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A THEOLOGY FOR EARTH:
NATURE AND GRACE IN THE THOUGHT OF
JOSEPH SITTLER

BRUCE ALLEN HEGGEN

August 1995

A Dissertation submitted to
The Faculty of Religious Studies
McGill University
in partial fulfillment of the degree,
Doctor of Philosophy

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**Theology for Earth:
Nature and Grace
in the Thought of Joseph Sittler**

Bruce Allen Heggen

Abstract

The environmental crisis of the twentieth century challenges Christianity to articulate a theology adequate to support a viable environmental ethic. This dissertation finds such a theology in the thought of American Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler. Sittler characterizes his thought, not as a "theology of nature," but as an "incarnational theology applied to nature." Because of the christological and sacramental emphases in his theology, the dissertation demonstrates that the roots for Sittler's environmental concerns are to be found in the Christology and eucharistic theology of the sixteenth century reformer, Martin Luther. But in order to compensate for the emphasis in sixteenth century reformation theology on redemption as the salvation of the individual from sin, Sittler also retrieves the theology of the second century theologian, Irenaeus of Lyons. In his own fight against gnosticism, Irenaeus demonstrates continuity between Creation and redemption as acts of the same God. Thus Sittler develops a "theology for earth," emphasizing the continuity of nature and grace and, using concepts drawn from literature, music, architecture, painting, and modern physics, articulating an "ontology of communion" in which human beings recognize the presence of God in their own participation in the raw materials and processes of the world.

**Une Théologie pour la terre:
la nature et la grâce
dans la pensée de Joseph Sittler**

Résumé

La crise écologique du vingtième siècle invite le christianisme à formuler une théologie susceptible de nourrir une éthique écologique viable. Cette thèse retrouve une telle théologie dans la pensée du théologien luthérien américain, Joseph Sittler. Sittler qualifie sa pensée non pas de "théologie de la nature," mais de "théologie d'incarnation appliquée à la nature." Vu l'accent christologique et sacramentel de sa théologie, cette thèse montre que les préoccupations écologiques de Sittler remontent à la théologie christique et eucharistique du réformateur du seizième siècle, Martin Luther. Cependant, afin de compenser l'inflexion de la théologie réformatrice orientée vers la rédemption comme salut personnel du péché, Sittler récupère également certains concepts chez le théologien du deuxième siècle, Irenaeus de Lyon. Dans sa lutte à lui contre le gnosticisme, Irenaeus démontre la continuité qui existe entre la création et la rédemption en tant que des actes du même Dieu. Ainsi Sittler développe une "théologie pour la terre" qui met en avant une continuité entre la nature et la grâce et, à l'appui des notions puisées dans la littérature, dans la musique, dans l'architecture, dans l'art, et dans la physique moderne, qui formule une "ontologie de la communion" dans laquelle les hommes reconnaissent l'existence de Dieu de par leur propre prise sur la matière et le processus du monde.

Til Mor og Far
In Memory

To Hazel
with affection
and
in appreciation

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Omnis natura Deo loquitur.

Hugo of St. Victor

I said to the almond tree, "Speak to me of God."

And the almond tree blossomed.

Nikos Kazantzakis

PREFACE

This has become an essay exploring the theology of the first article of Christian faith, the article concerning creation and preservation. That this is so has come as a surprise to me: my research began several years ago as an inquiry into the nature of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the relationship between the Eucharist and the promise of the New Creation, to which Christians have looked forward since Pentecost. Clearly the expectation of a new age was shaped by the apocalypticism characteristic of Jewish (and other) theologies at the time of Christian origins.¹ But I was interested in "more substantial matters:" I understood Christian faith to claim that the Spirit of God invoked in the Eucharistic Prayer transformed the elements of bread and wine so that those who eat and drink of them are themselves transformed, having then, already in the present, a share in God's eschatological future that is still awaited in fullness.² These are themes in Christian theology which have generally come under the provenance of the theology of the third article, which is concerned with the Holy Spirit, the Church, and, as I have noted, the Sacraments and the Age to Come.

A second awareness informs this curiosity as well: that is, that to be human before God is not only to be called to holiness.

¹Cf. Ernst Käsemann, "On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic", in New Testament Questions of Today, tr. by W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 108-137.

²Cf. Geoffrey Wainwright, Eucharist and Eschatology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, 1981).

To be human before God is to be recalled to the fact that one is a creature of the earth. Scripture claims that we are created of the earth and human observation concludes that we are surely to return to the earth. Yet the call to holiness suggests that there is some kind of transformation of the earthly elements of which human creature, too, is created. And there is an intimation implicit in the Eucharist that the sacramental transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ is a dimension of the transformation of human creature into a holy (although certainly still human) creature. Since the Reformation, interpretations of the Eucharist have been a source of division among western Christians. The churches which identified themselves as Reformed have wanted to see the presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine as symbolic. Lutherans have insisted that, while bread remains bread and wine remains wine, yet, in the power of the Holy Spirit the bread communicates the body of Christ, and the wine, the real presence of his blood. Roman Catholics have been understood to believe that the Eucharistic prayer changes the substance of the bread and wine themselves, so that the bread becomes in fact Christ's body, and the wine, his blood. The ecumenical conversations of the last one hundred years have done much to clarify these observations, which we now understand to be more often than not caricatures of other communions and their eucharistic theologies. These conversations have done much to foster a profound theological convergence among Christians, which

in turn has gone far to bring cooperation in social action and ministry to common communities, the mutual recognition of ministry in common worship, and even common celebration of the Eucharist.

Curiosity about the nature of the sacraments, however, led me to the deeper question of the ontological presuppositions that allow, conceptually and experientially, the logic of the sacrament. I began to sense, not only that the sacraments are a witness to formative and transformative relationship of the finite and the infinite,² but that the universe in its expansiveness as the habitation of humankind is, in the words of Archbishop William Temple, a "sacramental universe"³; and that therefore the issues involved in a proper understanding of the Eucharist were nothing less than the enormous issues raised by inquiry into the relationship of nature and grace. And this awareness has led me to Joseph Sittler.

This project has taken longer and been more daunting than I could have anticipated at the beginning. Among other things I have learned that, however many hours one may spend reading and writing in solitude, the production of a doctoral dissertation is not the sort of thing that one can do alone. There have been

²Paul Tillich, The History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism, ed., Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), has been particularly instructive for this insight. Cf. especially Part I, Ch. 5, and Part II, Ch. 3.

³William Temple, Nature, Man and God (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1953).

occasions for gladness. Those few days that I have been able to devote to single-minded, concentrated, and uninterrupted writing have been a joy. Sittler's short books and many articles are always "a good read." And the diversity of his own interests have allowed me not only to read theology but also to investigate the canons of poetry and to attend the events of the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal, all in the name of dissertation research!

More important are those with whom I have come into contact along the way. Whenever I have been among Lutherans (and other Christians, too) in North America I have met women and men who knew Sittler as a teacher, as a lecturer, as a pastor, as a friend. Our conversations have not only illuminated his thought; they have also made the large spirit of his personality the more alive to me. Of the many with whom I have engaged in discussion, I want especially to thank Professors Philip Hefner of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and Martin Marty of the University of Chicago. Their brief suggestions have pointed me in particularly fruitful directions. At an early stage of my research the library staff of the Lutheran School of Chicago shared with me the thorough bibliographical work done on Sittler by Peter Bakken, who was at that time a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago. I am deeply indebted to Mr. Bakken and to the staff of the Jesuit-Kraus-McCormick Library at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago for their generosity.

Colleagues and teachers at McGill University have also provided many hours of stimulating conversation and encouragement. Andrew Taylor and Eric Beresford have been generous with their provocations and observations, and I am glad for their friendship and grateful for their scholarship. I am most grateful to Professor Douglas John Hall for his enthusiasm and counsel from the inception of this project to its conclusion.

Theology is of and for the church, and I would be remiss to neglect the congregations and parishioners whose lives have become intertwined with mine during the time in which I have been writing. New Hope Lutheran Church and Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church supported me in a difficult move from the high plains of Colorado to the inner city of Montréal. Both the Evangelische Lutherische Sankt Johannes Gemeinde and Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church offered sanctuary for worship and opportunity for service in pastoral ministry during my sojourn in Montreal. The recent months that I have spent with Our Savior Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Student Fellowship of Dartmouth College, in Hanover, New Hampshire, have brought unqualified joy. In these parishes I have met many who have helped keep me afloat in one way or another, and who merit an expression of my appreciation. Glen and Barb, Tom and Charlotte, and Darlene have helped in particularly concrete ways. Helmut and Grace have afforded boundless hospitality. In recent months Liese, Kimm, and Ruth have been constant in their encouragement of and enthusiasm for my writing. Evelyn Johnson has read several drafts of this

manuscript with painstaking scrupulosity, and it is much the better for her corrections of spelling and grammar. Mange Takk!

My family has waited a long time for me to complete this project. I have been absent from too many occasions marking significant transitions in our little "clan." We look forward to more times together than we have had as brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews.

I remember vividly a summer day when, as children on our father's farm in the Red River Valley of northwestern Minnesota, my older sister and I took dirt from a cultivated field and held it in our hands, and felt awe for the black richness of the loam. I think it was then that I first realized that human beings are intricately and organically connected to the earth of which we are created and to which we shall return. I am saddened that my father died before I could give this work to him, in partial payment for our flax field north of the trees. Chief among my champions has been his sister, Hazel. I trust that she will recognize my gratitude to her as I ask her to receive this for him, and for my mother, from whom I first heard the stories of breaking sod in Prairie View.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
The Massachusetts Institute of Technology
August, 1995

INTRODUCTION:
THE INTERCALATED WEB OF MEANING
"All Things": The Fecundating Matter for Theology

"Nature and grace" is the theme that predominated in the mature thought of Joseph Sittler as a systematic and constructive theologian. A theologian of the Lutheran Church in America, and of one of its predecessor bodies, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, he served for many years as an American Lutheran representative to the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. It was the task of this commission to seek out ways by which the Christian witness to Jesus Christ as Lord of the earth might be made more credible by the establishment of real unity among Christians who had been divided for centuries. Reflecting on his efforts on this commission, Sittler claimed that unity would have to be a matter, not of administrative reorganization or theological reconstruction, but obedience to the theological fact that God has given the human being a home within the world of nature. He writes,

I was asked to address the Assembly of the World Council of Churches on the theme, The Unity of the Church ... And I came up with the conclusion that the unity of Christ's church was a gift not likely to be bestowed as a reward for ever so fresh rearrangements of past theological formulations or forms of the church, but would be given when the churches asked together, and really waited for an answer to the question -- what is the substance of that ethical obedience which is required by this time's facts about man's behavior in history and in his creaturely placement within the world of nature?¹

¹Joseph Sittler, "Nature and Grace: Reflections on an Old Rubric" (Dialog 3, Winter, 1964), p. 252f.

