

Foreword

THIS WORLD IS OUR HOME! John Mustol has provided here one of the most powerful theological and scientific arguments for this conclusion. He laments the fact that we Christians perceive ourselves as separate from the rest of God's creation, particularly from nature. The root cause of this, as of other forms of alienation, is sin, but, he says, "it has been exacerbated by philosophical, religious, cultural, scientific, and technological developments in the modern era."¹

In this foreword, I'd like first to suggest a very significant philosophical development (but one that goes all the way back to early Christian apologists) that has been a major cause of our alienation. Then I'll turn to developments in both science and biblical studies that are calling us "back home."

Diogenes Allen, in his lovely book *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, subtitles a chapter on Plato's philosophy, "This World Is Not Our Home."² Allen points out that when early theologians encountered Plato's creation story in the dialogue *Timaeus*, they thought that either Plato had somehow read Genesis or he had received his knowledge by divine revelation.³ Because Plato's works were so useful in addressing the Christian message to pagan audiences, a great deal of his thought became incorporated into the Christian tradition. However, throughout the twentieth century, biblical scholars and theologians have concluded that much of his philosophy had displaced earlier, more authentic Christian teachings.

I have become famous (or infamous, depending on one's point of view) for promoting a physicalist account of human nature; I, along with many others, believe that body-soul dualism was a later addition

1. See p. 227 of this volume.
2. Allen, *Philosophy*, 39.
3. *Ibid.*, 15.

to Christian thought, not found in the Bible, and that it has had pernicious effects, only one of which is the tendency of so many Christians to see ecological issues as irrelevant to Christian ethics. Physicalism and dualism are each bound up with an entire worldview. Dualism belongs to a worldview that owes a great deal to Plato. He invented the notion of a nonmaterial realm transcending this corruptible material world. The dualist view of the person mirrored this cosmic dualism. The human soul, immortal, belongs to the transcendent realm of the Forms (or Ideas), and life in the body is temporary imprisonment. Value resides in the other world; in fact, some of Plato's followers counted matter as essentially evil. The Western imagination has been deeply influenced by this otherworldliness, and Christians have focused more on a Platonic hope for the soul's escape, to live forever in a transcendent heaven, than what has come to be seen by scholars as a more accurate reflection of the gospel.

By the middle of the twentieth century many biblical scholars and theologians had come to see body-soul dualism as an import from Greek and Roman philosophy. More importantly, they recognized that the good news Jesus preached was not about getting to heaven, but rather about the kingdom of God, already "come near" in his person (Mark 1:15). Evangelical scholar George Eldon Ladd is now famous for his insistence on the centrality of the kingdom of God to New Testament teaching. This is not, of course, to deny the afterlife. It is rather to emphasize the importance of bodily resurrection. If the heart of Jesus' preaching was the kingdom of God, then we might say that the heart of Paul's was the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and its implications for our own future.

Looking forward to the resurrection and transformation of our bodies leads naturally to the expectation that the entire cosmos will be similarly transformed. In Jesus' resurrection we see the first fruits of the transformation for which the whole creation is longing. As the Apostle Paul says: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:19–21).

I turn now from biblical studies to science. Science, too, provides grounds for the recognition that this world is indeed our home. Mustol

rightly emphasizes the significance of the story of our creation out of the dust of the ground. What cosmology now tells us is that this dust is ultimately star dust. The heavy elements form in stars and are distributed when the stars explode—to become planets and plants and people.

In cosmology there is a fascinating discussion of the so-called anthropic issue. This is based on calculations showing that very, *very* small changes in any of the numbers that go into the basic laws of physics would have resulted in a universe in which no life is possible. For instance, if the strength of gravity had been slightly higher, our universe would have collapsed in on itself too quickly for stars, planets, and life to evolve. These anthropic calculations have led some interpreters to describe the universe as fine-tuned for life. Some see it as the work of God; others dismiss it as mere chance. But it has led a number of thoughtful scientists to raise questions about the significance of human life in the universe. “I do not feel like an alien in the universe,” says physicist Freeman Dyson.⁴ Indeed, this world is our home. The vastness of the universe was once taken to speak to human insignificance. But in light of the anthropic calculations, we can say that the universe needed to be as immense as it is, and as old as it is, and as full of stars as it is, in order for us to be here.

If, in light of current biblical research, current developments in cosmology, and (most important for readers of this book) current developments in the science of ecology, we reject the Platonic vision of the “flight of the alone to the Alone” and return to the biblical view of the rule of God “on earth as it is in heaven,” we find a vision of the end of time that shows the ultimate value of history; that shows that history is meaningful, for past achievements are not left behind but transformed, and past sorrows add poignancy to present joy. Finally, it is a vision that shows there to be ultimate value in our care for and harmony with the whole of nature. This will be a world whose character Isaiah evoked in his prophecy:

“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. . . .
 I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. . . .
 The sound of weeping and crying will be heard in it no more. . . .
 They will build houses and dwell in them;
 they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. . . .
 Before they call I will answer;

4. Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, 250.

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while they are still speaking I will hear.

The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion shall eat
straw like the ox

They will neither harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain,”
says the Lord.

Isa 65:17–25, *passim*

Note that this is a social *and* ecological vision—the re-creation of
earthly life. It is a vision of unimpaired, immediate relation to God. It is
a vision of a whole new cosmos—new heavens as well as new earth—in
which humankind *and all of nature* will be reconciled.

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