

Biblical, Modern, and Post-Modern/Post-Christian Views of Nature, Human Nature and Mimetic Theory

*Robert J. Daly, S.J.
Boston College*

Just as it may no longer be possible to find a “pure” native American voice totally unaffected by modern, Western technological culture, far less possible is it to find a voice that is “purely” biblical. Even when we go back to their own “original” times, none of the voices that speak to us from the pages of the Bible are “pure” in the sense of being unaffected by a variety of sometimes quite diverse religious and cultural backgrounds and experiences. This original complexity is multiplied many times over when we, here in the twenty-first century, read biblical texts or discuss issues related to them, issues for example like nature and human nature. No one of us remains unaffected by our roots in classical culture through which the Bible has come down to us. Nor are we unaffected by the ensuing challenges to that culture and the controversies about it that have come from several renaissances, and from modernity, reformation, enlightenment, historical criticism, the hermeneutics of suspicion, deconstruction and post-modernity, and another quite recent reversal that we can call post-secularism.¹ This paper is an attempt to unpack some of this complexity and to bring it into conversation with mimetic theory.

We begin by examining the text of the Bible, looking first at the foundational opening chapters of Genesis. What we find there are two distinct but related creation stories, at least one of them a recognizable ancient Near Eastern cosmogony. Together these creation stories — two of the many micro-narratives that constitute the (presumed) macro-

¹ See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und wissen. Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2001. Laudatio: Jan Philipp Reemtsma*. Sonderdruck Frankfurt/Main 2001) 9–31, as cited by Helmut Hoping, “Die sichtbarste Frucht des Konzils: Anspruch und Wirklichkeit der erneuten Liturgie” in G. Wassilowsky, ed., *Zweites Vatikanum – Vergessene Anstöße, gegenwärtige Fortschreibungen* (Freiburg – Basel – Wien, Herder, 2004) 90–115, at 95.

narrative commonly referred to as “Christian salvation history” – form the basis of what contemporary scholarship calls an “originating hypothesis.” This particular originating hypothesis is foundational to the ways (notice the plural) – the ways in which the Religions of the Book, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam look at nature and human nature. This paper will focus on how I, a particular Christian, now in the eighth decade of life, and quite consciously a product of the complexities I have been mentioning in these opening paragraphs, read this originating hypothesis and, out of that background, try to understand nature and human nature.

The biblical creation story has an unmistakable family relationship with the earlier Babylonian and other cosmogonies of the ancient Near Eastern world. It also has much in common, at least in its attempt to explain how things now are, with the later originating hypotheses – “great narratives” or “great stories” they are sometimes called – of the likes of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, and, at least implicitly, of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, and, of course, the mimetic theory of our own René Girard, to which we, by the very fact of our gathering here, also accord a privileged status.² Some of these originating hypotheses contradict each other, especially when they make claim to absoluteness or claim to tell the whole story; but there is still something important that practically every one of them can tell us about our understanding of nature and human nature.

The opening scene of the Bible, the seven-day cosmogony of Genesis 1:1 – 2:3, seems to have been given its final literary shape by a school of so-called priestly writers in the late sixth century BCE, during or shortly after the Babylonian Captivity. It is remarkable that it is placed first, since the very different creation story that follows it, beginning in Genesis 2:4 – the story of God forming first man and then the garden, and then the animals and finally a woman – was shaped some four hundred years earlier. Furthermore, the two stories, if one takes them literally as history or science, are irreconcilably contradictory.

Genesis One has humankind, male and female, created at the end of the creation process. Genesis Two, on the contrary, has the man created at the very beginning of the creation process, and then the garden with all its trees, plants and rivers, and then the animals, and then, finally the woman at the end of the creation process. Yet, while these stories are obviously neither history nor science in the modern senses of these words, these texts continue to inspire, enlighten, and even challenge critical scholars in our own day.

