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You Make All Things New

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'You Make All Things New': Jonathan Edwards and a Christian Environmental Ethic

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Abstract
This article examines the way in which the theology of Jonathan Edwards can contribute to the construction of a Christian approach to ecological ethics that maintains crucial elements of the Christian theological tradition. By way of comparison, the article begins with an examination of the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, whose approach to dealing with the ecological implications of the Christian tradition diverges sharply from the perspective offered by Edwards, and provides a useful contrast to his approach. The article then turns to an extensive discussion of Edwards' view of nature and the theology of creation, particularly the relationship between creation and the triune nature of God. The final sections examine an application of Edwards' theology of creation to the development of a Christian environmental ethic.

Keywords
Jonathan Edwards, public theology of creation, Christian environmental ethic, Trinitarian, eschatological, panentheism

Introduction

> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away'. And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new' (NRSV, Rev. 21:3–5).

'The deeper we look into nature, the more we realize that it is full of life, and the more profoundly we know that all life is a secret and that we are united

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with all life that is in nature'.[1] The works of Albert Schweitzer express a sentiment that is also present in the works of Jonathan Edwards. Both Schweitzer and Edwards are strongly conscious of the beauty of God's creation, and are conscious as well of the importance of that creation as something which human beings are a part of rather than apart from. Both see clearly that, in creation, God has given a gift to humankind which humankind is obligated to give back to God in praise, thanksgiving and compassion. Schweitzer's ethic of 'reverence for life' is his expression of the divine reality that he sees revealed in the natural world.[2]

Edwards, on the other hand, sees reverence for life not as an expression of a general divine reality but rather as an expression of the very specific reality of the triune God of the Christian faith. Through his theological reflection on the natural world and the participation of human beings in it, Edwards understands the natural world not merely as a creature of God, something which is separate from God, but also as something intimately related to God. The natural world is not simply the arena of God's revelation, but rather the actual repetition of the divine glory.

In light of the apparently worsening ecological crisis in which human society finds itself today, Christians are in need of intensive reflection on the relationships between God, humanity and the natural world. It is no longer possible to accept a theology in which humanity is viewed as the sole proprietor of a nature that is seen to exist solely for our benefit. To the extent that human beings are seen to be not merely a part of God's creation, but its pinnacle, to which the rest of creation is subservient, Christians will have nothing to contribute to contemporary discussions on ecology and the future of the planet. What is needed is a perspective on that natural world which recognizes both the unique place of human beings, and our equality with the rest of creation. In this article, I propose the theology of Jonathan Edwards as a resource that may contribute to that perspective.

I shall therefore examine the way in which Edwards' theology can contribute to the construction of a Christian approach to an ecological ethic, specifically one that maintains crucial elements of the Christian tradition. By way of comparison, I will begin with an examination of the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, whose approach to dealing with the ecological implications

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1) Ann Cottrell Free, ed., *Animals, Nature and Albert Schweitzer* (Washington: The Flying Fox Press, 1988), p. 26.

2) See Charles R. Joy, ed., *The Spiritual Life: Selected Writings of Albert Schweitzer* (Hopewell: The Ecco Press, 1947), p. 261.

of the Christian tradition diverges sharply from the perspective offered by Edwards, and provides a useful contrast to his approach. I will then turn to an extensive discussion of Edwards' view of nature and the theology of creation, particularly the relationship between creation and the triune nature of God. In the final sections, I will propose an application of Edwards' thought to the development of a Christian public theology of creation.

The Problem of Theology and Ecology

Rosemary Radford Ruether has been one of the key theologians for at least twenty years to have promoted an ecologically attentive and responsive theology.[3] Her ecofeminist approach to theological discourse has provided important resources to Christian thinking on environmental issues, and her book, *Gaia and God*, is one of the seminal texts in the development of ecological theology.[4] Ruether's work pioneers an approach to theology and ethics that underscores the interconnections between theological premises and moral conclusions. The moral dimensions of theological argument are, for Ruether, dependent upon the conceptions of God, ourselves and the world that we bring to our analysis of ethical issues, including, crucially, environmental issues.

Ruether's theological perspective provides a lens into a powerful alternative approach to understanding the relationship between ecology and ethics, which is substantially different from that offered by Edwards, and which suggests key touchstones regarding the elements that need to be present in any ecologically responsive brand of public theology. Ruether's theology represents an important synthesis of divergent strands in thinking about the relationship between ecology and theology. It is thus an aid to understanding the driving concerns of a significant group of those theologians for whom environmental issues are central to understanding human moral responsibility in the modern world.

Additionally, the ecofeminist movement, of which Ruether's thought is representative, poses a significant challenge to orthodox Christian theological accounts of the relationship between God, creation and the human race. The perspective offered by Ruether represents one of the best-articulated and most

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[3] For an overview of different approaches to the subject of theology and ecology, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses, see Peter Scott, 'Types of Ecotheology', *Ecotheology*, 4 (1998), 8–19.