That particular venture led to his creative and provocative address to the World Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1961, in which he proposed, not simply

a christology of the moral soul, a christology of history, ... [or] a christology [if not of the ontic then christological] affirmations ... so huge as to fill the space marked out by ontological questions ... but ... a daring, penetrating, life-affirming christology of nature.²

Such a Christology, he claimed, is "Christology expanded to its cosmic dimensions, made passionate by the pathos of this threatened earth, and made ethical by the love and wrath of God."³ He acknowledged later that this effort was "more exciting than extensive, brighter in promise than substantial as an argument."⁴ Nonetheless he pushed forward, and his effort to clarify and substantiate what he had suggested led him to find it "impossible to stop short of raising again the huge and venerable issue of Nature and Grace."⁵ In the thought of Joseph Sittler, "Nature and Grace," while it informs the theological themes of Eucharist and Eschatology, and while it is instructed by the claim and promise of Christology, is fundamentally a First

²Sittler, "Called to Unity" (The Ecumenical Review, Vol. 14, No. 2, Jan. 1962), p. 183.

³Ibid., p. 186. (Sittler is inconsistent, even in the same article, in his capitalization of such terms as "Christology." In citing material, I will follow the author's own practice. In my own writing, I will use upper case for nouns, and lower case for adjectival forms.)

⁴Sittler, "Nature and Grace: Reflections on an Old Rubric", p. 253.

⁵Ibid.

Article consideration which provides a substantial theological basis for that discipline in what we have come to recognize as an "ecological, nuclear age."⁶

Biographical Sketch

Joseph Sittler, Jr., was an American theologian, born in Upper Sandusky, Ohio, in 1904. He was the third child and second son in the large family of the pastor of a German-American congregation of the Joint Synod of Ohio, which church body later became part of the United Lutheran Church in 1920, and of the Lutheran Church in America in 1962. Sittler was a graduate of Wittenberg University and of Hamma Divinity School in Springfield Ohio. He was ordained into the ministry of the United Lutheran Church in 1930, and served as pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in Cleveland, Ohio, until 1943, when he was called to Maywood, Illinois, to teach systematic theology at the Chicago Lutheran Seminary. In 1953 he was appointed Professor of Theology at the Federated School of Theology, later the Divinity School, of the University of Chicago. He served as president of the American Theological Society in 1951 and he was a member of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches from 1958 to 1966. He was a regular delegate to the assemblies of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches. Following his retirement from the University of Chicago in 1972,

⁶The words are borrowed from Sallie McFague, The Body of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

he was appointed "Distinguished Professor in Residence" at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. He held this position until his death in 1987.

The Argument in Summary

The first chapter of this thesis is a survey of the doctrine of creation and preservation and of the attitudes towards nature in the history of Christian thought and western culture and in current conversation. It is often alleged that Christian faith is supportive of destructive human attitudes towards the earth. At best, indeed, the witness is ambiguous, as Paul Santmire has pointed out.⁷ Joseph Sittler, however, asserts, in the words of C. S. Lewis, that "God likes matter; God made it!"⁸ That affirmation notwithstanding, it remains that the doctrine of creation in the Christian tradition has little to say about "the creation" of "nature" as such. This affirmation -- and the correspondent lacunae -- is a part of the consensus of the "classic formulation of doctrines of creation" from Origen to Calvin. As modernity has moved away from the theological and religious presuppositions of the Reformation era and its antecedents, the world of nature has been increasingly understood

⁷Cf. H. Paul Santmire, The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

⁸Sittler, "Theology of the Land," taped lecture presented to the Wisconsin Rural Development Center, March 1985. Sittler does not in fact acknowledge C. S. Lewis; cf., however, Carl Braaten, "The Sacramental Principle" in Principles of Lutheran Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 273.

as "other", over against the human observer of the world of nature. This world is considered to be desacralized and available for utilitarian purposes. This mood changed somewhat in the nineteenth century as thinkers of the Romantic era claimed a higher estimation of creation in its beauty and violence. Chapter One traces the thread of the doctrine of creation and of attitudes towards nature through neo-orthodoxy and introduces the consideration of Joseph Sittler as a signal statement on the issue.

The main body of the dissertation fills out Sittler's thought in light of his sketches and provocations. Chapter Two addresses the "cosmic scope" of Sittler's Christology. After his presentation at New Delhi, his thought, like that of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin², was considered to be "poetic" but speculative and too removed from the individual in history to be a christological witness to the saving acts of God. Chapter Two identifies the sources of Sittler's Christology, not only in light of the work done by other twentieth century theologians who developed a Christology of cosmic scope, but also in light of Chalcedonian and Lutheran Christology.

²Sittler has indicated his debt to Karl Rahner in Essays on Nature and Grace (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), pp. 106, 115, 131, 133). I have found no specific reference to Teilhard in his writings although I understand from conversations with those who worked with Sittler that he read Teilhard with profit and appreciation. Moira Creede, in her dissertation on Sittler's thought (Logos and Lord: The Cosmic Christology of Joseph Sittler. Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Leuven), has argued persuasively for the compatibility of Sittler's Christology with the more fully developed statements of both Rahner and Teilhard.

It was for his christological statement at New Delhi that Sittler first gained international attention as a constructive theologian, and Christology is central to his theological effort. Although long respected for his concern for the care of the earth, Sittler insisted towards the end of his life that his theology "is not derived from nature; it is a theology of the incarnation applied to nature -- which is quite different."¹⁰ The application to nature, however, requires that Christology be sufficiently expansive to match the scope of spatial and temporal awarenesses of modern people in their individuality and particularity. Nonetheless he insists as well that a Christology of such scope not lose sight of the particularity of Jesus as the One in whom we encounter the "incandescence" of the grace of God. Sittler's theology is therefore relentlessly christological. It is not radically christocentric, however, but rigorously trinitarian, for, he maintains, only an adequate doctrine of the Trinity is a sufficient basis for a theology "for" the earth.¹¹

Chapter Three discusses the "means of grace" in Sittler's thought. For one who is so able to see the presence of God in that which he beholds in the world around him, Sittler has surprisingly little to say about baptism as the means by which God's grace is communicated to the person in the rite of

¹⁰Sittler, Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations, ed. by Linda-Marie Delloff, with a foreword by Martin E. Marty (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), p. 67.

¹¹In this Sittler shows affinity with Gustav Wingren. We will recognize his dependence upon the early to mid-twentieth century Scandinavian interpreters of Luther.

initiation into the Christian community, and only a little more to say about the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Perhaps this is because, as he observes, "grace is institutionalized by Rome; it is individualized by Lutheran dogmatics."¹² But for Sittler, grace is more than the "forgiveness of sins" given to individuals. Sittler understands that grace is operative in the world of daily activity, where men and women are confronted with ethical questions of increasing complexity. This is the situation in which Sittler, the preacher and the poet, attends throughout his career as a theologian, to "the doctrine of the Word" in which language serves as a means of grace to shape the human creature's perception of the reality of the surrounding world.

The third chapter concludes that the means of grace are not limited to the word and sacraments of the Christian churches. Culture, too, may serve as a vehicle by which grace may be communicated to human beings. On the other hand, the means of grace are constitutive of community. Chapter Four proceeds from this to discuss how Christology and the means of grace form the theological foundation for Sittler's ethics. Sittler was a keen observer of culture and was sharply and shrewdly aware of the ethical complexity of modern industrialization and urbanization. Nonetheless culture cannot develop without attention to the care of the earth itself. And yet: attention to the earth cannot be given at the expense of appropriate structures of human

¹²"Depersonalization," p. 165.

community, either. The hard decisions of common life in community with other human beings and with the earth itself demand that people live in faith as trust in the gracious will of the God who is Creator and Lord of heaven and earth.

Finally, chapter Five discusses Sittler's understanding of the eschatological as foundational for theological and ethical reflection. For Sittler, Eschatology does not simply refer to a sense of the future beyond time, but the sense of human, creaturely finitude in contrast to the infinite Creator. In the course of the development of the argument throughout these chapters, it will become clear that Sittler is consistently informed by Martin Luther's witness to Jesus Christ as the One who comes bringing God's grace to God's creation.

Limits to the Discussion

While Sittler's thought has significance for "theology of nature" or for "environmental ethics," it is not my intention, nor was it his, to present his theology as a "theology of nature." His theology is rather a trinitarian and christological expression of concerns arising from the First Article of the Creed. These trinitarian and christological emphases inform theological discussion of ecology, environment, and ethics. Consequently, while these areas are implicit in the discussion, they are not the focus of discussion. Ecological awareness is significant for Sittler's thought, but as an analogy for understanding the interrelatedness of the whole of created

reality to which the gospel of God's grace in creation and redemption is brought to bear. Sittler's Beecher lectures, delivered at Yale in 1968, were indeed entitled The Ecology of Faith; but "ecology", which he defines as "the science that deals with the mutual relationship between organisms and the environment,"¹³ is not itself the subject of his lecture series on preaching in the modern situation. The use of the concept of "ecology" is, rather, for Sittler, "an effort to illuminate the present situation of preacher and parish by exploring the relational determinants suggested by the science of ecology."¹⁴ It is the attempt, he says aphoristically, to find "an analogy big enough to do justice to all the trees, and at the same time lure the mind to the forest."¹⁵ That is to say, "ecology" is a metaphor to remind the hearer of the totality of the reality to which the modern preacher must address the Christian message. Thus Sittler writes,

Every situation in which the Word of God is declared in preaching is a place and a moment on [a] riverbank [where the trees grow and decay]; and the permeability of that time and place to the declared Word is bound up with the forests, the birds, the beetles, and the waters of history. From Incarnation to culture is a straight line, for the determination of God to embody his ultimate Word places man's relation to that Word inextricably in the web of historical circumstances. The Word is not naked, it is historically embodied. The hearing situation is not naked, either, and culture is the name for that ecological matrix in which the

¹³Sittler, The Ecology of Faith (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg Press, 1961), p. 3.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 3.

embodied will and deed from above addresses the embodied hearer at every point along history's river.¹⁶

Ecology serves Sittler as an extended metaphor for a theology of comprehensive scope, and is granted a large measure of his theological curiosity. But discussion of the science of ecology itself will be outside the scope of this essay.¹⁷

Among the aphorisms one encounters regularly in Sittler's writing is the question asked by a student, "But how can anything mean unless everything means.?" The original context for the question was a classroom lecture on pre-nicene Christology. The profundity of the question, Sittler explains, is that "unless there is a Christology whose magnitude is somehow congruent with the magnitude of [the student's] personal experience as reflected

¹⁶Ibid., p. 4f.