One of the challenges that we encounter in reading these Genesis texts concerns the idea of stewardship. Influenced by modernity, enlightenment, and modern science, most people in modern Western culture read these texts as teaching that the material world was made by God primarily for the benefit of humankind: *“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”* (Genesis 1:28). Most of us hear these words as telling us that our God-given task is, as the writers of modernity emphasized, to be masters and rulers – in effect exploiters – of nature. However, recent developments in the biblical theology of nature suggest that this exploitative understanding of stewardship, an understanding that is happily co-opted by some of the most egregious contemporary despoilers of the environment, is actually quite the opposite of what seems to be intended by the biblical text. Rather, as H. Paul Santmire, has argued, the biblical witness, especially in its full context, does not suggest a sometimes exploiting stewardship; it moves much more in the direction of seeing humans as being in a kind of limited partnership with God and with nature.³

² But we do grant, of course, along with James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 20–21, that Girard’s theory is more than, and definitely other than just another *idée générale*.

³ H. Paul Santmire, “Partnership with Nature According to the Scriptures: Beyond the Theology of Stewardship,” *Christian Scholars Review* 32/4 (2003) 381–412. For a review of these recent developments in biblical theology, Santmire recommends that one begin with the following: Theodore Hiebert, “Re-Imaging Nature: Shifts in Biblical Interpretation,” *Interpretation* 50/1 (January 1996) 36–46; *idem*, *The Yahwist’s Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford, 1996) and William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

The command to humankind to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28) is the same command and in the same words that is given to “the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind” (Gen 1:21–22). And *everything* that God made is pronounced to be “very good” (Gen 1:31 and *passim*), apparently without distinction in this respect between humankind and the other creatures. God is portrayed as launching a history not just with humans, but “with the whole world, with many creatures.”⁴ Further, the command to fill the earth *and subdue it* (Gen 1:28) usually comes to us in grossly misleading translations that seem to reflect more the prejudices of scientific modernity than the authentic biblical meaning. For the language and rhetorical structures with which humankind is commanded to *subdue* or *rule* the earth is similar to that used in verses 16 – 18 where the “greater light is to *rule* the day and the lesser light to *rule* the night. “God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to *rule* over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good” (Gen 1:17–18).⁵ The connotations of dominative subjugation in the English word *subdue* would, if the same word were used to translate these verses about the sun and the moon, make a shambles of their obvious meaning and connotations.

Further instances of translations veiling, and even distorting the authentic biblical meaning – or at least a meaning that speaks to an ecologically sensitive modern reader – can be found in chapter two of Genesis. In this creation story, God begins by forming man “from the *dust of the ground*” (Gen 2:7). The Hebrew word for “dust of the ground” is *adamah* which, literally, means *arable soil*. Before this, it had just been noted, there was as yet “no one to *till* this *adamah* – arable soil” (Gen 2:5). As Hiebert points out: “It is the claim that humanity’s archetypal agricultural vocation is implanted within humans by the very

⁴ Santmire, “Partnership with Nature” 391.

⁵ *Ibid.*

stuff out of which they are made, the arable soil itself.”⁶ But there’s more: a few verses later, after the creation of the garden, we read: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to *till* it and *keep* it” (Gen 2:15). The English verbs, *till* and *keep*, used in this typical translation are, for children of modernity like ourselves, profoundly misleading. The Hebrew for *till* is the verb *abad*, whose basic meaning is to *serve*. It is the same word used in the Prophet Isaiah for the Servant of God. The Hebrew for the word *keep* is the verb *samar*, the same word used in the Aaronic blessing: “May the Lord bless you and *keep* you.” As Santmire trenchantly observes:

With only the received translation before them, general readers of this text might well understand it as a kind of capitalist manifesto: to develop the productivity of the land and keep the profits. They would have no reason to think that the words refer in fact to *identifying and responding to needs of the land itself and protecting the land from abuse or destruction*.⁷

The reason most of us would miss this meaning in the biblical text is that we read it from our typically modern context. That context is described by Santmire as follows:

The core images that shape the construct [of stewardship] typically have had to do with the management and indeed the mastery of nature. Given the fact that the dominant culture in the modern West has been shaped by a vision of human progress, and with that vision the drive to master, even dominate nature technologically, often for the sake of the rich and the powerful, the idea of stewardship has tended to be publicly shaped, not to say totally defined, by the motif of human power over nature. This, in turn, has brought the idea of stewardship into what has typically been a close, if not logically necessary, relationship with the willingness, even the passion, to exploit nature for the sake of dominant nations and classes, sometimes at

⁶ Theodore Hiebert, “Rethinking Approaches to Nature in the Bible,” in *Theology for Earth Community: a Field Guide*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996) 28, as quoted in Santmire, “Partnership with Nature” 402.

