included Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵Lamarche-Vadel, *Michelangelo*, 52.

¹⁸⁶At different times in history leaders have attempted to conquer and unify their kingdoms in attempts to consolidate ultimate authority. Early Israel tried to maintain a united kingdom, Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, Constantine, and Justinian are all examples of this desire for unity and power. But in the late 5th century the "Doctrine of the Two Swords" separated this unity in an attempt to ensure peace. They were divided into temporal and spiritual realms, governments having temporal authority and the Church having authority over spiritual issues, but leaving a clause that said in times of conflict between these that temporal powers would defer to the church, and thus maintain a single religious unity. But political shifts over the centuries left the Church constantly struggling with its authority and its divisions. In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII issued "Unam Sanctam," which responded to acute tensions with the papacy. It again attempted to assert pontifical and Catholic supremacy; thereby, hoping to ensure unity and harmony according to its religious ideals.

¹⁸⁷Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 126.

¹⁸⁸Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 126-127, 130, 132.

¹⁸⁹Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 127.

However, Calvin does address the topic of nature and prefers to use the metaphor of *theatre* when speaking of God and the natural world. Citing this metaphor, Belden C.

Lane writes:

[Calvin's] favorite metaphor in speaking of the natural world and its beauty was to describe it as a theatre of God's glory. Every human being, he said, is 'formed to be a spectator of the created world and given eyes that he might be led to its author by contemplating so beautiful a representation.'¹⁹⁰

Moreover, the principal actor in this vast theatrical production is none other than God alone, evoking desire by 'showing himself in the visible splendor of his apparel.'¹⁹¹ As Calvin understood it, the contemplation of God's beauty on the great stage of nature is a performance that absorbs the whole of creation. It is the end toward which everything is made.¹⁹²

Following the Reform tradition, sculptures and paintings were allowed and understood as from God only if they depicted items that could be seen with the eye.¹⁹³

This meant that landscapes and people could be subjects of art, as long as the art was not specifically religious. Thiessen makes the observation:

It is interesting to note that this is precisely what happened with the reformation in the Low Countries. Religious images were abandoned for genre subjects, still life and historical painting. Yet, in many of these non-

¹⁹⁰Belden C. Lane, "Spirituality as the Performance of Desire: Calvin on the World as a Theatre of God's Glory," *Spiritus* 1 (2002): 1. Belden references: John Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, commentary on Romans 1:19. This reference can be found in his collected works in Latin and French, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, in fifty-nine volumes, edited by, Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, in the huge *Corpus Reformation* (Brunswick: A. Schwetckhe and Son [M. Bruhn], 1863-1900, vol. 49, 23.

¹⁹¹Lane, "Spirituality as the Performance of Desire: Calvin on the World as a Theatre of God's Glory," *Spiritus* 1 (2002): 1. This reference is from Calvin's *Institutes* of 1559 cited by Belden. He references: *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles and edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

¹⁹²Lane, "Spirituality as the Performance of Desire: Calvin on the World as a Theatre of God's Glory," *Spiritus* 1 (2002): 1. Belden's reference: "Comm. Ps. 115:17, CO 32:192. Quoted from the English translation of Calvin's *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), vol. 11, 358."

¹⁹³Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 127.

religious works, distinctly moral messages, such as the symbolical inclusion of the seven deadly sins, were retained and developed.¹⁹⁴

This kind of sublimation is not restricted to the Low Countries or to the sixteenth century.

With the Reformation and Counter-Reformation there was a dispersal of creative energies that opened the window, even more so, to different understandings of aesthetics, art, beauty, God, and the natural world. However, at this juncture of time there can still be found an overwhelming belief in God and, although not always followed, there is the sense that one needs to live a moral life as part of a religious path in which one aspires toward the beauty of God or religious ideals. Creation can still be understood as reflecting the Creator, as a means to the Creator, and as less significant than the spiritual world.

C. Aesthetics and Nature

In this the final section of chapter one, we will focus more closely on ideas and attitudes toward creation, or what we customarily refer to as nature or the natural world, in those years primarily after the Renaissance. Part one will set a general context and part two will examine a limited number of ideas on aesthetics or art that, in particular, pertain to or refer to nature.

1. Changing Perspectives and the Idea of Interconnectedness

Many have viewed the world as spirit and matter that are mixed to different degrees. For example, a horse would have more spirit than a piece of wood, humans more than a horse. But in the fifteenth century Nicholas of Cusa begins to use the term “machine” in speaking of the world, which would later help to diminish the *spirit* part of this metaphysical understanding. Although the term is without the full force of the

¹⁹⁴Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 127.

meaning of “machine,” he anticipates what lies ahead. His work is an example of earthly order beginning to be viewed as mechanistic:

[T]hrough visible things and their magnitude, beauty, and order we are led to marvel at the divine art... For through arithmetic God joined things together; through geometry God fashioned them in such a way that they receive steadfastness, stability, and mobility, according to their conditions; with music God gave them such proportion that there is not more earth in earth than water in water, air in air, and fire in fire, so that no element is wholly resoluble into another. Therefore, the machine of the world cannot perish. (Book2, Ch. 13, para. 175, p. 166)¹⁹⁵

Yet, we also find toward the end of the Renaissance a shifting of ideas on beauty toward a new complexity: “Beauty did not so much spring from balanced proportion, but from a sort of torsion, a restless reaching out for something lying beyond the mathematical rules that govern the physical world.”¹⁹⁶ Equilibrium, not unlike dissatisfaction with the ancient Greek value of repose, was not communicating the depth that it had once delivered. For beauty to be understood differently and for a “change to occur in the arts... the world had to be understood as less ordered and geometrically obvious.”¹⁹⁷

Ptolemy’s (4th – 3rd century B.C.E.) theory of the cosmos with earth as its center was “based on the perfection of the circle” and it “seemed to embody the Classical ideals of proportion.”¹⁹⁸ Centuries later Copernicus (1473-1543) and Galileo (1564-1642) challenge geocentric belief when they each put forth a heliocentric understanding. But also shocking was Kepler’s (1571-1630) “planetary model, in which the earth revolves

¹⁹⁵Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*. Quoted in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 109. Thiessen credits: “*The Classics of Western Spirituality, Nicholas of Cusa, Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. and ed. H. Lawrence Bond, New York, Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1997.”

¹⁹⁶Eco, *History of Beauty*, 95.

¹⁹⁷Eco, *History of Beauty*, 95-96.

¹⁹⁸Eco, *History of Beauty*, 96.

along an ellipse of which the sun is one of the foci,” thus, the “image of spherical perfection was thrown into crisis. This was not because Kepler’s model of the cosmos did not obey mathematical laws, but because—in a visual sense—it no longer resembled the ‘Pythagorean’ perfection of a system of concentric spheres.”¹⁹⁹

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Western world was beginning to let go of a very orderly cosmos in terms of science, politics, religion, and commerce. In the seventeenth century René Descartes (1596-1650) questions the convergence of our different kinds of beliefs across disciplines.²⁰⁰ He determines that understandings arising from myths, theology, and science do not meet. He moves to start his analysis from a different point, his own power to reason. He encourages thinking that emphasizes human reasoning, which further divides body and mind, and matter and spirit.²⁰¹ This shift is not exactly the same dualism of the past that placed greater emphasis on the transcendent. Rather, there is growing emphasis on the human mind.

For Descartes, *thinking is existing*. His questions lead him to work “out a very clear and complete mechanistic conception of the physical world, including the world of organic creatures, and his thinking along this line has helped to give direction and impetus to the scientific study of nature ever since.”²⁰²

More so, if the world is not ordered as we thought and religion seems to have gone to war even with itself, then what are we to think and to believe? Mark Lilla

¹⁹⁹Eco, *History of Beauty*, 96.

²⁰⁰Among these other thinkers was the empiricist, Francis Bacon (1561-1626).

²⁰¹Philip Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers* (New York: Enchanted Lion Books, 2005), 72-73.

²⁰²Monroe C. Beardsley, ed., *The European Philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, 1988), 3- 4.

explains that times were ripe in the seventeenth century for the ideas of philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Writing on political theology Lilla argues:

Traditionally, political theology had interpreted a set of revealed divine commands and applied them to social life. In his great treatise “Leviathan” (1651), Hobbes simply ignored the substance of those commands and talked instead about how and why human beings believed God revealed them. He did the most revolutionary thing a thinker can ever do—he changed the subject, from God and his commands to man and his beliefs.²⁰³

Hobbes was a materialist, which means matter is matter. Even God is matter.²⁰⁴

And in this material world Hobbes believes that the “natural state of man is one of war and strife, unless acted upon and governed by the rules of social living.” He thinks humans have free will, but are under the constraints of natural law: “Only a covenant kept by the rule of the sword can keep man from falling back into his natural state.”²⁰⁵

Hobbes was followed by others, such as John Locke (1632-1704) who furthers the divide between religion and the secular by aiming to put thinking on sound scientific grounds, empirical grounds. In the West, an increased valuing of reason was fueling the rise of science. In this regard, Isaac Newton (1647-1727) asserts the idea that the “universe runs according to law-governed mechanical principles.”²⁰⁶

These principles were providing new tools, as it were, for inventors; thus, creating new wealth for people beyond the traditional aristocracy. Also, countries and enterprises were greatly enhanced by trade and the establishment of new colonies around the globe,

²⁰³Mark Lilla, “The Politics of God,” *The New York Times*, 19 August 2007, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/magazine/19Religion-t.html>...> (19 August 2007). Mark Lilla is professor of the humanities at Columbia University. This essay was adapted from his book, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

²⁰⁴Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*, 69.

²⁰⁵Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*, 69.

²⁰⁶Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*, 71.

including in the Americas. The business of oppression, subjugation, and slavery provided needed labor for commerce. Some of these labor *resources* were considered property and although the issue of slavery is too large for this study to address it is important to note how privilege and power can objectify difference and the perception of others as things or property.

By the eighteenth century parts of the Western world were changing quickly. But, the environmentalist Bill McKibben, citing the economist Jeffrey Sachs, believes that it was the invention of a practical version of the steam engine that finally catapulted the West into rapid growth and development. McKibben writes:

[I]n 1712, something new finally happened. A British inventor named Thomas Newcomen developed the first practical steam engine. He burned coal, and used the steam pressure built up in his boiler to drive a pump that, in turn, drained water from coal mines, allowing them to operate far more cheaply and efficiently. How much more efficiently? His engine replaced a team of five hundred horses walking in a circle. And from there—well, things accelerated. In the words of the economist Jeffrey Sachs, ‘The steam engine marked the decisive turning point of human history.’²⁰⁷

Why? Because before the steam engine was in use, large numbers of domesticated animals were needed to be cared for and fed, which meant lots of farmers needed to grow a great deal of grain to feed them. This meant less for the general population to consume and an increased need to work on farms. But with a working steam engine humans began to construct an entirely different energy apparatus that is based on fossil fuels.²⁰⁸ This, in turn, allowed more food for more people and innovation

²⁰⁷Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Times Books, 2007), 1. For data on the steam engine McKibben credits: “Gordon John Steele, “What Has Watt Wrought?” *Forbes*, July 1997, p. 144.”

²⁰⁸As of 2007 one finds estimates of the United States reliability on coal for energy ranging between 55-65 percent.

raised confidence in humanity's ability to imagine, create, and shape the future of life on earth. And inventions, such as the steam engine, bolstered human determination to do so.

Again, McKibben writes:

First coal, then oil, then natural gas allowed for *everything* we consider normal and obvious about the modern world, from making fertilizer to making steel to making electricity. These in turn fed all the subsidiary revolutions in transportation and chemistry and communication, right down to the electron-based information age we now inhabit. Suddenly, one-hundred-percent growth in the standard of living could be accomplished in a few decades, not a few millennia.²⁰⁹

Interestingly, just as confidence was rising regarding the power and specialness of the human species to be inventive, the human ego is confronted with the idea of evolution.

Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory in the nineteenth century served to focus attention on the human species and to question its origin. With evolution humanity stood to lose its privileged pinnacle as a species totally set apart from the rest of the natural world.

However, by the mid-nineteenth century God was still thought to be in nature or thought to be reflected in nature. But as practical, mechanistic visions grew and were transformed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by events, cultures, and science, questions regarding metaphysics multiplied regarding whether nature, or matter, is imbued with Spirit, or if nature even reflects a Creator. More basically, does *God* exist?

The dream, or "illusion," loomed large that humanity could manifest its own destiny, and for some it did, but in the twentieth century the world experienced two *world wars*. By their end, nuclear power had been unleashed, killing more than ever imagined.

²⁰⁹McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Times Books, 2007), 6.

The total dead from World War II is estimated at fifty-two million.²¹⁰ The extent of destruction to the natural world can only be guessed. Questions began to rise regarding human progress, our technology, and inventions.

In retrospect, as early as 1818 the novelist Mary Shelley wrote an alarmingly prescient tale about human creativity that tells of a lack of foresight and concern for the consequences resulting from human makings and science and technology. Even as confidence in human abilities grew, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), among others, began to ask questions. Referring to Greek tragedy, he challenges both science and art. He thinks that they each require both “dream and song,” and he suggests that “existence can be understood and justified only in aesthetic terms. This then puts scientific inquiry in a new light: it is either a misleading failure or a rival to art; in the latter case it is itself a kind of illusion similar to the illusion of art.”²¹¹

The dangers of modern times are becoming evident. In the mid-1930's Martin Heidegger is exploring the differences between art and technology, or equipment, in his lectures later published as “The Origin of the Work of Art.”²¹² For Heidegger, art is more than a functionary; it has to do with truth that is somehow “working.”²¹³

Also, throughout the twentieth century a growing conservationists and environmentalists movement increasingly sounds the alarm that *progress* has a significant

²¹⁰<http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/timeline/statistics.htm> (25 August 2007).

²¹¹Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art & Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 496. Editors' comments.

²¹²Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Philosophies of Art & Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, ed. by Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 647-708. This version was first published in 1964.

²¹³Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Philosophies of Art & Beauty*, 666.

price tag. Among such early issues to be recognized were pollution, decline and extinction of species, and the diminishment of wilderness.

In 1962 a still, small voice asked us to look at nature differently and urgently. That voice was Rachel Carson and she wrote *Silent Spring*. In her text she makes earth the subject and she begins to demonstrate how human actions affect life on the planet, and not just human life. Whereas Darwin had begun to show how we are related to other species, she aims to demonstrate how we are *interconnected* with other life forms, and to the consequences of our technological ways of living on the planet. While Carson was not the first or the only person to draw attention to the interconnectedness of all of life, she does mark a moment when concern begins to spread to the general public and to a wider arena of professional disciplines. Among other voices was Hans Jonas, a philosopher, who tries to show that we have an ethical responsibility for the technology that we create and for the ways in which it impacts the environment.²¹⁴

2. Aesthetics and Nature

In the eighteenth century, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762) uses the term *aesthetics* as a way to further the work and divisions of the sciences. To do so he narrows *aesthetics* to the senses, intending to place the science “concerned with sense knowledge, alongside logic.”²¹⁵ Baumgarten has a particular goal:

The aim of aesthetics, for Baumgarten, was to perfect sense knowledge, and this perfection he considered to be nothing less than beauty itself. In other words, beauty is not so much an attribute of things, or a feeling of

²¹⁴See: Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

²¹⁵Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 156.

what is pleasant, but rather an expression of perfecting one's attainment of knowledge in and through the realm of the senses.²¹⁶

Baumgarten places the “‘higher’ senses of sight and hearing primarily with mental activity.”²¹⁷ With Baumgarten one finds that questions are shifting. Where the medievalists might ask how nature reflects the beauty of God, during the Enlightenment, and further into Modernity, people are asking, how we judge something to be beautiful and even if we can?

While it is with Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) that aesthetics is propelled into its own distinct arena in philosophy, Kant does not come to his ideas as if he is in a vacuum. For example, Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) had already come to the conclusion that there was something akin to an internal sensibility, different from “sensible pleasures,” and “rational pleasures.”²¹⁸ Hutcheson concludes that the source of our pleasure in beauty is not to be “fixed on objects, as it had in rival rationalist accounts of beauty,” but that the source of this pleasure “lies in us as well as in objects.”²¹⁹ The objects, however, do “give rise to the pleasure of beauty to the degree they possess complex order,” “uniformity and variety in high degree.”²²⁰ Uniformity and variety are not pitted against each other, but exist simultaneously. And there could be beautiful theories, just as there could be beautiful things.²²¹

²¹⁶Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics*, 156. Thiessen directs the reader to the following: “M. Hauskeller, *Was das Schöne sei* (1994), p. 209.”

²¹⁷Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, “Phenomenology,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2005), 170.

²¹⁸James Shelley, “Empiricism,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2005), 44.

²¹⁹Shelley, “Empiricism,” 42-43.

²²⁰Shelley, “Empiricism,” 46-47.

²²¹Shelley, “Empiricism,” 47.

However, David Hume disagrees with Hutcheson's idea of a distinct, third sensibility. Instead, he "takes the pleasure of beauty to arise with the involvement of both senses and reason, and to have not one but irreducibly many causes in objects." More so, Hume can find no way to establish a "standard of taste."²²² He is up against John Locke's belief that beauty is a sentiment that does reside in the mind.²²³ But he aims to determine if there could be "principles of taste." He asserts that there are two stages that we pass through before establishing judgments of taste: the perceptual stage, and the affective stage. Affective experiences cannot be compared and judged, but perceptual experiences can. Some perceptions are simply more accurate than others.²²⁴

Hume observes that there is across time and cultures examples of similar judgment, as with great works of literature. He concludes that when such appropriately sound examples are determined not to be beautiful that fault lies not with the object, nor the principles, but with the person's perceptions.²²⁵ "Properly weighted perceptions" yield proper judgments:

[W]here there exist universal principles linking the perception of the properties of a work to the arousal of sentiments of pleasure and displeasure in the mind, where, in other words, we would all respond uniformly to a work if we only ideally perceived it, the response of the true judge is the ideal response because the perception of the true judge is ideal perception.²²⁶

Hume is criticized for not recognizing the importance of context when it comes to value.

But he is given credit for distinguishing "mere differences of taste from perceptual

²²²Shelley, "Empiricism," 47.

²²³Shelley, "Empiricism," 48.

²²⁴Shelley, "Empiricism," 48-49.

²²⁵Shelley, "Empiricism," 49.

²²⁶Shelley, "Empiricism," 50-51.

differences of taste, and in then arguing that the latter must have a standard in ‘real matter of fact.’”²²⁷

Kant picks up the task of judgment in his three critiques. First he wrote *Critique of Pure Reason*, then *Critique of Practical Reason*, followed by *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In the first he tries to “justify metaphysics” by synthesizing the perspectives of the rationalists and the empiricists.²²⁸ He comes to the conclusion that “in order for human beings to interpret the world the human mind had to impose certain structures on the flux of incoming sense-data.”²²⁹ These he calls the “Categories,” along with time and space.²³⁰

In the second critique, he arrives at his “categorical imperative,” which basically means that when we are confronted with a moral question that we should ask ourselves: What if everyone did this?²³¹ And in his third examination, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant makes a leap in that he goes “beyond empirical analysis to the identification of the aesthetic as a domain of human experience equal in dignity to the theoretical and the practical (i.e., the cognitive and the moral).”²³² Kant asserts that in the making of an aesthetic judgment certain things are important; such as, disinterestedness; the notion of free contemplation; the possibility of making subjective universal

²²⁷Shelley, “Empiricism,” 51.

²²⁸Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*, 97.

²²⁹Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*, 97.

²³⁰Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*, 97.

²³¹Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*, 97.

²³²Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Beauty*, 278. Editors’ comments.

judgments; when something is found to be beautiful others ought to be able to agree; and spatial and temporal relations are to be valued over content or the utility of the object.²³³

According to Christian Helmut Wenzel, Kant aims to show that judgments of taste are not all about emotions or cognition; that is, they are neither totally subjective nor objective.²³⁴ More so, although Kant's analysis of beauty has its "roots in an act of contemplation," he does take into account the relationship between the beholder and the object.²³⁵ Kant argues that there are four moments to such an analysis.²³⁶

The first moment refers to *disinterestedness*. This means that the beholder does not have a vested interest in the object. In this regard, Kant distinguishes between three kinds of interest or pleasures: the agreeable, the good, and the beautiful. The relationship based on *agreeableness* rests on the subject's feelings or pleasures, while the *good* rests on concepts, rules, and values.

However, with the second moment we see that it is in the *subjective* that *beauty* rests; the reason being that the beholder's concern does not depend upon an investment in the object. There is nothing in the object that we can definitively point to that can justify such a declaration; therefore, there must be "grounds in us and in our relation to the object" that justifies this claim."²³⁷ Because of disinterestedness there can remain room

²³³Donald W. Crawford, "Kant," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2005), 56-61.

²³⁴Christian Helmut Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics: Core Concepts and Problems* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 1-3.

²³⁵Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics*, 2.

²³⁶Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics*, 25-26, 142.

²³⁷Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics*, 142-143.

for Kant's second moment, a *universal* claim of beauty to which everyone should agree.²³⁸

Kant's third moment involves *purposiveness*. This means we "merely play with the representation of the object through our powers of cognition," and although this "play is suitable for cognition in general" it is "not determined through any concepts." Thus, *purposiveness* is "without purpose," or beauty is itself the form and the end.²³⁹

However, rationality and emotion are features of the third moment, although it cannot be "reduced to them." More so, it is wrong to assume that the "satisfaction in beauty is merely a less-developed or lower form of cognition." In addition, following the moment described as *purposiveness* is Kant's fourth moment, referred to as *necessity*. It holds that if the "first three moments are in place, then we cannot but judge the object to be beautiful."²⁴⁰

Even though there may be elements of disharmony (ugly) in beauty, our cognitive powers actively search to find harmony. In fact, a "local disharmony" may create or be part of a "harmony in a wider context." But in the "case of the ugly there is no wider context available in which the disharmony would turn into harmony." However, a "more sophisticated play between imagination and understanding may produce harmony where earlier perception had produced only disharmony."²⁴¹

²³⁸Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics*, 25-26, 51, 142-143.

²³⁹Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics*, 143-144.

²⁴⁰Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics*, 143-144.

²⁴¹Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics*, 132.

While Kant is most intent on judgments of taste regarding the beautiful, he does consider the *sublime*. He contends that there are two steps related to the *sublime*. One has to do with magnitude or size, and the other with power or dynamism.²⁴²

Kant writes that “it is the disposition of the mind resulting from a certain representation occupying the reflective judgment, but not the object, which is to be called sublime.”²⁴³ Recognizing how inventions of magnification have affected people’s perceptions and imaginations, he says that it is the ability to enlarge one’s perceptions with the imagination that stretches intellectual comprehension.²⁴⁴ In comparison, it is the mind that “feels itself moved in the representation of the sublime in nature, while in the aesthetic judgment on the beautiful in nature it is calm contemplation.”²⁴⁵

When Kant speaks of the sublime it is with regard to nature. It has to do with those experiences where we feel overwhelmed by the scale of the natural world and by its command and energy. In the midst of its overpowering magnitude and vitality we feel small and powerless. Interpreting Kant, Crawford contends:

Nature’s might makes us recognize our own physical impotence, considered as beings of nature, but at the same time nature discloses to us our unique power of a different kind of resistance. We can come to realize that nature has no dominion over us, even over our physical and sensory response, since we have the ability, through the use of our reason, to direct our sensible faculties not to feel fear in fearful circumstances.²⁴⁶

²⁴²Crawford, “Kant,” 62-64.

²⁴³Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, para. 25, p.134.

²⁴⁴Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, para. 28, p. 143.

²⁴⁵Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, para. 27, p. 141.

²⁴⁶Crawford, “Kant,” 64.

Something is revealed to us about our own power and freedom in the midst of the ordeal, a kind of superiority as compared to nature.²⁴⁷ Judgments of the sublime can be universal, just as judgments of taste; however, they do not pertain to an object per se, but more to “a state of mind.”²⁴⁸

Kant’s work also includes some reflection on morality and beauty. Crawford writes:

[A]t a minimum Kant seems to think there is an analogy between the two realms. The pleasure in apprehending and judging beauty (and perhaps the sublime as well) is ultimately based on an awareness of (and pleasure in) our faculty of judgment itself exercising a power over sensibility, which is required if morality is to have a point. Based on this analogy, it is possible for an individual’s exercise of taste to transfer to the moral realm, the realm requiring the exercise of our freedom (in judgment, above all) to direct our actions in the empirical world.²⁴⁹

Both the judgment of taste and the judgment of morality require reflection. Beauty is, or at least can be, a symbol of morality.²⁵⁰

Concerning a very particular issue of morality, Kant focuses on mimesis. He tells about a “mischievous lad” who tricks people into thinking that they are hearing live songbirds when they are, in fact, hearing only a young man’s imitations. He says:

[A]s soon as one becomes aware that it is a trick, no one would long endure listening to this song, previously taken to be so charming; and the same is true with every other songbird. It must be nature, or taken to be nature by us, for us to be able to take such an immediate interest in the beautiful, and even more so if we are to be at all able to expect of others that they should take this interest in it.²⁵¹

²⁴⁷Crawford, “Kant,” 64.

²⁴⁸Crawford, “Kant,” 64.

²⁴⁹Crawford, “Kant,” 67. The parentheses are those of the translators.

²⁵⁰Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant’s Aesthetics*, 117-118. See Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, section 49.

²⁵¹Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, para. 42, p. 182.

Is it simulation, or deception, which Kant like Plato would find most upsetting?

Obviously the lad has knowledge of the songbird, but he is tricking his listeners who are attached to the original. It is Aristotle's view on art's imitation of nature that Kant seems to reframe.

Aristotle writes that "'nature' has two senses," form and matter and that "art imitates nature," claiming that art and physics must know form and matter "up to a point."²⁵² However, Kant's rendition seems to move the conversation to a place that leaves room for later questions that ask: What is nature and what is art, and what is the difference? Kant writes:

In a product of art one must be aware that it is art, and not nature; yet the purposiveness in its form must still seem to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature. On this feeling of freedom in the play of our cognitive powers, which must yet at the same time be purposive, rests that pleasure which is alone universally communicable though without being grounded on concepts. Nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature... beautiful art must be regarded as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art.²⁵³

Kant wants the making of art to be unconstrained and free to be explored. Art not being the same as nature, yet made to look like nature, foreshadows contemporary issues related to virtual reality, bio-engineering, mimetic biology, and such.