[4] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

substantive arguments in favour of that approach and against one that is more directly rooted in traditional Christian theological categories.[5]

Ruether identifies several distinct strands in Christian thinking about the environment. First, she makes reference to the 'creation-centred spirituality' championed by such thinkers as Matthew Fox.[6] Fox bases his creation spirituality in the idea of 'original blessing' defined as a 'vivid sense of original goodness'.[7] Thus, the attitude toward creation that human beings ought to take, according to Fox, is one of celebration and compassion; he states: 'Goodness is fundamentally relational. It is the life-giving and celebratory interconnection of all things. Evil is the denial of that interconnection'.[8] Fox does not see the particularities of the Christian faith as essential to an ecological worldview; instead he argues that: 'the cosmic Christ is thus another name for original and final blessing. It is both immanent divinity present in all things and their interconnection, and the fulfilled being of the cosmos, which it seeks to realize'.[9]

The work of Teilhard de Chardin is another touchstone that Ruether considers for an ecological ethic. She observes that, for Teilhard: 'Earth is one living organism, not only spatially, but across time'.[10] Furthermore, for Teilhard, the evolving world is moving progressively forward to an 'Omega Point', through which universal consciousness will be realized; hence, as Ruether states: 'Teilhard sees this evolution toward unitary Mind as, in some sense, the evolution of immanent deity or the cosmic Christ. An increasingly collective consciousness develops, finally the organic substratum of the planet will die away, and Unitary Mind will be born from the finite earth into eternal life'.[11]

The third view considered by Ruether is process theology. In process thought, God presents the universe with its 'initial aim' from which God sets the universe on its optimal path. However, due to the freedom of the individual elements of the universe, those elements may opt not to pursue the

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5) Ibid.

6) Ibid., p. 240. See, for example, Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000 [1983]) and Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).

7) Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 241.

8) Ibid.

9) Ibid.

10) Ibid., p. 243. See, for example, Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959 [1955]) and Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004 [1957]).

11) Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 245.

path of the initial aim that God has set for them. Thus, Ruether explains: 'As entities opt for particular choices, these actualizations are taken into the being of God as God's consequent Nature. The reality of God is thus shaped through interrelation with self-actualizing entities'.[12]

Ruether accepts or rejects different aspects of all three of these approaches in her project, which she terms 'an ecofeminist theocosmology'.[13] She argues for the unity of the whole universe (human beings, animals and nature, as well as the whole of creation and God), basing her proposal in recent discussions of quantum mechanics and the unity of subatomic particles, writing that:

> As we move below the 'absolute minimum' of the tiniest particles into the dancing void of energy patterns that build up the 'appearance' of solid objects on the macroscopic level, we also recognize that this is also the 'absolute maximum', the matrix of all interconnections of the whole universe. This matrix of dancing energy operates with a 'rationality', predictable patterns that result in a fixed number of possibilities. Thus what we have traditionally called 'God', the 'mind', or rational pattern holding all things together, and what we have called 'matter', the 'ground' of physical objects, come together. The disintegration of the many into infinitely small 'bits', and the One, or unifying whole that connects all things together, coincide.[14]

In light of this, Ruether asserts three essential elements of an ecological spirituality: 'The transience of selves, the living interdependency of all things, and the value of the personal in communion'.[15]

The difficulty with all the proposals that Ruether describes, including her own, is that they do not give adequate consideration to the history of Christian doctrine regarding creation and nature. To be sure, Ruether's methodology provides her with a good rationale for not taking such history seriously, since she argues that the classical Christian tradition is steeped in ideologies of domination and exploitation.[16] Thus, Ruether's project is to separate out the truth to which those traditions refer from the patriarchal matrix in which they have become embedded. As such, the weight she is willing to give traditional doctrinal positions on such matters is minimal at best.

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12) Ibid., p. 246.
13) Ibid., pp. 247–53.
14) Ibid., pp. 248–9.
15) Ibid., p. 251.
16) Ibid., p. 3.

Ruether's approach to the connection between theology and ecological ethics illustrates the idea that what we understand to be the relationship between God and the world will tell us a great deal about what responsibility we have for the world, and what role human beings play in the larger cosmic drama that unfolds on planet earth. If, as many Christians have argued and continue to argue, the world is given to human beings for their own use, and if human beings are viewed as having the right and perhaps the obligation to exploit the resources of the world for solely human purposes, then the question of human moral responsibility for the environment becomes a question only of what environmental policies are good for human beings. If, however, as Ruether argues, human beings are an interdependent part of the ecosystem, which itself participates in the divine being of God, then questions of environmental ethics are understood as a matter of the web of relationships between human beings and the rest of the world, as well as a matter of honouring God through our treatment of the natural world.

The central contribution of Ruether's ecofeminist theocosmology, then, is its insistence that we cannot separate questions of ecology from questions of theology. The strands of thought that Ruether weaves together into her understanding of human participation in the ecological totality of the world represent the foundations of a Christian ecological theology.

However, important as Ruether's contributions to ecological theology are for those Christians who seek to root an environmentally responsible ethic within a more traditional understanding of the relationship of God to the world, her approach will not suffice. There are three central reasons for this. First, she does not give any attention to the Trinitarian understanding of God which must be central to any Christian theological ethic. Her references to 'classical western cultural tradition' (by which she means, primarily, traditional Christian orthodoxy) depict the God of this tradition in 'male, monotheistic' terms.[17] The doctrine of the Trinity is not factored into her discussion at all.

Secondly, Ruether's ecofeminist theological perspective does not have an account of salvation history or the role of Jesus Christ within that history. Admittedly she does have a discussion of the 'fall', but the fall in her terms is explicitly limited to the 'fall into patriarchy', with the implication that liberation from patriarchy is the primary (or perhaps even sole) requirement for human and ecological salvation. To the degree that Jesus Christ comes into the discussion, it is only as a symbol of a larger theological–ecological transformation that needs to be brought about in the world. She speaks of

17) Ibid.