¹⁷Theological reflection on ecology per se has been done by, for example, Thomas Berry, C.P., with Thomas Clarke, S. J., Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 1991); Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), with foreword by Brian Swimme; Sallie McFague, God's Body: An Ecological Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Jürgen Moltmann, Gott in der Schöpfung: ökologische Schöpfungslehre (Munich: Christ Kaiser Verlag, 1985); Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), with essays by Audrey Shenendoah, Ismar Schorsch, Sallie McFague, J. Ronald Engel, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Dalai Lama, Robert Prescott-Allen, and Steven C. Allen. Early scientists to reflect on the transcendent aspect of nature include Loren Eiseley, The Star Thrower (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), with introduction by W. H. Auden; Lewis Thomas, The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), Idem., Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony (New York: Bantam Books, 1983). See also Bill Devall and George Sessions, Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985).

in the world, then nothing will have much meaning."¹⁹ Much of the constructive work done by other systematic theologians who take the student's question seriously is reflection on the relationship between religion and science.²⁰ Philip Hefner, for example, has written,

the creation-affirmation stands in an especially intimate interface with the ordinary, secular, nontheologically concerned realities of life ... The various themes in which the discussion has been divided indicate the points at which nontheological conversations engage the reflection on creation: beginnings of the world and life; the process of history; the nature of the human being and the processes underlying human development; endings, whether that be thought of as extinction of the species, the death of the planet and the universe, or individual death; and the question of final perfection whether in this life or in some other.²⁰

These questions were of interest to Sittler, whose education as an undergraduate included the study of biology and who was curious about the significance of the study of modern physics for constructive theology. But the study of the relationship of science to theology as a discrete subject of inquiry will also be outside the scope of this thesis.

¹⁹"A Protestant Point of View," in John Miller, C. S. C., ed., Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press; New York: Association Press, 1966), p. 434.

²⁰Cf., eg., Ted Peters, ed., Cosmos as Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), with essays by Arthur Peacocke, Ian G. Barbour, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert John Russell, Nancy C. Murphy, Roger E. Timm, and H. Paul Santmire.

²⁰Philip Hefner, "The Doctrine of Creation" in Christian Dogmatics, ed. by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) Vol. I, p. 353.

Nor is this an essay in ethics. Sittler's contribution to the study of ethics is esteemed highly²¹. But Sittler does not understand theological ethics to be a discipline unto itself. He identifies this perspective as a particularly Lutheran perspective, derived from the Lutheran understanding of the nature of the Gospel: "The Gospel is an action of God which, in faith, creates a reacting orientation of a man's whole life to God. The believer's life is determined by the new life stream of faith."²² Ethical judgment has its roots in awareness of "the love and wrath of God."²³ Ethical reflection is accountable to theology; ethical existence is first of all theological existence. Sittler's basis for saying this is the Bible itself:

The Bible is relentlessly ethical; but it is not a summary of ethics, however elevated. To drop in on the teachings of Jesus as if in their naked aphoristic simplicity they were self-evident, or even intelligible, is like dropping in on the coda of a Bach fugue having missed the polyphonic development.²⁴

That Sittler is aware of the ethical significance his theology is evident at nearly every turn. But this dissertation is a

²¹Cf. Edward LeRoy Long, A Survey of Christian Ethics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 143-5; James M. Gustafson, Christ and the Moral Life (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 174-176; Gustafson, Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 120-122.

²²The Doctrine of the Word: in Lutheran Theology (Philadelphia: The Board of Publication of the United Lutheran Church of America, 1948), p. 10.

²³Cf. "Called to Unity," p. 186.

²⁴Sittler, "What Is the Nature of Man," p. 190.

discussion, not of Sittler as an ethicist, but as a theologian, attentive both to the historic tradition of Christian faith and to the current need of the world in which he finds himself placed.

V. Method and Sources in the Theology of Joseph Sittler

The writer of an earlier dissertation on the thought of Joseph Sittler described him as a theologian "with both feet planted firmly in mid-air"²⁵ -- an appellation of which Sittler himself heartily approved.²⁶ As a theologian, however, Sittler has come under constant criticism for what is perceived as lack of clarity:²⁷ for a way of speaking that is poetic and intuitive but judged to be speculative and even irrelevant. Sittler was aware of the complaints of his theological style and refused to apologize for it. In Essays on Nature and Grace he quotes Alfred North Whitehead's remark that "style is the morality of the mind"²⁸. If, he says, in his writing there is

... a certain looseness, a seeming leap from one kind of data to another, an unusual putting together of facts and reflections that seem on the surface to be

²⁵Creede, op. cit.

²⁶Sittler, Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook, p. 20.

²⁷Cf., e.g., Creede, op. cit., pp. xxviii; Steven C. Bouma-Prediger, Toward a New Christian Theology of Nature: A Critical Comparison of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltmann (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, The University of Chicago, 1992), p. 251, p. 277f.

²⁸Sittler, Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 2.

far apart, a symbiosis of insights that are biblical, historical, poetical, practical... ²⁹

then "these peculiarities are a way of being 'moral'." ³⁰ He was aware of the perils of such a style, he says, but chose "to disobey with my eyes open," ³¹ because one cannot divorce the particularity in which one practices a certain intellectual competence from the "web" of reality to which one and one's competency are wedded. To hold this awareness is "to be forced to open up theological speech according to the requirements of the theme itself." ³² He continues,

The 'web' apart from which I cannot think, or think about thinking, is the ecological structure of the human reality. The term 'ecology' has a transphysical meaning. It points with unadmissible stubbornness to the context of all things; it insists that no thing exists apart from all things. All orders have uncertain edges, all categories leak, all propositions conceal a presupposition, or an aware or unaware limitation with which alone they are accurate or represent truth. ³³

Sittler holds this position on method and style consistently. In his early programmatic essay, "A Theology For Earth," he had already noted,

I am not an architectural systematic theologian at all! When I look at systematically wrought works like those of Tillich, Aulén, Niebuhr -- my first reaction is one of thundering astonishment! Examination of what they have done is a response secondary to my admiration for

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., p. 3.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., p. 3.

the fact that they have done it at all! What I have of intellect is so permeated by its involvement with sense, emotion and remembrance -- a feeling for the blend of consonance and dissonance in life, an intuition wholeness and a sense of humor called forth by all vigorous proposals of the partial, that it will forever be beyond my compass to produce a system about anything!²⁴

Consequently he understands himself as a theologian whose "systems" are constantly challenged by surrounding intimations of chaos. Yet, this "chaos" is the source of the theologian's creativity.²⁵

Thus he finds it impossible to articulate a predetermined "theological method". In Essays on Nature and Grace he writes,

My own disinclination to state a theological method is grounded in the strong conviction that one does not devise a method and then dig into the data; one lives with the data, lets their force, variety, and authenticity generate a sense for what Jean Danielou calls a "way of knowing" appropriate to the nature of the data. To the aggressive demand of several students that he state forthwith his theological method, Professor Tillich replied that the student was asking that something be supplied at the beginning of the sentence that could only come at the end! He added that he himself had not even raised the methodological question until he was two thirds of the way toward completion of his Systematic Theology.

Every theologian, to be sure, has a theological method, but the clarity and permeative force of it is likely to be disclosed even to himself only in the course of his most mature work. When that method does become clear it will be seen to have been a function of a disposition toward the evaluation of data in their living historical force, and not an imposition of abstract norms for "truth" or "authenticity" arrived at early and exercised consistently.

²⁴Sittler, "A Theology for Earth," p. 367.

²⁵Ibid., p. 368.

This "disposition toward the evaluation of data" is a profound largely subterranean thing... ²⁶

... every man has a dispositional bent which, when acknowledged, goes a long way toward understanding what one historian has called "the mystery of the mind's attention." Why does one person "attend" to what another does not? ²⁷

Earlier in his career he expresses this methodological interface of the theological and the experiential in terms of the double vocation of the theologian:

We have given, then, a Professor of Christian Theology. The poor man, unless he be a hod-carrier for a closed tradition or have a human soul carved of alabaster, will be alive and responsible to a double vocation: A vocation to work at the task of Christian Theology, and a vocation to citizenship in the twentieth century. The first vocation binds him to history, history in general and ecclesiastical history in particular. In obedience to this first vocation he must always look back and look down with responsibility, with gratitude, and in complete teachableness. In obedience to his second vocation (and this vocation is from God, too -- for he was born a man on earth before he was called to a professorship on a theological faculty), he must look his day full in the face, participate in the joyous thud of ideas in collision, listen to its multiple voices, become creature of its vitalities and torments. But as a man of this day he cannot avoid coming to terms with the fact that what he has to communicate is so radically strange to the symbolical mentality of his time that he can scarce find hooks to hang it on, allusions to convey it with, or a matrix of association to bear it forth. ²⁸

This double concern for accountability to the theological tradition and accountability to the experience of the world in which one lives is reinforced with regularity by appeal to Joseph

²⁶Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 20.

²⁷Ibid., p. 21.

²⁸"A Theology for Earth", p. 368.

Haroutunian: "Man's mind follows the fortunes of his body with an absolute seriousness."³⁹

Sittler's refusal to apologize for so seemingly chaotic a methodological predisposition has another source as well. He also sees this kind of seemingly "a-systematic" methodological predisposition at work in the thought of Martin Luther. In The Doctrine of the Word, he writes:

There is, to be sure, a sense of the term systematic thinker before which Luther would not qualify -- which in fact he would not understand. If, that is, the connotation of system which is proper to propositional logic is made absolute, then Luther was not systematic. But we must decidedly reject any such presumption. There is a system proper to the dissection of the dead; and there is a system proper to the experience and description of the living. There is a system proper to the inorganic; and there is a system proper to an organism. A crystal has a system. But so does a living personality in the grip of a central certainty. If, then, by system one means that there is in a man's thought a central authority, a pervasive style, a way of bringing every theme and judgment and problem under the rays of the central illumination, then it must be said that history shows few men of comparable integration.⁴⁰

This central authority in Luther's thought is identified as faith:

This "common center" and "glowing core" of Luther's theology and -- despite the complex and embattled course of Lutheran theology since the sixteenth century -- of Lutheran theology today is faith as an independent form of the apprehension, reception, and actualization of the life of God. Whenever theology is informed by faith as its constituent principle an unmistakable dynamism pervades its every part and method. This is so because when God is known by faith,

³⁹The Anguish of Preaching, p. 35; "The Scope of Christological Reflection," p. 332.

⁴⁰The Doctrine of the Word, p. 4.

that very way of knowing bestows an immediacy of relationship not communicable in subject-object ways of knowledge.⁴¹

God can not be known as an "object of knowledge" but only as one knows another in the context of a relationship. The nature of the relationship between God and the human being is "faith." To characterize further this relationship of faith, Sittler appeals to Luther, in much the same way and for much the same reason as he appeals to Joseph Haroutunian. His own way of "doing" theology reflects the experience of both the Reformed theologian and the Reformer who said, "I did not learn my theology all at once; I had to ponder it ever more deeply, and my spiritual trials [tentiones, i.e., Anfechtungen] were of help to me in this."⁴² Sittler concludes for himself that

One cannot engage in theological study, live in the encounter with the absolutely crucial, without anguish the institution (both church and seminary) and the world want adjustment, not anguish Luther searched deep, and the searching-place was pointed out to him by his temptations.⁴³

Conrad Simonson offers a slightly different perspective on Sittler's methodological concerns. Assessing Sittler's theological position as expressed in New Delhi, Simonson writes that, "Underlying Professor Sittler's call for a cosmic Christology was an understanding of man irretrievably engaged

⁴¹Ibid., p. 5f.