From this study, we can assume that one of Kant's objectives is to show that something is missing with only a reasoned and moral assessment of reality, and in fact, his work became the "cornerstone of Romanticism."²⁵⁴ Also, he laid the groundwork for

²⁵²Aristotle, "Physics," trans. R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 2001), Book II, chapter 2, 194a, 10, 20-25.

²⁵³Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, para. 46, p. 185.

²⁵⁴Crawford, "Kant," 66.

aesthetics developing into its own discipline by separating aesthetics from his earlier critiques. His work, marked by the idea of disinterestedness, contributed to aesthetics becoming mainly concerned with art, separated from the natural world and ordinary experience.

But some decades later Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) insists that philosophy is the “final” form, with “art but one previous step toward truth.”²⁵⁵ Hegel speaks of a kind of correlation between reality and the notion of reality.²⁵⁶ Beauty is only “one way in which truth is expressed.”²⁵⁷ Yet, for Hegel, in the broad scale of things, art does surpass nature:

Without entering now into the disputed question how far the quality of beauty can justly be predicated of such objects, and consequently the beauty of nature comes generally into competition with that of art, we are justified in maintaining categorically that the beauty of art stands higher than Nature. For the beauty of art is a beauty begotten, a new birth of mind; and to the extent that Spirit and its creations stand higher than Nature and its phenomena, to that extent the beauty of art is more exalted than the beauty of Nature. Indeed, if we regard the matter in its formal aspect, that is to say, according to the way it is there, any chance fancy that passes through any one’s head, is of higher rank than any product of Nature.²⁵⁸

The word he uses to assess nature is “utility.”²⁵⁹ Hegel’s assertion leaves no doubt that the human maker is privileged.

Yet, by the nineteenth century, while there is a drive toward technology, scientific understanding, industrial growth and progress, there is also a growing awareness by some

²⁵⁵Hofstadter and Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art & Beauty*, 378.

²⁵⁶Hofstadter and Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art & Beauty*, 379.

²⁵⁷Hofstadter and Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art & Beauty*, 380.

²⁵⁸Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F. P. B. Osmaston, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, eds. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 382-383.

²⁵⁹Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F. P. B. Osmaston, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, 382-383.

that many people are being left behind to fend for themselves in socially dire circumstances. Modernity's cities must deal with rancid water, coal blackened air, rivers of sewage, disease, and growing populations. Along with political and philosophical writers, we see books such as *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), by Charles Dickens, and paintings, such as *The Potato Eaters* (1885) by Vincent van Gogh.

While America during this time was still greatly influenced by England and France and although artists in the United States were wrestling with a very different and still not very populated terrain beyond the cities, even here the struggle between rural and urban was emerging. For example, in 1836 Thomas Cole "envisaged" in his painting, *The Oxbow*, "tensions between nature and culture," as he shows a serene valley covered with tree stumps, having been felled for the railroad.²⁶⁰ Later, in 1888 Albert Bierstadt executes a painting called, *The Last of the Buffalo*.²⁶¹

Conclusion

In this chapter we have attempted to show an unfolding of ideas and understandings concerning aesthetics, nature, and theology. First, we explored aesthetics starting with the ancient Greeks, followed by the ancient Hebrews, and then examples of early Christian ideas. Next, we selectively considered the use of aesthetics in first and second millennium Western history. And finally, we took note of some of the changing perspectives regarding aesthetics and nature through the Enlightenment and into Modernity.

²⁶⁰ Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer, *American Sublime: Landscape painting in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 65. See also pgs. 39, 41.

²⁶¹ Wilton and Barringer, *American Sublime*, 63.

We highlighted ideas usually associated with aesthetics; such as, measurement, order, harmony, mimesis, representation, images, idolatry, spirit/matter, virtue, illumination, the beautiful and the sublime, and the natural world and human constructions. From this survey we can assert a working statement about aesthetics.

Over time the meaning and reach of aesthetics has functioned in diverse and broad ways. It has included how we appreciate beauty, as well as how we perceive, select, order, measure, judge, imagine, express, construct, form, and create. Its meaning has functioned according to various canons, standards, criteria, or principles, and our understanding of aesthetics has been influenced by our needs, fears, joys, yearnings, revelations, inspirations, hopes, geography, and history. Aesthetics has been strongly related to sense experience, but not limited to sense experience. Consistently, the idea of harmonization arises, as well as questions concerning the validity of mimesis. Often these ideas and questions have involved human beings seeking unity and harmony with the spiritual world, and now with the world itself. In addition, when it comes to aesthetics, we have seen that the question of how to balance reason and emotions has been part of the conversation through history, for sure since Plato. It emerges in Kant's thinking on his ideas related to *disinterestedness* and *universality*.

Particular to Christianity, we see that divinized humanity was allowed to be represented with sensate material and, then, with the help of these representations and symbols, mortals would seek to be molded in the *likeness* of the *prototype*. Gradually the taboo on representing even the Godhead faded away and depictions of God became very humanlike.

More so, having known their smallness in the natural world and the largeness of Mystery, humans begin to imagine the cosmos differently with the growing importance of reason and the rise of science and technology. There is a sense that human makings are of greater value than nature because it takes a human mind to produce such things as art.

Humans explore and push the outer edges of their power over nature, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not. And while the latter centuries brought with them many welcomed discoveries and inventions, there are some who questioned modern developments, which relied so heavily on the idea of human progress.

Now, in the midst of a growing human population, our fierce attachment to consumer products, and our growing technological capacity and dependency, many are reflecting on the precarious state of the contemporary environment with feelings of deep sadness, as well as fear. However, many also feel an ethical demand and urgency to appreciate nature with greater sensitivity, while simultaneously responding to the challenge to imagine and to create *well*. Increasingly, questions concerning *harmonization* and *mimesis* now involve humanity/culture and the natural world.

What does it mean to appreciate the contemporary earthly environment, which we now understand is all so interconnected? What does it mean to be a human creator/maker in a world where humans are more and more responsible for shaping the global landscape, a complex integration of nature and culture? What do *beauty*, *harmony*, *mimesis*, and the *sublime* mean today? How is the Mystery we call *God* active and present in the contemporary and evolving environment?

In the next chapter we will examine Sallie McFague's work, particularly her approach to nature and her use of aesthetics. McFague dedicates notable effort to the integration of theology, aesthetics, and science in her approach to the natural world.

Chapter Two

Ecotheologian Sallie McFague and Her Use of Aesthetics

This chapter will examine how theologian Sallie McFague uses aesthetics in her theological work regarding the natural world. Since McFague's contribution to understanding the role of metaphor in theology is important not only for understanding her theology, but also for comprehending her treatment of aesthetics, this chapter will begin with her notion of metaphor, followed by attention to a particular metaphor for which her work is best known, "the world as the body of God."¹ This will provide us with a foundation for examining the topics of nature and aesthetics, and McFague's suggestion that we read and write about nature as a way to render us more sensitive to the natural world. Since her use of "glory of God" and "fully alive" have relevance for this study, they will also receive attention. Finally, we will assess McFague's work and attempt to name her contributions related to how we might think about and approach nature aesthetically?

A. Metaphor in McFague's Theology

Sallie McFague's first major text on the topic of metaphor was published in 1975, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*. This work was followed in 1982 by *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. In the preface to her 1982 book she reflects on *Speaking in Parables*. She writes:

¹Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 60.

In part, the book attempted to suggest a variety of reflective forms other than constructive theology as genuine Christian literature in light of what appeared to me to be an improper primacy of theological reflection over other forms. The value of the book, in retrospect, was its recognition of the importance in religion of imagistic language as the base and funding for conceptual, theological language; however, I did not attend to the movement from the one language to the other.²

Thus, in *Metaphorical Theology*, McFague seeks to narrow the divide between the world of images/metaphorical language and conceptual religious language about God. She considers her heuristic, metaphorical theology a “thought experiment.” She wishes to prevent literalistic interpretations of any of her suggested models of God.³

McFague’s interest in the topic is not with methods of language or models of God for their own sake. Rather, by the time she writes *Metaphorical Theology* she asserts that for Christianity to remain relevant it must examine the metaphors and models that it employs. Christianity must be willing to let go of metaphors and models that no longer communicate depth of meaning and be willing to offer or embrace metaphors and models that speak to contemporary experience. Even more so, in the second edition she addresses an urgent contemporary issue that focuses her point.

In her preface to the 1985 printing of *Metaphorical Theology* she recalls an address by Gordon Kaufman to the American Academy of Religion in 1982 in which he speaks of the need for both deconstruction and reconstruction of our religious symbols. He speaks to the possibility that our religious symbols could be “irrelevant” and even “harmful” to life on planet earth.⁴ McFague’s subsequent books will participate in this examination and dialogue. For the purpose of this study we must keep her growing

²Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), vii.

³McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, viii.

⁴McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, x.

concern about Christian symbols in mind as we explore her understanding and use of metaphor.

McFague is convinced that “metaphorical thinking constitutes the basis of human thought and language.” Reminiscent of Aristotle’s positive assertion that even children use imitation to learn,⁵ she says even as “infants we construct our world through metaphor.”⁶ For McFague, metaphor is neither a copy of that to which it refers, nor is it a new creation totally un-tethered from reality.⁷

In fact, McFague values work being done by *deconstructionists* in philosophy and theology in terms of their questioning of traditional metaphysics, solidified metaphors, and the exploration of negative theology, but she also challenges a number of their assertions.⁸ Some thinkers declare that language is nothing more than metaphor,⁹ the text being inclusive of its author, but with no referent.¹⁰ McFague disagrees, and gives caution both to fundamentalists who tend to literalize and make absolute the text and its metaphors, as well as to deconstructionists who espouse extreme forms of deconstruction, asserting that all is metaphor, whereby a metaphor only refers to another metaphor...¹¹

McFague believes that these two positions are linked. She writes:

“[F]undamentalism fails to appreciate that the language of theology is metaphorical, and

⁵Aristotle, “Poetics,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. Ingram Bywater (New York: Random House, 2001), 1457-1458, (citation 1448b 5).

⁶McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 15.

⁷McFague, *Models of God*, 26.

⁸McFague, *Models of God*, 24.

⁹McFague, *Models of God*, 23.

¹⁰McFague, *Models of God*, 22-24.

¹¹McFague, *Models of God*, 22.

deconstruction refuses to acknowledge that there is anything but metaphor.”¹² In their extreme, one sees only *presence*, and the other only *absence*.¹³

McFague does not accept that “language (writing)” is only about itself, nor is one constructed metaphor as good as another. Instead, she says: “All that follows is that our access to reality is in every case mediated and hence partial and relative,” and that “the presence of many constructions, many metaphors, assumes conflict and the need for criteria.”¹⁴ But how is one to determine whether one construction or metaphor is better than another? She writes:

[T]his is the claim that I would make: that a construction of the Christian faith in the context of a holistic vision and the nuclear threat is from our particular perspective and for our particular time relatively better than constructions that ignore these issues.¹⁵

McFague is pushing for theological language that engages the current reality that is increasingly imperiled. She knows that language is reflective, in that it interprets reality, yet, at the same time, it is also constructive:

All renderings of reality are metaphorical (that is, none is literal), but in our novel constructions we offer new possibilities in place of others. In this sense, we create the reality in which we live; we do not copy it, or to put it more pointedly, there are no copies, only creations. The assumption here, however, is that there is a reality to which our constructions refer, even though the only way we have of reaching it is by creating versions of it.¹⁶

However, no one can create images of God. McFague claims that culture(s) gives rise to religious symbols; that is, they are “born and die in a culture for complex reasons.”

¹²McFague, *Models of God*, 22.

¹³McFague, *Models of God*, 23-25.

¹⁴McFague, *Models of God*, 26.

¹⁵McFague, *Models of God*, 27.

¹⁶McFague, *Models of God*, 26.

Thus, we need to “attend carefully to the images in the culture and church which appear to be emerging and to experiment imaginatively with them, reflecting on their implications for life with God and with others.”¹⁷

Concerning Jesus and fearing literalism and various kinds of idolatries, McFague prefers to understand him as a “parable of God.”¹⁸ Jesus as “parable of God both ‘is and is not’ God.”¹⁹ He tells about “God’s relationship to us” through his parables and by way of his very person. McFague’s “metaphorical theology is ‘positive’ as well as ‘negative,’ giving license for speech about God as well as indicating the limits of such speech.”²⁰ But her concern is over more than how we speak about God. She questions *what* is being said and to this end she sees Scripture as a starting place, and not the final theological measure:

The New Testament writings are foundational; they are classics; they are a beginning. But if we take seriously the parables of Jesus and Jesus as a parable of God as a starting point and model, then we cannot say that the Bible is absolute or authoritative in any sense except the way that a “classic” text is authoritative: it continues to speak to us. What must always be kept in mind is that the parables as metaphors and the life of Jesus as a metaphor of God provide characteristics for theology: a theology guided by them is open-ended, tentative, indirect, tensive, iconoclastic, transformative.²¹

McFague also distinguishes between metaphorical language and symbolic language by describing symbolic statements as being “not so much a way of knowing and speaking as they are sedimentation and solidification of metaphor.... The tension of

¹⁷McFague, *Models of God*, 20.

¹⁸Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 18-19. She specifically credits Leander Keck and John Donahue for their work on this subject. See footnote #21, page 200.

¹⁹McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 19.

²⁰McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 19.

²¹McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 19.

metaphor is absorbed by the harmony of symbol.” With metaphorical tensions, we are still in the process of making judgments.²² Rather simply, sacramental thinking can be seen as “priestly and metaphorical thinking as prophetic.” Accordingly, the former “assumes an order and unity already present waiting to be realized,” while the latter, “projects, tentatively, a possible transformed order and unity yet to be realized.”²³

Granted, McFague’s distinctions are oversimplified. However, she is trying to describe differences in metaphors, as well as to show how some religious metaphors have lost their potency.

Speaking practically about how we use metaphor, she writes: “Metaphor is seeing one thing *as* something else, pretending ‘this’ is ‘that’ because we do not know how to think or talk about ‘this’ so we use ‘that’ as a way of saying something about it.”²⁴ Indeed, we cannot know anything literally or directly, but we have “simply acquired a way of looking at it which is acceptable to us.”²⁵ One might say, our perception has met a certain criterion or, by repetition, we now take for granted that it is so, and while we do not know all there is to know about a topic, we attempt to communicate what we think we know.

With the use of metaphors, models help us to organize our thinking; they assist us in noticing certain data and in filtering out other information as theories develop. This is as true in the sciences as in the humanities. However, when frameworks are not understood as having some sense of “metaphorical roots” open to revisions, they can

²²McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 16.

²³McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 17.

²⁴McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 15.

²⁵McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 16.

become like idols, frozen in time.²⁶ Following physicist/theologian Ian Barbour, McFague gives four ways to consider models that are relevant for scientists as well as for theologians: naïve realism; positivism; instrumentalism; and critical realism.²⁷

With *critical realism* there is the understanding that no model is complete or fully adequate.²⁸ However, McFague recalls Barbour writing that critical realists “hold that there are entities in the world something like those described in the model; they believe there is some isomorphism between the model and the real structures of the world.”²⁹ Models, in fact, “*redescribe* reality.” In theology and in science, “something *new* is being said about reality which the user of the model believes describes it better, more appropriately, than the accepted views.”³⁰

We do not deal with “reality as it is” and then articulate “views of it”; rather, we deal with views of reality, “old and new, accepted and unconventional.”³¹ In fact, there are no fully accurate *descriptions*; rather, what we have are interpretations.³²

Still, our constructed models lead to theories and we continue to use them as long as they yield illumination.³³ McFague writes:

When we find that the models of a theological tradition illuminate our experience, we are claiming that they interpret, explain, make sense of that experience. More important still, we are making a judgment that they can

²⁶McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 25-26.

²⁷McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 132. She credits Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 34-38.

²⁸McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 133.

²⁹McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 133. She credits Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 42.

³⁰McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 133-134.

³¹McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 134.

³²Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, Theology, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2008), 52.

³³McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 142.

make sense of it *because* they refer to reality, because in their own way—that is, partially and indirectly—they are a redescription of it. They are not reality [or that reality], but a construct or interpretation of it, which must, however, be in some sense isomorphic with reality *or* they would not be able to make much sense out of life as lived.³⁴

Theological traditions that shed light on our experiences include those ancient methods and models that were used to speak of, depict, and *illuminate* religious wisdom. In general, redescriptions or models are made up of metaphors, and “good metaphors” are ones that are still vibrant; they still surprise us or “shock” us.³⁵ They can “bring unlikes together... upset conventions... involve tension” and are “implicitly revolutionary.”³⁶

B. McFague’s Major Metaphor: The World as Body of God

McFague acknowledges in her 1987 book, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age*, that there has been some degree of advancement “against the androcentric, hierarchical character of the Western religious tradition,” at least in some circles and places. But, she contends that even feminists have not done enough to understand and embrace the “intrinsic value” of nonhuman creation in a way that could bring about a change in our consciousness, a change that is necessary in an age threatened with nuclear catastrophe and experiencing environmental degradation.³⁷ But feminists are not alone in having fallen short.

McFague claims that process theologians “have not moved boldly to suggest other models more suited to a view of God as intrinsically and radically relational.”³⁸

³⁴McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 142.

³⁵McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 17.

³⁶McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 17.

³⁷Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 6-7.

³⁸McFague, *Models of God*, 19.

Regarding black and Third World theologies, she says that while they “fully retain the agential aspects of the Western concept, they do so in a way that limits God to the realm of persons and history, leaving much of the cosmos unaddressed.” Their focus has been primarily focused on and limited to liberating human beings who are oppressed.³⁹

Along with discouraging anthropocentrism, McFague rejects a mechanistic view of nature. Rather, she supports an understanding of nature that is more organic, while avoiding sentimentalizing about nature, as well as a “leveling of all distinctions” between nonhuman creation and humans. She writes:

[T]he evolutionary, ecological perspective insists that we are, in the most profound ways, “not our own”: we belong, from the cells of our bodies to the finest creations of our minds, to the intricate, constantly changing cosmos. The ecosystem of which we are part is a whole: the rocks and waters, atmosphere and soil, plants, animals, and human beings interact in dynamic, mutually supportive ways that make all talk of atomistic individualism indefensible. Relationship and interdependence, change and transformation, not substance, changelessness, and perfection, are the categories within which a theology for our day must function.⁴⁰

To support this holistic vision McFague states in *Models of God* that we need a “new sensibility.” It would require us to be responsibly informed about nuclear issues and necessitate that we be conscious of the “constructive character of all human activities,” including our world views and our religions.⁴¹ She claims that in the last century we came to an “increasing awareness of the creative, interpretive character of human existence.”⁴² Now, however, we urgently need to take responsibility for our interpretations and our creativity.

³⁹McFague, *Models of God*, 19.

⁴⁰McFague, *Models of God*, 7-8.

⁴¹McFague, *Models of God*, 21.

⁴²McFague, *Models of God*, 21-22.

Concerning symbols of faith, the task of deconstructing and reconstructing cannot be “merely or mainly hermeneutics.” Instead, theology must be constructive and willing to risk thinking ideas that may be different from the past.⁴³ McFague suggests we experiment with imagining the world as God’s body, as well as imagining God as mother, lover, and friend.

McFague proposes that these suggested models “offer possibilities for envisioning power in unified, interdependent ways quite different from the view of power as either domination or benevolence.”⁴⁴ Domination encourages a “sense of distance from the world” and the latter usurps human responsibility.⁴⁵ These are evidenced in our metaphors of God as king, ruler, judge, and overwhelmingly male. Her “thought experiment” attempts to critique triumphalism, imperialism, and patriarchy, and to offer some alternative models by which to seek and understand the relationship between God and creation.⁴⁶ McFague writes:

[W]hat if we were to understand the resurrection and ascension not as the bodily translation of some individuals to another world—a mythology no longer credible to us—but as the promise of God to be permanently present, “bodily” present to us, in all places and times of our world? In what ways would we think of the relationship between God and the world were we to experiment with the metaphor of the universe as God’s “body,” God’s palpable presence in all space and time? If what is needed in our ecological, nuclear age is an imaginative vision of the relationship between God and the world that underscores their interdependence and mutuality, empowering a sensibility of care and responsibility toward all life, how would it help to see the world as the body of God?⁴⁷

⁴³McFague, *Models of God*, 21.

⁴⁴McFague, *Models of God*, 20, 62, 69, 70.

⁴⁵McFague, *Models of God*, 69.

⁴⁶McFague, *Models of God*, 20.

⁴⁷McFague, *Models of God*, 60.

McFague stresses several times that “world as the body of God” is a *metaphor*. She is not “defining or describing the world or universe as God’s body nor God’s relationship to it as that of mother, lover, or friend.”⁴⁸ Certainly these metaphors will “miss the mark.” However, she intends for a heuristic theology to play with ideas in order to discover something that is needed. Metaphor can be “disclosive and illuminating,” creating “both a *shock* and the *recognition*” of something different. McFague is attempting to present metaphors that are appropriate for our time, “illuminating” in some way, and better than those that are presently operative.⁴⁹

Recognizing body language that is found in the gospel writings on bread and wine as body and blood, and in the stories of the resurrection, McFague asserts that the tradition does have a strong bodily sense. But, the “world as body of God” must include more than humankind.

However, while traditional images of king and kingdom may lean toward deism, McFague’s metaphor could bend toward pantheism. Arguing against this she claims that “God is not reduced to the world if the world is God’s body.”⁵⁰ She writes:

Without the use of personal agential metaphors, however, including among others God as mother, lover, and friend, the metaphor of the world as God’s body would be pantheistic, for the body would be all there were. Nonetheless, the model is monist and perhaps most precisely designated as panentheistic; that is, it is a view of the God-world relationship in which all things have their origins in God and nothing exists outside God, though this does not mean that God is reduced to these things.⁵¹

⁴⁸McFague, *Models of God*, 63.

⁴⁹McFague, *Models of God*, 63.

⁵⁰McFague, *Models of God*, 71.

⁵¹McFague, *Models of God*, 71-72.

McFague thinks the “world as God’s body” is a fruitful, but not faultless metaphor and in her 1993 text, *The Body of God: an Ecological Theology*,⁵² she works to further her case.

In *The Body of God* she explains that contemporary organic models have roots in ancient ideas, but while a classic organic model often emphasizes harmony and unity, freedom of the parts can be lacking. Furthermore, because these models are usually based on male bodies and male associations, women’s experiences and their associations are often missing in these formulations. A universalism can be found that seeks to apply a blanket description of experience for everyone.⁵³

With Christianity there emerged a visible reality of an invisible deity. Christ became known as the head of the *body* and humanity as the remainder of the body. However, non-human creation is usually not mentioned. With Neo-platonic thought matter becomes less important and the spirit/mind is given greater and greater significance, resulting in a dualistic vision of body/matter and spirit/mind. In addition, she claims that Christianity went from a “creation to a redemption context.”⁵⁴ This led to salvation focusing on another world, beyond existence on earth. Nonetheless, with the rise of science organic thinking became less popular. The machine model excelled and still does.⁵⁵

According to McFague, for an organic model to be relative for today, it would have to recognize diversity and wholeness; freedom and the common good; biological evolution and cultural evolution; human embodiment and the embodiment of all forms of

⁵²McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁵³McFague, *The Body of God*, 36-37.

⁵⁴McFague, *The Body of God*, 32.

⁵⁵McFague, *The Body of God*, 32-33.

creation; natural science and religious faith. It would have to leave room for a personal God who is somehow compatible with science even if not demanded by science.⁵⁶ An organic understanding of the world needs to make sense “not just to our minds, but to our bodies, our feelings, our needs, and even our hopes and dreams.”⁵⁷ She gives four basic reasons why an organic model might be adopted by someone. They include “our own embodied and cultural experience; the testimony of significant communities to which we belong; the view of reality current in our time; and the usefulness of a perspective, model, or construct for humane living.”⁵⁸

Her intention is to suggest an organic model that speaks to contemporary times. Ultimately, she wants to “remythologize” our appreciation and understanding of the God/human/creation relationship. She writes:

[T]hrough remythologizing the doctrines of God and human beings in light of the picture of reality from contemporary science—through the use of the organic model as a way of reconceiving the relation of God and the world—the appropriate human stance vis-à-vis God and our planet will emerge. Remythologizing involves both appreciation and understanding; it is a form of embodied thought combining image and concept that calls forth both a feeling and a thinking response. It also implies an ethical response. If one uses the model of the universe as God’s body, if one appreciates and understands creation as organically interrelated, one would, or at least might, act differently toward it than if one used the model of creation as a work of art.⁵⁹

She remains cautious because she knows that just because we know right, we do not always do right, as St. Paul explained.⁶⁰ But she thinks remythologizing carries with it some degree of hope as she emphasizes ethics in the context of embodiment.⁶¹

⁵⁶McFague, *The Body of God*, 77, 76-85.

⁵⁷McFague, *The Body of God*, 85.

⁵⁸McFague, *The Body of God*, 85.

⁵⁹McFague, *The Body of God*, 81.

⁶⁰McFague, *The Body of God*, 81. See Romans 7:15.

As she does so, she refuses to get caught between two colliding world views, one being atomistic and the other being holistic. Instead, she acknowledges the need for both.⁶² McFague writes: “The universe is a body, to use a poor analogy from our own experience, but it is not a human body; rather, it is matter bodied forth seemingly infinitely, diversely, endlessly, yet internally as one.”⁶³ She is concerned about particularity and interconnectedness.

In *The Body of God* McFague wants to learn from the metaphor, not concretize or literalize the metaphor such that anyone would think God is a body, especially analogous to a human body. She wants to explore what happens to us when we pursue such a view; that is, when we appreciate, understand, and ethically live out of the recognition and the shock that God is embodied through creation’s diversity and unity.