Christ's sacramental importance to an ecological theology, but never in more than general and conceptual terms. Furthermore, she speaks approvingly of Fox's interpretation of Jesus Christ as 'not simply confined to the historical Jesus, nor only related to human souls' but as 'the immanent Wisdom of God present in the whole cosmos as its principle of interconnectedness and abundant life'.[18]

In addition, the eschatological motif is missing from Ruether's analysis; she offers no discussion of the idea of the 'renewal of creation' that is central to Christian hope. Although she lauds the attempts of early Christian theology to merge 'cosmogony and eschatology', she laments what she sees as its failure.[19] Instead, she sees hope for creation rooted in a human ethical and political transformation toward a more earth-centred spirituality, 'rooted in love for our real communities of life and for our common mother, Gaia'.[20]

Thirdly, Ruether's approach to ecotheology leads to a form of pantheism, in which God is identified with the natural world and with humanity. She writes: 'Both of these voices, of God and of Gaia, are our own voices'.[21] We have already seen that her interpretation of quantum mechanics leads to an identification of God, mind and the material world. Yet Christian theology has historically rejected pantheism in its various forms for making God and God's operations both identical with and dependent on the world. There is in a pantheistic world-view no possibility of transcendence beyond the phenomenal world and, what is more, no possibility of salvation, since the one on whom we rely for our salvation is identical to the situation from which we must be saved.

In Christian theology, the proposition that the world is God's creation means that the world is not God. As Robert Sokolowski argues:

> This understanding of God, as capable of being without the world, as capable of being all that there is, with no lessening of goodness or greatness, is a Christian understanding. It is not the appreciation that pagans have of the divine, and it is not that which naturally comes to mind when people think about the sacred and the ultimate.[22]

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18) Ibid., p. 241.
19) Ibid., p. 237.
20) Ibid., p. 274.
21) Ibid., p. 254.
22) Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), p. 10.

What it means to be faithful to the God of the Christian faith is to be faithful to God as the creator of the world, not as a member of it. When God is identified with the world, God cannot be understood on Christian terms, for in that case there is nothing distinct about the person and work of Jesus Christ, and there is no new creation to which Christians can look forward. Thus Ruether's pantheism presents another obstacle to accepting her approach as a Christian environmental ethic.

None of these critiques should be read as a dismissal of the important contributions that Ruether has made to a theological understanding of ecology. On the contrary, there are a number of places where Ruether offers crucial corrections to the dominant trend within Christian thinking. In much of what she affirms, she is entirely right; it is in what she either ignores or denies that problems arise. Ruether is correct in her rejection of patriarchal monotheism, but in sharing that critique, I would argue that a Trinitarian theology has the potential to answer her concerns much more fully than the pantheism she embraces.[23]

Furthermore, in so far as Ruether emphasizes the need for ethical reflection on environmental issues, she is absolutely right. However, the absence of an eschatological motif in her work creates a problematic expectation that human beings can, of their own accord, achieve the kind of society that would be ecologically sustainable. On the contrary, I want to argue that it is important to affirm the eschatological motif in so far as it promises the renewal of creation through God's gracious action, rather than through our own work. This is not to say that we are to be passive in the face of a massive ecological crisis, but rather our ethics needs to be an ethics of response to and anticipation of these eschatological promises.[24] It is crucially important to affirm the necessity of the kind of society that Ruether envisions, but we must not imagine that the creation of such a society would mark the end point of the divine purpose for creation.

Finally, in so far as Ruether's pantheism emerges from a desire to insist that God is intimately related to God's creation, she is right. However, at the same time that we affirm God's immanence in creation, we need to be able to affirm the reality of divine transcendence. God is indeed intimately involved in cre-

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23) The issue of male God language would still create thorny problems in this discussion, as Ruether would no doubt be dubious that a God who is known as 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' could be an answer to and a rejection of patriarchy.

24) Here Jürgen Moltmann has been a very important voice; I will explore below his contribution to this discussion, and its compatibility with Edwards' theology.

ation, but creation does not exhaust the divine reality. Over against the pantheism of Ruether, a Christian ecological theology needs to affirm a Trinitarian panentheism, in which God's involvement in creation is seen as being a part of the totality of God's reality. We need to assert that God is not dependent on creation, but nonetheless participates in the creation through the overflowing of divine love.

Ruether's approach to ecotheology marks one, albeit significant, attempt to come to terms with ecology in light of the Christian faith. What is striking in her analysis of the three alternatives to her view is that none of them reflects the Christian tradition in the way that I would like to affirm here. Fox's mysticism and the philosophical theologies of Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead are each grounded in norms and traditions separate from mainstream doctrines of creation. I would argue that this need not be the case for an ecologically responsive theology.

In contrast, Edwards provides a metaphysical justification for a Trinitarian doctrine of creation that is grounded in the reflection of God's beauty in the created world. From the basis of Edwards' Trinitarian understanding of creation, I will outline the theological underpinnings of a Christian ecological ethic. I will then examine some of the implications of such an ethic.

Jonathan Edwards' Trinitarian Doctrine of Creation

One of the most interesting facets of Edwards' thought is his rejection of the traditional western metaphysics of substance several decades before similar work was done by British empiricists such as George Berkeley and David Hume.[25] While the metaphysics of substance asserted that behind everything that we perceive was a substance of which we could have no idea (since ideas come from sense perception), Edwards argues that, since knowledge could emerge solely from sense perceptions, we could not postulate anything so murky as a 'substance' of which we could have no direct knowledge. Rather, he states: 'Substance… is nothing at all distinct from solidity itself; or, if they must needs apply that word to something else that does really and properly subsist by itself and support all properties, they must apply it to the divine

[25] Cf. George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979 [1713]) and David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (La Salle: Open Court, 1988 [1748]).