⁷ Santmire, “Partnership with Nature” 402.

any cost. The idea of stewardship, in this respect, has by default served to support environmental degradation and social injustice.⁸

For this reason Santmire suggests that, when speaking of the Bible, we should simply avoid using the word *stewardship* as unavoidably misleading, and replace it with the term or concept “partnership with nature.”⁹ In my own work, I have made a similar suggestion regarding the word *sacrifice*, when speaking of its Christian meaning. For the word *sacrifice* is so overloaded with negative connotations that the very mention of the word — at least at the outset — makes it impossible to bring out its more positive, authentic Christian meaning, a meaning that points not so much to our giving up or destroying something, but to our sharing in, and to our being partners with the self-communicating life and love of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit.¹⁰

From the perspective of a partnership with nature that I have been suggesting, especially when we read the seven-day creation account in Genesis 1 not as an isolated story but as the prologue to the whole great story of the Bible, an additional fundamental emphasis that emerges is the theme of “creative intervention in nature.”¹¹ First to be noted is that the primordial intervention of God in creation is not the work of some impersonal force, but personal actions of speaking, giving, and even sharing: divine actions that seem to involve a kind of partnering of God with creatures, calling them to be involved in the work of creation in their own way, according to their own canons of being and acting. Notice the wording, indeed the repeated wording: when it comes to the creation of life, and here in Genesis One that begins with vegetation, God does not seem to create directly,

⁸ From an earlier draft version of the article “Partnership with Nature”

⁹ Santmire, “Partnership with Nature,” esp. 381–89.

¹⁰ See Robert J. Daly, S.J., “Sacrifice Unveiled or Sacrifice Revisited: Trinitarian and Liturgical Perspectives,” *Theological Studies* 64 (2003) 24–42; *idem*, “Marriage, Eucharist, and Christian Sacrifice,” *INTAMS Review* 9 (2003) 56–76; *idem*, “Sacrifice: the Way to Enter the Paschal Mystery,” *America* 188/16 (May 12, 2003) 14–17.

¹¹ Santmire, “Partnership with Nature” 385. This theme of “creative intervention in nature” is the first of three major themes regarding creation/nature that Santmire finds in the Hebrew Scriptures. The other two, as we will point out, are: “sensitive care for nature” and “awestruck contemplation of nature.”

as with the light and the sky and the waters. Instead, *God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation . . . " And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation (Gen 1:11-12). A few verses later: "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures . . . " (Gen 1:20). A few verses after that: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth" (Gen 1:22). It continues: "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." (Gen 1:24).*

But then, while still on the same sixth day on which the earth, at God's command, had brought forth *living creatures of every kind*, there is an interruption in this process of already existing beings bringing forth other living beings. God now intervenes and speaks not only more directly – there is the addition of the summarizing words: *God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, . . .* – God also intervenes more personally, speaking in the first person: *"Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gen 1:26-27).*

At this point, the priestly writers explicitly reconnect to the earlier process (in Gen 1:20-22) of already created beings bringing forth other living beings, and in doing so being blessed and being commanded to be fruitful and multiply. For now we have, given to a humankind that has been created in God's image, and given in the same words as to the creatures of the sea and the birds of the air, a blessing and the command to be fruitful and multiply: *God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen 1:28).*

I have already pointed out how modern readers tend to misread this verse as license and command to be exploiting masters and controllers of nature. Let me add three further reasons to indicate that the biblical authors probably had something else in mind. First is the overall rhetorical and literary structure of the account that highlights not only the unique place of humankind, but also the close association, or creaturely fellowship of humankind with the other creatures. They are all given the same blessing and command to increase and multiply.