She feels something radical needs to happen. Eventually, she will move in the direction of perceiving nature and its parts more personally; that is, as *subjects*. She begins this turn when in *Models of God* she contributes to discourse about God as creator, savior, and sustainer with metaphors of mother, lover, and friend.⁶⁴

While McFague thinks a “planetary perspective would advocate... for including much on earth hitherto excluded,” she is aware of deficiencies inherent in other attempts to perceive all of creation more inclusively.⁶⁵ Among such efforts is *creation spirituality*. She claims that creation spirituality’s aesthetic perspective overly focuses on celebration

⁶¹McFague, *The Body of God*, 48.

⁶²McFague, *The Body of God*, 93.

⁶³McFague, *The Body of God*, 97.

⁶⁴McFague, *Models of God*, 183.

⁶⁵McFague, *The Body of God*, 69.

of the cosmos in hope that it will overwhelm us with awe, inspiring us to live ethically. Needless to say, it falls short.⁶⁶

Another effort that she mentions is *natural theology*. She says that while it does allow for God, a deistic God, it leaves out revelation and does not make room for a personal God.⁶⁷ Rather, it tends to focus on the “questions of why and how,” keeping it a “work of the mind.”⁶⁸ Her desire is for a “spirit theology” that focuses attention “on the rich variety of living forms that have been and are *now* present on our planet. The breath of God enlivening each and every entity in the body of the universe turns our attention to a theology of nature, a theology concerned with the relationship of God and our living, breathing planet.”⁶⁹

Eventually, McFague comes to believe that “process theology, which uses the analogy of the human self to postulate a form of subjectivity and purpose throughout all of existence, from the lowliest bit of matter to God,” along with evolution, or what Gordon Kaufman calls “creative serendipity,” could yield helpful results in rethinking nature.⁷⁰ However, in the midst of late twentieth century thinking she is also aware of the importance of historical consciousness.

Nevertheless, McFague comes to recognize the limits of understanding the world primarily through an historical lens. As early as 1993 she asserts that “now, space should become the primary category for thinking about ourselves and other life-forms.”⁷¹

⁶⁶McFague, *The Body of God*, 71. She is referring to some of the work by Matthew Fox.

⁶⁷McFague, *The Body of God*, 77.

⁶⁸McFague, *The Body of God*, 145.

⁶⁹McFague, *The Body of God*, 145.

⁷⁰McFague, *The Body of God*, 76-77.

⁷¹McFague, *The Body of God*, 100.

McFague contends that we should focus on the need for *space* that every creature requires. Because focusing on *space* serves to make the playing field a bit fairer for all creatures. This situates us all together on one small planet. Secondly, the reason she says “we need to turn from a historical (temporal) to a natural (spatial) perspective” is because with space the relationship between ecological issues and justice concerns become highlighted.⁷² Ironically, the “crisis facing our planet is, in a sense, temporal: How much time do we have to preserve the possibility of life in community? But the reason that time matters is because we are misusing space.”⁷³ She writes:

We are ruining the space, and when this occurs, justice issues emerge centrally and painfully. When good space—arable land with clean water and air, comfortable temperatures and shade trees—become scarce, turf wars are inevitable. Wars have usually, not just accidentally, been fought over land, for land is the bottom line. Without good land, none of the other goods of human existence is possible. Geography, often considered a trivial subject compared to the more splendid history (the feats of the forefathers), may well be *the* subject of the twenty-first century.⁷⁴

In her effort to move toward perceiving the earth as embodied space and toward a healthier way of engaging with nature, she recalls five models of God that influence how we understand nature: deistic (God as clockmaker); dialogic (“God speaks to humans and we respond”); monarchical (nostalgic kings control their subjects with little interaction with other forms of nature); agential (“God is assumed to be an agent whose intentions and purposes are realized in history”); and the organic model (for example, the world as God’s body).⁷⁵ Preferring the two latter models, she welcomes process theology, but

⁷²The Noble Peace Prize in 2007 was given in large part to Al Gore because of his having demonstrated to the world a connection between global warming issues and their connection to peace.

⁷³McFague, *The Body of God*, 101.

⁷⁴McFague, *The Body of God*, 101.

⁷⁵McFague, *The Body of God*, 139-140.

moves it toward a “social view of agency.”⁷⁶ She wants to re-imagine the relationship of God and humanity, inclusive of all of creation where humans take on neglected responsibilities of caring for creation.

For McFague, *spirit* is the spirit of God embodied in the world, not as pantheism, which would reduce God to the world, but closer to panentheism. She asserts:

[God is the] spirit that is the source, the life, the breath of all reality. Everything that is is *in* God and God is *in* all things and yet God is not identical with the universe, for the universe is dependent on God in a way that God is not dependent on the universe.”⁷⁷

In support of an agential/organic model, she distances herself away from any interpretation of the creation stories in Genesis that speak of a *production*. This would imply something existing externally to God. God is not an “Architect” who creates the world out of nothing (2 Maccabees 7:28). Rather, God creates in and from Godself. McFague supports a *procreation* and *emanation* model.⁷⁸ However, these terms can be problematic if they are overly extended.

Even so, according to McFague, God is “sacramentally embodied.” The mystery of God is always mediated through some kind of embodiment, and never exhaustively.⁷⁹ In recollection of Exodus 33, she says it is similar to the “back and not the face of God that we are allowed to see.”⁸⁰ Then, with the New Testament’s portrayal of the Spirit

⁷⁶McFague, *The Body of God*, 140.

⁷⁷McFague, *The Body of God*, 149.

⁷⁸McFague, *The Body of God*, 151-152.

⁷⁹McFague, *The Body of God*, 150.

⁸⁰McFague, *The Body of God*, 131, 150.

renewing creation, Jesus of Nazareth becomes the embodied “extension,” leading to an “identification in the ‘cosmic’ Christ.”⁸¹ All of creation is relational in a dynamic God.

What McFague is trying to encourage is a non-static, evolving, relational model that works our imaginations and challenges our actions.⁸² Furthermore, in her next book, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*, she argues that “Christian practice, loving God and neighbor *as subjects*, as worthy of our love in and for themselves, should be extended to nature.”⁸³ She works to deepen our awareness of the similarities and connections between humanity and the rest of creation, while also respecting difference.

C. McFague’s Use of Aesthetics and Her Response to How to Love Nature

McFague argues that an appreciation and understanding of nature are “prerequisites for appropriate action” toward a compromised natural world.⁸⁴ More directly, she insists that Christian *nature spirituality* calls us to love nature as subjects, and to do this we “must pay attention to it, learn about its needs, [and] become better acquainted with it.”⁸⁵ We do not love generally, but in the particular.

She believes, optimistically perhaps, that by “remythologizing the doctrines of God and human beings” in light of understandings about creation from contemporary science and through the use of a contemporary organic model that a more appropriate

⁸¹McFague, *The Body of God*, 147, 157.

⁸²McFague, *The Body of God*, 151-153.

⁸³Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians, How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 1.

⁸⁴McFague, *The Body of God*, 81.

⁸⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 24-25.

“human stance vis-à-vis God and our planet will emerge.”⁸⁶ However, toning down her optimism, we recall again her writing that if one “appreciates and understands creation as organically interrelated, one would, or at least might, act differently toward it than if one used the model of creation as a work of art.”⁸⁷

She disparages seeing the world as art because this renders the world an external production of a mostly transcendent God. A production model supports a dualistic hierarchy of body and mind; such that, it “depends upon an intellectual/aesthetic context: creation is of the mind, not the body.” This being so, aesthetics is primarily associated with the mind.⁸⁸ McFague wishes to move away from models that speak of production, products, or artifacts and away from models where there is a distancing between subject and object.⁸⁹ She prefers procreation models that are inviting of the feminine, asserting that creation models are more rooted in patriarchy than those based on procreation.⁹⁰

However, while viewing the world as a production or an artifact is not what she wants to do, she does think that art can be helpful in experiencing nature:

[Art] frames fragments of our world: paintings, poetry, novels, sculpture, dance, music help us to look at colors, sounds, bodies, events, characters—whatever—with full attention. Something is lifted out of the world and put into a frame so that we can perhaps for the first time, *see* it.⁹¹

Reminded of her overall project, she writes:

We are asking the question, how should a Christian love nature? The answer emerging is that we must pay attention—detailed, careful, concrete

⁸⁶McFague, *The Body of God*, 81.

⁸⁷McFague, *The Body of God*, 81.

⁸⁸McFague, *The Body of God*, 155-156.

⁸⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 31.

⁹⁰McFague, *The Body of God*, 255-256, footnote 29.

⁹¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 29.

attention—to the world that lies around us but is not us. We must do this *because we cannot love what we do not know.*⁹²

For McFague, aesthetics becomes a way to pay particular and detailed attention by using all of the senses, not just the eyes. She wants us to be touched by nature.⁹³ She does not want to see nature as art, but she does want to approach and experience nature with an artist's sensual awareness and sensitivity. McFague's aesthetics stresses a sensual awareness that joins in partnership with science in an effort to know and love nature.

Ironically, because the task of paying attention to the natural world is central to her project McFague relies more on physical perception than on imagination. She says what the aesthetic mode of perception “helps us do is pay attention to individuals in all their particularity.”⁹⁴ And while she does make use of aesthetic imagination, such as her use of metaphor, she is cautious regarding the imagination and nature, especially concerning fantasy. She says the danger is when we “imagine who the other is, rather than taking the time to find out.”⁹⁵

More so, she claims “aesthetic detachment” is necessary as a first step to developing an empathic way of seeing nature. We “cannot connect appropriately with real others, in their real differences from us, until we acknowledge who and what they are in their own worlds with their own wishes and needs.”⁹⁶ She is equally committed to

⁹²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 29.

⁹³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 91-92, 94.

⁹⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 114.

⁹⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 114.

⁹⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 114.

connecting earth's beauty, with its vulnerability, to humanity's responsibility to care for creation.

In her 1997 book, *Super, Natural Christians*, she argues that Christian practice should include loving nature as *subjects*.⁹⁷ Herein, she works to deepen our awareness of the connection between God, humanity, and the rest of creation, and she further pursues her ideas as postulated in *The Body of God*:

If God is physical, then the aesthetic and the ethical unite: praising God in and through the beauty of bodies entails caring for the most basic needs of all bodies on the planet. If God is physical, then the divine becomes part of the everyday, part of the pain and pleasure of bodily existence.⁹⁸

McFague wants us to think differently, hoping that we might act differently toward nature. But how do we connect the aesthetic and the ethical, without playing the mind game *as if God is physical*? In *The Body of God* she devises a metaphor/concept that we then use as an overlay or a lens through which to see, understand and interpret the world. Her attention is on how we perceive *God*, a very embodied *God*, who is also transcendent. She hopes that if we can change humanity's thinking about God maybe we can change our thinking and actions toward nature. However, at the end of *The Body of God* she seems to initiate a reversal to this approach, or at least she seems to question its emphasis. One gets the inkling that in her next work she will highlight human experience. She writes:

Over the years I have learned that the closer attention I pay to whatever piece of the world is before me—the more I know about it, the more open I am to its presence, the closer I look at it or listen to it or touch it or smell it—the more amazed I am by it. It is not that I “see God in it” in any direct or general way; rather, it is the specialness, the difference, the

⁹⁷McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 1.

⁹⁸McFague, *The Body of God*, 133.

intricacy of each creature, event, or aspect of nature that calls forth wonder. And that wonder helps sustain me; it helps me stay the course.⁹⁹

Recounting an experience in the woods around an old, dying tree with new saplings rising out of its decay, she writes:

Perhaps this is the way that we see the presence of God in the world and are nurtured and renewed by it—not through feelings of oceanic oneness with nature but by paying attention, listening to, learning about the specialness, the difference, the detail of the “wonderful life” of which we are a part... We do not use nature or other people as a means to an end—our union with God—but see each and every creature, every body, as intrinsically valuable in itself, in its specialness, its distinctiveness, its difference from ourselves. This acknowledgement of difference and intrinsic worth is not only the basis of an ecological ethic as we have seen, but it is also the source of a nature spirituality. The earth becomes the place where we put down our roots and renew ourselves to stay the course, not because all creatures are transparent images of God but because each in its own peculiar idiosyncratic, special difference is a wonder to behold.¹⁰⁰

Indeed, in light of her dissatisfaction with approaches to nature that would focus on our dissimilarities with nature, it is not surprising that she chooses to explore an experiential direction in *Super, Natural Christians*. Herein, she proposes that we extend the love we have for God and neighbor to nature.¹⁰¹ She asks for a change in “sensibility, in how we view nature,” as well as for changes in how we live.¹⁰² She advocates that we “relate to the entities in nature *in the same basic way* that we are supposed to relate to God and other people—as ends, not means, as subjects valuable in themselves, for themselves.”¹⁰³

⁹⁹McFague, *The Body of God*, 210.

¹⁰⁰McFague, *The Body of God*, 211.

¹⁰¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 1.

¹⁰²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 1.

¹⁰³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 1.

But why is treating nature like a *subject* that much better? And how would we go about doing this? McFague speaks of the *arrogant eye* and the *loving eye*. The first, a more traditional approach, sees non-human nature as very much other than humans, as something that humans are to use and control. The arrogant eye objectifies nature. It also uses nature as a “way to know God.”¹⁰⁴ It tames harnesses, conquers, or shoots nature as with a gun or a camera and captures it for our pleasure and use. It views nature’s landscape only from the human perspective. There can be a “controlling gaze” or a “voyeurism” about the *arrogant eye*.¹⁰⁵ But the loving eye understands humans as something similar to non-human creation, but with all having distinct differences. She writes:

The new sensibility understands human beings to be embedded in the world—indeed, in the earth: they are social beings to the core, and whatever they know of the world comes from interaction with it. The goal of knowledge is not control so much as it is healthy, humane existence for all parties concerned—not progress and profit but sustainability.

She questions whether we ever consider that they, various and particular parts of nature, are “subjects in their own worlds and not just objects in ours?”¹⁰⁶

A subject-subjects approach is further deepened by feminists’ views when there is an ability to “embrace intimacy” and “recognize difference.” This approach is enhanced when it sees the multiple, is interactive, and when it “sees a continuity between the self and others, it knows them differently—not as objects, but objectively.” It benefits when “self-interest and altruism are not always opposed,” because sometimes they even

¹⁰⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 57.

¹⁰⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 84-85.

¹⁰⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 85.

“converge.”¹⁰⁷ But should we really extend a subject-subjects approach to include nature? She responds:

In one sense, the question is redundant, if not absurd. The ecological model of self and world is *derived* from the workings of natural systems: we are interpreting the human self’s relation to the world as one instance of ecological interrelationship and interdependence. But, in another sense, the question is a real one because the subject-subjects model is based in *human* relationships.¹⁰⁸

However, it is important to recall that McFague’s “ecological model of the *self*” has two key features: 1) touch is the primary sense that grounds the model, instead of sight; and 2) it is a model.¹⁰⁹ That is, no model is perfect, but do these ideas challenge us to be more sensitive and just?

She states that we “cannot touch *without being touched*.”¹¹⁰ Touch is related to the “whole body.” It gives an immediate experience, not a mediated one. With touch we realize that the world is both “resistant” and “responsive.”¹¹¹ However, contemporary times rely pervasively on sight, even experiencing nature virtually.¹¹² Herein, space is compressed and the sense of touch is dropped.

McFague’s suggested model of knowing nature assumes that the world is “composed of living, changing, growing, mutually related interdependent entities, of which human beings are one.”¹¹³ The subject-subjects, ecological model is not a “dualism but a continuum. The knower and the known are more alike than they are

¹⁰⁷McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 105-107.

¹⁰⁸McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 107.

¹⁰⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 93.

¹¹⁰McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 93, 91-95.

¹¹¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 93, 91-95.

¹¹²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 88.

¹¹³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 96.

different.”¹¹⁴ In contrast, historically, humans maintained their premier position in creation because of difference.

McFague wants to connect sight to touch, such that vision is a “relational, embodied, responsive paying attention to others in their particularity and difference.”¹¹⁵

She states:

The eye of the body is not like the eye of the mind. The eye of the body respects and admires the physical, the concrete, and the diverse, rather than searching for the abstract, the general, and the same, as does the eye of the mind. The others known by the embodied eye will not be fitted into categories and types but seen as particular, embodied others that offer both resistance and response.¹¹⁶

McFague emphasizes the need to *pay attention*.¹¹⁷ Opposing the arrogant eye that uses nature as an object or as a mere stepping stone to God, she claims that Francis of Assisi epitomizes a kind of sensibility, a horizontal approach that pays attention to the other for what it is, but that he also recognizes and praises nature’s Creator with a vertical recognition.¹¹⁸ As a result, Francis was able to let nature be itself and allow nature to act as symbols of God. She points out that Leonardo Boff attributes Francis’s gift to his understanding of poverty. Quoting Boff, the text reads:

Poverty is a way of being by which the individual lets things be what they are; one refuses to dominate them, subjugate them, and make them objects of the will to power.... The more radical the poverty, the closer the individual comes to reality, and the easier it is to commune with all things, respecting and reverencing their differences and distinctions. Universal fraternity is the result of the way-of-being-poor of Saint Francis.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 97, 108.

¹¹⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 94.

¹¹⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 94.

¹¹⁷McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 26-29, 42, 69.

¹¹⁸McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 27, 55-57.

¹¹⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 56. McFague quotes : Leonardo Boff, *St. Francis: A Model for Human Liberation*, trans. John W. Dierchsmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 38.

McFague claims that this is close to what she means by her title, *Super, Natural Christians*.¹²⁰

Throughout history McFague sees that even with the help of Aristotle and medieval sacramentality, where the “world of created being is not a lump of clay,” that the emphasis remains using nature “as a way to God,”¹²¹ or simply on using nature. Either way, the natural world is *used* and not fully recognized for its own dignity. Perhaps, when anyone or anything is not appreciated for itself, then some aspect of life is not recognized and its particular gift is lost.

In response, McFague offers the subject-subjects, ecological model. But, how does one make this model active? In service of this she seeks a way to combine the experiences of sight and touch, and science and aesthetics. With this in mind, she encourages *direct experience* and the mediated experience of reading about nature; that is, reading *nature writings*.¹²²

In so doing McFague recognizes the benefit of art for its ability to focus and frame fragments of the world so that we might give our attention to them. Paying attention to nature is the first step in recognizing similarities and differences and in tendering us toward caring.¹²³ For this to happen she claims aesthetic detachment is necessary because it pushes us to recognize what is actually there. However, the danger of distance is that we can easily project our own fantasies onto the other.¹²⁴ Therefore,

¹²⁰McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 56.

¹²¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 57.

¹²²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 117.

¹²³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 28-29.

¹²⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 114.

the eye must be educated, as an “apprentice to a skilled worker, listening to the other as does a foreigner in a new country.” She goes on to write:

This is the eye that pays attention to the other so that the connections between knower and known, like the bond of friendship, will be based on the real subject in its real world. The world of touch, of childhood, of the first *naïveté* that tells us we *are* all inter-related and interdependent, becomes, through the educated loving eye, its mature, adult realization—the second naïveté.¹²⁵

In an effort to grow in knowledge and sensitivity to nature and to further the environmental work that is needed, she encourages reading *nature writings*. She claims that nature writing is the “ecological model in practice; it shows us how the loving eye develops.”¹²⁶

Interestingly, she compares nature reading to reading a religious autobiography. One genre is more connected to theology and the other to science, but in each there is a “personal, interpreted, concrete *experience* of the subject-matter, with no pretensions to being anything else.” Each tries to “let the material speak.”¹²⁷

Focusing particularly on nature writers, McFague claims that they are not simply interested in other species; they are interested in the relationship with the other. However, they do not wish to fuse with it or to overly separate from it.¹²⁸

Subsequently, she employs the metaphor of the maze and says that nature writing gives us a “maze” kind of knowledge and not a “landscape kind of knowledge.” Nature writing “welcomes the influence of the exterior landscape on the interior one; it seeks intimacy with the other but only by way of aesthetic distance and scientific accuracy—it

¹²⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 116.

¹²⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 129.

¹²⁷McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 130.

¹²⁸McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 130.

really wants to *know the other as other*.¹²⁹ While admitting that this process is not the only way to educate the eye, she believes that reading nature writing “may be one of the best ways to educate our eye to nature as subject,” because it “gives us privileged access to nature via another,” who is usually very experienced and well informed.¹³⁰

The writer offers us a close examination of a particular locale with a certain degree of that “first naiveté.” Attention is given to *place*, *wildness*, and *experience* in a manner that speaks of the writer’s care for it in several ways: “through accuracy and imagination, through a naturalist’s scientific attention to detail and a poet’s aesthetic attention to the particulars.” The experience of the writer is shared with the reader and it becomes a “second naiveté experience,” a “mediated account, a well-informed, imaginative interpretation by an adult.”¹³¹

When we read *nature writings* we do not get *the* experience of nature, but the mediated experience as transcribed by the writer. This combines science and aesthetics.

Regarding science, she writes:

Accurate, detailed, scientific information about other life forms as well as whole ecosystems is central to educating the loving eye. Scientific knowledge need not objectify the other. Rather, as we have seen, it can do just the opposite: it can produce appreciation of a desire to care for the other. In fact, we cannot care for the wild others unless we do know, in detail, in accurate detail, who they are and what they need.¹³²

She contends that the best writings on nature often have the best science.¹³³ But nature writers need aesthetics as well.

¹²⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 130-131.

¹³⁰McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 131.

¹³¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 131.

¹³²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 134.

¹³³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 134-135.

Aesthetics brings “attention to the other through image and metaphor” that lifts “up the concrete particularity of the earth other,” helping us to see what we often do not see; that is, it helps us to pay attention.¹³⁴ Surprisingly, she says that “aesthetic attention, arrested attention” facilitates the focusing of our “eye directly and precisely on the other.” It does so in a “connecting way; that is, metaphors attach us as well as arrest us.”¹³⁵ Thus, she returns to her theme of metaphor, going on to write:

The central model of this book—the subject-subjects model—is an attempt to focus our attention on the differences and uniqueness of earth others through the metaphor of subject for nature. A good metaphor first causes shock and then the shock of recognition. “Nature as subject” initially shocks, but, hopefully, it also causes a nod of acknowledgment. Hence, the aesthetic rivets our attention on the other, but in a way that connects us to the other. In other words, an aesthetic response to another is neither subjective nor objective, neither focused only on the self or only on the other, but on the connection of the self to the other. But, and the “but” is crucial here—on the other *as other*. The interest is, as with scientific attention, primarily on the other, not the self.¹³⁶

The experience is crucial, but the experience is now informed with “scientific knowledge and aesthetic imagination.”¹³⁷ The *other* does not get morphed into the writer’s view; instead, the *other* remains distinct, but with a connection to the writer, a connection that she or he cannot ignore.

In service of this connection, McFague denigrates the idea of seeing the world as a landscape, as spectators viewing from a perch and prefers, instead, the idea of thinking about the world as a maze. She believes that a maze more accurately represents the human experience in the world. She claims that it invites our senses to be active:

¹³⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 135.

¹³⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 136.

¹³⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 136. McFague refers the reader to : Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 54.

¹³⁷McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 136.

To find one's way about in a maze, a different kind of vision must come into play: one must pay close attention to detail. Objectifying, distancing, controlling vision is useless; rather, one must notice small, particular differences. Did I go by this hedge a few minutes ago? Am I getting closer to the center or to the margin? Can I locate myself by the sound of the fountain? One begins to feel like an animal, using all one's senses to maneuver one's way around this strange environment. One is inside nature, not outside it. One is part of it, not in control of it.¹³⁸

Approaching the world as a maze and rooted in the experience of nature, nature writing finds its role in bringing together both science and aesthetics, in hope of nurturing an ethical consciousness.¹³⁹

McFague moves in this direction because she is concerned that we as a species are having less and less experience with the natural world. She is aware that greater and greater numbers of people are now living in urban environments. She wants to know how we can care about something, the natural world, if we do not experience it and come to know it. The cities that we construct are built for the human species in mind, almost solely. Thus, she wonders "what happens to nature *and* to us in such habitats?" Not only nature suffers, but humans suffer also.¹⁴⁰

She tells about a young boy at the 1992 Los Angeles riots who could tell from the sound of gun shots what kind of automatic weapon it was. She goes on to say:

In another time and place he would have been able to identify six common species of hawks and owls by sound alone. The interior landscape is influenced by the exterior. The environment in which a child develops matters: whether that environment includes nature or is defined by weapons influences who that child becomes and what she or he cares about.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 68-69.

¹³⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 67-70.

¹⁴⁰McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 118, 123.

¹⁴¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 123. McFague gives credit to Paul Shephard, cited in Gary Nabham and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 28.

McFague looks toward those who live close to nature for insight. She says that those who spend time in nature, such as “naturalists, biologists, and nature writers—often claim that loving nature comes ‘naturally’ to humans.” A caring, responsible relationship is not primarily an obligation, because we not only touch nature, but it touches us too: “We belong with these others and feel good when we are in their company.”¹⁴²

However, McFague is not an elitist; she calls for “wilderness” as well as for those plain, simple kinds of “wildness.”¹⁴³ By wildness she means those planned and surprise habitats in our urban areas. These would include different sizes and kinds of city parks, as well as empty lots, cracks in the concrete, and balcony gardens. Nature is more than wilderness.¹⁴⁴

Furthermore, it is the “dualistic ideal” of living in the city and escaping to the wilderness that is “out-of-date and elitist. It takes care of the few while neglecting the many.”¹⁴⁵ In addition, the promises of suburbia have not fared so well, according to McFague “it lost both the diversity and excitement of a city as well as the wildness of nature.”¹⁴⁶

McFague knows that she is not an urban planner and that all she can do is encourage something like an ecological model that supports loving nature as subjects. She advocates for wilderness in order to “protect biodiversity” and for wildness in order to “encourage real encounters between human beings and nature.” She campaigns for

¹⁴²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 119.

¹⁴³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 123.

¹⁴⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 124.

¹⁴⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 125.