⁴²Luther's Works, American Edition, Vol. 54, Table Talk, p. 50.

⁴³The Anguish of Preaching, p. 32.

with the world."⁴⁴ In New Delhi Sittler had cited Allan Galloway's observation that the cosmic scope of grace was mandated if one wanted to avoid a dualism which "condemns the whole physical order as not being of God."⁴⁵ Referring to this, Simonson concludes that

cosmic Christology was proposed not as an evasion of ordinary human experience but as a necessary corollary of man's ever more exact knowledge and involvement of world structure and process. Christology, Sittler contended, must operate with a conceptual magnitude appropriate to the whole of man's experience and environment.⁴⁶

The far-reaching nature of Sittler's ecological theology is demonstrated also by the variety of his sources. Sittler is one of the "rare theologians" for whom literature serves not merely as illustrative material, "barometers of the cultural situation," or, in the words of Marshall McLuhan, the DEW line of civilization,⁴⁷ but, in the words of Nathan Scott, as "fecundating material for theological reflection."⁴⁸ In so

⁴⁴Conrad Simonson, The Christology of the Faith and Order Movement (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), p. 180.

⁴⁵Sittler, "Called to Unity", p. 178-179; cited by Simonson, p. 180.

⁴⁶Simonson, p. 180.

⁴⁷Cited by Douglas John Hall, Thinking the Faith: Theology in a North American Context (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), p. 138.

⁴⁸Nathan Scott, The Poetics of Belief: Studies in Coleridge, Arnold, Pater, Santayana, Stevens and Heidegger (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 171, n. 50.

doing Sittler exemplifies the project of Nathan Scott, who writes that

it is no doubt the case that many of those who give their allegiance to the decorums normally governing systematic thought are inclined to regard such modes of apprehension as have just been described -- the confrontative, the compositive, the stylistic, and the archetypal -- as issuing from (in Samuel Johnson's definition of the imagination) "a licentious and vagrant faculty ... [which] has always endeavored to baffle the logician ... and burst the inclosures of regularity." Certainly Western philosophy, whether in its traditional or its contemporary phases, has only very rarely permitted itself to be fructified by the poetic imagination. And in this, surprising though it may be, not even does theology present any exception: amongst the major theologians of the modern period there is virtually none -- excepting possibly Soren Kierkegaard and John Henry Newman -- whose work would appear to have been influenced in any decisive way by poetic methods and modalities. Both philosophers and theologians characteristically assume that the kinds of procedures and insights supervised by the poetic imagination represent "only a vague ... and uncertain way of talking, more useful for expressing human feelings and aspirations than for ... formulating coherent rational arguments." And thus both give Dr. Johnson's "licentious ... faculty" very short shrift indeed.⁴⁹

The Thesis

Sittler's project as a constructive theologian attentive both to the classic Christian tradition of antiquity and to the questions of the century in which he lived is to move the accents from christocentric to trinitarian thought; from grace given in redemption to grace present in creation. In this movement Sittler anticipates the thought of his younger contemporary, the Swedish theologian Gustav Wingren:

⁴⁹Scott, *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

that which is the most important point in the Bible, in the early church, and the most important point for Luther ... is the fact that God acts directly in the running of the world -- creating and giving life -- without going through the Church. [When that is not understood and appropriated it] is faith in the Creator that is being gouged away.⁵⁰

Yet Sittler himself has come under fire particularly from other Lutheran theologians who find in his thought a too positive assessment of the human creature and of the creation. This should not be surprising. Gustav Wingren suggests that Lutheran theologians since Luther do not have a positive understanding of the human creature and creation because in Luther's own thought, "no direct line from the gospel to the [human] body is to be found."⁵¹ Wingren finds this observation curious because "the New Testament is full of stories about healing miracles, where Jesus heals the sick and thus gives the body a liberating gift."⁵² Wingren finds it to be a peculiarity that "Luther consistently interprets these texts so that physical evil is understood as guilt and the health which Jesus confers is understood as the forgiveness of sins."⁵³ According to Wingren, Luther's emphasis on personal guilt and personal forgiveness has permeated Lutheran piety and doctrine since the time of the Reformation. Wingren continues, "one notes the same

⁵⁰Gustav Wingren, "The Doctrine of Creation", in Word and World Vol. IV, no. 4 (Fall 1984), p. 370.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 367.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

accent on sin and forgiveness in Luther even in the interpretation of the Lord's Supper. The Small Catechism compresses the gift of the Lord's Supper into "the forgiveness of sins." Other churches put other aspects in the liturgical center in the celebration of the Lord's Supper (e.g., the offering of one's self, the element of praise), but the Lutheran churches persist in their emphasis on confession and absolution."²⁴

Wingren suggests that this emphasis derived from the confluence of two things: Luther's own sense of personal guilt and anxiety before God, and the historical-political time in which he found himself located, and to which he contributed.

Wingren writes,

Luther was an interpreter of the Bible ... That he was able to break in pieces the medieval sacramental pyramid with its seven sacraments and give a new place in the congregation to baptism and the Lord's Supper was surely something much bigger and bolder than any analysis which he made of the function of the princes in the world But this fearless man is at the same time burdened with anxiety -- not anxiety before the emperor or before people, but anxieties before God's final judgment.

He finds in the Scriptures clearly set forth and in plain words, even though distorted and squandered away by the church, precisely what he needs: the forgiveness of sins, constantly given anew in the Word and the Sacrament. His personal courage and his personal anxiety work together to make him immovable with respect to his separation of law and gospel: the law belongs to the world, the gospel alone is to govern the church."²⁵

²⁴Ibid., p. 367.

²⁵Ibid., p. 368.

Thus Wingren's thought is an exposition of Sittler's contention that the Medieval Church institutionalized grace and the Reformers personalized it.⁵⁶ Wingren points out that "changes in the worldly realm, at the political level, made their contribution to this development ... It is ... biblical to allow earthly powers to take power away from the pope."⁵⁷ The historical and political context of the Reformation, however, is radically different from that of the New Testament and of the early church. Wingren argues that it is also radically different from our own time:

Luther's sharp division is still a problem, and it becomes increasingly a problem as secularization grows ... Luther inserts his biblically based conception into a political situation that did not exist in the Bible.⁵⁸

In his critical appreciation of both the significance and limits of Luther's insight for the time in which we live, Wingren, like Sittler, appeals to Irenaeus:

One confronts a much clearer and more fully developed faith in creation upon reading what the church Father IRENAEUS says about God's work in the world ... The Lutheran churchman intrudes the activities of the church into creation and accounts for the good in the world by reference to the influence of the gospel, which Irenaeus never does. He perceives from afar that such ideas smell of Gnosticism -- and they taste of Marcion, the arch-heretic.⁵⁹

⁵⁶Cf. *supra*, p. 13.

⁵⁷Wingren, *op. cit.*, p. 368f.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 369.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 370.

Wingren emphasizes the theological significance for a theology of creation that arises from this distinction between the situation of the Reformation and the situation of the early church:

[Luther's] separation of existence into two parts did not exist in the early church. For Irenaeus the line runs directly from the gospel to the body. Baptism and Eucharist yield Resurrection, not only forgiveness of sins for the harassed conscience. The point in what is said about the restoration of creation (recapitulatio) is that everything which God has created has a part in the salvation which God gives in Christ. The great antithesis is between death and life, not between guilt and forgiveness. Therefore, paradoxically, Irenaeus is really closer to us than Luther is.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, Wingren insists, even in Luther there is respect for nature and recognition of the work of God and presence of God, albeit hidden, in creation and in nature itself. Luther calls this hidden presence, *die Mummerei*, (masquerade) or *das Maskenspiel* (masked ball).

Nature (and also the community) is God's disguise. The Creator appears disguised hidden behind masks, one after the other. A fruit tree, or rain is a disguise for God. The mother who gives her breast to her child is also a disguise, *eine Maske, eine Mumme*. All the way God is giving life, but he does it disguised. All we see are the externals, the *larvae Dei* (masks of God).⁶¹

The mask, however, can be penetrated by the gift of faith, and God recognized behind the externals:

Faith breaks through the masquerade. It tears the mask from God's face and lays hold on God himself; it grasps his true nature, which is love. Whoever does not believe sees only the external things and serves up banalities about cause and effect, the chain of causality, etc., never God. Faith sees through what

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 361f.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 363.

God hides; faith discloses God as he is, the Giver of life behind it all -- Love.⁶²

Consequently a case can be made for a positive assessment of nature and a high doctrine of creation in Luther, if not in all of Luther's theological heirs:

Luther devotes a good deal of space to specific inquiries or to just what the doctrine of creation implies. At the same time, the picture of the Creator's work is complicated by Luther's sharp distinction between "body" and "conscience" and by the associated distinction between the law and the gospel (the worldly and the spiritual regimes). In the era of Lutheran Orthodoxy when the unity between the church and the state came to be almost total -- which was not the case at the time of the Reformation -- the doctrine of creation was in danger of being derailed.⁶³

In his discussion of theological method, Sittler speaks of method as a "predisposition towards data"; a controlling idea that governs all else. Or (to use another phrase from Joseph Haroutunian) it is a "piety of mind". Nathan Scott has correctly identified this "ruling passion" in the thought of Joseph Sittler as the rubric of "Nature and Grace" which Scott himself wants to speak of as "the doctrine of Creation." For, Scott observes, Sittler

has perceived, with a very great clarity, that it is, indeed, the doctrine of Creation which has been the major casualty of modern theology in the world of Protestantism, and one feels that the overriding interest in his career of recent years has been that of reclaiming for the theological testimony of our period what is at every point implicit in the declarations of

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., p. 365.

the Psalmist, that the earth is the Lord's and all the fullness thereof.⁶⁴

This proposal as described by Scott is in fact a near restatement of what Sittler himself, in "A Theology for Earth", called the constructive task of theology:

The largest, most insistent, and most delicate task awaiting Christian theology is to articulate such a theology for nature as shall do justice to the vitalities of earth and henceforth correct a current theological naturalism which succeeds in speaking meaningfully of earth only at the cost of repudiating specifically Christian categories. Christian Theology cannot advance this work along the line of an orthodoxy -- neo or old -- which celebrates the love of heaven in complete separation from man's lives in earth, abstract commitment to Christ from relevancy to those loyalties of earth which are elemental to being. Any faith in God which shall be redemptive and regenerative in actuality dare not be alien to the felt ambiguities of earth or remain wordless in the resounding torment of history and culture. For the earth is not merely a negative illustration of the desirability of heaven!⁶⁵

It is as a corrective to the "near derailing of the doctrine of creation" in modern theology, then, that we look to the thought of Joseph Sittler. It is true that Sittler appears to ignore the more recognizably Lutheran categories of "law and gospel" in order to work as what Scott calls "a catholic theologian in obedience to the Lutheran communion"⁶⁶ and operating instead with the categories of "Nature and Grace."