Second, as I have already indicated, the command to *have dominion over – rule over – the fish of the sea* etc. reminds one of *the greater light* [that is] *to rule over the day* and *the lesser light* [that is] *to rule over the night* (Gen 1:16). It may be a bit of a stretch to insist unequivocally, just on the basis of the received Hebrew text, that the writer of Genesis 1 had precisely the same thing in mind with these two expressions of having dominion over and ruling over. But there is no question that the third-century BCE official translators of the Hebrew Bible into Greek had precisely this connection in mind. The Septuagint translators use the same Greek word: in v. 16 *eis archas* (the noun form), and in v. 28 *archete* (the imperative plural verb form) to express this “ruling over.” If there is no connotation of exploitation in the verse 16 use of this word (with the greater and lesser lights ruling over the day and the night), there probably should not be here in the verse 28 use of it either (with humankind being given dominion over the other living creatures).

Third, we come to the unique command here in verse 28 that is given only to humankind, the command to *subdue* the earth: When we place this in the historical, cultural, and geographical context from which this text came, namely sixth-century BCE Mesopotamian civilization, we become aware of the text opening up to a nonexploitative understanding of humankind’s relationship to nature under God. This would be the idea of creative intervention in nature. Mesopotamia at that time was a thoroughly totalitarian culture. There was never any doubt about who was in absolute charge. It was also a civilization that depended on a relatively sophisticated irrigational technology, a

civilization that had learned to respect and make use of its natural environment, to intervene creatively in it, thus subduing something of its wildness and irregularity. In other words, Genesis 1 was shaped by Jewish writers who had first-hand knowledge of a successful technological intervening in nature by a powerful, authoritarian, (and, for its time, technologically sophisticated) Mesopotamian culture. No one had any doubts about what *subdue*, or *dominion*, or *rule over* might mean.

The sense of humankind's partnership with the other sentient creatures is then heightened by the following declarations of God: "*I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food*" (Gen 1:29). Notice, there is no mention of eating meat. Apparently, in the vision of the priestly writer, humankind began as vegetarian. That this is the intended meaning is confirmed in the following verse: "*And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food*" (Gen 1:30). The animals also are vegetarian.¹² Where does this come from, this "revelatory model of nonviolent creation of the world"?¹³ What sense can we make of it? Anyone familiar with the Bible cannot miss the similarity — indeed the same vision of a totally nonviolent nature — that we find in Isaiah's vision of the future kingdom, a human and a natural world of total justice and peace.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:6-9).

¹² See Norbert Lohfink, "Die Schichten des Pentateuch und der Krieg," in *Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit im Alten Testament*, ed. N. Lohfink (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1983), as cited and developed by James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) 29.

¹³ Williams, *The Bible* 29

If we are asking where all this came from, this oracle of Isaiah rather than Genesis 1 is closer to the source. Isaiah was active in the last half of the 8th century BCE, and the priestly authors of Genesis 1 were giving shape to their creation story two centuries later. During all that time, the Israelites were living in a world that all too often experienced human life as, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, “nasty, brutish, and short.” But that apparently did not keep them from dreaming of a human and natural world under God in which peace and total nonviolence was the rule. A final note on the end of this seven-day creation story: each of the first six days ends with the formulaic conclusion: *And there was evening and there was morning, the first [etc.] day*. The seventh day, on which God *rested*, has no such ending, suggesting, it seems, that the seventh day is still ongoing, that the work of creation is not yet finished. This reinforces the idea of human partnership with God.

The much different creation story that we now find beginning in chapter 2 of Genesis comes from a much earlier time, from about the 9th century BCE. The first significant action of God in this creation story, even before the creation of the garden, is that of God forming man *from the arable soil*.¹⁴ Thus, the order in which things get created is the opposite of that in Genesis 1. This was obviously not a problem for the inspired biblical authors. Nor should it be for us. For us it is yet another clear signal that we shouldn't look to the Bible for scientific information, but for religious and human insight. The insight offered us by this creation story (it comes from what is called the Yahwist tradition) is both complementary to and different from the previously related – but chronologically later – seven-day creation story in Genesis 1. The general sense of stewardship or, more accurately, partnership with God, is consistently developed further. However, the particular theme of creative intervention in nature is now complemented by an additional particular theme, that of sensitive care for nature.