¹⁴⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 125.

places of *wildness* in our cities where people, especially the poor, can encounter nature directly.¹⁴⁷ She draws attention to those small encounters with nature that “can be the occasion” when we are changed. She writes:

This is why as a theologian I believe that the way cities are constructed is critical to the future of our species as well as of other species. Of course, it is not *the* answer; it is simply one small piece in the vast, complex agenda spelling out how we can live humanely on this planet with all the others. I cannot stress often enough the many different changes that we first-world Christians (and others) need to undergo if the planet is to survive and flourish. The development of a Christian nature spirituality is merely the beginning step, the conversion to earth others, that should result in many kinds of changes (economic, political, legal, ecclesiastical) at many different levels of society, both national and international. Our focus here, however, is on a change in sensibility, and personally, but its reach can be—and must be—global.¹⁴⁸

However, McFague is not naïve. While she advocates for preservation of wilderness, and for places of wildness, she knows that the relationship between the natural world and humans is going to be “mainly on our turf.” Further, we need to “build nature into our new cities and rebuild it into those cities that have lost it.” This needs to be done for “nature’s sake and for our own.”¹⁴⁹ These constructions would be attentive to multiple voices, with clear inclusion of local people’s participation and concern for their interests.¹⁵⁰

As McFague develops her subject-subjects, ecological model she values experience, touch and sight, science and aesthetics, but now she needs to consider how humans would respond to nature within such a model. Thus, she grounds an *ethic of care* in *respect* while accepting *community* as the *metaphor* through which to comprehend our

¹⁴⁷McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 125.

¹⁴⁸McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 126.

¹⁴⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 128-129.

¹⁵⁰McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 128.

responsibilities to all others.¹⁵¹ By community she means one in which its members experience a kind of mutuality and where humans realize that caring for non-humans is both good for *others* and good for humanity. Caring builds community. It is not an instrumental or altruistic kind of caring, but more like a friendship.¹⁵² However, an ethic of care would need as part of it the justice and rights tradition to give it strength and to help guarantee limits.¹⁵³

Such a subject-subjects, ecological model is one that “arises from a sense of touch and never loses that base.”¹⁵⁴ It gives human beings a “sense of solidarity” with *others*. It is composed of interdependent relationships with other beings and other entities. Responsibility and cause of adverse events and conditions is understood within a broad complex system of nature and its cultural, social circumstances in time and place.¹⁵⁵ McFague realizes that the subject-subjects, ecological model challenges traditional Christianity and that Christianity also challenges it.

D. “The Glory of God” and “Fully Alive”

McFague believes that Christianity is challenged to extend its basic tenet of love, love of God and love of neighbor as oneself, to nature and when it does it then becomes something very close to the ecological model. She asks:

What justification is there for limiting the subject-subjects model to human beings, drawing a line in the sand at our own species, with all other species and the rest of nature outside the circle? On the basis of Christianity’s own most basic model, seeing God and others as subjects—as valuable in themselves, for

¹⁵¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 151-152.

¹⁵²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 153-155.

¹⁵³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 156.

¹⁵⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 162.

¹⁵⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 162-163.

themselves, and not just as for me or against me—should we not *also* love nature this way?... Is it not only better for the health of the planet, but also more Christian?¹⁵⁶

If we did extend this kind of respect and love, McFague claims that we would have a twenty-first century version of a medieval cosmological vision. It would be “outer-directed” with a “functional cosmology in which we and all other natural beings and entities would have a place.” Yet, different from most versions postulated by Christian medievalists, it would be more akin to the cosmology of St. Francis of Assisi, which allowed Francis to see “all things in God,” not just as “signs pointing to God or as symbols transparent to God, but each and every thing telling of the glory of God *in its own distinctiveness*.”¹⁵⁷

However, Christianity also challenges and enhances the model and it does so in a couple of different ways. First, it realizes human sinfulness and acknowledges God’s ultimate gift of forgiveness and love, a love that finds each subject “valuable *as such*.” This she calls *justification*. But along with justification is sanctification, which invites us to do likewise; that is, to love each *subject*.¹⁵⁸

Second, is the Christian *community of care ethic*. It focuses on the “well-being of the entire community,” not just a privileged few. It encourages the coming together of “social justice and environmental integrity,” but with a sense of priority for those who are the poorest. Now, however, the *poor* refers to human beings *and* to other parts of

¹⁵⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 167.

¹⁵⁷McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 167.

¹⁵⁸McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 168.

creation that are degraded and suffering, especially where humans who are poor and the poor of nature intersect.¹⁵⁹

Lastly, she speaks of Christian sacramentalism. In *Super, Natural Christians* her goal is to push its readers to experiment with viewing *nature as subjects*. But this is not her end goal. She reveals:

[N]ow as we consider what Christianity might offer to the model, we must add a new sacramentalism. This sacramentalism would, while “holding on to the huckleberries,” see all things in God. However, the focus of this Christian loving eye is not vertical but horizontal; not on “God in this tree,” but “*this tree* in God.”... When the Christian eye has been so educated, it can and should then see them also as intimations of the divine.¹⁶⁰

She says that sacramentalism should spur us toward a richer language about God, one in which we would not be so obsessed with God-talk such that it makes God super-human like, anthropomorphic and anthropocentric. Instead, it would be eager to include other metaphors from creation and God. Remembering diversity and particularity, she writes:

‘Nature’ is not a metaphor for God. The natural world is not a single entity but a marvelously rich, multidimensional, diverse, and intricate collection of life forms and things. It is precisely this character of the natural world that presents itself to us as a new and exciting way to speak of God.¹⁶¹

God’s glory is such that it is revealed in all of creation: “The incarnation of God in Christ Jesus further claims that the glory of God is revealed in the least, the most despised, the most oppressed of God’s creatures.”¹⁶² In her text, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology*

¹⁵⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 169.

¹⁶⁰McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 172.

¹⁶¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 173.

¹⁶²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 174.

and *Economy for a Planet in Peril*, she responds to the glory that she says is revealed, and writes:

[M]y relative absolute is that we live to give God glory by loving the world and everything in it. This is not an absolute, because I know it is simply my interpretation of the relation between God and the world, but it is a relative absolute because it informs everything else I say about God and the world.¹⁶³

For McFague, “nature is not ‘just nature,’” but “in its own way,” it “is a vision of God.”¹⁶⁴ And the “glory of God is every creature fully alive.”¹⁶⁵

McFague’s life experiences come to be expressed in “gratitude for life and glory to God,” whereby combining these two result in a passion for the world and for God.¹⁶⁶ This speaks to the Catholic sacramental appreciation of the world and the Protestant emphasis on transcendence,¹⁶⁷ with Jesus as the one who unifies:

The incarnation, it seems to me, is not merely or solely about Jesus. It is more radical than that, although for Christians Jesus is the paradigm of both God with us and the world within God. The incarnation reveals God as *always* with us and our being defined as within God. The incarnation is the solution to the “two worlds problem”: the problem of how to love God and the world.... In fact, loving the world, (not God alone), or rather, loving God *through* loving the world, is the Christian way.¹⁶⁸

She says that because we are made in God’s image we are to “grow into that reality by doing what God does: love the world.” This is our “vocation.”¹⁶⁹ To live and do otherwise is to live outside of God’s house rules and outside of harmony and order.

¹⁶³Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 29.

¹⁶⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 175.

¹⁶⁵McFague, *Life Abundant*, 180.

¹⁶⁶McFague, *Life Abundant*, 13. McFague claims to be following Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

¹⁶⁷McFague, *Life Abundant*, 13.

¹⁶⁸McFague, *Life Abundant*, 13.

¹⁶⁹McFague, *Life Abundant*, 13.

Trying to order reality around ourselves, brings with it disorder and confusion,¹⁷⁰ or chaos, distortion, and perversion of what really matters.¹⁷¹ To offer an alternative vision today takes a “sharp eye.”¹⁷²

Just appreciating is not enough, we must identify with those who suffer.¹⁷³ Christians must “not just live differently,” they are to “recommend an alternative to the paradigm of unlimited consumption.”¹⁷⁴ This means living according to “God’s house rules.” But what God’s house rules are “in terms of ecological and economic imperatives—is one of the major tasks of Christian discernment.” Indeed, the context of this “discernment is a cruciform one.”¹⁷⁵ Since the “God whom Jesus reveals is the Creator of everything that is, the ‘beloved’ must include *all* disposed, outcast creatures and not only human ones.”¹⁷⁶

McFague is careful not to equate human suffering with the suffering of non-human nature, while she avoids dichotomizing any creatures who suffer into dualistic hierarchal groups. She writes:

Christians are those who should love the oppressed, the most vulnerable of God’s creation, for these are the ones according to the Gospel who deserve priority. Christians, then, should be super, natural, for in our time, nature can be seen as the “new poor,” not the poor that crowds out the human poor, but the “also” poor; and as such it demands our attention and care.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁰McFague, *Life Abundant*, 13.

¹⁷¹McFague, *Life Abundant*, 21.

¹⁷²McFague, *Life Abundant*, 22.

¹⁷³McFague, *Life Abundant*, 13.

¹⁷⁴McFague, *Life Abundant*, 14.

¹⁷⁵McFague, *Life Abundant*, 14.

¹⁷⁶McFague, *Life Abundant*, 19.

¹⁷⁷McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 6. She refers the reader to *The Body of God*, page 165, 200-201.

McFague's Christology has been challenged in the past as being left of center, perhaps even post-Christian,¹⁷⁸ but with *Super, Natural Christians* she seems to move more toward the center. Concern for nature is not just because our very lives depend on a healthy environment, but there are Christian theological imperatives as well:

If God the redeemer is concerned for the well-being of all of creation, then we have to extend the line we have drawn which puts us *within* the circle of divine concern and the rest of creation *outside*. And we must do this, first of all, for theological reasons. It is what Christian praxis demands... because commitment to the God of Jesus Christ demands it.¹⁷⁹

McFague focuses on liberation and care for those who are most oppressed, but as the circle widens to include *all* of those who are oppressed, Christian practice gets quite complex and challenging.¹⁸⁰ We have learned that simple charity to people who are oppressed is not the answer, they must also be "empowered," but how do we *empower* the non-human oppressed?¹⁸¹

McFague looks for what is distinct in the Christian voice and suggests its liberation praxis for the poor; that is, the "paradigm of the destabilizing radical love we see in Jesus' parables, healing stories, and eating practices," which now must be extended *to* nature. This extension to nature is counter-cultural and prophetic because it is at "odds with the religion of Economism"¹⁸² and how we structure incentives based on profit.

¹⁷⁸Cf. Schannon Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding: The Feminsits Christologies of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson in Conversation* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1998.) McFague's theological writings have received the following criticisms: 1) her efforts discard tradition too easily; 2) Jesus can become relativized as one unique figure among many; 3) the specific message of Christianity that centers on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus can be lost; 4) thus, her Christology raises further concerns related to incarnation and salvation (81, 88, 107).

¹⁷⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 12-13.

¹⁸⁰McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 13.

¹⁸¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 13.

¹⁸²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 14.

With such an extension of praxis, McFague envisions Jesus' ministry reaching toward nature in three ways. First, Jesus spoke to overturning the tables of power, which now means "turning the hierarchy of humans over nature," and supporting the belief that nature is loved for "itself by God in Christ." Secondly, "salvation means the health of bodies" and should address the ecological deterioration of earth, which is an affront to God, "who desires the wellbeing not just of humans but of all creation." Thirdly, we are reminded of Jesus' eating practices which are a "foretaste of the eschatological banquet when all creation will be satisfied and made whole" together.¹⁸³

The *Abundant Life* that McFague advocates is one where we know the belovedness of all of creation and where we try to live in a way that lives out of God and toward God, while also in God. This means living with gratitude and with a desire to give back, but not necessarily out of duty. We are to avoid what causes injury or is not life giving and, on the other hand, there is an attachment to what helps creation to flourish.¹⁸⁴ Our individualism must have limits.¹⁸⁵ Our *self-centered-world* is de-centered and re-centered on God and others, all others.¹⁸⁶

The traditional metaphor/symbol used to express the dynamism of God-self and into which we are invited is the *trinity*. She writes:

[T]he God who cares about the management of the household, is its creator, liberator, and sustainer. The radically transcendent *and* radically immanent God is the source of everything that is, the power that frees creation from what would destroy it, and the love that nourishes it in every moment. The God whose glory is every creature fully alive cannot be a solitary, distant being. The "trinity" is a *model*, a way of speaking of God,

¹⁸³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 15.

¹⁸⁴McFague, *Life Abundant*, 22.

¹⁸⁵McFague, *Life Abundant*, 23.

¹⁸⁶McFague, *Life Abundant*, 21.

that tries to express God's profound involvement in, with, and for the world.¹⁸⁷

McFague claims that the trinity is about God, who is transcendent and immanent, and it is also about God in relation to the world.¹⁸⁸ The "trinity is about God's love for the world and the world's response."¹⁸⁹

In the midst of dynamic love we recognize that we love God by loving the world well, such that our relationships with nature need habitual attention. Our relationships with nature need a day-to-day praxis of paying attention to nature that is based in piety. Just as our prayer life needs time, and our friendships need time, so do our relationships in the natural world.¹⁹⁰

McFague claims that Christian nature spirituality is "not nature romanticism," but neither is it "very optimistic about the future." Yet, it is "determinedly realistic" and "determinedly hopeful," because the creator of all creatures is "working in, through, and on behalf of us all."¹⁹¹

E. Contributions

In evaluating McFague's use of aesthetics concerning nature, it is necessary to note how she believes "nature" is not easily defined and that over the centuries its meaning has changed and will continue to change. However, while acknowledging the cultural lens, she does support an evolutionary, relational, ecological, community model of nature. *Nature* is an interdependent reality where God and humans share some degree

¹⁸⁷McFague, *Life Abundant*, 143. She acknowledges the work of Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991).

¹⁸⁸McFague, *Life Abundant*, 143.

¹⁸⁹McFague, *Life Abundant*, 144.

¹⁹⁰McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 177.

¹⁹¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 178.

of intimacy with the natural world. She rejects hierarchical dualism because it not only distances humans from the rest of creation, but it pits humans over and above all other aspects of creation.¹⁹² Rather, she encourages local and particular experiences and relationships among humans and the natural world.¹⁹³ However, in the midst of this discussion she recognizes that there is no more “pristine” nature,¹⁹⁴ or no more natural world on earth that has not been degraded, altered, or affected by humanity.

Against this backdrop, we remember that McFague’s work has developed over several decades as writings dedicated to ecological theology. She came to understand earlier than most theologians that humans are responsible for the degradation of earth’s environment and that we must be held responsible for doing something about these conditions. Her contributions have been in the form of speculative and constructive theology that she hopes will be functional in people’s lives.

McFague retrieves from the past, re-forms in certain cases, and offers new possibilities. Her sometimes novel ideas and nuances, as well as her insights about contemporary environmental conditions, are recognized among her greatest strengths. However, her historical retrievals, assessments, and Christology are often points where she elicits questions and her greatest criticism. These issues have been addressed by others and are not the main focus of this study.¹⁹⁵

Instead, this analysis concentrates more narrowly; that is, on McFague’s use of aesthetics and her understanding of it in connection with the way in which she views and

¹⁹²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 46-47.

¹⁹³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 120-122.

¹⁹⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 128.

¹⁹⁵Cf. Schannon Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding: The Feminists Christologies of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson in Conversation*, 81, 88, 107.

approaches nature. Early on, McFague uses aesthetics via her experimentation with metaphors and images of our traditional images for God. She concludes that some traditional metaphors can restrict our vision of who God is for us, especially when metaphors are held narrowly or with exclusivity. More so, they can constrict, inflate, or distort understandings that we have of ourselves, of each other, and of the natural world. In response, she puts forth a metaphor that she knows will itself be incomplete and limited, yet she hopes that it will divulge something that we need to be about in our relationships with God, fellow human beings, and with all of nature: *the world as the Body of God*. She wants us to change how we see God, so she tries to influence our images and metaphors about God. She wants to jolt us into seeing God and the world differently.

McFague's next surprising metaphor in service of her concern is *nature as subject*. Urging us to see nonhuman nature as subject(s), she encourages us to recognize and relate to the natural world in a new way. While McFague is good at negating her metaphorical assertions, always aware of their incompleteness, she remains committed to the particular; that is, "*this tree in God*."¹⁹⁶

Indeed, in *Super, Natural Christians* McFague's strategy for encouraging us to engage nature more as *subject(s)* and to care differently for nature is one of paying attention. To do this she focuses on attentive skills employed in science and aesthetics in order to nurture a different sensibility toward nature.

In *Models of God* she claimed that our "renderings of reality" are indeed metaphorical, not literal, but in our fresh constructions we offer new possibilities to

¹⁹⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 172.

replace others, such that we create the reality in which we live. We do not copy reality, for there are no copies, “only creations.” However, they do “refer” to a reality.¹⁹⁷

In *Super, Natural Christians* she says that science draws upon its ability to be attentive to details in reality. It knows “about the other in its particular, special, unique character and ways,” and it has at its “heart of appreciation” a “subject—that is, *as it is*, as *what it is*.”¹⁹⁸ And aesthetics, at least concerning that genre of art and science that is called *nature writing*, involves “attention to the other through image and metaphor. Just as science is one form of lifting up the concrete particularity of the earth other, so also is art.”¹⁹⁹ Together, science and art deal in particularity, appreciation, image, and metaphor, and according to McFague, metaphor makes some degree of reference to reality.

Indeed, metaphors are “renderings of reality,” not copies. However, *art*, beyond nature writing, involves material *renderings*, as well as conceptual ones. Either way, our material constructions and our conceptual or linguistic constructions are part of our cultural, social, and ecological environment. McFague uses aesthetics through nature writing as a way to nurture the *loving eye*, which mainly keeps aesthetics in the mode of observation and appreciation.

She wants to support a certain kind of intimacy with nature whereby an appropriate bonding is established through apprenticeship, listening, and friendship.²⁰⁰ To “*know the other as other*” she stresses “aesthetic distance and scientific accuracy.”²⁰¹ McFague is very concerned that we not project onto nature what we fanaticize about

¹⁹⁷McFague, *Models of God*, 26.

¹⁹⁸McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 134.

¹⁹⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 135.

²⁰⁰McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 119. See also pages 114, 131, and 157.

²⁰¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 131.

nature.²⁰² At times her version of *aesthetic detachment* can seem to lean more heavily toward the impersonal, but this certainly is not her intention. Rather, she is trying to make space for theology and aesthetics at the table of academic and public discourse, where science usually reigns.

What she calls “aesthetic detachment” can be extended to the justice realm. In fact, it needs to be extended so that our efforts are not *soft*. Egalitarian justice needs good policies and laws. In the end, McFague supports a model based on care and community: “The community model says that the well being of the whole is the final goal, but that this is reached through attending to the needs and desires of the many subjects that make up the community.”²⁰³

McFague’s aim is to encourage the *loving eye*, such that a person would want to build a caring and just community attentive to *all*. She focuses on nature writing as a way to do this because she thinks the genre of nature writing is unique in its use of science and aesthetics; that is, in the way that it encourages an informed subject to connect with a non-human subject/nature. However, she ignores the larger resource of aesthetics in history and in contemporary times, as well as its wider range of relational, interpretive and creative capacity that could be in service of connecting with nature as subjects and envisioning a shared environment.

Nature writing, per se, is generally thought to have begun around the time of Linnaeus and his *Systema Naturae* (1735) in which Linnaeus introduced a system that

²⁰²McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 114.

²⁰³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 114, 157-158.

allowed living things to be identified and classified.²⁰⁴ Natural theology was already established when in the second half of the nineteenth century certain authors were beginning to be called *natural history* writers. They were working to “provide their readers with an antidote to industrialism and urbanization” and an alternative to what was thought of as the coldness of science.²⁰⁵

At a time when some writings are still found to be quite pastoral, the fields of science are discovering an ever greater complexity to nature. In turn, nature writing begins to take on a more complex form as well.²⁰⁶

Also, in the latter half of the nineteenth century we see “origins of what we today call the environmental movement.” Those involved begin to understand more clearly how economic systems and industrial growth and development are pressuring the natural world. Subsequently, we find at the beginning of the twentieth century the “activist voice and prophetic anger of nature writers,” who declare “in [John] Muir’s words, that ‘the money changers were in the temple.’”²⁰⁷

Had McFague wanted to use the genre of nature writing as a premiere example of a process that nurtures the *loving eye* because of its use of science and aesthetics it might have been helpful if she had taken greater notice of the history and complexity of this particular genre. She could have used a greater number and a more diverse sampling of

²⁰⁴Robert Finch and John Elder, eds., *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 19. Cf.: Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 18, 55.

²⁰⁵Finch and Elder, eds., *The Norton Book of Nature*, 20.

²⁰⁶Finch and Elder, eds., *The Norton Book of Nature*, 20-21.

²⁰⁷Finch and Elder, eds., *The Norton Book of Nature*, 22-23. John Muir, 1838-1914.

writings. McFague's three main examples of nature writing are all "by white, North American, middle-class women."²⁰⁸

Although none of the three main writers that she features engage nature in urban areas, McFague, nevertheless, strongly encourages all kinds of local and small efforts at being green in urban areas. Yet, she realizes that these efforts are not enough:

They will not restore the wilderness; they will not save the planet if commercial interests continue to degrade it and if consumers do not rein in their insatiable appetites. But local effort by ordinary people to restore nature in their cities is a necessary and encouraging step. It is necessary because if most of us and our children are to experience nature and thereby grow to care about it, nature must be close by. It is encouraging because the future of the natural world will be inevitably intertwined with human beings: we must learn to live *together*. The extinction of nature and the extinction of the experience of nature are profoundly connected. Our encounters with nature can be reminders that we *do* care about these others who are now so frequently out of sight, out of mind.²⁰⁹

McFague tries to re-educate the *arrogant eye* such that it becomes a *loving eye*; surprisingly, but quite practically, rooted in touch. However, McFague, in the preface to her 2001 book, *Life Abundant*, writes:

I have written each of my books in an effort to make up for deficiencies in the last one. *Life Abundant* is no exception. After completing *Super, Natural Christians* ... I realized love was not enough. I realized that we middle-class North American Christians are destroying nature, not because we do not love it, but because of the way we live.²¹⁰

Reflective on her work and committed to heuristic theology, which learns from taking chances, she admits of her dissatisfaction and continues to explore. This time she moves into economic systems, the household management of earth.

²⁰⁸McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 137.

²⁰⁹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 148-149.

²¹⁰McFague, *Life Abundant*, xi.

Neither the *shock* of different metaphors for God, nor experience of nature with the added reflective assistance of science and aesthetics, supplies her with the results that she had hoped. So, she takes the best of what she thinks her previous works have to offer and she moves into economics, seemingly leaving aesthetics behind. She decides, then, that the mission needs more than love; it needs the nuts and bolts of taking care of the household of earth, both its micro and macro systems. However, in the end, there was no need for McFague to disparage her own efforts to combine science and aesthetics because the task needs more than *love*.

McFague could have retrieved from the tradition of nature writing more of a sense of its trajectory, which might have given her aesthetic approach more dynamism. She might have pushed the question about how nature writing enlivens a cadre of aesthetic characteristics and creative activities. She does not engage the practice in today's technical world, but holds it comfortably within a contemplative reserve. McFague's *subject-subjects* model prioritizes relationship and touch, with touch integrating with sight, but she never specifically draws correlations between this and aesthetics. Historically theological aesthetics, as well as contemporary aesthetics, might have helped to deepen her project, which is to nurture the *loving eye*, all in service of a larger project, which is to care for *all*, especially the poor, both human and nonhuman.

McFague concentrates on nurturing the *loving eye* as a way to build relationships with nature. But she is far less attentive to the creative person whom she hopes these relationships will change. Still, she claims that humans are "constituted by and exist only in relationships,"²¹¹ and that we are interpretive *and* creative beings.²¹²

²¹¹McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 162.

She chooses to focus her process of nurturing the *loving eye* on combining aesthetics and science, inclusive of first hand experiences of nature, in order to foster the *loving eye* in order that we might share these experiences with others in a meaningful manner. McFague does not ask how *nature writing* is unfolding or developing during contemporary times. This might have been helpful. In both *Super, Natural Christians* and in *Life Abundant* one can find examples of a negative reception of contemporary genres, such as photography and its other forms. She suggests that we “leave the camera home and take the notebook.”²¹³

Granted, she does admit that there are other “mediating forms such as field guides, science textbooks, nature films, and museum displays” that are available and that they are “certainly useful for educating the loving eye.” But it is nature writing that “gives us privileged access to nature via another—and usually well-informed human being’s experience with nature.” Thus, nature writing “may be one of the best ways to educate our eye to nature as subject.”²¹⁴

Even though the gifts of writing combined with aesthetics and science may be a choice that many of us would support, encourage, and long to see as an embraced way to develop one’s understanding, appreciation, and relationship with the natural world,²¹⁵ we must push beyond the boundaries of our own comforts. McFague’s preference may be good in theory, but the reality of our day is that we live in what is being called a *visual or mutli-media culture*. Could it be that *nature writing* is being done in different modalities

²¹²McFague, *Models of God*, 21-22.

²¹³McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 137.

²¹⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 131. See also 120-121, 137.

²¹⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 137.

today and to insist upon the scribe may be to doom what is ultimately desired? Even the Church recognized there was more than one way to *write*, as with Scripture and icons. Does she limit the experience and then say it is not enough, rejecting it for economics, as if these worlds are separate?

McFague wants to avoid a nineteenth century *landscape* vision of the world because this perspective towers over the natural world from a limited and privileged human vantage point, and then frames reality as we wish or as we naively and romantically wish it were.²¹⁶ Similarly, she claims that the camera's eye is basically arrogant because it highlights vision from one human perspective and because it plays into a diminishment of first hand experience.²¹⁷ Later, she does redeem a photo of earth from space by NASA, acknowledging that it is acceptable, as long as it is seen through the sensibility of the subject-subjects model.²¹⁸ In light of her aversion to the single perspective, she proposes that we think of the world as a *maze*²¹⁹

In theory this might sound appealing, but the reality is that this idea never really gets off the ground and she herself continues to use the term *landscape* throughout her texts. McFague criticizes the shallow dimensionality of the *landscape* metaphor, but she replaces it with one that mainly speaks of confusion and not dimensionality.