Being or power itself'.[26] Thus, Edwards saw no need to go behind the reality of solid things to establish the rationale for their existence; rather, the fact of their existence was itself a sufficient explanation.

Over against substantialist metaphysics, Edwards argues for what Sang Hyun Lee calls a 'dispositional ontology'. In other words, Lee writes, Edwards subscribes to a metaphysic in which: 'Habits and laws . . . are the abiding principles of being. They do not merely *belong* to entities but rather are constitutive of their being. Things . . . do not have habits but *are* habits and laws, which are the essence of things'.[27] Thus, rather than assume the existence of a static and independent entity called 'substance', Edwards views reality as dependent at every point on the activity of God. Edwards replaces the prevailing substantialist view with one that is both dynamic and relational.[28]

This dispositional ontology is not predicated only on the material world, but also on God in God's own being. Just as we cannot postulate a material substance upon which reality is dependent, neither can we postulate God as any sort of substance. God, too, is ontologically constituted by habits and dispositions. This is not to say that God is to be identified with the world, but rather that the same metaphysical principles that Edwards rejects when discussing the material world must also be rejected for the spiritual world.

Thus God, too, in Edwards' thought, is made of habits and dispositions. Specifically, God is a disposition to self-communication of the divine essence, and it was via this disposition that God engaged in the creation of the world: 'The great and universal end of God's creating the world was to communicate himself. God is a communicative being'.[29] However, God does not create the world monarchically, as it were, but rather relationally: as God the Father, Son and Spirit.

God as a disposition to self-communication desires to communicate the divine reality perfectly. Thus, Edwards writes:

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26) Jonathan Edwards, 'Of Atoms', in Wallace E. Anderson, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 6: *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980 [1714]), pp. 209–19 at p. 215.

27) Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, expanded edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 48–9 (original italics). I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Sang Hyun Lee, in whose seminar at Princeton Theological Seminary I developed and presented an early version of this article.

28) See ibid., p. 50.

29) Jonathan Edwards, '332: End of the Creation', in Thomas A. Schafer, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13: *The 'Miscellanies', a–500* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994 [1722]), p. 410.

> God perpetually and eternally has a most perfect idea of Himself, as it were an exact image and representation of Himself ever before Him and in actual view, and from hence arises a most pure and perfect act or energy in the Godhead, which is the Divine love, complacence and joy.[30]

This idea that God has of Godself is a fully perfect repetition of the divine reality. In fact, Lee explains that for Edwards the reality in which God exists is precisely this disposition to repeat the divine reality.[31] The Son is the result of the perfect idea that God has of Godself; hence, Lee writes that, according to Edwards: 'The second Person of the Trinity is a repetition, via reflexive knowledge, of the Father's actuality'.[32] Thus, as the Father is God in this primordial state of disposition to self-communication, the Son is the idea, the eternal *Logos* of God; consequently, Edwards states: 'that which is the form, face, and express [exactly resembling] and perfect image of God, in beholding which God has eternal delight, and is also the wisdom, knowledge, logos and truth of God, is God's idea of himself'.[33]

God and the perfect idea of God that is begotten through God's disposition to self-communication exist in a state of perfect love. This relationship of love between Father and Son flows forth in another perfect reflection of divinity: the Holy Spirit.[34] Through this second repetition of the divine disposition to self-communication, Edwards writes:

> The Deity becomes all act; the Divine essence itself flows out and is as it were breathed forth in love and joy. So that the Godhead therein stands forth in yet another manner of subsistence, and there proceeds the third person in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, viz. the Deity in act.[35]

Thus Edwards summarizes his thinking on the Trinity as follows:

> And this I suppose to be that blessed Trinity that we read of in the holy Scriptures. The Father is the Deity subsisting in the prime, unoriginated and most absolute

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30) Jonathan Edwards, 'An Essay on the Trinity', in Paul Helm, ed., *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings* (Cambridge: James Clark, 1971), pp. 95–131 at p. 99.

31) Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, p. 188.

32) Ibid., p. 190.

33) Sang Hyun Lee, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21: *Writings on the Trinity, Grace and Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002 [1740]), p. 120.

34) Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, p. 192.

35) Lee, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21: *Writings on the Trinity, Grace and Faith*, p. 121.

> manner, or the Deity in its direct existence. The Son is the Deity generated by God's understanding, or having an idea of himself, and subsisting in that idea. The Holy Ghost is the Deity subsisting in act or the divine essence flowing out and breathed forth, in God's infinite love to and delight in himself. And I believe the whole divine essence does truly and distinctly subsist both in the divine idea and divine love, and that therefore each of them are properly distinct persons.[36]

Of particular interest for my purposes is the fact that Edwards envisions the Holy Spirit, being God's complete actuality, as having a particularly important part in creation; specifically, to bring about a world that is both beautiful and orderly, as a communication of the beauty and order of the divine being.[37] Furthermore, Edwards maintains, the mutual love of the three persons of the Trinity flows out of the Godhead *ad extra* in the act of creation:

> The world was made for the Son of God especially. For God made the world for himself from love to himself; but God loves himself only in a reflex act… The love of God as it flows forth *ad extra* is wholly determined and directed by divine wisdom… So that the creation of the world is to gratify divine love as that is exercised by divine wisdom.[38]

Thus the creation of the world is a Trinitarian action undertaken by the Father, Son and Spirit as an outflowing of the divine love and a repetition of the glory of God in time and space.[39] Creation, Edwards writes, is the result of 'the overflowing of God's internal glory, or an inclination in God to cause his internal glory to flow out *ad extra*'.[40]

However, in order for creation to be such a repetition of the divine glory, there must be creatures capable of perceiving this beauty in the world. That is the role of humanity in the creation: to praise and magnify the glory of God in creation. The mere fact that the divine being flows *ad extra* into creation is not in itself sufficient to glorify God. For Edwards, intelligent

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36) Ibid., p. 131.