⁶⁴Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Poetry and Theology of Earth: Reflections on the Testimony of Joseph Sittler and Gerard Manley Hopkins" (The Journal of Religion, Vol. 54, No. 2, April 1974), p. 103f.

⁶⁵Sittler, "A Theology for Earth", p. 373f.

⁶⁶Scott, "The Poetry and Theology of Earth", p. 102.

Nonetheless, we shall find in what Paul Santmire has called, Sittler's "elegant system", a provocative retrieval, however implicit, of what Luther called "the masks of God." This retrieval, when coupled with the breadth and scope which (in Sittler's estimation) the modern situation demands of theology, and with the sense of continuity of creation and redemption that is found in Irenaeus, provides him with a vigorous, life-affirming theology for earth cast in the old Augustinian categories of "Nature and Grace."

CHAPTER I

NATURE, GRACE, CREATION: DISJUNCTIONS AND CONJUNCTIONS IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Das Gott creator heist, das ist ein vnerforschlich ding, vnd Gott schafft doch teglich Das sind lauter vnderverck! Gott ist in der creatur, die vlrckt vnd schafft er. Aber wir achtens nicht vnd suchen dieueyl secundas vnd philosophicas causus; damit lernt man den artickel nymer mehr recht de creatione.

--Luther

1. Contempt for the Earth? Current Emergency and Historical Observations

American Vice-President Al Gore has written a penetrating analysis of what has come to be known as the ecological crisis. In his book, Earth in the Balance, Gore describes environmental degradation and accelerated disaster in global perspective. The events he reports are catastrophic, the kind of thing that has come to be described in popular parlance as "apocalyptic." Gore invokes support from a variety of disciplines in his assessment of the global situation. But while the network of the problem is complex, he claims that the root cause of the situation is fundamentally simple:

The need for personal equilibrium can be described in an even simpler way. The more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual. As a politician, I know full well the special hazards of using "spiritual" to describe a problem like this one. For many, it is like one of those signs that warns a motorist, Steep Slope -- Truckers Use Brake. But what other word describes the collection of values

¹Martin Luther, Werke, Weimar Ausgabe Tischreden 5, 17, 10-23 (1540).

and assumptions that determine our basic understanding of how we fit into the universe?²

In two core chapters of his book Gore clarifies what he means by describing the global environmental situation as a "spiritual" crisis. We live, he writes, in a culture that is "dysfunctional" and "abusive". Indications of the absence of "personal equilibrium" are symptomatic of a larger problem rooted at a deeper level in a large community that includes human beings in relationship with each other, with the earth itself, and with God.

Gore presents his hypothesis specifically as a response to "Deep Ecology" and the "Gaia hypothesis." According to the "Gaia hypothesis", originated by James Lovelock, the entire earth is one complex self-regulating system that has maintained critical components of its support systems in perfect balance for eons -- until the present time.³ This hypothesis is echoed in the several schools of "Deep Ecology," one of which posits that the global ecosystem will in fact maintain its balance: but because life on the earth is of greater value than human life as such, the earth may, if necessary, maintain its balance at the expense of human life.

According to Al Gore, these theories are a refutation of the Cartesian principle that the human being is separate from the rest of creation, and the human being may with impunity observe,

²Al Gore, Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit (New York: Plume, 1993), p. 12.

³Ibid., p. 264.

analyze, utilize, develop, and exploit the rest of the earth and its resources. The Cartesian principle, Gore says, is a distortion of "the old story" of human beings living in relationship with the earth that is told, for example, in the Hebrew Scriptures. The "old story" tells of "God's covenant with both the earth and humankind, and its assignment to human beings of the role of good stewards and faithful servants."⁴ Because the "old story" has been distorted, the story needs to be told anew. The new telling must be a spiritual story, for the Cartesian distortion of the old story has left human communities devoid of a sense of the spiritual reality needed to maintain the appropriate balance between human beings and the earth upon which we live. Gore recognizes that the factors that account for the destruction of the biosphere by the human inhabitants of the planet are manifold: they are historical, cultural, and economic as well as spiritual or religious. Since before recorded history, human survival, to say nothing of the development of human culture, has depended upon manipulation of the environment by the human creature.

But with the Enlightenment, and particularly with the thought of René Descartes, there developed an intellectual rationale for separation of self and the world of one's habitation. The Cartesian world view privileges abstract thought and analysis over the experiences of feeling and affect. This has created a "cleavage between mind and body, intellect and

⁴Ibid, p. 218.

nature" resulting in a "psychic pain at the very root of the modern mind."⁵ Gore posits that the denial of affect and experience for the sake of abstract thought and analysis, and the denial of a sense of integral relationship with the rest of the earth, coupled with authoritarian structures that both depend upon and reinforce that denial, both leave the human creature numb and foster consumptive behaviour patterns that now threaten to destroy the earth.

As an antidote for this catastrophic systemic dysfunction and the consumptive addictive behaviours and processes that derive from it, Gore calls for an "Environmentalism of the Spirit". An "Environmentalism of the Spirit" rejects that interpretation of the concept of "dominion" of the earth in the second chapter of Genesis in which "dominion" means "the abusive exploitation and domination of the earth and of all that is vulnerable to one more powerful."⁶ An "Environmentalism of the Spirit" acknowledges that the "way we experience the world is governed by a kind of inner ecology that relates perception, emotions, thinking, and choices to forces outside ourselves."⁷

⁵Ibid., p. 219.

⁶Prof. Larry Rasmussen of Union Theological Seminary recently related to a group of Lutheran Campus Ministers that current research on the exegesis of this passage indicates that it has only been since Descartes that this passage has been interpreted in such a way as it could be seen to legitimate domination and exploitation. Prior to this time, the emphasis had always been on the stewardship of creation.

⁷Gore, p. 241.

This "Environmentalism of the Spirit" addresses a spiritual vacuum, characteristic of the resident of the modern industrialized world, that leads one to seek solace in the excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs or the insatiable accumulation of goods. It recognizes patterns of behaviour in families, communities, and the society at large, that deny the experience of affect that indicates that we are sentient beings who are in fact deeply connected to the earth itself. It questions all distractions that prevent human beings from recognizing their real connection with the natural world.

Because an "Environmentalism of the Spirit" is concerned for values, it recognizes the relationship between environmental degradation and social injustices. In opposition to those who insist that the intellectual and philosophical responsibility for environmental degradation comes from the Christian tradition and its roots in Jewish religion and Greek philosophy, it interprets both Hebrew and Greek Scriptures so as to clarify that "the duty to care for the earth is rooted in the fundamental relationship between God, creation, and humankind."² An "Environmentalism of the Spirit" recognizes that position in other religious traditions as well.

There are other scientific alternatives to Cartesian thought as well. For instance, the Heisenberg principle, posited earlier in this century, "established that the very act of observing a

²Ibid., p. 244.

natural phenomenon can change what is being observed."⁹ But of fundamental importance is the ability to see God in the world. "We are not used to seeing God in the world," Gore writes, "because we assume from the scientific and philosophical rules that govern us that the physical world is made up of inanimate matter whirling in accordance with mathematical laws and bearing no relation to life, much less ourselves." But Gore claims that "the image of God can be seen in every corner of creation, even in us, but only faintly. By gathering in the mind's eye all of creation, one can perceive the image of the Creator vividly."¹⁰

Al Gore is not alone in his assessment that the environmental crisis is a spiritual crisis. His basic assertion was anticipated by the Muslim theologian, Seyyed Hosein Nasr. In the Rockefeller Lectures presented to the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1966, Nasr argued that the environmental crisis grew from a lack of recognition of the "sacred" as a dimension of creation. This lack of recognition of the sacred allows the modern person to utilize all natural things for his or her own purposes. It is primarily a Western phenomenon, although it can not be legitimated by the Western religious traditions -- the "monolithic Abrahamic traditions," or what Douglas John Hall has called, following George P. Grant, "the tradition of Jerusalem." The tendency to plunder the earth is not seen in those lands influenced by the Near Eastern traditions Orthodox

⁹Ibid., p. 253.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 264.

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Nasr contended at that time that the Eastern traditions had not yet yielded to the temptation to exploit the earth for what the West alleged to be "human benefit" because they still saw that the earth itself was sacred. The intellectual development of the European West, however, had eradicated any sense of sacrality from the world of nature. This gave permission to Western science to develop technologies to explore and dominate the world of nature.

In a paragraph reminiscent of Gore's critique of western men and women caught up in "the myth of mastery," Nasr attributes such problems as over-population, urban congestion, the exhaustion of natural resources, the destruction of natural beauty, the technological disfiguration of the environment, and the rise of mental illness, to the "domination of nature." But it is not the "domination of nature" alone that is the culprit, but "[t]he sense of domination over nature and a materialistic conception of nature ... combined ... with a lust and sense of greed which makes an ever greater demand upon the environment."¹¹ Making reference to the thought of Joseph Sittler, Nasr links this materialism and lust to the lure of economic progress as an end in itself and to the particularly American belief of limitless resources, "as if the world of forms were not finite and bound by the very limits of those forms."¹²

¹¹Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1968, 1990), p. 5.

¹²*Ibid.*, p.40, n. 6. Cf. Sittler, The Ecology of Faith, p. 6.

Spiritual exercise has been replaced by jogging; spiritual ascent, by the conquest of mountains; the heavens are made accessible, not by prayer, but by the airplane and the space ship.

There is, Nasr laments, "everywhere the desire to conquer nature, but in the process the value of the conqueror himself, who is man, is destroyed and his very existence threatened." Science itself is the arbiter of values, its own value and goals no longer determined by criteria set by philosophers and theologians. Those who protest cannot be taken seriously because their protest is too often a matter of sentimentality, not spiritual vitality, and too many religious thinkers are afraid of offending the world of science, or being thought irrelevant. It is only rarely that one hears that "the belief in the domination of nature is the usurpation, from the religious point of view, of man's role as the custodian and guardian of nature."¹³

Considerations from the History of Christian Thought

Gore and Nasr, the one a Christian politician and a member of the Southern Baptist Convention, the other, a Muslim theologian, both identify the core issue of the environmental crisis as "spiritual." For Gore, the American Christian, the spiritual problem is to be found within the heart of the individual; for Nasr, the problem is the intellectual evisceration of a sense of spirit in the world of nature, and the

¹³Ibid., p. 19.

inability of people of faith to remind other people of their accountability before God for their use or misuse of the earth. By speaking of the "environmental crisis" as an issue of "spirituality," they tack a somewhat different course across the troubled waters of theological reflection on the environment and that devastation which threatens us with what is generally perceived as "apocalyptic urgency."