However, the word *landscape* is often used across disciplines today as a metaphor for the overall composition of environments, often dynamically composed. *Landscape* can refer to complex or simple situations and conditions. It can refer to an emotional

²¹⁶McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 68.

²¹⁷McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 82-83.

²¹⁸McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 96.

²¹⁹McFague, *Models of God*, 67-70, 92 [landscape/maze].

landscape of a community; an economic *landscape* of an international region or country; the *landscape* of a high plateau or a marshy terrain; the *landscape* of a small town or a complex large metropolis; the factious *landscape* of a global church; or the diverse *landscape* of Post-Modernity. Her idea of *landscape* is far too one-dimensional and *maze* as a metaphor simply does not work, not even for McFague.

While the term “maze” is very descriptive and it does have certain advantages, it does not seem to generate the influence McFague intended, and is not used in her next book on economics. Using the metaphor *maze* as a way to see the world *feels* like the following: *The world is like a well into which you just keep falling.*

Nonetheless, McFague is doing something important. She is exploring *space* in light of a comment that she makes in *The Body of God*, where she argues that geography “may be *the* subject of the twenty-first century.”²²⁰ The subject of space forces us to ask questions about who has or does not have space; how much or how little; how is it divided and shaped; what is the condition and location of the space; what is its composition (resources); how is it impacted by humans, and how is it cared for by humans? The questions surrounding *space* activate the topics of nature, aesthetics, theology, culture, politics, economics, ethics... in poignant ways. But she does not overtly, at least, expand on her comment or connect it with her on-going body of work until *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*.²²¹

In her 2008 text she continues to assert her metaphor, *the world as the body of God*, but now in regard to global warming and issues related to how we care for *place*

²²⁰McFague, *The Body of God*, 101.

²²¹Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2008), 23.

and attend to *space*. She contends that Western culture has overly emphasized time and history.²²² By paying attention to *space*, she ultimately connects human greediness for physical space with egocentric space; thus, the “power of the kenotic God lies in giving space for others, dying to self that others might live. This strange reversal—losing one’s life to save it—is also the sensibility that is needed if our planet is to survive and prosper.”²²³

Earlier, in *Super, Natural Christians*, McFague considers the way in which the *arrogant eye* seeks to own or control nature, which comes down to controlling space.²²⁴ More so, in 2008 she cautions against perceiving the natural world as absorbed by human construction and invention such that nature is perceived as replaced by development, invention and the urban world. She contends that the “hybrid model of city as nature tends to hide the ‘rights’ of other life-forms as well as our necessary care for these others on whom we depend absolutely.”²²⁵

True enough, but while she wants to distinguish the particular subjects of the natural world, she does not acknowledge strongly enough how the environment is an increasing mix and blend of nature and culture. In the contemporary environment distinctions between nature and culture get more and more difficult to recognize and name because of the results of human actions. To say that nature should not be absorbed by culture does not stop it from happening. The question is what can we do as part of a theological aesthetics of the environment that supports recognizing and respecting

²²²McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 106, 123-125, 137-138.

²²³McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 138.

²²⁴McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 67-90.

²²⁵McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 125.

distinctions wherever possible? As part of this aim, how can we be attentive to language and metaphors that are in some way reflective of an environment that is increasingly an integration and blending of nature and culture.

Making space for others is reflective of something McFague wrote in *Super, Natural Christians* on poverty regarding the lives of St. Francis, Leonardo Boff, and Jesus.²²⁶ It is not the kind of poverty that makes people and nature and whole communities sick, but it is the kind that frees the world to be *fully alive* in an earthly, unromanticized existence of Mystery.

In today's world, a theological and aesthetic understanding of *fully alive* for all of creation will inevitably have to inquire about a deep kind of freedom that makes space for *all*, especially those who are poor. In *A New Climate for Theology* McFague admits that most of us will not be saints like Francis of Assisi,²²⁷ but hopefully we will see and act in the world differently enough to ensure a just and sustainable world.

In light of global ecological situations today, Sallie McFague deserves credit for insightful analyses, beginning with her 1987 book, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. McFague's works are usually found to be challenging because she pushes readers to think differently and to experiment with their life choices. She pushes herself to experiment and she is not afraid to change course. This helps to make her interesting and credible, even if one's agreement with her is not total.

What this study takes from McFague is a view of nature based on an ecological-evolutionary-subject-subjects model that is rooted in God-self who is more than creation. In *A New Climate for Theology* she re-asserts that we see the *back of God*, as in Exodus

²²⁶McFague, *Life Abundant*, 164-165, 198.

²²⁷McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 156.

33:23, and that we find “intimations of transcendence *in and through* the world.” At the same time she insists that while the “body metaphor is an important one,” it needs to be “complemented by others.”²²⁸ However, while McFague stresses that her metaphors are not to be taken literally, in 2008 she admits that she is “not afraid of pantheism; the line between God and the world is fuzzy.”²²⁹ In some sense, she comes to the edge of metaphor. She writes:

God is the “stuff” out of which everything comes and to which it will return. Life emanates from God and is more “like God” than like anything else. All creation was made in God’s image, as a reflection of God, and this is what we humans must acknowledge and live into.... The world (all matter) is a manifestation of God, for God is reality.²³⁰

Danger exists with an overly transcendent perception of God, as well as with an overly immanent perception of God. While God may be totally *other*, McFague asserts that creation does share some similarity, therefore indicating to us something about God.

However, just as there are dangers to be had in conflating creation with God, there can be difficulties when we unite aesthetics and ethics because we can lose the potency and gift of each. McFague does seem to come close to merging them in *The Body of God* when she writes:

If God is physical, then the aesthetic and the ethical unite: praising God in and through the beauty of bodies entails caring for the most basic needs of all bodies on the planet. If God is physical, then the divine becomes part of the everyday, part of the pain and pleasure of bodily existence.²³¹

In *A New Climate for Theology*, McFague reassesses the connection between aesthetics and ethics and moves the topic to another level of discourse. She argues:

²²⁸McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 106.

²²⁹McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.

²³⁰McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 164.

²³¹McFague, *The Body of God*, 132-133.

If we cannot find the transcendent *in* the world, in its beauty and its suffering, then for us bodily, earthy creatures it is probably not to be found at all. Finding transcendence in and ... through the earth means paying attention to others: the ethical rests on the aesthetic, the prior moment of realizing that something outside of oneself is real. Only then is one capable of the kenotic action, the retreat of one's relentless ego, to allow the glory of God and the need of the neighbor to fill oneself. The aesthetic is the recognition of otherness; the ethical is the practice of self-denial necessary so that others—God and neighbor—may be praised and served. Thus, with the thought experiment of the world as God's body, we can affirm with Simone Weil that "God is reality": the body of the world, the ordinary reality of our lives, is where we meet God.²³²

Where Plato and some others would claim that aesthetics is dependent upon whether or not something is moral, McFague in 2008 stands opposed to this idea and asserts that the "ethical rest on the aesthetic." For McFague, the ethical is dependent upon the "recognition of *otherness*" because recognition is preliminary to ethical action.²³³ By asserting that the ethical is dependent upon the aesthetic the task of recognizing reality and its relationships must precede the "practice of self denial necessary so that others—God and neighbors—may be praised and served."²³⁴ More so, if aesthetics is about *recognition of otherness*, then McFague's theological distinction between God and creation is preserved.

McFague's insight enhances and challenges our understanding of aesthetics. It augments our understanding of aesthetics as being characterized by harmonization because recognition means that there is some degree of ordering, selecting, memory, imagination, associating, connecting, or a kind of making sense of *otherness*, hopefully with a positive integration of reason and emotions. Theological aesthetics does so

²³²McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113. Also, the term *aesthetics* appears on pages: 74, 88, 112, 127, and 134. For other allusions to the topic, see: *ecological unity*, 75; *vision*, 89; *measure*, 130-131; *picture*, 150, 162; and *ordered*, 151.

²³³McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113. She describes Genesis 1:31 as an "aesthetic statement of the intrinsic worth of each and every creature," 134.

²³⁴McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113.

because aesthetics searches for a way to order or bring entities together according to the measures of care, justice, and, now, sustainability. McFague's insight lends depth to a theological aesthetics of the environment as we struggle to recognize the particulars and to live justly and well as a complex environment of nature and culture.

Conclusion

From a Christian perspective, humans are in integral relationship with a Trinitarian God and God's creations, both human and non-human. We are called to recognize others, to pay attention, to wonder and learn about others, to appreciate, to identify with, or, at the very least, respect others, especially those who are poor. This means being responsible in particular relationships and being responsible for systems that we construct. It means responding to a call to embrace a new kind of poverty for those of us who have so much.

McFague encourages us to remember the cross of Christ when any part of creation suffers and to recognize the fullness of God's glory in the community of all of creation. In *Super, Natural Christians*, a text wherein she concretely uses aesthetics, she pushes her reader to envision "*this tree in God*,"²³⁵ and to envision the world of the tree, the fish, the bee, the bird, the ocean... and of persons who are poor.

Over the course of her work, McFague grows in her understanding and use of aesthetics, especially in her understanding of its importance and place concerning ethics. Although *aesthetics* was not her main task, it might be helpful to provide dialogue with a broader understanding of theological aesthetics historically and with contemporary aesthetics. Also, McFague does not engage a twentieth/twenty-first century world of

²³⁵McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 172.

technology that uses multi-forms of communications, marked by an especially high preference for the visual. This is delicate territory for theology because McFague's concerns are real regarding the diminishment of first hand experiences of the natural world. Furthermore, while her cultural understanding of *nature* expands over time, as in *A New Climate for Theology*, this dimension of *nature* still requires attention as humanity is moving more aggressively in its ability and willingness to alter, shape, and even compose novel forms of life through the use of science and technology.

The environment is an integration of nature and culture, with culture's footprint growing by the day. In light of McFague's assertion of ethics resting upon the aesthetic, the search for early common ground between nature and culture, perhaps even before the aesthetic moment of *recognition*, may be beneficial.

However, before moving to theological topics per se, it will be important to consider non-theological aesthetic approaches to nature for what they might bring to a contemporary conversation. Three authors whose works we will examine are Emily Brady, Allen Carlson, and Arnold Berleant.

Chapter Three

Does Contemporary Aesthetics of Nature Enhance a Theology of Nature?

In this chapter we will examine the works of three contemporary scholars writing in the area of aesthetics and nature: Emily Brady, Allen Carlson, and Arnold Berleant. Each of these writers approaches the subject from a different perspective, but all with sensitivity for ecological issues. Our goal in this chapter is to glean from these writers, who are outside of theological circles, ideas that could be helpful or challenging to a *theological* aesthetics of nature/environment.

In recent decades, the field of aesthetics has expanded to include questions beyond those limited to the arts, such as dance, music, literature, and the visual arts. This expansion is in spite of those who would insist that aesthetics is only about art and against those who call for the demise of aesthetics altogether, because they believe it is too anthropocentric.¹ Among the various possible aesthetic approaches to nature are the following:

1. non-aesthetic—
nature cannot be appreciated aesthetically because it simply is not art, nature is not made by humans;
2. nature as art—
nature is approached through object model/like sculpture or via landscape model/like painting;
3. cognitive/conceptual models—
nature is approached primarily through the natural sciences or via historical information related to certain places;
4. non-cognitive/non-conceptual models—

¹Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott, eds., "Introduction," in *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 8, 12-13. Five groupings were derived, in part, from their information.

- something other than a cognitive component becomes its central feature, such as imagination, freedom, or mystery;
5. broad environmental models—
focus is on social/cultural and natural world integration.²

The writers examined in this chapter do not fall into either of the first two camps, but they do represent diverse opinions in a complicated arena that includes the cognitive and non-cognitive, and places in-between. For this study, the writings of Emily Brady, Allen Carlson, and Arnold Berleant have been chosen because each believes that nature can be aesthetically appreciated. All three encourage a serious understanding of aesthetics and nature, which means none of them approach nature simply as art.

However, Berleant does not separate art and nature to the extent that Carlson and Brady do. His work stresses a strong social and cultural perspective. Brady employs a non-cognitive model that emphasizes a renewed understanding of disinterestedness, along with imagination used well. And Carlson, using a cognitive model, believes the natural sciences should be central to any appreciation of nature. In addition, these writers recognize that their efforts build upon the works of others.

In an introduction to an edited work published in 2008, Carlson and Sheila Lintott tell of a particular shift in the appreciation of nature that took place with the observations of George Perkins Marsh, who is considered the first American environmentalist (1801-1882), followed by John Burroughs (1837-1921, a conservationist) and John Muir (1838-1914, founder of the Sierra Club). Carlson and Lintott write, for example, that Muir found “all of nature and especially wild nature aesthetically beautiful.” He found “ugliness only where nature was subject to human intrusion. His positive aesthetic appreciation seemed to encompass the whole natural world, from creatures considered

²Carlson and Lintott, eds., *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*, 9-12.

hideous in his day, such as alligators, to natural disasters thought to ruin the environment, such as earthquakes.”³ In contrast to viewing nature as frightening and needing to be tamed or conquered, or as material whose purpose was specifically for human use and pleasure, all of nature was accepted and seen as beautiful. Following Burroughs and Muir, Aldo Leopold (1887-1948, an ecologist/environmentalist) presents a more complex “vision of the relationship” among “aesthetic appreciation of nature, environmentalism and an ecological understanding of the environment.”⁴

Also, noteworthy for this study is the fact that none of the three writers that we will examine moves into religious or theological territories, unless to draw distinctions. The most that any one of them does is to leave a small opening through which religion or theology might contribute supplemental meaning. However, the guiding question will be what do Brady, Carlson, and Berleant offer to a contemporary theological aesthetics of nature/environment?

A. Emily Brady

Emily Brady works in the area of philosophy and aesthetics with a particular interest in natural environments and cultural geography.⁵ Brady opposes cognitive theorists who hold that an appropriate appreciation of nature requires a certain level of knowledge, usually related to science. Instead, she joins with those who assert non-cognitive theories, which means that she thinks a person does not have to know science or be an expert in any particular discipline in order to have an appropriate aesthetic

³Carlson and Lintott, eds., *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*, 5-6.

⁴Carlson and Lintott, eds., *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*, 6.

⁵Emily Brady has served as vice-president of the *International Society for Environmental Ethics*, is associate editor of the journal, *Environmental Values*, and is a professor at the University of Edinburgh. <<http://www.geos.ed.ac.uk/homes/ebrady/>> (accessed on 17 February 2008).

appreciation of nature.⁶ She describes her non-cognitive approach as an *integrated aesthetic model*.

Brady is most concerned that a cognitive view, such as one espoused by Allen Carlson, which requires scientific knowledge to some degree, would usurp the distinctiveness of what aesthetics has to offer and would restrict the contribution of other reasonable ways of informing an aesthetic appreciation of nature.⁷ She disagrees with Carlson's primary dependency on science, whereby he divides nature into natural science categories, such as, class, order, and family, reminiscent of categories found in art, such as painting and painting's different genres, and sub-genres. Carlson then uses natural science as a guide for the appreciation of nature by way of these categories. Brady contends that this discounts, at best, other experiences, appreciations, interpretations, and ways of knowing.⁸

However, aesthetics is frequently viewed as superfluous. It is often looked upon as being rooted primarily in human desires, pleasures, and preferences of taste, and is mostly associated with art, having been cut away, generally, from ordinary experiences and theological thought. Relativism and subjectivism abound; thus, all that the aesthetic perspective can bring to the table of decision making concerning the appreciation and valuing of the natural environment is a voice for the preservation of great scenic views,

⁶Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 3, 86-102, 102-116.

⁷Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 93-94,100-111. Brady's disagreement with cognitive models is particularly focused on Allen Carlson's work, as she states on page 93.

⁸Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 98.

historically valued environments, such as the Civil War era at Gettysburg, and appreciation for sites conducive for pleasure and outdoor recreational activities.⁹

Today, when natural environments are threatened, for example, by brash development projects, interested parties in defense of conservation, or more earth friendly forms of development, look to more cognitive, objective presentations to affirm natural environments. This usually means relying upon scientific models.

Science is seen as required in an appreciation of nature because it is believed that science can present as objectively as economics can tally currency. In public debate the objective voice of science must confront a strong emphasis given to economics; that is, the monetary value of natural environmental sites, the need for jobs and economic development, and/or a community's recreational interest that often involves economic development. But, Brady feels too much is lost when we depend so heavily on science for its appreciation and judgment of nature. Thus, she works diligently and methodically to build a case for an aesthetics of nature that includes and supports a more robust experience, appreciation, and judgment of an increasingly complex natural environment(s) that can be communicated cogently.

In support of her aim, Brady must show that it is possible to describe and assess natural environments without necessitating specific knowledge such as science. She must offer a method that is reasonable and communicable to others. And, she must address the question of whether or not nature is a social construct.

Brady views the nature/culture debate as a continuum, with one end occupying a holistic/ecological position where humans are understood as very much a part of nature.

⁹Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 225-226.

On the other end, “nature is not real, but rather a cultural construct,” where human ideas determine the *meaning of nature*. Here, the emphasis is on culture; such that, “humans are exclusively cultural beings rather than a part of nature.”¹⁰ Of course, there are places between these extremes, and this is where Brady generally makes her stand. Regarding environmental landscapes she writes:

On some accounts, all environments or landscapes are cultural; some constructivists contend that even pristine environments, if they exist, are experienced through cultural lenses and conventions. My view takes a much narrower conception, given that I have made a distinction between nature and culture. Cultural landscapes are those which have been intentionally modified by humans but where nature still plays some role.¹¹ They range from landscapes with traces of human habitation and agriculture, to the heavily modified landscapes of intensive agriculture and sparse settlements of indigenous cultures. Although urban environments would appear to be cultural landscapes, it makes more sense to keep them in a category of their own, since their urban character leaves much less room for nature compared to, say, the rural countryside.¹²

While Brady is aware that the term “landscape” is not totally satisfying, she does not dismiss it.¹³ She realizes that it carries with it meanings derived from earlier times as part of the Enlightenment and early Modernity, such as associations with the *scenery model* (landscape) of aesthetic appreciation, which was itself derived from the *picturesque theory*. The picturesque theory lies somewhat between the “serene, pastoral qualities of beauty and the awesome grandeur of the sublime.”¹⁴

¹⁰Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 52-53, 100.

¹¹Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 70. Brady refers the reader to Steven Arntzen, whom she says discusses “cultural landscapes in relation to environmental philosophy,” noting that she shares some of his views. Steven Arntzen, “Cultural Landscape and Approaches to Nature – Ecophilosophical Perspectives,” in Lehari, Laanemets and Sarapik, eds., *Place and Location II* (Tallinn: Estland, 2001).

¹²Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 70.

¹³Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 21.

¹⁴Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 39. Referring to Kant and the sublime, see in this text chapter one, pages 70-71.

Aesthetic ideas related to the *beautiful*, the *sublime*, and the *picturesque* each had their extremes, but in some ways they show evidence given to understand what the differences are between an aesthetics of art, such as painting, and an aesthetics of the natural world. They, in fact, signaled a change:

All three of these new ways of aesthetically valuing nature signaled a softening of the predominant attitude which saw nature as ugly and uncontrollable, and as something to be tamed and perfected by [and] through human ideals. With the picturesque (as with the sublime) came a valuing of change, disorder and the otherness of nature. However, set against this, the picturesque was strongly human-centered in according value to landscapes in virtue of how well they met the standard by picturesque paintings.¹⁵

These changes led to questions, such as: Is it necessary to differentiate between nature and culture?

As part of her work, Brady claims that within the contemporary landscape there are “degrees of naturalness and degrees of culture,” with her approach resting somewhere in the balance, claiming that she “leans towards the ecological view without embracing it.”¹⁶ She holds that there are different frameworks for understanding the natural world and culture, such as myth, aesthetics, religion, science, etc. She is resilient in her resolve not to let any one framework be the interpreting lens for the natural world. She is especially cautious regarding the hermeneutical lens of science.

Nevertheless, Brady must contend with Carlson’s claim that an aesthetics of nature necessitates a scientific/natural science model. But she fears such a model lacks a

¹⁵Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 42.

¹⁶Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 52-53, 100.

vital vulnerability and breadth of diversity.¹⁷ Therefore, she looks for a way that will balance the objective and subjective in an appreciation of nature.

For assistance with a proper balance Brady turns to *disinterestedness*, but not with an understanding such that the subject would be passive or where disinterestedness would leave an unbridgeable distance between humans and the natural world.¹⁸ She begins by recalling that in the eighteenth century Anthony Earl Shaftesbury (1671-1731) argues for disinterestedness in moral philosophy. She writes:

The original meaning of disinterestedness lies in eighteenth-century moral philosophy, where Shaftesbury identifies the disinterested standpoint with morality. Moral action is motivated by affection for something for its own sake, and it is therefore contrasted with desiring an object as a means to an end, for one's own pleasure or for any other use... Disinterestedness thus begins in this ethical context and is then brought smoothly into aesthetic theory to characterize the standpoint that we find in Kant.¹⁹

Shaftesbury clears a way to understand Kant's version of disinterestedness as not about passivity or distance, but about the "active use of the capacities of perception, thought and imagination,"²⁰ but without self-interestedness or utility.²¹ Yet, Kant writes about aesthetic contemplation in such a way that it could be understood as passive. Brady, arguing against this kind of interpretation, writes:

Only judgements [*sic*] of taste are characterized in this way because the activity of the perception is complete in itself. So, the passivity of the aesthetic response means only inactivity in respect of interest, and it does not preclude active contemplation. But just what does this active contemplation consist in? I would like to discuss the role of imagination

¹⁷Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 89-91, 93-102.

¹⁸Referring to Kant and *disinterestedness*, see in this text chapter one, pages 67-73.

¹⁹Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 132.

²⁰Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 133.

²¹See in this text, chapter one, pages 68-71 regarding Kant's ideas on *four moments* in aesthetic judgment and the *sublime*. The *four moments* include: *disinterestedness*; *universal claim*; *purposiveness*; and *necessity*.

as one aspect of this engagement to show that aesthetic attention is rarely passive and that there is no conflict between disinterestedness and participation with the aesthetic object.²²

Brady distinguishes between an interest in the object that is beneficial to the subject and a contemplative engagement by the subject in the aesthetic object.

Brady reads Kant such that *contemplation* refers to the harmony between the play of imagination and understanding. *Contemplation* is not “constrained or directed by determinate concepts of the object.”²³ Rather, Brady contends that Kant sees the role of the mind in aesthetic experience as active, “one which involves playing with the perceptual features of both artworks and natural objects.” This mode of attention is not a “still, passive state of mind.”²⁴ Again, referring to disinterested aesthetic pleasure, Kant writes:

This pleasure is also in no way practical, neither like that from the pathological ground of agreeableness nor like that from the intellectual ground of the represented good. But yet it has a causality in itself, namely that of maintaining the state of the representation of the mind and the occupation of the cognitive powers without a further aim. We linger over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself, which is analogous to (yet not identical with) the way in which we linger when a charm in the representation of the object repeatedly attracts attention, where the mind is passive.²⁵

Brady is clear that Kant’s contemplative aesthetics is not passive. More so, she is determined to show that he does not intend that aesthetics require or encourage unqualified detachment or distance between the subject and the natural world. She writes: “‘Distancing’ is mistakenly coupled with the idea of creating distance (physical or

²²Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 133.

²³Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 133.

²⁴Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 133.

²⁵Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer; trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Chp. 12, pg.107. The parentheses are those of the translator. Brady uses this quote in *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 133.

otherwise) between subject and object rather than distancing oneself from desires and needs which might get in the way of appreciating the object itself.”²⁶

Brady does not wish to err on the side of objectivism, which speaks of correct and incorrect, true and false, or on the side of formalism, which makes “knowledge irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation” because the “aesthetic is identified exclusively with the perception of form.”²⁷ Nor does she advocate for relativism and subjectivism whereby aesthetics approaches nature loosely, by way of gross sentimentality or exorbitant fantasy that does, in fact, distance the appreciator from nature.²⁸

Thus, with the help of a renewed disinterestedness that in aesthetic engagement means the subject *is* focused on the *other*, but not for personal gain, Brady moves to present the use of affectivity and imagination in aesthetic experience, appreciation, and judgment in such a way that aesthetic appreciation and judgment are reasonable, credible, and communicable. Her goal is to make it possible for affectivity and imagination to have contributive influence when it comes to determining how we value nature. She does this in two ways. First, she describes what she means by *imagination*, and then she insists that for an aesthetics of nature to be taken seriously there needs to be a *reasonableness* about it. In addition, it needs to be able to be communicated and shared.

Oddly, Brady does not believe that imagination, like science, is a necessity for aesthetic appreciation; however, it can certainly contribute to it:

By bringing a range of experience and ideas to bear on perception, imagination contributes to the meaning and context of aesthetic objects, and to situating ourselves in relation to them. It opens up new relations and connections and [adds] to the context of appreciation. Contrary to

²⁶Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 134.

²⁷Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 98, 130.

²⁸Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 112-113.

Kant's position, I do not believe that imagination is a necessary condition of aesthetic experience.... But when imagination is active, it opens up the aesthetic horizon and deepens the aesthetic response. As an important component of the integrated aesthetic, it has the potential to encourage a more intimate engagement with our natural surroundings.²⁹

Brady does not tackle with any finality the meaning of *imagination*, but she does determine that there are two basic categories for understanding imagination. These are “sensory imagination and creative imagination.”³⁰

Sensory imagination is what fills in the blanks between our concepts and sense perceptions. It brings memories into the present, thus acting as a bridge or connector. It aids us in recollecting who people are, as well as assisting us in determining what an object is. This aspect of imagination does not involve what we think of generally as “creativity or invention.”³¹

Creative imagination entails possibilities, inventiveness, problem solving of all sorts, make-believe and daydreams. Brady says that this is sometimes referred to as the “productive imagination” because its activity is “not mimetic, but poetic,” allowing us to engage experience in new ways and to go beyond the conventional.³² Imagination cuts across all categories of experience, including those of the natural world and of culture. Brady says imagination has the capacity to bring meaning, which “emerges from the interaction of live creature with environment.”³³

²⁹Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 147.