37) See Jonathan Edwards, '293: Spirit. Creation', in Schafer, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13: *The 'Miscellanies', a–500*, p. 385.

38) Lee, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21: *Writings on the Trinity, Grace and Faith*, p. 142.

39) Edwards, '332: End of the Creation', in Schafer, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13: *The 'Miscellanies', a–500*.

40) Jonathan Edwards, '448: End of the Creation', in Schafer, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13: *The 'Miscellanies', a–500*, pp. 495–6 at p. 496.

creatures are required in order to appreciate what God has done in creation.[41] In this way, God does not simply create the world, but actually participates in it, and is in fact 'enlarged' via creation.[42] Creation is thus actually an emanation of God's being, rather than something wholly external to God—a 'multiplication' of it.[43]

However, this raises a concern I touched on earlier with regard to Ruether, that this may then make God dependent on God's creation. Edwards argues that it does not. It is true that God is intimately involved in and participates in creation, but God is not dependent on creation for God's own perfection: 'God stands in no need of creatures and is not profited by them. Neither can his happiness be said to be added to by the creature, but yet God has a real and proper delight in the excellency and happiness of his creatures'.[44] While not allowing God to be conflated with creation, Edwards can write:

> Thus it appears reasonable to suppose that it was what God had respect to as an ultimate end of his creating the world, to communicate of his own infinite fullness of good; or rather it was his last end, that there might be a glorious and abundant emanation of his infinite fullness of good *ad extra*, or without himself, and the disposition to communicate himself or diffuse his own *fullness*, which we must conceive of as being originally in God as a perfection of his nature, was what moved him to create the world.[45]

Thus, as Lee argues: 'What one might call an 'external fullness' of God's internal fullness is what is aimed at through God's act of creation . . . However, this act of God's self-enlargement through the creation of the world is *not* God's self-realization as God but rather his *external* repetition of his *internal* actuality'.[46] What is more, this external repetition is not complete at the moment of its inception, but is rather in the process of becoming more and

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41) See ibid.

42) For a discussion of 'enlargement' in Edwards, see Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 201–10.

43) Jonathan Edwards, 'Dissertation 1: Concerning the End for Which God Created the World', in Paul Ramsey, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989 [1749]), pp. 403–536 at p. 433.

44) Jonathan Edwards, '679: Goodness of God. Love of God. Happiness of Heaven', in Ava Chamberlain, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 18: *The 'Miscellanies', 501–832* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000 [1731]), pp. 238–9 at p. 238.

45) Edwards, 'Dissertation 1: Concerning the End for Which God Created the World', in Ramsey, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings*, pp. 433–4 (original italics).

46) Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, p. 203 (original italics).

more the image of God through time. Thus there is a teleological and, what is more, eschatological aspect to creation.[47]

Humanity is created to be the agent of God's eternal self-repetition in time and space. As created, the world, through the agency of the humanity that perceived God's glory in the divine creation, was in motion toward becoming that temporal self-repetition. However, in Edwards' view the fall prevented that from taking place.[48] Christ's redemptive activity made it possible for human beings to once again perceive the beauty of God in the world and thus participate in the divine glory in this way. Edwards conceives of a point at which God will consummate the work of redemption through Christ, but that does not imply the 'end of the world' in the sense commonly imagined. Rather, the world will at that point become again that which it was originally intended to be; the realm in which God's glory is made temporally manifest, as Edwards describes:

> The greatest fruits of all are after that. The glory and blessedness that will be the sum of all the fruits will remain to all eternity after that. The Work of Redemption is not an eternal work, that is, it is not a work always a-doing and never accomplished. But the fruits of this work are eternal fruits.[49]

Through the accomplishment of Christ's redemptive work, humanity is once more enabled to perceive unrestrictedly the beauty of God and creation, and thus participate in the repetition of God's disposition to self-communication within time and space. However, it should not be understood that this process is one that will come to an end. Rather, for Edwards, the enjoyment of God that the redeemed have is one that is in a constant state of growth toward completion, but is never fully complete.[50]

Thus eschatologically there is an infinite exploration of the divine fullness, which takes place within the created world. Through the redemptive work of Christ, the world is renewed and set back on the path for which it was created by God. Edwards writes: 'In doing this God's design was perfectly to restore all the ruins of the fall, so far as concerns the elect part of the world, by his

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47) Ibid., p. 211.

48) See John F. Wilson, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 9: *A History of the Work of Redemption* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989 [1739]), p. 125.

49) Ibid., p. 119.

50) See Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, p. 219.

Son. And therefore we read of the restitution of all things'.[51] Thus, through the eschatological renewal of creation, the triune God of Jesus Christ will restore the world to that state in which it can truly and eternally become a temporal repetition of the love and beauty of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Edwards' Theology of Creation and the Possibility of an Environmental Ethic

At the outset, I argued that Ruether's ecological theology suffered from three difficulties that made it problematic for a Christian theology of nature. First, it was not Trinitarian; secondly, it was not based in salvation history; thirdly, it was pantheistic. At the same time, however, I affirmed that a Christian theology of nature would have to endorse several of the elements in Ruether's project. Thus, it would have to reject a patriarchal monotheism in which the world was subjected to an authoritarian God; it would have to be fruitful for ethical reflection on environmental issues; it would have to affirm the participation of God in the created world, rather than standing aloof from it.

