

## Early Christianity

[Not ERN final]

The early Christian tradition expresses a profound ambivalence regarding the natural world. On the one hand, it affirms continuously the goodness and spiritual significance of the natural world, an affirmation rooted in two central convictions—that the world as created by God is good and that the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ has transfigured all created matter. On the other hand, the early Christian tradition expresses genuine suspicion regarding the dangers of the wrong kind of attachment to the things of this world. At times, this suspicion expressed itself as a fear of, even a revulsion toward material reality, toward embodied existence, toward the cosmos as a whole. However there were also times when this suspicion of the world was understood in broader, more symbolic terms, a way of articulating the need to resist values believed to be antithetical to the Gospel. Much early Christian theological reflection, as well as the liturgical and spiritual life of the community, was affected by this deep-seated sense of ambivalence toward the living world.

Early Christian theological reflection unfolded within a highly charged climate of debate in which one's sense of God was directly and deeply affected by one's sense of the world and vice-versa. Irenaeus of Lyons, for example, who in the second century articulated one of the early Christian world's most emphatic and systematic expressions of the created world's goodness and value, was responding in part to the work of certain gnostic thinkers who held to a deeply pessimistic view of the created world and of the malevolent demi-urge who was understood to be responsible for having created it. According to Irenaeus, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation allowed no such pessimistic view of the world. For Irenaeus, the incarnation or enfleshment of God in Christ meant that the entire material world had been transfigured and was

a kind of sacrament through which the eyes of faith could see the very light of God. In the process of affirming this truth, Irenaeus preserved for Christians not only a sense of the goodness and integrity of the created world, but also the goodness and integrity of God who created and sustains it.

Another kind of conversation, between Christianity and Greek philosophy, also affected how the early Christian community viewed the world and God's relationship with the world. For well-educated, philosophically sophisticated Christians such as Clement and Origen of Alexandria, the integration of Christianity into a Platonic philosophical framework was necessary if the Christian faith was to be seen as coherent and meaningful within the Greek-speaking world of Late Antiquity. But their brilliant synthesis also meant accepting certain aspects of Platonism's hierarchy of values and its de facto dualism (material realities, being corruptible, occupied a lower place in this hierarchy than non-material or spiritual realities, which through their kinship with God, the supreme Spirit, were seen as having eternal value and significance). The result was a profound and creative new articulation of Christian theology and spirituality. But it came at a cost. The suspicion of or aversion towards the physical world that one often senses in these and other writers leaves one uncertain about how successful they were at incorporating a fully incarnational Christianity into their thought-world and practice.

Augustine of Hippo, writing in Latin from North Africa, largely accepted this Platonic dualism of matter and spirit as part of his understanding of Christian theology and employed it to articulate two important ideas that had vast influence upon the subsequent Christian tradition. The first was that the spiritual life has to do primarily if not exclusively with the interior life of the human being, an idea that effectively relegated the non-human phenomenal world to secondary status. The second was his deeply pessimistic attitude regarding human nature and the

physical world (rooted, some have argued, in the influence of Manichean thought and its radically pessimistic attitude toward the physical world), an attitude that made it difficult for him to affirm what for Irenaeus had been axiomatic: that the world and everything in it is good. Augustine was not the first to articulate these ideas. But his brilliance in doing so ensured that they would become part of the very pulse of subsequent Christian thought for centuries to come.

The synthesis of Christian and Greek philosophical thought also contributed significantly to the Christian community's ability to articulate how and in what ways God's presence could be felt and encountered in the world, to the development of a distinctly Christian cosmology. Central to this Christian cosmology was the idea of the logos or Word of God. The prologue of the Fourth Gospel's had already expressed clearly the idea that Christ the logos had played a crucial role in the creation of the cosmos: "When all things began, the Word already was. The Word dwelt with God, and what God was, the Word was. . . Through the Word, all things came into being" (John 1: 1). Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and other early Christian thinkers took this idea and, drawing upon the Stoic's profound sense of the logos as the very animating principle of the cosmos, developed it into a coherent Christian cosmology. Responding to those who claimed that God is remote from the created world, Tertullian cited the Stoics who, he said, remind us "that God [through the logos] permeates the world in the same way as honey in the comb." Elsewhere, Tertullian addresses the question of how the divine logos can be said to permeate the sensible world without losing its divinity: it is like the sun's relations with its own rays, he says, which are a portion and extension of their source. Both analogies draw upon the idea of logos as generative principle immanent in the cosmos. According to Clement of Alexandria, the logos has three distinct but related dimensions. It is utterly transcendent, being identical with the totality of the ideas or powers of God. It is also the principle or pattern of

everything that has been created. And it is the anima mundi, or world soul, the law and harmony of the universe, the power which holds it together and permeates it from the center to its most extreme boundaries.