In the last decade there has been an increasing body of theological reflection on the environment, generally in an attempt to identify the theological roots of the crisis, and to look for alternatives within the tradition of Christian theology which people of Christian faith might use as a basis for their struggle on behalf of the earth. Lutheran theologian Harold Ditmanson, for instance, complained already in 1964 that Western Christendom expresses a long tradition of contempt for the natural order. Ditmanson locates this contempt first in the theology of the early church, a consequence of its fight against gnosticism and moral corruption. He traces it in Augustine and, with the most obvious exception of Francis of Assisi, through the thought of the medieval church as well. Reformation theology, too, failed to see the possibility for the renewal of a positive understanding of the created order as God's creation and as the object of God's redemptive act in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rather, the world was seen to be the corrupt arena for God's action, and the human creature, a sinner in need of eternal salvation made possible by a

transcendent saviour. In the ensuing years of geographical and scientific discovery, the church "renounced nature," and separated itself from science. Yet, Ditmanson insists, nature is *capax deitatis*; and therefore there is need in our time for a "theology of creation."¹⁴

Ditmanson is one of the early spokespersons for those theologians who lament Christian theology's failure to value the world of creation and who inquire as to the sources of this failure. The lament and diagnosis is also echoed in other disciplines. The American poet, Robert Bly, observes a lack of interest in nature on the part of eighteenth century poets who were convinced that "nature is defective because it lacks reason."¹⁵ His analysis echoes those of both Al Gore and Seyyed Nasr. Tracing themes in European and North American poetry of the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries, Bly writes that since Descartes, the development in European culture of utilitarianism, pragmatic science, and Protestant dogmatism has isolated the human being from the rest of the created order. This isolation has been intensified by the rise of technology, and finally leads to the exploitation of the natural order by the human being who cannot conceive of an organic relationship with those things which are perceived to be incapable of the kind of

¹⁴Harold Ditmanson, "The Call for A Theology of Creation" (*Dialog* Vol. 3, 1964), p. 269.

¹⁵Robert Bly, ed., News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980), p. 9.

intelligent, rational thought which distinguishes "man" from the rest of creation.

In a statement that has become a "classic" protest against Christian theology's complicity in the ecological crisis, medievalist Lynn White claims that Jewish and Christian theology almost consistently neglect any positive theological affirmation of nature. In his estimation of the theological tradition and its consequent ethic, it is the biblical mandate that the human creature should exercise "dominion over the earth" that has not simply fostered exploration or neglect of the earth by its human inhabitants, but actually invited human abuse and exploitation of the extra-human creation. White writes,

Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christians ... We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must be also essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.¹⁶

Such readings of the Jewish and Christian theological tradition are only partially true. As Al Gore and Seyyed Nasr both recognize, there is and has been that in "the tradition of Jerusalem" which does affirm the earth as God's creation and, with the human creature, the object of God's redemption. But the

¹⁶Lynn White, Jr., "The Religious Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (Science Vol. 155, 10 March 1967), pp. 1203-1207.

isolation of this theme in theology, and its consistent application to disciplined care of the earth, has been difficult and at times tortuous. In the years since Professor White made his allegation that the tradition of Jerusalem is responsible for contributing to the intellectual sources of the environmental crisis, numerous articles and books have been published, of which Vice President Gore's is only one of the most recent. Often these are written and published without coordination or reference to or recognition of other publications. In reference only to the growing theological interest in a "theology of nature," American Lutheran theologian Paul Santmire has written,

It would be a mistake to say that the ensuing discussion of the theology of nature has gone nowhere. But, as anyone familiar with the discussion knows, it has been uncertain and episodic at best. After more than 20 book-length studies and scores of articles directed to the topic, one can justly ask what has really been said. It is symptomatic of the disjointed state of the discussion that books and articles continue to appear under the rubric "Toward a New Theology of Nature" which show little or no acquaintance with the fact that a significant international discussion has been under way for 20 years.¹⁷

Santmire's frustration is shared by Norwegian bishop and theologian Per Lonning, who has written even more pointedly:

So much has been said and written in recent years about the alleged *Schöpfungsvergessenheit* (oblivion of creation) in contemporary theology that one gradually starts to doubt it. A forgetfulness so generally

¹⁷H. Paul Santmire, "Toward a New Theology of Nature" (*Dialog*, Vol. 25, Winter 1986), p. 44.

observed and regretted can hardly be too dominant -- it must somehow belong to the past?¹⁰

Lonning is quick to dispel his doubt that ignorance of the world of nature in theological discourse is a thing of the past. Indeed, as he demonstrates in a recent study prepared for the Institute for Ecumenical Research, it is an issue that is vital in and to current ecumenical conversation: "it is true that creation has been 'lost' to theology in a rather crucial way and that in our day a remarkable revival seems to be taking place." But this "revival" is, in Lonning's assessment, nonetheless, difficult. He continues:

Even if words like Creator, creation, creature, and createdness have always been frequently used in theological language, this vocabulary has been integrated into Christology or anthropology in such a way that its relatedness to the universe, to nature, to the environment, and to the real phenomenal world to which we belong has become radically restricted. Creation talk tended to be about something different than the realm of the creature! Neither the human "creatureliness" (Geschöpflichkeit) of existential theology nor the human "creativity" (Schöpfungstum) of political theology -- the one with utterly pessimistic overtones, the other so optimistic -- had a primary focus on creation, that is, the relationship of the Creator to his creature. In a way, the ideas of "creatureliness" and "creativity" are competitive, the one emphasizing that the limitations of human existence are dependent on a creator beyond all human control, the other confirming that human activity is the immediately relevant expression of the wonder of creation. However, in their anthropological restriction they have two decisive things in common: They overlook the creature in its multiplex concreteness, and they tend to reduce the role of the Creator to that of a qualifier of human existence (be

¹⁰Per Lonning, Creation -- An Ecumenical Challenge? Reflections Issuing from a Study by the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Stasbourg, France (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1989), p. 5.

it in a negative or a positive direction) instead of viewing creation as a dynamic, global relationship -- Creator: creation -- the Creator's action for, with, and through his creatures.¹⁹

Responding to those who complain that Christian theology has consistently viewed creation, or nature, or the earth, negatively, Lonning surveys the history of Christian doctrine in order to identify this restricted understanding of the natural order in Christian thought. In his estimation, there is no person or movement in the history of Christian thought that either is absolutely responsible or escapes culpability for the dilemma. Contemporary liberation theologies have claimed or implied an "ontological priority of redemption/liberation over any created 'givenness' to be liberated." Secular theology "declared the world to be 'merely' worldly, delivered from all religiously motivated taboos and demands on mystical veneration." Existential theology "limits theological awareness to the isolated act of human decision before God", excluding 'objectified reality' from its vision." Barthianism rejected "not only 'natural theology' but also a biblical theology unwilling to adopt a *Heilsgeschichte* approach to creation." Ritschl rejected a factual orientation of religious judgments as "metaphysics," claiming theology to be purely "value-based."

The Schleiermacher school rejected the world, in origin as well as complexity, "to the benefit of mystical human dependence on an abstract divine providence." Kant "separated 'practical'

¹⁹Ibid.

cognition from the observation of facts, and threw ethical awareness back on sheer inwardness." Enlightenment Deism "exiled God to an imaginary site behind the nexus of causality, leaving the actual world as a network of natural 'laws' with no indication of "immediate divine intervention." René Descartes "separated mind from matter." Bacon and Galileo "proclaimed the purity of factual observation as a means to gain control of the world of matter," making human beings "the sovereign ruler of their environment." The Reformers focused on salvation "as the human being's personal relatedness with God," thus "unconsciously [screening] off the wider setting of creation."

Late Medieval Scolasticism taught a "voluntaristic image of the Creator" which "tended to make creation an arbitrary event without the coherence of a detectable, intrinsic meaningfulness." Classical Scolasticism taught a "strictly conceptually ordered universe" which "neglected creation faith - live relationship with the Creator - and prepared posterity for an endless series with alternative cosmological models." Augustine "prepared an anthropological narrowing of the theological vision and a corresponding overemphasis on the corruption of nature," which was seen principally "as an object of human covetousness." The Neoplatonism of both the ancient and the modern Greek theological orientation "is reflected in the iconic presentation of the divine presence in creation" which Lonning calls "a rather denaturalized concept of transfiguration." And Docetism and Manicheanism, too, are found to be at fault, even though

"condemned and rejected by the old church," for they continue to survive secretly "according to the old law: victus victori legem dat (the conquered dictates his conditions to the conqueror)."²⁰

One senses again the frustration expressed by Ditmanson, that in the whole of Christian thought, one finds little basis for a positive valuation of the world of nature. If Lonning's assessment of the attitudes towards nature to be found in the history of Christian doctrine is correct, it would seem that there is little prospect of finding anything to serve as a sound theological basis for Al Gore's plea for an "Environmentalism of the Spirit."

2. The "Romantic" Alternative

The modern period has seen numerous attempts to look for the basis of an ethic that will give positive assessment to the natural order outside of Christianity. This movement was particularly strong in the "romantic period" of philosophy, theology, art, and literature, which began in the middle of the eighteenth century, continued through much of the nineteenth century, and continues to be influential in the twentieth. The painting and literature of Romanticism in particular reflected an appreciation of nature, and sought to base that appreciation outside of Christian religion. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the romantics were reacting against the

²⁰Ibid., p. 23f.

enlightenment and industrialism: Kenneth Clark has called the painting, poetry and music of this period, "The Romantic Rebellion." The second is that, with few exceptions, the romantics were unable to see enlightenment Christianity as sympathetic to their project.

Commenting on German literature of the period, Robert Bly describes the artistry of Novalis, Herder, and Goethe as an attack on that enlightenment and industrialist position that failed to recognize the "spiritual depth" of sentient extrahuman creatures that are most close to human beings. It is true that Hölderlin, Novalis, and Herder, with their appreciation of nature, contributed to the thought of Schleiermacher. But Schleiermacher concentrated, not on the external appreciation of the rigour, beauty, and authenticity of nature, but on the subjective side of Romanticism. The Romantic sensibility makes its greatest contribution to theology through Schelling, whose thought was foundational for the ontological theology of Paul Tillich.

In England, Enlightenment thought had led to the growth of industrialism. Industrialism, however, also led to the growth of major urban centres, with slums filled with workers who lived and worked under nearly inhumane conditions for wages that barely sustained life. The early Romantic poet, William Blake, whose Christian vision was profoundly influenced by Immanuel Swedenborg, wrote against "the dark, satanic mills" and looked forward to a time when once again "Jerusalem" would be

reestablished "on England's green and pleasant shores." The great English romantic, William Wordsworth, was more blunt in his rejection of Christianity in favour of an earlier pre-Christian vision to support his longing for the restoration of a world-view that valued nature:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our lives away, a sordid boon!
This sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
It moves us not. -- Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled by a creed outworn ²¹

Paul Tillich, whose own thought was influenced by the German Romantic thinkers, claimed that America never really had a Romantic movement.²² He is right in that Romanticism has never been a dominant mood in American culture as it was in Germany and England. The formative thinkers of the "Great experiment of the enlightenment" took their early cues from French and English deism and pragmatism. Consequently, American religious thought has generally developed in the currents that run between the emotional releases of frontier revivalism and an intellectual

²¹In The Portable Romantic Poets: Blake to Poe, ed. W. H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Viking Penguin, 1950, 1978), p. 168. Italics mine.