Edwards answers my criticisms of Ruether in that he does have a Trinitarian, non-pantheistic theology of creation with an eschatological referent that does not reduce the possibilities of creation to mere human potentialities, but actually looks beyond itself toward a renewal of the created order. Yet we must then ask whether Edwards accounts for those elements of Ruether's programme which it is important to maintain. I would argue, with some qualification, that he does.

First, Edwards' Trinitarianism does not fall into the trap of an authoritarian monarchicalism.[52] On the contrary, it is a deeply relational and participatory understanding of the Trinity, in which each person is related to the other two, not in a relationship of subordination, but of mutual love and support. The Father is the first person of the Trinity only in so far as the Father is the primordial basis of the Godhead. Yet, all three persons together are active in the creation. The purpose of God is to eternally communicate the divine reality, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. However, this God is not a singular, modalistic God, but rather a God whose nature is to be in relationship. Furthermore, the

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51) Wilson, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 9: *A History of the Work of Redemption*, p. 124.

52) Since, however, from the perspective of feminist theology, the use of exclusively male language for the persons of the Trinity is unacceptable, I am open to the examination of alternatives that maintain a relational character.

purpose of creation is precisely to be in relationship with this God. As God wills to communicate divinity to creation and have creation participate in divinity, so are they in relationship with one another.

This aspect may also aid in satisfying another element of Ruether's approach—that God be seen as a God who participates in creation. We have seen that God does in fact participate, not pantheistically, as a part of nature, but panentheistically, as the God who wills to be intimately engaged with creation. These are crucial distinctions: God participates in creation; God is not identified with creation. As Edwards points out on many occasions, God did not need creation, but God willed that the divine glory emanate *ad extra*, and God delights in the beauty of creation. Yet if creation had never been, God would not be the less for it.[53]

The question then is of the fruitfulness of Edwards' thought for a Christian public theology of creation. I will argue for the possibility that we can reappropriate some of Edwards' ideas for a new age and recover his sense of the deep divine participation in the created world, in order to help us think ethically about the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves.

Edwards and the Possibility of a Public Theology of Creation

Lee is among those who believe that Edwards' theology of creation does have implications for an environmental ethic. He writes that: 'Edwards' theology has a strong ecological motif with a high valuation of the physical world, as can be seen, for example, in his conceptions of the sensible knowledge of the regenerate and of the Christian's hope for the new heaven and new earth'.[54] Gerald McDermott also recognizes how deeply the ethical implications of Edwards' metaphysics run, writing:

> Because being is habit, it is active and relational, and drives toward union. Regenerate human being is joined with the divine disposition, and therefore by a sort of necessity reaches out to other intelligent beings to know and love them. Hence the Christian is 'impelled' to work today to build the Kingdom of God; he or she

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53) Hence creation is 'superfluous' in the sense that God does not need it for the sake of God's being, but because of the overflowing character of God's love it becomes an element of God's disposition to self-communication.

54) Sang Hyun Lee, 'Jonathan Edwards on Nature', in Sang Hyun Lee, Wayne Proudfoot and Albert Blackwell, eds., *Faithful Imagining: Essays in Honor of Richard R. Niebuhr* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 39–59 at p. 40.

> will not wait passively for a millennial future… Edwards would not brook a Christian flight from history, or any retreat from a responsible and wholehearted commitment to action within history. For the Christian is driven by the propensive, relational, and enlarging nature of the divine being that has now infused his or her own disposition.[55]

Thus the fact of God's redemptive work within us compels us to a responsibility for the world and for other people, and demands from us not an escape from the pressures of public life, but an active engagement with it. Edwards' theology of nature offers several motifs that are useful for such an engagement around issues of ecology.[56]

The Aesthetic Motif: Our Responsibility and the Beauty of Creation

Lee states that: 'Every created entity is to be a repetition or image of God's beauty, and one cannot repeat God's beauty without knowing and loving it'.[57] Therefore, he continues: 'The knowledge and love of God… is the first requirement for all ontological and epistemic fulfillment'.[58] Thus the beauty of creation is directly representative of the grace and glory of God. As such, it is something for which we must have the utmost care, for our appreciation of the beauty of creation and our ability to love and know God are closely intertwined.

If this is the case, then we cannot imagine that beauty is something that belongs to us, to do with as we please. Specifically, we cannot imagine that the beauty of the natural world is something that is of lesser value than our immediate human needs. Rather, the beauty of creation is something that needs to be preserved and appreciated, and even added to. It is a catalyst for our reception of God's grace, and thus must be maintained.

Furthermore, this implies that beauty is not something that is subject to our autonomous control. Thus a policy of, for example, creating a nature reserve on which to keep a small sample of those flora and fauna which we are in the process of destroying through anthropocentric activities is not reflective of the

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55) Gerald R. McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 100.

56) For an extensive discussion of the ethical implications of Edwards' theology of the Trinity, see William J. Danaher, *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

57) Lee, 'Jonathan Edwards on Nature', in Lee, Proudfoot and Blackwell, eds, *Faithful Imagining*, p. 56.

58) Ibid.

beauty of God. Rather, it places us in control of the life with which we are dealing, and regards it instrumentally as an object for manipulation, rather than relationally as something through which we might participate in the divine becoming of the world.

This is not to say that no interference with the natural world is ever permitted by human beings; we too, after all, are part of creation. However, anything we do to our natural surroundings has to be done precisely in the realization that we are participants in the world; therefore, we cannot treat the world as something separate from ourselves. Furthermore, whatever we do, either by way of development or preservation, destruction or protection, needs to be done in the knowledge that everything with which we are involved is also involved with God, and thus must be treated with respect. It is through our perception of the beauty of these things that we are able to perceive the beauty of God.