³⁰Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 148.

³¹Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 148.

³²Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 148-149.

³³Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 149. In her work, Brady refers to John Dewey because of his interest in experience and imagination. See John Dewey's text: *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 2005), first published in 1934. Dewey was an American pragmatist who helped connect (or reconnect) aesthetics to multiple kinds of experiences, especially ordinary experiences, so that aesthetics is not limited to the art world alone. Also, in this chapter see footnote #130.

But, Brady, like others, does not endorse superficial or trivial uses of imagination in an aesthetics of nature. There is a difference between imagination and the imaginary, or fantasy.³⁴ For Brady, “imagination is not opposed to truth.”³⁵ Reminiscent of McFague’s use of metaphor, there is a referent in Brady’s use of imagination in terms of an aesthetics of nature and it is squarely the natural world.

Brady strives for relevant imaginings, a kind of balance between what is, was, and what could be, perhaps a search for deeper meaning without losing a connection with what simply is. It involves using imagination to wonder about the other; that is, using perceptions, understandings, memories, associations and beliefs that one has and then making a leap beyond this in order to engage with nature more deeply. It does not involve flights of fantasy about nature that have no connection to reality,³⁶ such as pigs in evening gowns with painted nails dancing the rumba. There may be other occasions for such fancy, but Brady would not consider these excursions relevant or appropriate for an appreciation of nature.

Furthermore, Kant, according to Brady, allows for imagination to freely explore the object and its relationships but he does not allow for a freedom that distorts from the original sense of the object.³⁷ Although his understanding of aesthetic judgment does not have a cognitive aim, Brady writes:

In its free play, imagination makes connections and associations in relation to the object’s qualities for their own sake. However, imagination does not have an entirely free rein; Kant is not putting forward imagination as ‘fancy,’ the power behind fantasy. Although free from the laws of the understanding, imagination

³⁴Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 149.

³⁵Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 148.

³⁶Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 149, 165, 168.

³⁷Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 153-154.

operates within a relationship with the understanding and the very basic concepts of cognition.³⁸

Related to this, she asserts that imagination in nature has not been investigated thoroughly enough and although imagination is not a requirement for appreciation of the natural world, it is very important in an aesthetics of nature. While Brady writes of sensory imagination that connects the sensual world with thoughts and concepts, and creative imagination that involves invention, she further describes imagination in several modes, including: associative; metaphorical; exploratory; projective; ampliative; and revelatory.³⁹

According to Brady, *ampliative imagination* “involves the *inventive* powers of imagination,” although it may not necessarily “make use of images.” It “amplifies what is given in perception.”⁴⁰ *Revelatory imagination* involves following along an experience of amplification, but leads to some disclosure that gives way to significance or new meaning, but “not in a religious sense.” Brady avoids religious/spiritual language. She writes:

Revelatory imagination is part of an aesthetic experience, and in this respect the revelation that occurs is not an extra-aesthetic truth that is disclosed. Rather, an idea, belief or value is crystallized through heightened aesthetic experience, where perceptual and imaginative engagement with nature facilitates the kind of close attention that leads to revelation. A quick glance at a lamb reveals little except an acknowledgement of its sweetness. But the fuller participation of perception and imagination brings about a stronger grasp of the nature of innocence. Contemplating the fresh whiteness of a lamb and its small, fragile stature evokes images of purity and naivety. It is through dwelling

³⁸Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 151. See also Christian Helmut Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics: Core Concepts and Problems* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 9.

³⁹Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 153-158.

⁴⁰Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 156.

aesthetically and imaginatively on natural phenomena that we may achieve new ways of seeing.⁴¹

Again, Brady is in dialogue with Kant when she asserts that “imaginative devises—symbolic images, metaphor—open out new meanings beyond the limitations of literal language.”⁴² In addition, Brady stresses that we are not just to imagine, we are to “imagine well,” which means it is important that we allow the qualities of the natural world to “evoke and direct our imaginings.” Secondly, we are to operate out of disinterestedness. And thirdly, “imaging well is characterized by comparing imagination to a virtue”; that is, using imagination “skillfully and appropriately according to the context of aesthetic appreciation.” She emphasizes flexibility in the use of these guides as a way to assist us in distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant use of imagination.⁴³ Yet, even with such assistance our perceptions of nature and discernment of aesthetic qualities can diverge.

The task is to understand the reasons for our disagreements, which can include bias, prejudice, inappropriate attention, differences related to our experience, as well as “multiple legitimate experiences of aesthetic objects.”⁴⁴ But even with this kind of effort, our differences of appreciation may persist. In addition, our discernment of aesthetic

⁴¹Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 157.

⁴²Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 157.

⁴³Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 158.

⁴⁴Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 207. Brady refers the reader to Frank Sibley’s, “Objectivity and Aesthetics,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 42 (1968); reprinted in *Approaches to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*. Also: John Benson’s, “Sibley after Sibley,” in *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays After Sibley*, eds. Emily Brady and Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 226.

qualities can change over time because of greater attention, familiarity, or reflection, but they may also remain as initially experienced and legitimately so.⁴⁵

However, the goal is not uniformity of discernment, but some degree of consensus around how to move forward in terms of how we live with and in nature, which often requires that we make difficult decisions concerning the restoration, preservation, development, or even total forfeiture of natural environments or species. Worse is when no responsible discernment takes place due to ignorance, deception, greed, or perhaps even fear, because we do not know what to do, or because we are overwhelmed by the complexity of the situation.

Brady insists that for an aesthetics of nature to be helpful it must be credible and to be credible it must be communicable. This entails an awareness of the “particularity of the aesthetic object, the appreciator and the aesthetic situation.”⁴⁶ Being able to move from the “particular to the communicable” is essential. She writes:

This is not particularity as private experience. The practical approach to objectivity is an active, perceptually engaged method that encourages aesthetic communication between individuals. Through argument and conversation about our aesthetic judgements [*sic*] we learn from others and may develop a critical aesthetic vocabulary that is designed and developed with the special demands of the environment in mind.⁴⁷

Her aim is to share intelligibly about why nature is meaningful and valuable. But for Brady this does not always require special information such as science. Yet it may, and when it does she suggests that its involvement be among other kinds of contributions in hope of communicating a fuller interpretation of what the natural environment is about. This approach, she contends, demonstrates greater respect for nature.

⁴⁵Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 208.

⁴⁶Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 206, 212-213.

⁴⁷Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 206.

Brady claims that with disinterestedness aesthetic appreciation is “akin to friendship that evolves into a close relationship with some degree of intimacy while at the same time maintaining distance to allow others to be themselves.”⁴⁸ She says further:

[I]t should not be surprising that a disinterested, integrated aesthetic potentially supports an environmental ethics characterized by respect and care.... Respect is a moral concept that depends upon allowing the other to be who they are, without using them as a means to one’s ends. Aesthetic and moral values are distinct, but each type of valuing may complement the other for developing an appropriate attitude towards the natural environment.⁴⁹

Brady is not a moralist, as was Plato who believed that if something is morally defective it is also aesthetically defective. Rather, she is an *autonomist*, one who believes that “artistic value is non-instrumental; its value lies in a distinct, autonomous domain untouched by moral consideration.”⁵⁰ However, an extreme autonomist holds that defects in morality *never* cause a decrease in the aesthetic value. Plato and Leo Tolstoy would be considered extreme moralists. Instead, Brady describes herself as a moderate autonomist, and thinks Kant would be too.⁵¹

A typical aesthetic/moral study is one Brady recalls used by Cheryl Foster.⁵² It raises the question, is a sunset whose vibrant colors are actually caused by pollution aesthetically beautiful? Should moral constraints apply to aesthetic judgment? Foster responds in the affirmative. How can we affirm something that is harmful as beautiful?

⁴⁸Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 142.

⁴⁹Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 142.

⁵⁰Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 248.

⁵¹Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 248

⁵²Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 249-250. See Cheryl Foster, “Aesthetic Disillusionment: Environment, Ethics, Art,” in *Environmental Values*, 1, (1992): 212.

Brady questions this judgment because the visual experience of those qualities remains “brilliant.”⁵³ Brady argues:

Aesthetic value is primarily concerned with perceptual qualities and the emotional and imaginative responses connected to them, as well as the meanings that come through appreciating these qualities. In this respect aesthetic evaluation is generally restricted to perceptual, emotional, and imaginative experiential states rather than significantly cognitive ones. Moral value is primarily concerned with making choices about how one ought to act, and how one ought to treat humans and the rest of nature. This is not to say that moral considerations are not part of our aesthetic experiences, or that aesthetic considerations are not part of moral deliberation. But aesthetic and moral value are nevertheless distinct and require judgement [*sic*] on their own terms.⁵⁴

Brady would not dismiss moral judgment from aesthetics, admitting that human agents by their actions can show a lack of aesthetic sensitivity.⁵⁵ Therefore, she advocates for “moderate autonomism,” which “addresses the feeling that moral considerations ought to have some bearing on aesthetic appreciation but preserves the view that aesthetic judgements [*sic*] are distinct from moral ones.”⁵⁶

Furthermore, Brady does not assume that all of nature is beautiful; that is, she does not automatically embrace a *positive aesthetics*.⁵⁷ A positive aesthetics would mean that wilderness is always aesthetically superior to cultivated nature because the latter is affected by human agents whose works are critiqued. For Brady, *positive aesthetics*

⁵³Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 248.

⁵⁴Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 251.

⁵⁵Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 252.

⁵⁶Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 251.

⁵⁷Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 198-199.

raises difficulties about how to compare natural environments that are wild and, more so, if they are not pristine.⁵⁸

Brady stresses a method built on first hand perceptions, not just visual ones, and what she calls “practical objectivity” as a way to judge natural environments. And while she does not approach nature as art, she does recognize similar skills and sensitivities that are relevant to both art and to nature.⁵⁹ In fact, she supports a method of discernment based on particular experience, argument, and conversation:

The practical approach to objectivity is an active, perceptually engaged method that encourages aesthetic communication between individuals. Through argument and conversation about our aesthetic judgements [*sic*], we learn from others and may develop a critical aesthetic vocabulary that is designed and developed with the special demands of the environment in mind.⁶⁰

Brady asserts that an aesthetics of nature ought to be rounded and full and not limited to measurable data. She advocates for multiple ways of experiencing, appreciating, and describing nature with primacy given to direct experience; argument and conversation in discernment toward judgment; and a renewed understanding of disinterestedness. These are features that McFague would support, but McFague would *require* a scientific perspective in her appreciation of nature. This is made clear by the

⁵⁸Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 198-199. Brady is in dialogue with Janna Thompson, “Aesthetics and the Value of Nature,” *Environmental Ethics*, 17, 1995, 291-305.

⁵⁹Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 198-199. Brady follows Janna Thompson.

⁶⁰Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 206. Brady expands on material related to first hand perception, argument and conversation provided by Frank Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts,” *Philosophical Review*, 68, (1959). Revised version reprinted in: Frank Sibley, *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, eds. John Benson, Betty Redfern and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 20-23.

attention that she gives to science in her works, such as *Super, Natural Christians* and *Life Abundant*.⁶¹

Brady also deepens the conversation by fleshing out the use of imagination in concert with our relationship with nature. She assists our understanding when she explains how time with nature can be practiced. She helps to open up the experience, showing how it can be a subtle, but real dialectic that never becomes synthesized into one, but where two parties remain distinct, yet somehow engaged. Also, with Brady, aesthetic value and moral value do not fold into one, but serve complementarily.

B. Allen Carlson

Allen Carlson is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Alberta and has written extensively on aesthetics and the natural environment. According to Carlson, we cannot appreciate nature unless we know what it is and this requires the natural sciences.

Carlson situates the present discussion in light of history, realizing the importance of past figures, such as Kant. But, contrary to Brady, he understands Kant's meaning of disinterestedness to require greater distance between the subject and the natural world:

[T]he roots of environmental aesthetics lie in the ideas about aesthetic appreciation developed in the eighteenth century and given classic expression by Kant. Central to this approach was the concept of disinterestedness, in virtue of which aesthetic experience was construed as distanced from everyday interests, such as the practical and the personal. The coupling of the concept of disinterestedness with the eighteenth-century fascination with the natural world resulted in a rich tradition of landscape appreciation. With the aid of disinterestedness not only could domesticated, rural countrysides be seen as beautiful, but even the wildest of natural environments could be appreciated as sublime. Moreover, between the beautiful and the sublime, disinterestedness made space for

⁶¹McFague gives attention to ecology in relationship to the scientific account of the universe's evolution, beginning with the Big Bang, see *Life Abundant, Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 100-101.

the emergence of an even more powerful mode of landscape appreciation, the picturesque.⁶²

The picturesque, while associated with landscape paintings, expanded to include “aesthetic experience of any kind of environment simply by focusing attention on picture-like qualities involving sensory surface and formal composition.”⁶³ But, the focus on landscape as an *object* of aesthetic attention did not endure intact, except perhaps for those “landscapes especially suited for disinterested, formalistic appreciation: grand scenes that could be easily composed to enhance picture-like sensory and formal qualities.”⁶⁴

Change was occurring on multiple levels. This included the rising significance of art in general, Hegel’s prominence of art over nature and the “expanded importance of the artifactual as opposed to the natural in western civilization,” such that the “natural world was increasingly marginalized.”⁶⁵

As the twentieth century emerged, concepts associated with limited ideas of disinterestedness and with formalism led to an aesthetic sidelining of anything that was not art.⁶⁶ However, in response to disinterestedness and formalism, mid-twentieth century analytic aesthetics rejected these constraints, at least in art, giving way to liberating forms such as Expressionism and the institutional organism of the art world itself. This was a “new paradigm of emotionally and cognitively rich engagement with a

⁶²Allen Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2005), 541-542. Regarding Kant, see in this text, chapter one, pages 67-71.

⁶³Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” 542.

⁶⁴Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” 542.

⁶⁵Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” 542.

⁶⁶Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” 542.

cultural artifact, intentionally created by a designing intellect, informed by both art-historical traditions and art-critical practices, and deeply embedded in a complex, many-faceted art world.”⁶⁷

However, what some observers began to recognize was that the “aesthetic appreciation of the world beyond the art world was left behind, seemingly involving at best only distanced contemplation of sensory and formal qualities.”⁶⁸ Nature “lacked key features of the new paradigm,” leaving nature unable to be appreciated within it.⁶⁹ Thus, aesthetic appreciation in general could be limited to art. But Aldo Leopold, a renowned naturalist, and others, objected to using the art world’s paradigm to appreciate nature.⁷⁰ Appropriate resources and tools for appreciating nature were needed.

In 1966 Ronald Hepburn wrote an article that “almost single-handedly launched the renewal” of interest in an aesthetics of nature.⁷¹ According to Carlson, Hepburn argued that those very “deficiencies” in nature are actually “sources for a different kind of a potentially very rich aesthetic experience.” Carlson writes:

[Hepburn] emphasized the fact that since the natural world is not constrained by things such as designing intellects, art-historical traditions and art-critical practices, it facilitates an open, engaging and creative mode of appreciation. However, Hepburn also demonstrated that there is in the appreciation of nature, as in the appreciation of art, a movement from trivial to serious aesthetic experience. He argued that if we are to realize this serious kind of aesthetic experience of nature, then the open, engaging, creative appreciation must be guided by an understanding of the real nature of the natural world.⁷²

⁶⁷Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” 543.

⁶⁸Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” 543.

⁶⁹Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” 543.

⁷⁰Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” 544.

⁷¹Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” 544. Carlson refers to: Ronald Hepburn, “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty” republished in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, eds. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), 43-62.

⁷²Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” 544-545.

But in the 1960's the cultural pendulum was swinging in the direction of recognizing the importance of "immediate sensuous and emotional responses." Hepburn, followed by Carlson and others, feared such a trend would lead to a trivializing of nature that, in the end, could not contribute to the larger conversation concerning the degradation of nature. Eventually, Carlson resorts to a cognitive, more scientific approach, as a way to deliver an aesthetic appreciation that is "guided by knowledge and understanding."⁷³ His approach is referred to as the *natural environmental model*.⁷⁴ And following in the spirit of Leopold, "who linked the beauty of nature to its ecological integrity and stability,"⁷⁵ Carlson contends that a cognitive model based in the natural sciences can be "embraced by philosophers concerned to bring our aesthetic appreciation of nature in line with our ethical duties to maintain nature's ecological well-being."⁷⁶

Carlson believes that our experience of nature must be something akin to what the pragmatist John Dewey advocated. It must be a "consummatory experience: one in which knowledge and intelligence transform raw experience by making it determinate,

⁷³Carlson, "Environmental Aesthetics," 547-548.

⁷⁴Allen Carlson, "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, eds. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), 72.

⁷⁵Carlson, "Environmental Aesthetics," 548. Carlson credits Aldo Leopold, "Conservation Esthetic," in *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), and to J.B. Callicott, "The Land Aesthetic," in J. B. Callicott (ed.), *Companion to a Sand County Almanac: Interpretive and Critical Essays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

⁷⁶Carlson, "Environmental Aesthetics," 548. Carlson credits H. Rolston, "Does Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature Need to be Science Based?," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 35: (1995), 374-86, also M. Eaton, "The Beauty that Requires Health," in J.I. Nassauer (ed.), *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology* (Washington: Island Press, 1997), also Y. Saito, "Appreciating Nature on its Own Terms," *Environmental Ethics*, 20: (1998), 135-149, and P. Matthews, "Scientific Knowledge and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60: (2002), 37- 48.

harmonious, and meaningful.”⁷⁷ However, in contrast to Dewey, Carlson’s model centralizes scientific knowledge, although sometimes this can mean relying upon common sense knowledge.⁷⁸ He writes:

This knowledge gives us the appropriate foci of aesthetic significance and the appropriate boundaries of the setting so that our experience becomes one of aesthetic appreciation. If to aesthetically appreciate art we must have knowledge of artistic traditions and styles within those traditions, then to aesthetically appreciate nature we must have knowledge of the different environments of nature and of the systems and elements within those environments.⁷⁹

Different environments require different approaches to apprehension and appreciation, that is, “our knowledge of the environment in question indicates how to appreciate.”⁸⁰

Furthering his argument, Carlson delineates between design appreciation and order appreciation.

Art is designed, it entails an object that embodies that design, and it involves an agent, a designer/artist that makes it appropriate for evaluative judgment.⁸¹ Art, traditionally, has focused on an object that is generally limited and contained in some way. Even art genres that feature process acts or objects that are discovered or found and are determined to have aesthetic value involve artists’ decisions concerning the process, selection, and materials to some degree. However, these latter genres, according to

⁷⁷Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” 71. John Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, attempts to counter analytic aesthetics by reconnecting aesthetics to ordinary and practical experience. Also, in this chapter see footnotes #32 and 129.

⁷⁸Regarding *disinterestedness*, see Allen Carlson’s text, *Aesthetics and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 23-27.

⁷⁹Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” 72.

⁸⁰Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” 72.

⁸¹Allen Carlson, “Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature,” in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 216.

Carlson, are best approached via order appreciation versus design appreciation. Carlson writes:

An individual *quo* appreciator selects objects of appreciation from the things around him and focuses on the order imposed on these objects by various forces, random and otherwise, which produce them. Moreover, the objects are selected in part by reference to a general nonaesthetic and nonartistic story which helps make them appreciable by making this order visible and intelligible. Awareness and understanding of the key entities—the order, the forces which produce it, and the account which illuminates it—and of the interplay among them dictate relevant acts of aspection and guide the appreciative response.⁸²

Similarly, nature does not have an intentional design and it does not have a designer.⁸³ According to Carlson, nature should not be approached using a design model; instead, nature should be approached using order appreciation. Carlson claims nature is not art, stressing appreciation should follow the “lead of the object.”⁸⁴

Carlson asserts that there are three “entities significant to order appreciation in nature: 1) “the relevant order is that typically called the natural order”; 2) relevant forces are the forces of nature, such as related to geology, biology, and meteorology, that shape the planet and all that is in it; 3) and the “story given to it by natural science” through its many areas of study such as “astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, genetics, meteorology, geology as well as the particular explanatory theories within these sciences.” Carlson states: “Awareness and understanding of evolutionary theory, for example, is relevant to appreciating the natural order as revealed in flora and fauna; without such knowledge the biosphere may strike us as chaotic.”⁸⁵ Ultimately, Carlson

⁸²Carlson, “Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature,” 218.

⁸³Carlson, “Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature,” 206-208, 212, 219. Also, Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 78.

⁸⁴Carlson, “Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature,” 219.

⁸⁵Carlson, “Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature,” 220.

wants to understand the natural forces that shape the natural environment. Thus, he is uneasy approaching nature via a design model, especially a design model that is based in theism.

Any aesthetics of nature that relies on theistic accounts, where God is understood as the artist, are criticized as overly simplistic of both nature and God.⁸⁶ However, important to Carlson's appreciation of nature is his belief that all of nature is basically beautiful in some way; that is, "untouched, pristine nature has only or primarily positive aesthetic qualities."⁸⁷ Yet he does not justify a positive aesthetics of nature based upon religious or theological grounds, which he works to avoid.⁸⁸

There are multiple difficulties to be found within Western theistic perspectives that play down an appreciation of nature. These include dualism, which holds that spirit is of greater value than matter, descending in importance according to the degree of mental giftedness. Further, if humans and the natural world are in need of redemption, how can nature be good or beautiful? And, if there is such a thing as ontic evil in the world, then by extension, if there is ugliness in the world, how can you have a positive aesthetics of nature?⁸⁹ Carlson contends that it took secular aesthetics and secular science to free aesthetics of nature from restrictive theism.⁹⁰ He advocates for an aesthetics of nature based in science:

⁸⁶Carlson, "Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature," 215-216. See also, Noël Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 244-266.

⁸⁷Carlson, "Environmental Aesthetics," 549. See also, Allen Carlson, "Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 220-221.

⁸⁸Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 3, 81-84.

⁸⁹Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 3, 81-84, 116-117.

⁹⁰Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 3.

Scientific information and redescription make us see beauty where we could not see it before, pattern and harmony instead of meaningless jumble. If these suggestions are correct, they begin to explain the relationship between scientific knowledge and the aesthetic appreciation of nature. They begin to account for the way in which the two have developed hand in hand and why, in light of scientific knowledge, the natural world seems aesthetically good.⁹¹

Among those who believed that untouched nature is beautiful, sullied only by humans, are George Marsh, John Ruskin, and John Muir.⁹² More contemporary believers “not given to absolute or universal claims” say that nature is more than likely good and beautiful.⁹³ Carlson looks at art critically because human actions and makings are open to critique, but he looks at nature positively.⁹⁴ Negative criticism of nature really pertains to that part of the natural world that has been affected by humans.

Carlson contends that even if you do not think that nature qualifies as an aesthetic entity, you cannot deny that we respond to nature aesthetically.⁹⁵ However, because nature is not human art it should not receive evaluative judgment based upon art’s criteria; rather, it should “involve explaining it and judging it in terms of what it is, placing it within its natural category, its species, genus, etc., locating it in its natural history and in its environmental milieu.”⁹⁶ Carlson claims: “Appropriate aesthetic appreciation is that appreciation of an object that reveals what aesthetic qualities and value it has.”⁹⁷ But Carlson also makes a connection between “correctness in science and

⁹¹Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 87.

⁹²Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 4-5, 72-73.

⁹³Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 74.

⁹⁴Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 75. Carlson credits: Aarne Kinnunen, “Luonnonestetiikka,” in *Ymparistoestetiikka*, eds. Aarne Kinnunen and Yrjo Sepanmaa (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 1981), 49.

⁹⁵Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 77.

⁹⁶Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 78.

⁹⁷Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 88.

aesthetic goodness” saying that this connection is both complex and contingent. First, he believes that a “more correct categorization in science is one that over time makes the natural world seem more intelligible, more comprehensible to those whose science it is.” It does so by recognizing certain qualities “order, regularity, harmony, balance, tension, resolution, and so forth.” He writes:

If our science did not discover, uncover, and/or create such qualities in the natural world and explain the world in terms of them, it would not accomplish its task of making it seem more intelligible to us; rather, it would leave the world incomprehensible, as any of the various world views that we regard as superstition seem to us to leave it. Moreover, these qualities that make the world seem comprehensible to us are also those that we find aesthetically good. Thus, when we experience them in the natural world or experience the natural world in terms of them, we find it aesthetically good. This is not surprising, for qualities such as order, regularity, harmony, balance, tension, and resolution are the kinds of qualities that we find aesthetically good in art.⁹⁸

However, Carlson asserts a strong qualification regarding his views on aesthetics and nature. He does not claim a positive aesthetics of nature beyond one limited to a specific paradigm based in science/natural history, and he does not think this is a drawback. Instead, he believes it is less “misleading” than broader, grand proposals.⁹⁹ Furthermore, he contends that advances made in the “natural sciences can be viewed as heralding a corresponding advance in positive aesthetics” and “ecological” aesthetics in general.¹⁰⁰

Along this line, Carlson, similar to Brady, makes distinctions between extreme and helpful forms of disinterestedness. He claims that the difficulty with the

⁹⁸Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 93-94.

⁹⁹Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 93-95.

¹⁰⁰Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 95.

disinterestedness tradition is that “too much attention is paid to the concept of the aesthetic and too little to that of appreciation.”¹⁰¹ Furthering his case, he writes:

Following in the wake of analytic aesthetics’ assault on essentialism, formalism, and disinterestedness, more recent philosophical movements such as feminist aesthetics and postmodernism so completely rejected these doctrines that they leave no basis for anything but the most radical answers to the question of aesthetic relevance. Thus we now have what I call, rather casually and indifferently, a postmodern approach to aesthetic relevance, which seemingly holds that anything and everything that any appreciator happens to bring to an object is relevant to its aesthetic appreciation, for in some sense or other the object is created anew in light of that which the appreciator contributes to it.¹⁰²

Carlson claims to emphasize an appreciation of nature that practices a kind of sympathy for nature, making the point that you cannot have a narrow understanding of disinterestedness and, at the same time, call for sympathy for nature.¹⁰³

Carlson’s model is reliant upon cognitive knowledge, which includes understanding the workings of nature and nature’s interrelatedness. His model is reliant on science, which itself depends on a kind of objectivity, but Carlson does not embrace traditional disinterestedness. Traditional views of disinterestedness discourage any focus on utility or personal benefit and interest by the subject in the object. Instead, Carlson moves away from traditional disinterestedness, as well as formalism, and places more attention on nature itself with the use of an object-focused approach rooted in science/natural history.¹⁰⁴ However, he does believe that the *natural environmental*

¹⁰¹Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 105.