Such ideas contributed significantly to the capacity of Christians to believe in and experience God's presence in the created world. Nor were such ideas limited to the sphere of philosophical and theological reflection. They reached into nearly every aspect of Christian life and thought, including art and architecture, biblical commentary, mystical experience, ascetic practice, music, and poetry. In the fiat lux of the genesis creation account and in the luminous gold background of ancient Christian and later Byzantine mosaics, logos comes to expression through light. According to Irenaeus, the word that speaks through the cross also gestures forth across the cosmos: "because [Christ] is Himself the Word of God. . .who in His invisible form pervades us universally in the whole world, and encompasses its length and breadth and height and depth. . . the Son of God was also crucified in these, imprinted in the form of a cross on the universe." One finds exquisite artistic expression of this idea in the Mausoleum of Galla Placida in Ravenna. There, the cosmic cross appears on a dark blue shallow dome in the midst of stars arranged in concentric circles, an image whose diminishing size toward the center gives one the impression of gazing into a heavenly vault.

The same logos that sustains the cosmos can, suggested Origen of Alexandria, rise up to meet us in the most intimate depths of religious experience. For Origen, one of the privileged places of such encounter was the reading of scripture. Here the logos comes to us as an ardent lover who kindles within us a passionate love for the world: "If a [person] can so extend his thinking as to ponder and consider the beauty and grace of all things that have been created in the Word," he claims, "the very charm of them will so smite him, the grandeur of their brightness will so

pierce him as with a chosen dart. . . that he will suffer from the dart Himself a saving wound, and will be kindled with the blessed fire of His love.” Here is a sensual, palpable logos, present to us, says Origen, as touch, fragrance, sound, vision, and taste.

Within the Christian monastic tradition, tasting and chewing upon the logos became a way of life. For the monks of the Egyptian desert, the logos arose from the silence as a powerful and numinous presence. To ruminate, digest and absorb such a word into the very marrow of one's being was to be brought into the very presence of the Holy One. Nor was the natural landscape of the desert itself an insignificant part of this process. According to Athanasius's Life of Antony, the Word of God not only beckoned Antony to withdraw into the desert, but called him to a particular place – a wild and beautiful spot in the remote Arabian desert known simply as “the inner mountain.” Such a powerful pull did it exert upon Antony's imagination that, upon seeing it for the first time, he “immediately fell in love with the place.” The entire subsequent Christian tradition of monastic stability, or devotion to place, owes much to this early sense that places are alive with the power of the logos, that they do indeed speak to us with a particular voice, that rumination upon the word and the spirit of the place are integral elements in the larger rhythms of the spiritual life.

Still, as a whole, the early Christian tradition remained ambivalent toward “the world.” Early Christians clearly lived with a profound sense of the world's goodness and beauty and some of their most creative theological work reflects the desire to understand their relationship to a God who is present to them in and through the things of this world. Yet, they also knew themselves to be “strangers” in this world, not entirely of this world. Clearly the development of this sense of life in the world as a kind of exile owes much to Platonic or Manichean or Gnostic influences; but at its root, it is a principle arising out of the Gospels themselves. And in that

context, at least, it had more to do with allegiances than with a sense of the inherent evil of the world. Jesus's disturbing question to his followers, "God or Mammon?" had a lasting effect upon the Christian imagination. To become a disciple of Jesus was to struggle with the question of to what or whom one was to give one's allegiance, to consider carefully what or whom was deserving of that allegiance. It was to raise questions not so much about the inherent goodness of the world (in the sense of God's created order) but about the problematic and deeply compromised character of existence (the order governed by 'principalities and powers'). In that sense, the Christian notion of being "strangers" to this world carried within it the seeds of a healthy and necessary skepticism regarding the ordering of power in the world. But it also carried within it the seeds of a different and more problematic orientation: a suspicion of created matter and a commitment to a radical interiority that made it difficult if not impossible to cherish the created order as spiritually significant. The legacy of this problematic denial of the world within early Christian is still very much with us. Any honest evaluation of the ancient Christian tradition needs to reckon with it seriously. But we must also be prepared to acknowledge the creative cosmological vision found within early Christianity. Whatever suspicions the Christian community may have felt toward the world, it also expressed a profound and enduring love for the living cosmos and a sense that its sustaining energy was rooted in the Word of God.

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**Further Reading:**

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