If we choose to build in a previously undeveloped area, then whatever we do must be done with an eye to the preservation, if not the expansion, of the beauty that is already inherent in the setting. Simply to clear a forest, for example, without attending to the aesthetic consequences of the action, would be to act without regard to the way in which God is revealed in the natural world. An ethics of creation which takes account of Edwards' theology of creation would delineate an aesthetic of creation through which we may make relative judgments as to how we ought to develop and beautify the world around us.

The Reverence for Life: Humanity and the Integrity of Creation

Another implication of Edwards' theology of creation (one to which I alluded at the beginning of this article) is that it entails a 'reverence for life'. This phrase, which was coined by Albert Schweitzer to describe his own ethic, is applicable on different grounds from Edwards' theology of creation. As God participates in creation, and as we participate in God through creation, so we are called upon to view the sustenance and preservation of life as being of paramount value. Just as we cannot act toward the natural world with no notice either of its inherent beauty or of the way in which divinity is communicated to us through that beauty, so we cannot act toward the natural world as though the life which it contains is only for our good, and not a good in itself. On the contrary, life itself is of value since it participates in the creation of God. Through God's disposition to self-communication, all life has value, in that it has the potential to contribute to the divine self-communication.

Thus a Christian environmental theology will be one that affirms life as a good that is not to be lightly discarded. With Schweitzer, we can affirm that: 'All life is sacred, including that which from a human point of view seems lower in scale'.[59]

Such an ethic has serious implications across the spectrum of moral issues—from abortion and war to questions of poverty and economic justice. It bears some resemblance, in this respect, to the Catholic doctrine of a 'consistent ethic of life', which has become the touchstone of much contemporary Catholic social teaching. If we are called to have reverence for all life, then we are called to treat all life with the dignity it deserves; that is, the dignity of a creature of God, a creature who may be revelatory to us of God's beauty and love. Thus we are forbidden on this basis from treating any creature as an object of our mere enjoyment or use. Again, this has implications for how we treat other human beings as well as for how we treat the natural world, but at the very least it implies that the natural world is as worthy of our respect as any human being. Moreover, both the natural world and human beings are a part of creation as participants in God's work of temporal self-repetition.

Furthermore, we cannot envision ourselves apart from the world that surrounds us, since we are partners with creation in the repetition of the divine beauty. While the usurpation of the natural world for our own ends may not be the original sin (although a case may be made for that), it is certainly a product of original sin. In such a case we have then twisted nature toward something for which it was not intended, failed to give it the dignity which it deserved, and failed to show it the reverence to which it was entitled as God's creation. Thus a Christian ecological ethic that is reflective of Edwards' work must include an appreciation for the divine value of life and for the need to show that life reverence.

The Eschatological Motif: Ecology and the Eternal Sabbath of God

The eschatological motif is essential for understanding Edwards' theology of creation and its implications for ecology. Such a motif shares interesting points of contact with, and offers an interesting counterpoint to, the theology of Jürgen Moltmann. In *God in Creation*, Moltmann considers in depth the ecological importance of the Christian creation narrative and its eschatological

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59) Joy, *The Spiritual Life*, p. 269.

trajectory.[60] In many ways his work provides a contemporary echo of precisely those issues raised by Edwards over two hundred years ago. In terms of eschatology and creation, Moltmann chooses the motif of 'sabbath' to focus the relationship between creation and consummation.[61]

Moltmann argues that the end for which God created the world was the eternal enjoyment of the divine love and glory. Humanity was not the last act of creation in the book of Genesis; rather, as Moltmann notes, it was the sabbath that completed the act of creation: 'It is the sabbath which blesses, sanctifies and reveals the world as God's creation'.[62] The sabbath rest is a herald of the eschatological sabbath of all creation, when it will rejoice and celebrate its rest in God.

Thus, the rest commanded of God's people in the Decalogue is not merely human rest from human work, it is an anticipation of God's coming kingdom; or, in Moltmann's words: 'The sabbath is the prefiguration of the world to come'.[63] Human beings are then called to anticipate the new creation in their living and acting. This means more than simply a resting from work; it is, rather, an active working to extend God's redemptive work in the world, not because we have the power to bring it to completion, but because we are called, in all that we do, to anticipate the age to come. As Lee writes, with due deference to Edwards:

> The accomplishment of God's end in creation, according to Edwards, is going to take an 'infinite duration' since the end befitting God is 'an infinite end'. What has to be created in time is none other than the infinite glory of God, and thus this project can never come to a temporal completion. The eschaton represents the finishing of God's redemption of the fallen creation that puts it on track again, so to speak, for the accomplishing of God's end in creation. So redemption comes to a terminus. But God's end in creation does not. God's end in creation has to go on in a process of unending progress.[64]

Thus the anticipation of the eschatological sabbath should not be taken to be an anticipation of an age of passive enjoyment of the divine benefits. Rather it

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60) Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, The Gifford Lectures 1984–1985, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993 [1985]).
61) Ibid.
62) Ibid., p. 6.
63) Ibid.
64) Lee, 'Jonathan Edwards on Nature', in Lee, Proudfoot and Blackwell, eds, *Faithful Imagining*, pp. 57–8.

is, as Lee describes, an eternal process of growing nearer and nearer to God. A Christian environmental ethic needs to be cognizant both of its obligation to work in anticipation of the new creation on the one hand, and to rest from work on the other hand. Thus neither passivity nor an all-consuming activism is implied here; rather, we must both work and play, both act and rest from action. Moreover, this is true of creation as a whole.