¹⁰²Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 131.

¹⁰³Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 104-105.

¹⁰⁴Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 131-133.

model can be enriched by supplementing it with other approaches, including non-cognitive approaches.¹⁰⁵

But Carlson is criticized, as evidenced by Brady, for asserting that science/natural science should be the central feature of any serious appreciation of nature. Thus, criticism surrounds what is generally thought to be left out of Carlson's model. Among these, for example, is profound emotional experiences of nature where one does not have significant knowledge of the environment, but is still moved appropriately and deeply.¹⁰⁶

Additional criticism includes how Carlson approaches those aspects of nature that are specifically shaped by humans, such as agricultural land, by asking, what is its function? As a result, you would appreciate and judge the environment based upon an aesthetic category set according to its particular utility.¹⁰⁷ But Carlson may not always go far enough in asking if the use or function of the land itself is proper and sensitive to a general ecological aesthetic.

However, Carlson is astute at recognizing that we tend to appreciate those environments that we are familiar with from our own experience. For example, we might find newly shaped environments, such as broad, wide fields with single crops and large, rectangular metal barns boring and unattractive, because we are not accustomed to them. Instead, we may be drawn to what we knew in years past; that is, fields where several

¹⁰⁵Carlson, "Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature," 226-227, footnote #53.

¹⁰⁶Nöel Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 259-265.

¹⁰⁷Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 135. See especially his chapter, "Appreciating Agricultural Landscapes," 175-193.

different crops are grown, that have trees, briars, and ditches stitched across its acreage, and where there can be found shapelier constructions.¹⁰⁸

In addition, Carlson suggests that aesthetic value can be “thin,” which is primarily related to the quality or value of its surface sense and its formal properties, or “thick,” which may include thin characteristics but also deeper “qualities and values that the object expresses or conveys to the viewer.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, the object may express or convey both thin and thick value. For example, a plastic houseplant may be given “thin” positive value, while its live version is given “thick” value. Items that are found along the way, or what some might call *junk*, could be arranged such that they express value related to both thin and thick value.¹¹⁰ However, caution is required, the “life values an object expresses are often the ones reflecting the values, emotions, and attitudes of the individuals who are responsible for its nature and function.”¹¹¹

According to Carlson, science is required for appropriate aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment. What makes Carlson so challenging and controversial is how adamant he is about this belief. In the final analysis, he wants the natural environment to be appreciated for what *it is*, even if humans are the ones who name it and describe it.

C. Arnold Berleant

Like Brady and Carlson, Arnold Berleant’s aesthetic approach stresses understanding the world as an ecosystem(s), as an *environment*.¹¹² However, Berleant

¹⁰⁸Carlson, “Appreciating Agricultural Landscapes,” 175-193.

¹⁰⁹Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 142.

¹¹⁰Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 143-148.

¹¹¹Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 143.

¹¹²Arnold Berleant is Professor Emeritus at Long Island University in Brookville, New York, and past president of the International Association for Aesthetics, 1995-1998.

works intensely to understand the active engagement of *art/culture* and *nature*, asserting that there are multiple factors that influence the ongoing dynamic of an environment. These mutual pressures and influences interact and interweave.¹¹³ He perceives that within the environment there is a complex social matrix, what he describes as a social aesthetics that is integral to a broader environmental aesthetics.¹¹⁴

Berleant's focus on context moves away from the use of the terms *nature* and *landscape*, although he realizes that the term *environment* is no less vulnerable to the argument of human construction than are *nature* and *landscape*.¹¹⁵ Also influenced by Dewey's emphasis on aesthetic experience,¹¹⁶ Berleant's approach is referred to as an *aesthetics of engagement*.

Berleant believes that aesthetics as a discipline has become more than its eighteenth century understanding that is rooted in sense knowledge or perfection of the senses. Aesthetics includes other factors, such as cognitive ones like "meaning, memory, metaphor, symbol, and history,"¹¹⁷ yet, he strongly emphasizes sense experience:

[I]t is important to reaffirm the central place that sense perception holds in aesthetic experience, for the senses are essential and indeed central to the study of art and natural beauty. Of course, the early emphasis of aesthetics on beauty has changed with the evolution of the arts, and today the field embraces a wide range of qualities and features of perceptual experiences that may be termed, in some fashion, 'aesthetic'. These include the ugly, the grotesque, the comic or playful, as well as the conventionally pleasing. In fact the concept of beauty may itself be

¹¹³Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005), 8-9, 13-14.

¹¹⁴Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 149, 153-155.

¹¹⁵Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, eds., "Introduction," in *The Aesthetics of Human Environments* (Orchard Park, New York: Broadview, 2007), 13-14.

¹¹⁶Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 19-20. In this chapter see footnote #32 and 129.

¹¹⁷Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 3, 77-78, 110.

extended to cover such as these, in so far as they enable us to have experience that is both positive and aesthetic.¹¹⁸

He is adamant that sense experience not be limited to sight and hearing.¹¹⁹

Somatic involvement by a participant is “part of perceptual awareness,”¹²⁰ and, “aesthetic engagement may include a cognitive component in the form of mythical, religious, or other belief systems that informs, interprets, or guides perception.”¹²¹

Factors such as these combine, forming what Berleant calls an “aesthetic field, which may be seen as the matrix in which those experiences we call aesthetic take place.”¹²²

As Berleant pursues a broader understanding of aesthetics in today’s world, he recognizes that there are multiple forces impacting the environment, and that it is the *overall* environment that is today oppressed. He writes: “Not only has the countryside been desecrated: industry has invaded the city with industrial sites, acrid smoke, chemical odours [*sic*], and their accompaniment of slums, sweatshops, and despair.”¹²³ As Berleant pursues an environmental aesthetics, he names three major approaches to aesthetics: the *contemplative model*, the *active model*, and the *participatory model*, which he later refers to as the *engagement model*.

The *contemplative model*, according to Berleant, has a history rooted in the “intellectualist, visual model” whose influence remained even when art was set free from “[r]eligious, metaphysical, historical, and epistemological criteria,” which provided the

¹¹⁸Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 3.

¹¹⁹Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 3-4.

¹²⁰Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 110.

¹²¹Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 110.

¹²²Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 110.

¹²³Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 49.

“governing principles by which art was to be made, understood, and judged.”¹²⁴

Continuing, he writes:

When the study of art finally achieved its emancipation and identity late in the Enlightenment, this intellectualist, visual model was not abandoned. It became instead the governing metaphor for the explanation of aesthetic experience, which emerged as a contemplative attitude for appreciating an art object for its own sake. Only in the last century was this account challenged by explanations such as those based on empathy or pragmatic functionalism.¹²⁵

The *contemplative model* received special distinction during the Enlightenment, but versions of it go back to classical times.¹²⁶ It recognizes the art object as distinct and separate from its surroundings, and it “requires a special attitude, an attitude of disinterestedness, that regards the object in the light of its own intrinsic qualities with no concern for ulterior purposes.”¹²⁷ In its more contemporary version, it speaks of the object’s properties and of distinctive ways of looking at the object, sometimes using psychological theories that serve to remove or elevate the object from the experiential environment.¹²⁸ Distance and space are key components.

As in the history of landscape painting, there is a “conception of space modeled on the space of the physicist, more specifically the eighteenth-century physicist.” Within this view, Berleant says that space becomes an “abstraction, a medium that is universal, objective, and impersonal, independent of the objects that are situated in and move through it. Such an objective space leads to the objectification of things in it, which are

¹²⁴Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 4.

¹²⁵Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 4.

¹²⁶Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 4. Berleant notes the influence of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Kant.

¹²⁷Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 4.

¹²⁸Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 4.

then regarded from the stance of an impersonal observer.”¹²⁹ Berleant’s particular analysis of the *contemplative model* draws attention to the space that surrounds the solitary object. Later, this point will help contextualize his concern for the entire spatial influence.

Next, Berleant examines the *active model*, which, contrary to the *contemplative model*, usually stresses that the perceiver is absorbed in the object via sympathetic or empathetic identification with the object, rather than distance or separation. However, during the twentieth century “some proposals appeared that went well beyond the psychological locus of the common nineteenth-century alternatives.” Struggling to “overcome the passivity and separation of disinterested contemplation” they claimed that the aesthetic perceiver was a “multi-sensory, active agent.”¹³⁰

The result of the *active model* is not mathematical facts or scientific truths, but presences or energized space.¹³¹ This presence is diversely described, such that a “discernment of places with their value and meanings occurs in relation to the central position of the body,” and includes inner and outer presence, as well as relationship with the broader social world.¹³² Berleant, searching for patterns, writes:

What is common to the various forms of the active model is the recognition that the objective world of classical science is not the experiential world of the human perceiver. Thus there is a sharp

¹²⁹Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 5.

¹³⁰Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 6. Berleant would include in the *active model* John Dewey’s pragmatist approach, which highlights *experience* and understands that the body or “organism activates the environment and perception.” He would also include the philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1908-1961), who turns his attention to *perception* and phenomenology, arguing for “synaesthesia as a unified collaboration of all the senses.” These and others associated with the *active model* have as their reference point, the perceiving/experiencing subject. Space is considered in relationship to the perceiving subject (6-8). In this chapter see footnote #33.

¹³¹Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 7.

¹³²Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 8.

difference between space as it is presumably held to be objectively and the perception of that space.¹³³

But, the *participatory model* (a.k.a. *engagement model*) holds that the two previous models fall short. They do so because *environment* is “not wholly dependent on the perceiving subject.”¹³⁴ Instead, the environment “also imposes itself in significant ways on the human person, engaging one in a relationship of mutual influence.” Thus, the environment should not be objectified, and “it cannot be taken as a mere reflection of the perceiver, either.”¹³⁵

Berleant emphasizes the influence that the environment itself, natural and constructed, has on the human body and the human perceiver’s “definition of its lived space.”¹³⁶ He believes that the “environment is understood as a field of forces continuous with the organism, a field in which there is a reciprocal action of organism on environment and environment on organism, and in which there is no sharp demarcation between them.”¹³⁷ Berleant claims this view is not new, because “artists and architects have long utilized it.” What he says is different is an articulation of how environmental activity happens, along with an explanation that assimilates this understanding within the frame of aesthetic theory, such that it holds for both art and physical environment.¹³⁸

Berleant’s model is sensitive to secondary features that do not inhere in the object, nor do they originate in consciousness; rather, they are “invitational qualities” or “characteristics to which perceptual awareness is receptive and to which it responds.

¹³³Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 6.

¹³⁴Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 8.

¹³⁵Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 8.

¹³⁶Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 9.

¹³⁷Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 9.

¹³⁸Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 9, 11.

They emerge only in the intimate reciprocity that is central to aesthetic engagement.”¹³⁹

This means that environment is not an “alien” something-or-other that surrounds human beings. Instead, Berleant asserts:

The environment is rather the medium in which we live, of which our being partakes and comes to identity. Within this environmental medium occur the activating forces of mind, eye, and hand, together with the perceptual features that engage these forces and elicit their reactions. Every vestige of dualism must be cast off here. There is no inside and outside, human being and external world, even, in the final reckoning, self and other. The conscious body moving within and as part of a spatio-temporal environmental medium becomes the domain of human experience, the human world, the ground of human reality within which discriminations and distinctions are made. We live, then, in a dynamic nexus of interpenetrating forces to which we contribute and respond.¹⁴⁰

In the midst of his dynamic understanding, Berleant is convinced that if aesthetics loses its connection to the experiential it becomes “empty spider webs of logic.”¹⁴¹

Even though Kant’s work in aesthetics did focus primarily on the natural world, it, paradoxically, helped set in motion Modernity’s marginalization of the natural world. Aesthetics, in fact, became centered on objects, developing along the scientific vision of its day, dealing with “discrete objects to which the human subject stands in various external relationships.”¹⁴² This provided “art with an identity of its own and an independent cultural status.”¹⁴³ More so, while traditional aesthetics distanced nature

¹³⁹Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 13.

¹⁴⁰Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 13.

¹⁴¹Arnold Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2004), 2. See also: Berleant’s, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005), 77-78.

¹⁴²Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics*, 7.

¹⁴³Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics*, 2.

from humanity, it also “separated the arts from their integral place in the matrix of human cultural life.”¹⁴⁴

But, Berleant claims that with the environmental crisis there has been a “rediscovery of the values that reside in and depend on our environment,” and with this rediscovery has come recognition of the need for an enlarged, inclusive aesthetics that does not lose focus on particularity.¹⁴⁵ Berleant writes:

[A]n enlarged aesthetic awareness allows us to extend aesthetic appreciation to the natural world and beyond the appreciation of nature to all environmental situations, including urban and industrial ones. Moreover, environmental aesthetic values lead us past the search for beauty to the recognition of negative aesthetic values and the importance of the aesthetic criticism of particular environments. While nature may always be beautiful, as some have held, the nature that humans have re-made may not.¹⁴⁶

Contrary to a narrow interpretations of disinterestedness, Berleant encourages an *aesthetics of engagement*. Engagement, he believes, “connotes a range of appreciative involvement” whose degrees will vary according to the situation, appreciator, and the context.¹⁴⁷ Berleant is immensely aware that it is the human person who is aesthetically involved in the environment, whereby *environment* is the natural world, the human constructed world, the social and the virtual world, and where neither the natural world nor the human stand apart from the other. Rather, they are “best understood as realms that in experience are actually co-extensive.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics*, 2.

¹⁴⁵Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics*, 3.

¹⁴⁶Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics*, 3.

¹⁴⁷Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics*, 9.

¹⁴⁸Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, vii.

Berleant is significant for this study because he describes today's environment in more amorphous, fluid terms. He deals starkly with questions about the *real* world and the *virtual* world. Is the *virtual* real?—Berleant claims that it is, whether it be computer generated or of the human mind.¹⁴⁹ He sees similarities between cyberspace and its computer generated worlds with that of fiction, letter writing, history, and human imagination. For example, humans *write* stories, creating *other worlds* per se, but today we *write* using many different formats, all part and parcel of a contemporary landscape. Cyberspace is part of the larger environment and it has its own aesthetic domain as well.¹⁵⁰ Berleant writes:

The electronic world is neither more real nor less real than the world of dreams or the world of daily activities. In fact, we might regard the realm of cyberspace, cybertime, and cybermotion as the dream world of the inhabitants of the high tech computer world.... The human presence, then, is as integral to a cyberaesthetic as it is to the aesthetic of every other environment. Nor can we ever stand entirely outside it. Moreover, the cyberenvironment offers resistance to our desires and imposes its demands on us, just as other environments do.¹⁵¹

In fact, speaking to the difference of environment and place, with place being more particular and circumscribed, he writes:

There is something to be gained in explanatory force with a definition of place that is not earthbound. It may be that some of our most vivid and compelling experiences of place occur in space that is imaginary or that inhabits dreams. This may be taken as a comment on the spaces in which many of us live in industrialized environments, spaces at the least not memorable and that often provide what is perhaps our most common experience of location, placelessness.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 82.

¹⁵⁰Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 72-73.

¹⁵¹Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 72-73.

¹⁵²Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 82.

Although Berleant is very open to human innovation and construction, he is sensitive to how humans construct. He gives a scathing critique of “happy make-believe,” family-friendly Disney World, describing it as a “subtly penetrating” environment of “glittering surfaces,” behind which “hide disturbing meanings.”¹⁵³ It is an environment that lauds technology as that which solves problems and makes for a perfect world that is benignly fueled by consumerism. It is, according to Berleant, a “megamonument to the commodification of culture.”¹⁵⁴

False and hallow, theme park ideology sells and replicates, taking extravagant and simple forms around the globe, a kind of “corporate colonialism,” even creating “history as it influences our beliefs about the past,” as well as beliefs about the present.¹⁵⁵ Disney World represents “itself as the full flowering of the Modern ethos, with its confidence in a future guided by scientific imagination toward a technological utopia.”¹⁵⁶ The difficulty resides in distortions and the “blurring of distinctions,” such as the “deliberate confusion” of different modes of reality like “economic reality” with fiction and fantasy,¹⁵⁷ and, one should add, the natural world with fiction and fantasy as well.

Berleant encourages analysis of motives and interests, arguing that because of postmodernism we cannot resort to facade level certitudes that blur differences and distort facts. He asserts the provisional character of life, but does not “abandon us to intellectual fragmentation and cognitive chaos.” Instead, he calls for a “conceptual

¹⁵³Arnold Berleant, “Deconstructing Disney World,” in *The Aesthetics of Human Environments*, eds., Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson (Orchard Park, New York: Broadview, 2007), 143-144.

¹⁵⁴Berleant, “Deconstructing Disney World,” 147.

¹⁵⁵Berleant, “Deconstructing Disney World,” 145.

¹⁵⁶Berleant, “Deconstructing Disney World,” 145.

¹⁵⁷Berleant, “Deconstructing Disney World,” 146.

landscape vastly different from the modernist ideal of an unequivocal order revealed by ‘the light of reason.’” He encourages visioning the world as one, but with multiple meanings and a plurality of relationships. Furthermore, he says that we must admit value with the assistance of an “enlarged cognitive realm.”¹⁵⁸

Berleant, whose *aesthetics of engagement* encompasses both art and nature,¹⁵⁹ believes that no human activity is value neutral.¹⁶⁰ In fact, although Berleant’s aesthetic analysis of the theme park may have started with description, it concludes with “moral judgment.” He writes:

This does not create an unwelcome complication in the knowledge process; it recognizes that another facet on the complex jewel of human understanding has been glowing all along. We find ourselves returning, in this humanized landscape of understanding, to the insight of our classical forebears that truth and value are inseparable, but we must couple this with the recognition by contemporary science and philosophy that these are invariably contextual and contingent.¹⁶¹

Berleant primarily studies the broader environment, the interweaving of culture and nature, and within this *environment* he investigates particular events, locations, and places. He is significant for this study because although we may speak as though the world of nature and culture are separate, one could argue that this dichotomy simply does not exist. Instead, this is the world in which we live: pristine nature on earth is gone; all has been touched, to some degree, by culture. However, as we find ourselves at the “close of the postmodern age,” Berleant believes that “multiple interpretations do not all have equal weight, that postmodernism requires deconstruction, and that its

¹⁵⁸Berleant, “Deconstructing Disney World,”148.

¹⁵⁹Arnold Berleant, “The Aesthetics of Art and Nature,” in *The Aesthetic of Natural Environments*, eds., Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Orchard Park, New York: Broadview Press, 2004), 86.

¹⁶⁰Berleant, “Deconstructing Disney World,”148. Clarification: *positivism* has to do with requiring measurable, empirical evidence, whereas a *positive aesthetic* refers to goodness and beauty.

¹⁶¹Berleant, “Deconstructing Disney World,”148.

deconstruction leads to a conclusion somewhat less destructive than indefiniteness and less autocratic than ‘Truth.’”¹⁶² He writes:

[An] aesthetic analysis of Disney’s worlds, by showing how realities are created and subverted, confronts us with the pervasiveness of the normative and the inseparability of the moral and the aesthetic. The challenge of our time is to reform knowledge and value in a way that is pluralistic and open-ended, and yet provides the basis for both decision and action.”¹⁶³

Berleant’s harsh criticism of Disney’s portrayal of reality and fantasy is not without surprising opposition. In an article noting the death of Ollie Johnston, a celebrated Disney animator who worked on such films as *Bambi*, the reporter tells of environmental criticism that would fit with Berleant, but also of those who think such works have generated empathy for the natural world more, even, than Disney’s nature films.¹⁶⁴ Needless to say, to assume that such media projects have no influence in shaping our concepts, appreciations, and engagements with the natural world is to make a foolish assumption.

Berleant’s work in environmental aesthetics attempts to grapple with a multifarious reality that grows in complexity. The situation itself continues to compound, due in large part to environmental degradation, increased population, growth in technology, and tensions in social, political, and religious sectors. In addition, our understandings and appreciations of what it means to be human and what it means to be non-human *life*, all contribute, for good or for ill, to the evolving process of ongoing creation.

¹⁶²Berleant, “Deconstructing Disney World,”148-149.

¹⁶³Berleant, “Deconstructing Disney World,”149.

¹⁶⁴Patricia Cohen, “Animated Bambi Debate Arouses Pastoral Passions,” *nytimes.com*, 23 April 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/23/books/23bambi.html...>> (accessed on 23 April 2008).

Conclusion

After examining works by Emily Brady, Allen Carlson, and Arnold Berleant, we conclude that they do contribute meaningfully to an historical understanding of how an aesthetics of nature/environment has evolved, and that they address many of the current debates. Also, similar to Sallie McFague, one or more of these writers emphasizes a strong need for firsthand experience as a way to know and appreciate nature. We find a valuing of non-human nature for its own dignity, as well as some degree of objectivity or disinterestedness *and* empathic feelings for the natural world. There is the recognition of the importance of aesthetics and science, and a sense of the connection between aesthetics and morality. We find with these writers an understanding that an aesthetics of nature/environment involves multiple issues related to economics and development in light of the contemporary world. There is a sense of environment as nature and culture and a growing appreciation of the significance of space and geography, in addition to history.¹⁶⁵

By their giving attention to these issues, McFague's work is validated or at least connected to contemporary scholarship in the area of aesthetics and the environment. However, in their differences these scholars also stand apart from McFague, some in their opposition concerning particular topics, but also when these scholars suggest ideas and issues not raised by McFague.

Individually, Brady would support McFague's desire to include a deep sensitivity for the natural world by not limiting appreciation to science alone, yet Brady's insistence that science is not required would not be acceptable to McFague. On the other hand,

¹⁶⁵Contemporary geography includes at least three main areas of study: physical; social/cultural; and geographic information science. Within these are included studies pertaining to development and environment.

Carlson supports McFague by emphasizing the need for an educated eye (natural sciences), but McFague might not find Carlson forceful enough in terms of how to develop sensitivity toward nature, and she would likely not agree with his seemingly neutral approach to the process by which cultivated nature functions. Berleant, however, opposes McFague with his assertion that virtual reality *is quite real*. He would be in alignment with her in terms of morality and aesthetics never being radically separated, as would Brady and Carlson.

Also, we find Brady reluctant to assume that nature is good, preferring instead to work at getting to know nature, trusting in what will be discovered. In a similar vein, it is interesting to remember how McFague encourages us to *work* metaphors, such as the *world as the body of God*, letting their tensions reveal something new to us.

Contrary to Berleant, McFague, who is open to science, seems leery of technology. She favors a simpler, more direct method of meeting the natural world, which she hopes, at least, will aid us in developing an appreciation and respect for non-human nature. Also, McFague encourages some degree of de-anthropocentrism, to which Brady and Carlson would lean, but Berleant is more resolved to the human footprint and to the undeniable fact of human culture's pervasiveness, although his vision of an environmental *field* would seem to neutralize arrogant hierarchies.¹⁶⁶

Each of these writers supports some kind of balance or integration of objectivity and subjectivity by the human subject regarding nature or what is often referred to as *disinterestedness*. For her part, Brady wishes to renew Kant's *first moment*, claiming *disinterestedness* helps to insure against self-interestedness by the subject and against

¹⁶⁶Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 9, 11, and 110.

focusing on the object's utility.¹⁶⁷ Brady does not believe that this has to mean a *distancing* of health emotions by the subject in regard to nature. Carlson, however, usually avoids the term *disinterestedness*, because he *is* concerned with how nature functions, but still he seeks a clearing of the subject's selfish interests. He uses science as his method of aesthetic engagement, but wants it to have a sympathetic quality. Varying from Brady and Carlson is Berleant, who prefers to avoid the subject/object dichotomy and focuses, instead, on the mutual influence that occurs between and amongst all of creation as a complex and dynamic environment that includes the natural world and culture.

Concerning the topic of *sublimity*, Brady claims it is a feeling and although nature's magnitude and dynamism can seem to overwhelm us, human reason finds a way to deal with it. However, she does not focus on the dominion of nature by human reason, but on the respect due to nature and the "ability, in our freedom, to transcend our phenomenal selves," because we have "resources beyond how it limits us."¹⁶⁸

Carlson takes a different track, asserting, that the magnitude and awesomeness of nature does not mean that nature is beyond our understanding.¹⁶⁹ Science, in fact, allows us to know and understand the natural world. Therefore, because of science, the feeling of the sublime regarding nature would seem to be eliminated or at least reduced.¹⁷⁰

Yet, perhaps the topic of the sublimity of nature is shifting, because of changes to the contemporary environment. That is, when humans alter and denigrate the natural

¹⁶⁷See in this text, chapter one, pages 68-71, regarding Kant's ideas on disinterestedness and the sublime.

¹⁶⁸Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, 38-39.

¹⁶⁹Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 80-81.

¹⁷⁰Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 85-95.

world leaving *incomprehensible* and *truly threatening* ecological circumstances, for example, global warming and ocean dead-zones, can imagination or science resolve these dilemmas? Is science alone to carry the burden and responsibility to apprehend the situation and its causes, and then the vision to carry us through what is needed for a sustainable and just environment?

None of these writers are relativist, nor are they doomsayers, but they do attempt to be realists. Each writer challenges humanity to recognize difference, appreciate *otherness*, discern value, engage the natural world responsibly, and to create well. All endorse respect and care for the natural environment, but none, other than McFague, engage Christianity as a path to do so.

However, what Brady, Carlson, and Berleant do offer is secular appreciation for the environment without theological assumptions. Their efforts give us a chance to be influenced outside of the Christian paradigm. This, in turn, allows us to see what it is that Christianity might have to offer that is at the very least different, if not more dimensional than what Brady, Carlson, and Berleant propose. At this juncture, it is important to note that although Brady, Carlson, and Berleant avoid giving attention to religious beliefs and theism, one must assume that each has been influenced, at least to some degree, by Western Christian history and culture.