²²Paul Tillich, A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism, p. 377.

positivism that either insists upon or denies a literal and concrete reading of Christian scripture and doctrine.²³

Yet, particularly in painting, philosophy, music and poetry, Romantic emphases did find their exponents in North America. Such poets and essayists of the American literary renaissance as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, were all influenced by German Romanticism as well as by English Romantic literature and the first English translations of oriental philosophy, and they shared the Romantic philosophers' emphasis on personal individualism balanced by a sense of unity with nature. Walt Whitman's poetry blends the optimistic expansiveness characteristic of ante-bellum America with both Emersonian individualism and Wordsworth's affirmation of a paganism which longs for the blending of self with nature. Emerson's essay, "Nature," an early manifesto of American Transcendentalism, describes human participation with the life of nature. Thoreau, writing at Walden Pond, became the great prophet of independent American social consciousness and appreciation for nature. It was primarily from Emerson and Thoreau that the American son of Scots immigrants, John Muir, who founded the Sierra Club, took his cues.

These romantic views of nature, however, are not without their problems. Paul Santmire proposes that

²³Continuing insistence on this singularly modern and American literal reading of scripture tends to make it the more difficult for current interpreters to find in Hebrew and Greek scripture a credible resource for an environmental ethic!

American history is dominated by two apparently contradictory themes, Nature versus Civilization and Civilization versus Nature. This, observed Perry Miller, is the "obsessive American drama."²⁴

It is not only an American drama, however: Santmire finds the problem already in such early work as that of the Latin poet, Virgil. In Virgil, the human creature lives "on the edge" between the development of the urban centre, and the encroaching wilderness perennially threatening to reclaim for itself those areas over which civilization had claimed "domination." According to Santmire, the ambivalent American attitude toward nature is a tension between "The Ethic of Adoration" and "The Ethic of Exploitation." Those who personify the first theme include Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Fenimore Cooper, Francis Parkman and John Muir, all of whom

came to identify the vitality of American life with nature, and therefore to oppose it to the city, the railroad, and the steamboat. This opposition was expressed most directly by Thoreau.²⁵

Thoreau in particular recognized the connection of love of nature and a "passionate moral concern for justice."²⁶ But, according to Santmire,

These two themes, love for the wilderness and commitment to social justice, are also evident in the philosophy of Thoreau's Concord neighbor, Ralph Waldo Emerson Temperamentally Emerson was not inclined to practice the rigorous rustic exercises commended in

²⁴Paul Santmire, Brother Earth: Nature, God and Ecology in Time of Crisis (Camden, N.J.: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1970), p. 16.

²⁵Ibid., p. 17.

²⁶Ibid., p. 18.

Walden Intellectually, Emerson approached nature more as a teacher for the Divine conscience in man than as a self-contained experience of raw and cleansing mystical communion.²⁷

In contrast to this "ethic of adoration," Santmire describes an "ethic of exploitation". This ethic, too,

is as old as the history of man. From his earliest beginnings man has contended with the forces of nature to keep himself alive and to enhance his style of life. Men have always been disposed to raid the resources of nature for their own purposes. But this understandable human habit was always constrained by the reality of nature itself. Nature could not be exhausted by the primitive plow or the Roman iron mine... But when the steam engine arrived, a new era was born, for America in particular. With this machine men could digest natural resources at an astounding rate. The ancient theme Civilization versus Nature thus began to take its obsessive modern form in the ethic of exploitation.²⁸

Literary critic Leo Marx focuses the nuance. Marx, too, acknowledges that the theme of the celebration of nature goes back in literature to Virgil. But Marx points to a journal entry from Nathaniel Hawthorne, sitting in Sleepy Hollow in 1844. Hawthorne was attempting an exercise in which he carefully described what he saw and heard. Suddenly his idyllic reverie was interrupted by a train whistle. Marx insists that this interruption is a new thing in the pastoral literature of America, and of the world: "What begins as a conventional tribute to the pleasures of withdrawal from the world is transformed by the interruption of the machine into a far more

²⁷Ibid., p. 19.

²⁸Ibid., p. 29.

complex state of mind."²⁰ What Hawthorne has described is of course part of the experience of the modernization of the whole of western Europe and North America. In America, however, it is felt the more precisely, because North America was the "untamed wilderness," the "garden" of which European bucolics since Virgil had been singing. Now this garden, too, was being transformed by the European hand. The domination over the primeval North American wilderness yielded what Santmire calls the "American schizophrenia" of two contemporary attitudes: "The Cult of the Simple Rustic Life" and "the Cult of Manipulation."

Meyer Abrams also understands the veneration of nature to be a significant dimension of the romantic painters' and poets' rebellion against the social decay that they saw to be part of modernization and urban industrialization. Yet the same Wordsworth who would "rather be a pagan" also wrote that nature "is red in tooth and claw." As Abrams points out, nature was not only revered and admired by the Romantics, but also feared.²¹ The Romantics' attitude toward nature, then, rather than being a retrieval of a premodern appreciation of the world of nature, is also one of ambivalence towards nature. As Rosemary Ruether writes, "The romantic exploration of alienation remained aesthetic. It did not grapple with a socioeconomic or structural

²⁰Marx, Leo, The Machine in The Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 15.

²¹Meyer H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1971), pp. 102ff.

dissolution of domination."²¹ This ambivalence of the Romantics was the source of another hazardous reality: Abrams reminds us that the Romantics rejected the revealed God of Christendom in favour of seeing nature as the revelation of God. This rejection is one of the strains contributing to the growth of secularization, on one hand, and to the "Blut und Boden" thought that was behind the development of the "Aryan nation" of Nazism, on the other. Consequently an "Environmentalism of the Spirit" (Gore) or a theology that is concerned with environmental issues demands more than a veneration of nature itself as somehow sacred, or the idealization of the preservation of certain endangered species or of "uncontaminated" wilderness areas at the expense of a just social order in a community that includes the earth.²²

3. Towards a "Theology of Nature": Constructive Efforts in Ecumenical Theology

The earth and the world of nature receive an increasing amount of attention from contemporary Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant theologians. Al Gore learned of the "new story" from the Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Berry, who invites "a

²¹Rosemary Ruether, "New Woman and New Earth: Women, Ecology and Social Revolution," in New Women/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 193.

²²Larry Rasmussen, for instance, has been particularly insistent on this fact. Cf. Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church and Society (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

new type of religious orientation." Drawing in turn on the thought of the Jesuit paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Berry describes the story of the universe as "a revelatory experience which can be understood as soon as we recognize that the evolutionary process is from the beginning a spiritual as well as a physical process."²²

In the "ecological doctrine of creation" of Jürgen Moltmann, the universe is created out of a divine self-limitation. In this act of creation it is not the human creature but the Sabbath celebration which is the crown of creation and the goal toward which the creation tends. One responds to the ecological crisis by recognizing one's participation in both the alienation and the liberation of nature, a liberation made more likely when one recognizes one's solidarity with nature as "embodied spirit."²⁴

Feminist theology also finds an affinity with theology concerned with the earth. Sallie McFague, a Protestant looking for a "destabilizing, inclusive, non-hierarchical" theology "for an ecological, nuclear age," borrows the metaphor of "God's Body" as a way of speaking of the presence of God in and for the earth. She intends that this should eliminate the dualistic approach to

²²Loneragan, Anne, and Caroline Richards, eds., Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987), p. 25. Cf. *supra*, p. 15, n. 21.

²⁴Jürgen Moltmann, Gott in der Schöpfung: ökologische Schöpfungslehre (Munich: Christ Kaiser Verlag, 1985), esp. Chapter 10.

the earth that permits exploitation of the earth.²⁵ Roman Catholic theologian Rosemary Ruether finds a connection between the human domination and exploitation of nature and the domination and exploitation of women by men. As already noted, Ruether is suspicious of any "romantic" re-appreciation of nature that fails to recognize the economic basis of the domination of both women and the earth: "They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society."²⁶ For, she writes elsewhere,

If dominating and destructive relations to the earth are interrelated with gender, class, and racial domination, then a healed relation to the earth cannot come about simply through technological 'fixes'. It demands a social reordering ... It demands that we must speak of eco-justice, and not simply of domination of the earth as though that happened unrelated to social domination.²⁷

According to Ruether, such "eco-justice" is dependent upon "a new consciousness, a new symbolic culture and spirituality" that transforms "our inner psyches and the way we symbolize the

²⁵Sallie McFague, Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); The Body of God: An Ecological Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

²⁶Ruether, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

²⁷Ruether, Gala and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1992), p. 2f.

interrelations of men and women, humans and the earth, humans and the divine, the divine and the earth."²²

Thus there is some constructive effort by Christian theologians towards a theological response to human destruction of the environment. Per Lonning has summarized a variety of contributions to ecumenical theology in the area of the theology of creation. Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, and "free" churches all have unique theological emphases that offer nuance to theological reflection in this area. Because Orthodox theology, as Seyyed Nasr observed, has not been so profoundly influenced by the intellectual and philosophical presuppositions of the Enlightenment and the Western industrial and post-industrial ethos, its response is of particular interest. The Orthodox challenge "the traditional Western distinction between creation and redemption," asking

On what premises is it meaningful to distinguish between a first and a second activity of God the Creator and Redeemer? Did creation take place as a fixed event, distinctive from its implementation in incarnation? Is creation even conceivable without salvation as its primeval content and its final realization?²³

The Orthodox theologians prefer to speak of "adoption", rather than "redemption": "the integration of human life into full, conscious, and organic fellowship with God." Thus Lonning observes, "The most appropriate key to an Orthodox theology of

²²Ibid., p. 4.

²³Lonning, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

creation seems to be the central concept of theosis." Theosis is understood to be

a process of transformation that essentially applies to human consciousness in its existential, prayerful relationship with God; creation in its fullness is only subsequently affected, namely, as comprehended in the new theotic vision of reality by human persons.⁴⁰

This anthropocentric perspective is qualified, however, by a "Christological and sacramental" understanding of the universe, reflective of the perichoretic interpenetration of the divine persons in Orthodox trinitarian theology. But the concerns for human transformation through prayer and the correspondent reappraisal of the earth as "belonging to and revelatory of God" are not uniquely Orthodox: they surface as well in the "theology for earth" of the American Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler.