We must not only be willing to cultivate the world around us (again, for God's benefit, not merely for our own), but also be willing to refrain from cultivation and give the land rest. To the degree that we domesticate animals, we must not use them to exhaustion, but must treat them with care and allow them rest and enjoyment just as we do ourselves. Just as all of God's creation will participate eschatologically in both the divine work and the divine play, so must we allow the world time for play when we use it for work; to do otherwise would be an abuse of God's creation and a failure to look ahead toward the world God is in the process of bringing about.

A Theology of Creation and Public Policy

One of the hazards of applying theological insights to the pressing moral problems that confront society is the temptation to leap directly from theological principles to their application in politics and public policy. While a theology that hovers above the particularities of social and political issues does not hold out much hope for guidance on particular ethical questions, one that assumes itself to be directly translatable into a normative plan for ethical action ignores the need for what John Bennett refers to as 'middle axioms'.[65] These are the intermediate concepts between the broader theological ideas under consideration and their application to social particularities. This requires the translation from a public theology to a Christian social ethic.[66]

In the case of the public theology of creation that I have examined here, this requires a consideration of what it would mean, in terms of its key motifs—the recognition of beauty in the natural world, the reverence for life and the need to harmonize work and rest in anticipation of the eschatological enjoyment of God's creation—to be meaningful in public policy terms. As I have suggested above, some candidates for middle axioms emerge fairly

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65) John C. Bennett, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956).

66) See, for example, Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996).

readily. A theology that emphasizes the beauty of creation would generate a normative expectation both that human beings have an obligation not to detract from the beauty of the natural world through their activity, and that their productive and creative activities must be consistent with the preservation and expansion of natural beauty. This would, as an example, facilitate a moral critique of pollution or other forms of environmental devastation on the grounds that, in addition to damaging human health and well-being, they detract from the beauty of creation.

Similarly, a theology that emphasizes a reverence for life in all its forms would give rise to a normative expectation that human productivity must exist in a state of rough harmony with the natural world. The rapid extinction of species as a result of human activity and the damage to the ecosystem caused by climate change together demonstrate that human beings have allowed themselves to disrupt that balance and must find ways to restore it, both through the repristination of natural systems where possible, and through the amelioration of damage through technology when necessary.

Finally, the eschatological motif in a public theology of creation would imply that human dominion over the natural world exists for a particular end; namely the repetition and magnification of God's beauty in the world. We may do with creation that which contributes to human well-being, in the context of recognizing that neither the natural world nor we exist for ourselves but rather for God. This motif relates back to the idea of stewardship as the central ethical responsibility of human beings toward the natural world.[67] The land, the livestock, our fellow human beings and we ourselves all exist for reasons beyond our own convenience, and we have an obligation to treat them in such a way that our ecosystem remains sustainable over the long term, and not be exhausted for our use alone.

How these principles might translate into public policy is a subject for considerable discussion. Clearly, different policy approaches may be developed to deal with pressing problems, yet all may be rooted within a general recognition of human responsibilities for stewardship and sustainability, reverence for life and appreciation of natural beauty. Whether in a particular case this requires, for example, carbon tax or cap-and-trade approaches to reducing carbon emissions, or some other policy designed to achieve the same result, the goal will reflect the kind of public theology of creation that I am

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[67] See, for example, Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, revised edn (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1990).

advocating here. Such a goal should be rooted in a recognition that human beings have an obligation with respect to creation, based on the understanding that the earth belongs to God rather than to us. Edwards' theology provides one possible lens into a theological understanding of our place within creation and our obligations toward it, out of which such policy considerations might arise.

Conclusion

I began this article by considering some of the important elements a Christian theology of creation might contain, concluding that any Christian environmental ethic should be Trinitarian, non-pantheistic and rooted in salvation history. Moreover, it must not be rooted in patriarchal monotheism, it must be panentheistic and it must be fruitful for ethical discussion. Edwards' theology of creation possesses all of these elements and is thus worthy of serious consideration as a dialogue partner in contemporary discussions of ecological ethics.

Criticisms of this argument may well be raised, but my purpose here has not been to solve every problem or answer every potential critique; rather, it has been to open the possibility of dialogue between Edwards' perspective and our own. This dialogue must span more than two centuries of theological work, but Edwards' theology of creation is as vital today as when he wrote it. Further, it can offer an illuminating way of thinking about the environment to those for whom both the classical tenets of the Christian faith, and a deep concern for the future of the planet, are important issues.

Edwards offers a theological foundation for the development of public policies that bring together his key motifs; that is, an appreciation of the beauty and integrity of creation, a reverence and a respect for life in all its dimensions, and the need to provide time and space both for productive work and for the necessary rest that anticipates the eschatological sabbath for which Christians hope. Clearly, this theological understanding is not simply an engine for generating public policy; yet I believe that policies which consciously reflect the concerns of an Edwardsian public theology of creation would be more ecologically sustainable and more consistent with a Christian concern with human flourishing than would those which engage in an instrumentalizing and objectifying concern with the exploitation of the natural world.

Edwards' multifaceted approach to theology, philosophy and science makes him a fruitful thinker for any era. Yet in order to determine more fully how his

theology may assist us today, we need to consider it alongside the whole range of contemporary philosophical, theological and scientific approaches to ecology, so that Christian theology can contribute to an environmental ethic that might offer hope for the planet, and thereby for us all. Edwards reminds us of what the Scriptures claim: 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers' (NRSV, Ps. 24:1–2).