¹⁴ As Hiebert points out (see above, note 6).

The background is not the (Mesopotamian) urban culture that lies behind Genesis 1, but a much more agrarian culture. The land, the arable soil, has an integrity and value in its own right. It is not just a platform to support human life, but rather, the reason why the human being was created in the first place, i.e., to serve (*abad*) the land and protect (*samar*) it.¹⁵ Before creating the human, the Yahwist remarks: *there was no one to till* [i.e., serve] *the ground* (Gen 2:5). Then, as we read on, we find that the animals are made from the same ground as the man. Not only that, their close relationship is further emphasized in that both the man and the animals are called a living being or living soul (*nephesh hayya*) (Gen 1:7, 17). This is obviously complementary to what is suggested by Genesis 1 having the animals and the human being created on the same sixth day. Granted, the naming of the animals by the man, is often interpreted as an act of dominative taking-possession. However, in the context of Adam naming Eve (Gen 2:23) and Yahweh naming Israel his beloved (Isa 56:5), it should probably be seen as more of an act of identity and affection than of domination. What is being suggested is not dominative possession but a sense of comradeship between Adam and the animals. Remember, it was the priestly writers and editors who placed this passage in this particular place in the Bible. Since they were the ones who saw humankind as created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), there may even be a suggestion of a priestly notion of the imitation of God: i.e., we garden because God first gardened for us.¹⁶

Of course, however close, the man and the woman are also quite distinct from the other animals, and, by implication, also from nature (not in the sense of being “other,” but more in the sense of occupying a special place among the other animals and in nature). In Genesis 1, only the man and the woman are in God’s image and likeness. And here in Genesis 2, not the animals but only the woman could be for the man a *helper as his partner* (Gen 2:20). They become one in a union that is described as total in its exuberance and exuberant in its totality. They are in total and harmonious union with each other, with all

¹⁵ Gen 2:15 – not “till” and “keep” as in most modern translations (see above, p. 4).

¹⁶ Santmire, “Partnership with Nature” 404.

other creatures, and with their natural environment. It is the paradise about which we humans dream. The Yahwist author doesn't use the words of the priestly writer, *God saw that it was good and it was very good*, but he doesn't have to. This was the good, the very good, about which humans longingly dream.

But paradise was lost. For lack of space, we have to pass over the dramatic personal dynamics of the biblical story of the Fall, and focus here on its effects on nature and on the relationship of humans to nature. We are skirting the theological quagmire of trying to figure out precisely what happened, or how what happened actually caused our now less-than-paradisal situation. Rather, in the light of what we can learn from the Bible, we are focusing more on our actual situation, as we know it from human history, and as we experience it in our own lives.

In terms of human relations, the woman falls into a relationship of subservience to the man, symbolizing the patterns of struggle, conflict, alienation, rivalry, and the domination of one person by another, the patterns that constitute the mostly sad material on which mimetic theory works. This is reflected in humanity's relationship with nature. Note that in the imagination of the Yahwist, the soil seems to remain innocent. When it receives the blood of Abel, it protests against the violence of Cain (Gen 4:10). This is important. For traditional interpretation suggests that nature is cursed, that it needs to be tamed, ruled, controlled, and, to the extent possible, even exploited. And God does indeed say to the man:

"Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:17-19).

But when we read the Bible with a touch of ecological sensitivity, we notice that the “logic” of the biblical narrative does not suggest that nature has done anything wrong, or that there is anything wrong with nature. Rather it is the human being that has messed up, and that messing up disturbs the harmonious partnership with nature with which the biblical narrative seems to begin. Sin, in other words, is not a cosmic but a social reality. Thinking this way, we can summarize with Santmire:

This allows us to say, metaphorically, as we survey planet earth today with the eyes of astronauts above, contemplating this beautiful, fragile blue and green island of life in the midst of the darkness of “outer space”: we humans are living in Eden, yet behaving as if we were living outside of Eden. That the sinful violence of our lives, individually and collectively, sometimes pounds the earth and then rebounds back upon us with even greater destructive power – as in the case of global warming, for example, driven as it mainly is by consumer greed – is no fault of the earth. The fault is all ours. And the rebound effect is a veritable divine curse upon our sin.¹⁷

However, beyond the themes of creative intervention in nature and sensitive care for nature, there is a third theme with which the Hebrew Bible, in talking about nature, challenges us. Stretching us far beyond the relatively comfortable challenges to creative and responsible partnership, is the theme of awestruck contemplation of nature. We encounter this in the meditation on creation in Psalm 104, and above all in chapters 38–41 of the Book of Job, God’s overwhelmingly powerful answer to Job’s complaints and accusations. It is God, the Lord, answering Job “out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1), glorying in the vastness, the exuberance, and the humanly uncontrollable wildness and violence of the world and its creatures that he has created. It is, among other things, one of the most thorough put-downs in all of human literature. For thirty-four chapters, Job and his three so-called friends, joined in the end by a fourth, Elihu, had provided a powerful illustration of the divine oracle in Isaiah 55:

¹⁷ Santmire, “Partnership with Nature” 406.

“My thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa 55:8-9)

For Job had ended his laments and complaints with a bravado challenge:

O that I had one to hear me!
(Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!)
O that I had the indictment written by my adversary!
Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;
I would bind it on me like a crown;
I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him. (Job 31:35-37)

Finally, enough is enough, even for God. Implicit in the anthropomorphic story line of the Book of Job is that God has been listening to this garbage and can hold himself in no longer. Allow me to paraphrase the beginning of the Lord's answer:

Who is this puny thing, blabbering about what he has no clue? Is it you, insignificant speck?
Where were you then when I laid the foundation of the earth, set the bounds of the seas, made
the winds and the rain, the heavens and the stars? Is it from you that light comes? You're the
one who controls the gates of death and of darkness? (see Isaiah 38)

This is sarcasm. Yes, but it is divine sarcasm; not the malevolent sarcasm that tries to destroy, but the kind of bracing, challenging sarcasm we sometimes hear from a talented aggressive coach who knows how to lead his charges to, finally, “get it right.” Nor does the Lord stop with rubbing Job's nose in his puniness vis-à-vis cosmic creation. He goes on to

the animal world that is presumably so much closer to Job's control. But even here, neither Job nor any other creature seems to be in control. We find no wolf lying down with the lamb. If anything, it's just the opposite. There is nothing like the vegetarian nonviolence of the Genesis creation stories, nor anything like Isaiah's vision of creation's "Peaceable Kingdom" (Isa 11:6ff). Rather, as Psalm 104 (v. 21) puts it, young lions roaring for their prey seeking their food from God. Notice how the Lord, in answering Job from the whirlwind, emphasizes those aspects of violent wildness that evade the control of the puny human, how the Lord seems to be glorying in the wildness of the hawk, the raven and the eagle, the exuberance of the wild ass, the dangerous uncontrollability of the wild ox, the maniacal prancing of the ostrich, the fearsomeness of the behemoth and, finally, the awesome leviathan of the deep.

AND MIMETIC THEORY?

Much more could be said, of course, but this should be enough to set up the question: How does all this relate to mimetic theory? I have been focusing on biblical views of nature.¹⁸ On the other hand, mimetic theory focuses primarily on human nature, and, at least until this conference, has paid relatively little attention to nature and the physical world of creation. This suggests that it might be helpful to step back and relocate ourselves in the big picture. We can begin by asking: What do we mean by "nature"?