We find an affirmative response to the question regarding whether or not these scholars can contribute to a theology of nature/environment. Christian theology benefits from their contributions in several ways. We find that they further encourage theology beyond the dualism of nature and culture; give growing support for the notion of one aesthetics of the environment that includes nature and culture, while appreciating

distinctions, interconnectedness, and integrity of systems. They challenge theology to actively include multiple frameworks as we try to appreciate, understand, and interpret non-human reality, as well as human reality. They also invite us to engage with nature respectfully, in the context of a very complex environment where all dimensions of the natural world on earth have been affected by humanity in some fashion.

While Brady, Carlson, and Berleant's contributions challenge or further encourage theological aesthetics to stretch in several ways, McFague's view challenges them as well. We have noted that Brady, Carlson, and Berleant are not very comfortable with religious topics. In comparison, McFague is adept with *God* language, but like her three colleagues, she too is uneasy with dualistic visions of creation.

McFague, in fact, does speak of the mystery of the *incarnation of God* in a way that sees Jesus as unique, but not as an anomaly.¹⁷¹ She contemplates ongoing, unfolding revelation as experienced in the wonder and depth of creation. Yet, Jesus' life reveals to us, as well as calls us to *cruciform living*, which welcomes and supports *abundant life* for all, here and now, in the midst of living, dying, mystery, and hope.

McFague joins the above scholars by focusing and engaging an earthly reality, but ventures beyond their comfort zone when she uses religious language to assert that the glory of a transcendent and immanent God is "every creature fully alive."¹⁷² In addition, in an effort to broaden our understanding of *salvation* beyond anthropocentrism and transcendent other-worldliness she again joins with Berleant, Brady, and Carlson when she avoids defining human experience in absolute terms or making human experience the defining criterion by which norms should be discerned and determined.

¹⁷¹McFague, *The Body of God*, 136-137.

¹⁷²McFague, *Life Abundant*, 143.

In comparison to McFague, we find that of the above mentioned scholars either one or more encourages a bolder grasp of the world's dynamic environment as nature and culture and, together, they more broadly emphasize and encourage multiple frameworks for engaging the environment. However, it seems that all four scholars recognize the increasing impact of science in aesthetic dialogue regarding the environment. McFague, for her part, encourages attributing greater subjecthood to nature, gives added weight to all those who suffer, and while still advocating for a strong theology from below, she seeds our imaginations with temporal and spatial stories and images that nourish and challenge us to live in a world marked by profound wonder. She encourages us to envision an ecological economic model that demands a healthy integration of the natural world and culture. Lastly, according to McFague, the "ethical rest on the aesthetic," that is, in the recognition of *otherness*, which she names as a *moment* prior to ethical action.¹⁷³

In chapter four we will suggest a framework for a theological aesthetics of the *environment* that includes nature and culture in light of the contributions of Brady, Carlson, Berleant, and McFague.

¹⁷³McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113.

Chapter Four

A Proposal for a Theological Aesthetics of the Environment

With appreciation for her effort to change and deepen human perceptions and relationships that we have with the mystery we call *God*, with fellow human beings, and with non-human creation, the ecological theology of Sallie McFague was chosen as a major focus of this dissertation. Earlier than many, she realized that theology needed to address how humans are degrading the earth. Over the years her understanding and commitment to the earth's natural environment has only deepened. As an element of her work she employed the use of aesthetics as a way to shift our perceptions and, hopefully, our actions. However, over the years, McFague's understanding of aesthetics has changed as well.

Early in her work she investigates the use of metaphor. In light of her metaphor, *the world as the body of God*, in 1993 she asserts: "If God is physical, then the aesthetic and the ethical unite: praising God in and through the beauty of bodies entails caring for the most basic needs of all bodies on the planet."¹

By 1997, as part of *Super, Natural Christians*, she overtly addresses the topic of aesthetics as a way to experience, know, appreciate, and respect the natural world. She wants to develop the *loving eye* toward nature, which is to be understood with greater subjecthood. Aesthetics and science are partnered for the task. However, in 2008 there can be seen a shift in McFague's understanding of aesthetics such that the "ethical rest on the aesthetic."

¹McFague, *The Body of God*, 132-133.

She claims that finding transcendence in and through creation means giving attention to *others*. Ultimately, “the ethical rests on the aesthetic, the prior moment of realizing that something outside of oneself is real.” Only at that point are we “capable of the kenotic action, the retreat of one’s relentless ego, to allow the glory of God and the need of the neighbor to fill oneself.” The “recognition of otherness” is *the aesthetic moment*, and where the “ethical is the practice of self-denial necessary so that others—God and neighbor—may be praised and served.”²

In essence, McFague plumbed the depths of her metaphor, *the world as the body of God*, and concluded that there is what she calls *the aesthetic*, that “prior moment” when we recognize *the tree in God*. Her insight contributes toward a twenty-first century vision of the environment that encourages us beyond fragmentation, and where respect for particularity and harmony are essential.

In summary, we contextualized our analysis by selectively surveying the history of aesthetics in the Western tradition, followed by an examination of Sallie McFague’s works regarding aesthetics and nature. Next, we explored the works of three contemporary scholars in the field of aesthetics and nature/environment. In terms of this dissertation’s examination and McFague’s recent claim that the *ethical rest on the aesthetic* this study proposes an initial framework for a *Theological Aesthetics of the Environment*. And, as a conclusion to this chapter, we will suggest questions for further study.

²McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113. Also, the term *aesthetics* appears on pages: 74, 88, 112, 127, and 134. For other allusions to the topic, see: *ecological unity*, 75; *vision*, 89; *measure*, 130-131; *picture*, 150, 162; and *ordered*, 151.

A. Context for a Framework

Ancient perceptions of creation envisioned one cosmos, but later we realized that these accounts did not give due regard to particularity and to differences. An historical survey has shown that aesthetics/beauty and goodness were often conflated, meaning for something to be beautiful it had to be morally good. Eventually the moral and the aesthetic were separated, until the aesthetic referred mostly to art. In due course, both the divine and the natural world became less a focus for art/aesthetics.

Through history, as knowledge of the natural world developed and social systems evolved, aesthetics was released from the confines of church oversight, becoming known as the science of the senses or the philosophy of art. Yet, almost in defiance of these new restrictions, over the last century understandings of *aesthetics* and *beauty* have stretched, as have understandings of *art*, *culture*, and the *natural world*, especially in light of ecological awareness and concern. As a result, we find that approaching creation today with two aesthetics, one for nature and one for culture, is much less helpful or attractive.

For example:

- 1) The human enterprise and the natural world are intricately intertwined, even blurring at times, even more so because of the scale of the human enterprise.
- 2) Aesthetics is a harmonizing activity that operates according to an unlimited number of themes arising from the natural world and human interest and invention, but with beauty still, often a central theme across divides.
- 3) *Beauty* is not limited to art or to formalism, but includes the everyday, the natural world, human constructions, religious themes, non-material, material, and virtual realities, as well as the sublime and at times, paradoxically, even those aspects of the world that some consider *ugly*.

In conjunction with these ideas we recall Brady's assertion that we should experience and appreciate the natural world via multiple frameworks. Her work stands to encourage and challenge contemporary theology to be in dialogue with many disciplines

as theology works to discover, as well as re-discover, and interpret the meaning(s) of the natural world and questions how humans are to be in relationship with the natural world. Her work also challenges theology to come to know the goodness of nature, and not simply to assume its goodness, especially at a time when we have less and less firsthand experience of the natural world.

Carlson's work insists that theology understand more about the science of the natural world if we are to appreciate nature for what it is. And Berleant challenges theology to a deeper perception and articulation of ways in which culture and nature mutually influence each other in the context of one web of life.

However, for a theological aesthetics of the environment that would encourage secular and theological positions to be in dialogue, and challenge us toward a more wholesome integration of culture and nature, a rudimentary framework seems necessary. In light of McFague's strong use of metaphor and analogy and her assertion that the *ethical rest on the aesthetic*, this study supports the use of a *modified analogical framework* for a theological aesthetics of the environment.

B. A Modified Analogical Framework

McFague holds steady to the belief that creation allows us some glimmer of the goodness of God, and she works to prod us beyond constricting mindsets about creation and God. In support of her efforts, she is attentive to the strong use of analogy in the Catholic tradition. She balances her use of dialectics, generally identified as a more Protestant approach, with analogy and its three pronged process of *affirmation, negation*, and a kind of *re-affirmation*, which encourages us beyond the limitations of both affirmation and negation. In her use of metaphors she guards against them becoming

literal or petrified. McFague's method allows her to explore relationships and their meanings, in hope of trying to assert new and renewed relationships, ones that are in service of *life abundant*. She experiments, trying to envision God and the world differently, hoping that human actions supportive of a bio-diverse rich environment will follow.

However, in a complex, dynamic world, when we employ analogy as a way to speak of God, the *goodness of creation*, and an ever evolving *ongoing creation*, how do we account for human contributions when goodness is not a given beyond the goodness of being? That is, human contributions to ongoing creation in the context of the earthly environment are not always positive.

Creation, as an evolving cosmos, includes planet earth, whose general habitat we now refer to as the *environment*. However, when analogous method starts with a positive assumption does the contemporary mind too readily become complacent? Do we let slip the work that is required for engaging, knowing, and appreciating the earthly landscape of culture and nature and of the *hybrid* manifestation of culture and nature, now *all* referred to as the *environment*?

At a time when it is no longer helpful to view culture and nature so dichotomously, does the affirmation, *the goodness of creation*, become a deduction of sorts, not emerging from relationship with the environment? Might we ask, how could an aesthetics of the environment support relationship and appreciation of culture and nature, as well as participation in the visioning and labors necessary for their integration as a sustainable future environment? And, in light of a strong and perduring history with analogy, would it be possible for the traditional process of Christian analogy to be used in

a modified fashion? That is, would it be possible to start from a place of common ground concerning culture and nature where room is made for theological and secular investigation and appreciation?

In response to this question, we suggest beginning with an acknowledgement of the *unknown*, instead of with an affirmation, even prior to McFague's aesthetics as *recognition of otherness*. That is, our framework for a theological aesthetics of the environment would begin by acknowledging how little we know about creation, in its parts and as a whole at any deep level. This does not imply that creation is unknowable or that we are overwhelmingly ignorant about the natural world. Second, we move toward further encounter with the environment by using multiple methods of exploration and engagement. Third, we would return to an acknowledgement of the unknown, but now, in light of our engagement with the environment, hopefully, to a deeper understanding, respect, and appreciation of its complexities. Thus, our question becomes: Would such a framework:

- 1) make us pause for just a moment before assuming who the other is or is not;
- 2) encourage rich questioning concerning the integration of culture and nature, as well as more openness to human limitations;
- 3) make it reasonable for us to be more cautious about our choices, constructions, and inventions having acknowledged the fact that we can never understand, appreciate, or plan for all of the consequences of our actions or makings;
- 4) promote dialogue with invested parties because we leave more opportunity for possibilities not yet imagined;
- 5) encourage a kind of humility in the face of ongoing creation and our challenge to participate well in its evolution;
- 6) encourage us to explore our affirmations and analogies of *God*, as well as nature, in light of a less dichotomous perception and understanding of culture and nature?

A modified analogical framework would begin from a position that appreciates a sense of not knowing, that respects our limitations even concerning appreciation. This

initial step holds that we can never plumb the depths of creation cognitively or through our senses. We cannot reach the ends of human creativity or foresee all of the ramifications of our choices, inventions, systems, and actions. Such an approach begins by taking seriously the vastness of creation, the intricacies of nature and of culture, and the limits and gifts of being human.

This model would start with an openness to wonder and to question, rather than with assumption and judgment. Instead of beginning with what nature is, or what culture is, we start with a sense of the complexity and richness of how every aspect of nature and culture mutually influence each other temporally and spatially.

In stage one there is a humble acknowledging of how much we do not know or can ever really experience. We respectfully question and acknowledge how much is still unknown about oceans, bees, trees, and birds, about complex communities of multiple species, even the human person and the formation of society. We respectfully wonder about how much we do not know about things of our own making: different cultures, different histories, the consequences of our politics and economics, human constructions and inventions, and about the simple experiences in our everyday joys and suffering. How much goes by us without our ever noticing, much less understanding, and appreciating? In addition, by beginning with an appreciation for the unknown we leave opportunity for both secular and religious questions and appreciations.

We often attribute the gift of wonder and fresh questioning to children, as well as to creative and reflective adults. Although worded differently and from a point of view of *doubt*, the gift to question has been especially attributed to theologian and ethicist,

Margaret Farley. Francine Cardman in a forward to a book of essays in honor of Farley recalls Farley's phrase of the "grace of self-doubt." Cardman writes:

The gift and habit of this graced self-doubt is a relational attitude that trusts the inherent power and attractiveness of truth at the same time as it acknowledges the incompleteness of our comprehension. It is a way of being that respects the integrity of the other, so that it seeks to persuade rather than impose, to invite rather than demand.... [T]he grace of self-doubt creates more space rather than less for truthful living.³

In stage two of a modified analogy we discover and learn that we are members of a complex milieu composed of many kinds of *others* who participate in their own kinds of worlds as part of the earthly environment. In the second stage of this proposed framework we participate in understanding and appreciating the environment. More so, we participate in the shaping and evolving of the environment, but with a vision that invites, challenges, and compels us to contribute to a biologically and culturally diverse, healthy environment that has a future; that is, theologically, to a kind of *eschatological hope* in action. More so, with hope (not wishing), and with what theologically we call *grace*, we engage culture and nature and live into affirming and participating in the goodness and beauty of creation.

In this modified analogical framework, because stage two is where the bulk of engagement occurs, it is here that we find a kind of *dialogue* between what has often been considered two opposing forces, culture and nature. However, we are beginning to perceive this tension not so much as a *clash*, but as a plea and a demand for a wholesome, ongoing integration, or harmonization of culture and nature. More succinctly, we are beginning to perceive the ongoing tension between culture and nature as an opportunity

³Francine Cardman, "Forward," in *A Just & True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics: Essays in Honor of Margaret A. Farley*, eds. Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xii.

and as a demand for creative, aesthetic activity that must aim in hope and service of an *environment that gives rise to a sustainable future*. Within such aesthetic activity we *recognize* the significance of *otherness*.

A theological aesthetics of the environment is a working harmonization of culture and nature struggling toward a sustainable future, while respecting particularities and communalities. It is not the rise of human value such that it clashes and struggles to conquer the natural world, and not just any integration of culture and nature. It is an ever evolving, ongoing integration and harmonization of culture and nature in ethical, creative tension with the challenging theme of sustainability and the deeper ramifications of what *sustainability* implies in the ongoing shaping of the environment.

However, in this model, moral and aesthetical distinctions are to be respected; that is, as each discipline goes deeper, the pull to converge is to be resisted. This resistance allows for further deepening, instead of collapsing into a too early or too shallow resolution. A too shallow resolution in an aesthetics of the environment would have us believe that corn for ethanol is a solution for an energy crisis, without investigating its ramifications and weighing many perspectives.

Also, while this study acknowledges that cultural and natural realities are increasingly more and more intertwined, this study argues that we need to work to name distinctions within the environment as best we can, especially as these distinctions become more subtle and difficult to name and describe. Forfeiting these distinctions leaves us with a flattening of existence; nature is absorbed by culture, which could look like Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the one extreme, or a corporate controlled urbanized *pseudo-natural* landscape on the other.

Instead of viewing nature and culture as opposing forces, at the core of this *dialogue* a Christian theological aesthetics finds *Mystery*/God with us, inviting us and drawing us into the much lived tensions of ongoing creation. In addition, we are called to be for one another in the very midst of these tensions, even to sacrifice for one another, human and non-human, in hope of a *sustainable* and *abundant* life for all, now and into the future.

Although the unique dignity of the human species is granted, the unique gifts of being human, including creativity, carry increased responsibility. While we are working to recognize greater dignity in non-human creation, the measure of human dignity will not be realized until we appreciate the increased measure of human responsibility. Thus, human freedom must engage ethical as well as aesthetic concerns.

At stage two, as part of this dialogue, diverse voices are encountered and engaged. Along with McFague's desire for increased subjecthood for non-human creation is Brady, who asserts that multiple frameworks are needed for discernment of aesthetic and ethical value. Brady and others struggle with Carlson's belief that scientific knowledge is central to an appreciation of the natural world. Also at stage two, we find the balancing of economic interest and the common good wrestling with the question of how policies and practices that shape the environment should be constructed if there is to be a future worth living.

A theological aesthetics of the environment focuses on how the environment both unfolds and is shaped. However, for Christians, participation in this ongoing process is itself informed through an ongoing encounter with the Christian story. This encounter includes engagement with the story of a dynamic cosmos, and continues through life's

evolving creation, world, and environment, rooted in a dynamic love we refer to theologically as the *Trinity*.

The lived Christian encounter calls us to a life of discernment, asking questions such as: Who or what are we not seeing, not noticing, not including, not appreciating, or not tending; what might be operating that we do not yet understand or may never grasp? How do we live lives of appreciation, gratitude, and respect of and for creation? Simultaneously, how can we be curious and responsibly assertive as creative beings? What are we not understanding or not willing to see concerning power structures and justice? In an environment where sin exists, how do we make decisions of aesthetic and ethical value regarding the integration of culture and nature? How do we avoid *missing the mark*, what is the measure, towards who/what/where is our aim?

Within a theological aesthetics of the environment the experience of beauty cannot be ignored. As a cross cultural and enduring reality, beauty attracts, nourishes, and inspires; it carries and enlivens the human mind and heart, individually and collectively. This model suggests that in order for the environment to give rise to a sustainable future we are compelled into a new awareness and experience of beauty. This experience is delivering a new type of aesthetical measure that operates in tandem with ethical concerns, both secular and religious. Does a particular activity contribute to the harmonization of culture and nature such that it supports a sustainable future, the flourishing of life, for all?

Theologically, working for an environment that has a sustainable future means that we are drawn into a deeper commitment to reality; further into the profound mystery called creation, with hope of a future experienced in immanence, where our responsible

participation is now vital. Anthropologically, humanity is now called to a new threshold, a new kind of vision or dialogue between culture and nature? Ordinarily, new responsibilities change us; they can seem to carry with them an invitation or a beckoning, if not a demand, for transformation and conversion. McFague claims that “reality is good because *God* is with us,” but then she clarifies this statement when she writes: “Reality can be said to be good only through joining God in trying to make it so.”⁴ Thus, she speaks to the goodness of creation in conjunction with the role of human participation in ongoing creation on earth.

For Christians, Jesus Christ is, as theologian David Tracy writes, the *prime analogue*, the harmonizing focus that draws us and gives us meaning.⁵ When we recognize the tension between culture and nature, yet envision it as an opportunity and a demand to participate well in ongoing creation then this tension becomes a special place of meeting where we encounter the creative Spirit of the living God with us. Within this tension and encounter we are called, humbly, to join in the responsibility and privilege of living and creating well. We do not go outside of this tension or use this tension to get to God. *Mystery* is already there in the creative, evolving space of culture and nature.

Because we are seeking a *theological* aesthetics of the environment, the question of ethics must always be at the table. Against the background of the Christian story, and into its story as well, is woven the lived tension of culture and nature, while the beliefs and values inherent in religious stories, and multiple stories, also become embodied in the environment.

⁴McFague, *Life Abundant*, 178-179.

⁵David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), 408.

How we use our creative capacities, care for humans and non-humans, as well as how we shape and tell stories, speaks to the ethos of a *theological aesthetics* of the *environment*. Together we are called to create lovingly and to love creatively in a world earnestly struggling with how to live, and how to move forward into a sustainable future for all. Herein, the sacramental story of Christianity as dynamic love is exercised and broken open. Ethical responsibility requires an assertive contemplation of otherness.

Stage three of a modified analogy represents a growing, compounding wonder concerning how much we do not experience, know, or appreciate, now in light of questions, experience, and dialogue. Take for example the fact that scientists have discovered approximately 1.8 million species, but they estimate that there are about ten times this many yet to be discovered.⁶ In light of this information, how do we participate in shaping the environment so all *others* can flourish?

C. Conclusion

In service of a rich theological aesthetics of the environment, before we name anything, or describe it as beautiful or good, this framework supports starting with a sense of the unknown, of wonder and respect for mystery, and letting experience and appreciation unfold from there. One might argue that a primary analogous symbol shared by God, nature, and culture, is mystery. Further, such an initial approach prepares us for an engagement between culture and nature that may leave us more open to surprise, to recognition of the other, to ethical practice, and to caution concerning the consequences of our actions and omissions. A third step returns us to a humble sense of an even greater

⁶Carl Zimmer, "The Encyclopedia of Life, No Bookshelf Required," *nytimes.com*, 26 February 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/26/science/26ency.html?sq=eol&st=nyt&scp=1&pagew...>> (20 May 2008).

unknown. In the spirit of analogous knowing, there is always more that we do not perceive, recognize, appreciate, or know, than there is that we do.

Although very similar to the traditional model of analogy, by starting with an appreciation for the unknown this framework supports McFague's fear of literalizing and idolizing our limited understandings of God, but, also, of each other, nature, and our own inventions. More so, in stage two, by insisting on multiple frameworks to explore and engage the tensions between culture and nature we are forced to widen and deepen the conversation of aesthetics and ethics, and to broaden membership at the table of dialogue. Yet, returning to a position of respect and wonder in stage three keeps us tethered to the tradition's model, which encourages us beyond our initial questions and wonderments, and then beyond our limited experiences and judgments.

In days gone by, when men and women looked up at mountain tops and saw distant glorious but haunting heights, or they looked at oceans and saw wide foreboding depths, or at the lunar light and surmised that it was a place of strange, shadowy powers, it may have been important for humans to start with affirming the goodness of creation as they analogously tried to understand and know God. But at a time when humans all too easily attempt to box mystery into limited ideologies, readily run ransack over the natural world, and when the value of human makings is too often deemed highly questionable, perhaps it would be important for a theological aesthetics of the environment to start with a kind of humility in terms of our perceptions and appreciations of the contemporary environment. Then, through engagement in the environment and with the creative tension of hope and vision of a future for all of life, we are challenged to discover, learn,

and create well as humble and privileged participants in the goodness and beauty of ongoing creation.

The creation story in Genesis 1 starts with darkness and the abyss: “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters” (Gen. 1:1 NAB). Then, however, God brings forth each day and what it holds, and God sees it and says that it is *good*. And, at the end of the sixth day God sees *everything* and says this is *very good*.⁷

In this proposed framework for a theological aesthetics of the environment we start with the unknown. Then, while recognizing that *each other* has its own aesthetic quality, the environment is like the sixth day when *everything comes together*. But, now the environment is realized in an evolving fashion and includes the creative tension of culture and nature in which humans are pressed to discern responsible participation in ongoing creation, in hope of a sustainable future.

A modified analogical framework speaks to the pervasiveness of mystery and of our need to explore more deeply the intimate, dynamic tension between culture and the natural world as it is the contemporary environment and the environment in which today’s people draw their operative analogies of life and of God. A modified analogical process offers some degree of common ground where culture and nature are encountered as one environment within a sense of respect for the unknown, and where the ethical aim of a future environment is a pervasive challenge to how we imagine, recognize, vision, engage, interpret, appreciate, relate, live, and create.

⁷McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 134. She considers Genesis 1:31 to be an “aesthetic statement.”

While Carlson argued science is central to an aesthetics of nature, this model asserts that respect for the unknown is central to an aesthetics of the environment. By doing so, this aesthetic framework encourages humans to not objectify nature, to not put undue faith in human makings, to create well, to appreciate the wonders of both culture and nature, and to discern the growing *hybrid* of nature and culture. It respects the magnitude, complexity, and the continuing task of working to harmonize the creative tension of culture and nature in aim of a sustainable and just future.

The ancient mythic story in Genesis 1 says that God called the seventh day holy, indicating that each facet of creation, somehow, is to be in relationship with the *holy*, to be in harmony with a holy reality. Challenging for today, the environment as culture and nature is about humans living and creating in a way that supports a vision of the planet as an earthly environment of rich bio-cultural diversity, at the very least.

However, an environment that supports a sustainable future may not be without its shortcomings. In fact, we may be aiming too low. But considering McFague's *abundant life* is leagues away, perhaps the first step is to work toward sustainability and justice. Toward this aim, this study suggests that it is important to continue to develop the aesthetical idea of a *thick* sense of beauty, which challenges us to address increasingly deeper ethical concerns as we struggle to participate well in ongoing creation. It would encourage a deep sense of *sustainability* as one emerging new measure of beauty.

Questions for Further Study

The explorations and limits of this study encourage further research in several areas. The following questions are suggestive of some of those areas and topics.

1. Is there room to rethink *contemplative attitude*, such that it is not about distancing, emotional or physical, as part of a theological aesthetics of the environment?
2. While direct experience with the natural world is encouraged, how do we balance the need *not* to engage nature so that the life of the natural world is respected, thus supporting a kind of *conscientious distancing* born of *reverence*?
3. Are human makings still valued more greatly than nature's capacity to create and contribute to the environment? For example: What is the cost of producing clean air, of pollinating crops? What is the dignity and worth of an ecological system? Is it appropriate to speak of the *rights* of nature and ecological systems, as in the Ecuadorian constitution of 2008?
4. What does it mean theologically to be a creative and responsible participant in ongoing creation when the margin for creating environmental mistakes is now basically zero? How is this both similar and different from secular perspectives and other religious perspectives?
5. Would a theological aesthetics of the environment that starts with respect for the unknown be supportive of non-violence, and if so, how?
6. If human beings are beginning to realize a new level of responsibility regarding the environment, what implications are there for theological anthropology? How are humans changed in the midst of new responsibilities and commitments? How, then, do we construct our homes and workspaces? How much *space* does any one human require?
7. How does language, secular and theological, continue to marginalize or exclude non-human creation? (Example: A perduring view that the earth/nature was given to humanity and is now *our property*.)
8. How is *beauty* to be named, experienced, and valued in a world struggling for sustainability?
9. In terms of Christian eschatology, how do we move more deeply into naming and living the experience of promise and hope, while experiencing the world as not guaranteed? What is the theological aesthetic appreciation and call of solidarity, suffering, ambiguity, and simplicity?
10. If the ethical rest on the aesthetic, as McFague suggests, then how does this change ethical discourse?

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