The first part of this paper offered a contemporary, ecologically sensitive reading of early biblical views of creation or, since in contemporary discourse the two terms are often

¹⁸ In contemporary usage, "creation" and "nature" – in the sense of "nature" understood as the physical environment in which we live – are often synonymous. "Nature," however, is not a biblical concept. It became part of the Christian theological vocabulary when the early Christians had to find language to express what they meant by God's divine nature and by the two natures, divine and human, of Christ, and later in the time of Augustine when they had to find ways to talk about the relationship between nature and grace. This theological sense, along with the (already) more common philosophical sense of nature (*physis*) as referring to the inherent or essential quality or construction of a thing, was what "nature" generally meant until relatively recently. The conservational and ecological connotations of the word "nature" that we take for granted do not go back to ancient or classical times.

assumed to be synonymous, early biblical views of nature. Within those biblical views, as we saw, human nature is not separate from nature, but is an integral part of nature. This integrality of nature in general with human nature in particular holds true whether human nature is thought of either as nature's center and high point, as in the Genesis creation stories, or thought of in the much more humble attitude vis-à-vis a more exuberantly uncontrollable nature that we find in chapters 38 to 41 of the Book of Job or in Psalm 104. What this is leading up to is to point out that our views of nature in general heavily influence, and indeed are inseparable from our views of human nature in particular, and human nature is what mimetic theory is all about.

Within Western Culture – whether understood either as essentially Christian or primarily humanistic or even post-Christian – one can identify two major contrasting views of nature.¹⁹ The first view (no priority of value implied) sees nature, including human nature, as essentially good, even sacred and holy. The second view sees nature, including human nature, and perhaps even beginning with human nature, as essentially flawed.

The first view emphasizes the essential goodness of creation/nature, as the repeated mantra “And God saw that it was good” of the Genesis 1 creation story teaches, and thus sees nature and human nature as essentially good. Adherents of this view would include those persons of biblical faith who (1) either do not believe that the Fall (the sin of Adam and Eve – see Genesis 3 and following) introduced essential flaws into human nature and the natural world, or (2) who believe that the flaws introduced by the Fall were healed by Jesus Christ, whose redeeming grace “divinizes” or elevates us and makes us sharers in the divine nature. It includes persons who have a sense of the sacramentality of the world around us, persons with an “analogical imagination,” as David Tracy described it.²⁰ But it

¹⁹ I apologize for the need of so broad-brushing a simplification, a simplification that might even border on caricature.

²⁰ See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

also includes persons who see themselves as optimistic humanists, people who, not necessarily for religious reasons, have a trusting confidence in the good and healing powers of nature in itself, who have confidence in the intrinsic ability of human beings to order and control themselves and their environment in proper and successful ways.

The second view, in contrast, gives greater emphasis to the darker sides of nature and human nature. Adherents of this view would include those Christians who believe that the Fall of Adam introduced serious, essential flaws into human nature and to the relationship between human nature and the rest of nature. Christian adherents of this darker view generally hold that Christ's redeeming grace does not heal the flaws that have been introduced by sin. In other words, grace does not really "sanctify" us but only "covers over" our sinfulness so that God, in his mercy, does not regard it. But adherence to this view is by no means restricted to people with this particular Christian understanding of original sin and its consequences. It clearly includes the obviously anti-religious Thomas Hobbes and the ultimately a-religious John Locke and Francis Bacon, the moderns who articulated human existence and destiny in terms of our ability to be masters and possessors and – to whatever extent useful to us – exploiters of nature.

It would, of course, be naïve to think that everyone fits neatly into one or other of these views of nature. In most human beings and in most human situations there is a complex combination of positive and negative, optimistic and pessimistic views and experiences of nature. In terms of what this paper is exploring, mimetic theory seems to correlate strikingly with the second view of nature and human nature as essentially flawed. Flawed human nature is the mother earth, so to speak, of acquisitive, rivalrous, conflictual mimesis, the mimesis that is the stuff of common human experience, the mimesis that is at the heart and soul of the great literature of the world, especially as we know it from the revelatory interpretations of René Girard.²¹ Flawed human nature is the raw material of

²¹ See esp. René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevski*, ed. and trans. James G. Williams (Crossroad: New York, 1997), *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (Oxford University: New

the mimetic processes that constitute the scapegoat mechanisms by which human culture is able to evade the worst consequences of its self-destructive tendencies. In this sense, mimesis is, by definition, good. In other words, however “bad” (in a moral sense) the passions and acquisitively rivalrous desires that feed the scapegoat mechanisms might be, they work out in the end for the good. Is it, then, simply redundant, to put the adjective “good” before “mimesis”?

Girard, as reported by James Williams, has at times spoken of a “good mimesis.” Williams astutely notes that if this simply means “effective mimesis” that keeps culture going by means of underlying sacrificial mechanisms, this would then logically reduce to the position of Thomas Hobbes. But Williams continues:

Good mimesis can also mean the revelation of the divine model that is not merely external to a given set of cultural differences, but is not part of the differential system that requires exclusion, victimization, and the latter’s ritualization in sacrifice or its subsequent traces. This is the mimesis of which he speaks, for example, in referring to Jesus’ enterprise of “starting the good contagion originating in good reciprocity” Here “good contagion” is the response of revelation to mimetic crisis and panic, and “good reciprocity” is exchange on the basis of the divine model, not on the basis of retribution and the possibility of revenge.²²

Let us try to unpack this. The attempt to do so will circle back to the promise implicit at the end of my second paragraph at the beginning of this paper: how I, a particular Christian, read the biblical originating hypothesis and, out of that background, try to understand nature and human nature. To do this requires that we keep in mind a careful, sometimes shifting, but always critical distinction between “good mimesis” in the sense of being effective, and “good mimesis” in the sense of being transformative.

York 1991 and Gracewing: Leominster, Herefordshire/Inigo Enterprises: New Malden, Surrey, 2000), *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins, 1966).

²² Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred* 261 n.17.

Effective good mimesis is the mimesis we have just referred to as the mimesis that keeps culture going through underlying sacrificial mechanisms. It succeeds in doing this because, more often than not, human beings find themselves living out of the second, darker, more pessimistic side of human nature that I briefly sketched a few pages ago. It is the “natural” working out, the “natural” consequences of the acquisitive, rivalrous, double-binding, scapegoating mimesis that, as Polonius put it in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, II.1: “by indirections find[s] directions out.”

Transformative good mimesis is, however, practically the mirror opposite of this. First, it begins to unveil the underlying sacrificial mechanisms of the *effective* good mimesis, thus undermining their culture-saving power. Second, it tries to do this by replacing these mechanism with their opposites, i.e., with a non-acquisitive, non-rivalrous, non-double-binding mimesis that does not scapegoat victims but identifies with victims. Following Girard and such interpreters of his such as James Williams, Gil Bailie, and James Alison,²³ we can see this embodied in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is, in other words, more or less at home with the first, more optimistic, more sacramental view of human nature we outlined a few pages ago.

This might well suggest that mimetic theory in general and especially its positive realizations in transformative good mimesis makes sense primarily in Western culture in general and Christianity in particular. My universalizing instincts resist drawing that conclusion. In fact, those instincts were at play in establishing the main theme of the COV&R 2000 meeting at Boston College, “Violence and Institution in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.”²⁴ All of these traditions have developed “mechanisms” for dealing with violence and for getting beyond at least the most self-destructive effects of violence. In other words, my universalizing instincts would insist that all successful cultures have, analogously, *mutatis mutandis*, both *effective* good mimesis

²³ Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995). For Alison, see above, n. 2; for Williams, see above, n. 12.

and *transformative* good mimesis. But we cannot go into that here. We must return to our reflection on biblical, modern, and post-modern views of nature and human nature.

When we do that, we notice that our contemporary, postmodern, ecologically sensitive reading of the biblical creation stories and the creation theology behind Psalm 104 and Chapters 38–41 of the Book of Job fits in much more congenially with the first view of nature and human nature, as, despite all their flaws, “essentially good, even sacred and holy,” than with the second view of nature and human nature as, despite their good points, essentially and radically flawed (see above pp. 14ff.). Nature and human nature are not opposing or conflicting realities. They are integrally part of the same reality. Human beings, when true to their own nature, are in fact in partnership with nature, a partnership which works itself out in responsible creative intervention in nature, in sensitive care for nature, and in awestruck contemplation of nature.

Not the end, I hope, but simply where, for the moment, I stop. – R.J.D.

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²⁴ See the principal papers and discussion summaries from COV&R 2000 in *Contagion* 9 (Spring 2002).