Retrieval: Joseph Sittler's appeal to "Nature and Grace"

In his article, "Nature and Grace: Reflections on an Old Rubric," published in 1972, Joseph Sittler insists that theological reflection confront seriously the question, "what is the substance of that ethical obedience which is required by this time's facts about man's behavior in history and in his creaturely placement within the world of nature?"⁴¹ In so putting the question, Sittler stresses that there can be no ethics without a theological ground for ethics. Here he aligns himself with Gore, Seyyed Nasr, and Lynn White, each of whom

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 171.

⁴¹"Nature and Grace: Reflections on an Old Rubric," p. 253.

insists in his own way that the answer to the problem of human behaviour toward the environment must be religious because the problem is religious: one cannot act ethically without a substantial basis for ethical activity. Sittler answers his question by locating this substantial basis within "the huge and venerable issue of Nature and Grace."⁴²

Joseph Sittler's move toward consideration of the environment in terms of such historical and theological breadth and depth as "nature and grace" began early in his theological career. In his programmatic essay, "Theology for Earth," he gives careful attention to the physical, tangible stuff of creaturely existence as data of significance for theological reflection:

I have felt a deepening uneasiness about that tendency in Biblical Theology, generally known as neo-orthodoxy, whereby the promises, imperatives, and dynamics of the Gospel are declared in sharp and calculated disengagement from the stuff of earthly life.⁴³

Starting from this "uneasiness," "nature" becomes, for Sittler, not simply an abstract theological or philosophical category. It includes the concrete, material, experiential location of the human creature in specific time and place, aware of creaturely interconnectedness with all other creatures, human and extra-human, sentient and vegetable, living and inert. "Nature" in Sittler's theology also includes human creative potential: artistic, intellectual, and technological. If theology is to be

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³"Theology for Earth," p. 369.

taken seriously, it must address humankind with so inclusive an understanding of "nature."⁴⁴

"Nature" so broadly understood demands an equally expansive understanding of "grace." But Sittler is less concerned to spell "grace" with such precision. Relying on the Reformation tradition he continues to describe "grace" as "God's good will toward God's creation, freely given." Sittler, however, discovers a nuance that drives him towards a reconstruction of the theology of creation, the theology of the first article. His nuance is that "grace" is also "the sheer givenness of life." That there is "something at all and not nothing" (Tillich) is, for Sittler, a matter of God's grace. This is biblical:

When, for instance, one reads the 104th Psalm, one becomes conscious that this Psalm speaks of the relationship between man and nature in quite a new way ... In this Psalm nothing in the world of man and nothing in the world of nature is either independent or capable of solitary significance. Every upward-arching phenomenon, every smallest thing, is derived from the fountain of life ... [They] are all bound together in a bundle of grace.

Yet this mighty structure of process and vitality, this complex of given creatureliness ... all hangs by a slender thread. Natural and mortal life are incandescent with meaning because of their mutual dependence upon the will of the ultimate and Holy one
....

Here is a holy naturalism, a matrix of grace in which all things derive significance from their origin, and all things find fulfillment in praise.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Cf. "The Scope of Christological Reflection," p. 337.

⁴⁵"Theology for Earth," p. 372.

Theological reflection on creaturely experience leads Sittler back to the themes of "nature and grace," and the articulation of a "theology for earth" in which grace is not simply a "second article" matter of human redemption, as it has tended to be in the Protestant tradition. For Sittler, grace as God's gratuity is located in the fact and processes of creation itself, and in the events and emergencies of daily creaturely experience.⁴⁶

In the course of his attempt to reclaim and expand "nature" as a theological category, Sittler draws on the historical theological tradition, and on the theology of the Reformers and the Greek Fathers in particular. Nonetheless, in so doing, he is moving in a new direction. Nathan Scott identifies Sittler's constructive theological project as a revision of the Christian Doctrine of Creation, and comments on his attempt to reclaim the natural order, not simply as symbolic, but as theological reality:

The doctrine of Creation, for example, is declared to be without any cosmological implication and is conceived to be nothing more than a mythical statement of the conviction that man's life is so ordered as to permit his organizing it in relation to questions of meaning. Though statements about Creation may seem to be saying something about the causality that underlies the world, their actual reference (as this line of interpretation suggests) is not at all to the world-as-nature, but rather to a certain possibility of man's self-understanding. And so this kind of hermeneutic

⁴⁶With reference to Sittler, Walter Brueggeman has recently observed the "cruciality of creation for Christian faith." He notes that the "classical three-part sermon" moves from sin to redemption to new creation, but has no place for creation. But the larger drama of salvation begins with creation! Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and the Post-Modern Imagination (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) p. 69, p. 108, n. 34.

proceeds, its intention being at every point to render theological statements as statements about human existence, as statements not about how things are in the world (*coram deo*) but about how things are with us. It is a strategem which, in the recent literature of American theology, found perhaps its first consistent development in the work of the late Carl Michalson -- but Michalson, like his master Friedrich Gogarten, is, of course, to be seen as only a late representative of a tradition reaching back to Wilhelm Herrmann, to Albrecht Ritschl, to Friedrich Schleiermacher, and ultimately, no doubt, to Kant and his relocation of theological reason to the region of the practical reason. For many of those whom we think of as exemplifying the major moments in the history of Protestant thought over the last hundred and fifty years would have been theologians a part of whose program involved the sponsoring in some degree of an abdication of the Christian faith from the natural order.

Now it is this whole strategem of retreat that Joseph Sittler has wanted to call into question....⁴⁷

Grace, Nature, and Creation in the History of Christian Thought

Joseph Sittler's "Theology for Earth" appears to be a satisfactory response to Al Gore's appeal for an "Environmentalism of the Spirit" and Seyyid Hossein Nasr's concern "to see the sacred as a dimension of creation." Like Dittmanson, Sittler claims that created things are *capax deitatis*. Drawing on his Lutheran heritage he witnesses eloquently to God's grace freely given to God's creation; influenced by Orthodox and Patristic theology, he demonstrates a sense of "theosis" by which the individual participating in the worship life of the community is transformed by grace and in turn sees the world itself as a place of grace.

⁴⁷Nathan Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 104f.

Several items beg discussion before proceeding with the inquiry as to how Sittler's thought serves the requirement for Christian theology to address the environmental crisis. One is the need for some precision as to how the theological tradition has understood "nature" and how current attention to "nature" is altering, for better and for worse, that understanding. The second is an evaluation of the attitudes in Christian scripture and theology towards nature. The third is a brief summary of what the tradition has held consistently as a "Doctrine of Creation."

1. Nature. Gordon Kaufman, for instance, challenges the entire project as outlined, because, he writes, one cannot simply speak of a theology "for nature," nor can one easily retrieve a theology "of nature" or "for nature" from the Christian tradition.⁴⁰ Kaufman finds too many definitions even in popular terminology, for the words "nature" and "natural." "Nature" may be used technically in theology with a variety of referents, of which "nature and grace," as suggested by Sittler, is only one. Kaufman's criticism moves the discussion into a larger orbit. One cannot simply collapse "nature" and "creation" as theological terms. Rather, when one looks at the issues of nature, grace, and creation in their historical perspectives, one recognizes that there is in the theological tradition a

⁴⁰Gordon D. Kaufman, "A Problem for Theology: The Concept of Nature." Harvard Theological Review 65 (1972), pp. 337-366. Sittler's is not the only project that Kaufman finds problematic; but Kaufman identifies him as the earliest among many.

distinction to be made between "doctrine of creation," "nature," and "nature and grace."⁴⁹

The issue is historical. Jaroslav Pelikan identifies the distinction between "Nature" and "Grace" in his History of Christian Dogma.⁵⁰ The discussion of "Nature and Grace" as technical theological terms begins with Augustine's discussion of nature and grace. The problem with "Nature and Grace" as technical terminologies is that they tend to be limited to "human nature" and "grace operative for and in human nature." Nature is thus not inclusive of the whole of nature, it is only human. Nature is understood as human nature throughout the Middle Ages and also in the Reformation. In fact, as human experience expands through the course of the Enlightenment, the doctrines of "Nature and Grace" diminish.

⁴⁹One is still surprised to find that "nature" as a concept continues to be problematic not only for theology but also for philosophy. In a recent interview Canadian environmentalist Neil Evernden makes the distinction between the popular convention of nature as "a collection of trees and rabbits" and "Nature as a system of regularities bound by 'scientific' law." According to Evernden, the conception of "Nature" ("with a capital N") first arose in the Renaissance. As conception, "Nature" is not concerned with "direct encounter or sympathetic response to the world, but with the hard-nosed discernment of that which lies beneath the surface." Derrick Jensen, "Opening to Wonder: An Interview with Environmental Thinker, Neil Evernden." The Bloomsbury Review: A Book Magazine (Vol. 15, No. 3, May/June 1995), p. 25. But cf. Clarence J. Glacken, Traces on the Rhodan Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967.)

⁵⁰Jaroslav Pelikan, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, 5 Volumes (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971, 1974, 1978, 1984, 1989).

With this in mind one appreciates the scope of the task that Sittler has taken upon himself when he seeks to expand the concepts of "Nature" and "Grace" so that they contain meaning for the human being of the twentieth century. His concern is not to replace the concepts. He seeks rather to articulate them with sufficient precision and detail that they have meaning correspondent to the experience of the man and woman living with the technological capacities and expansive world view of industrial and post-industrial society.

2. *The Doctrine of Creation.* Edmund Schlink expresses the problem as well as anyone when he observes that the Lutheran Confessions themselves say little about the creation as such. Schlink writes, "It is indeed noteworthy that there is not even a specific article on creation except in the [Large and Small] Catechism."¹ Similarly to the way in which "Nature" as a theological category (or philosophical conception) is distinguished from "the experienced world of nature as flowers and trees," a distinction is made between created reality as such, and "Creation" as a theological term which presupposes belief in a "Creator."² But according to William Hordern, "Belief in God as the Creator is central to Christian faith. The

¹Edmund Schlink, Theology of the Lutheran Confessions, translated by Paul F. Koehnke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), p. 37.

²Cf. Gore and Nasr, *supra*, p. 39, p. 41 both of whom recognize that a sense of the sacred in nature and a sense of human accountability as stewards of creation presuppose the religious recognition of a "Creator."

Bible begins with the Genesis story of creation, and most of the Bible presupposes that the world is the creation of God."²² In support of his discussion of "Creation" as a fundamental presupposition of Christian doctrine, Hordern cites Langdon Gilkey: "The idea that God is the Creator of all things is the indispensable foundation on which the other beliefs of the Christian faith are based."²⁴

But the doctrine that God is Creator has still not encouraged Christian men and women to care for the creation. This may be because the doctrine of creation has historically fallen under the rubric of the doctrine of God: To be sure, God and Creation are the substance of the first article of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, but "Creator" (or "Maker") is an attribute of God, and "heaven and earth" (and "all things visible and invisible"), the objects of God's creative activity. Hordern points out that these claims are issues of faith and revelation, not intended for or dependent upon scientific evidence or philosophical methodology for verification. Nonetheless, it is as faith claims that these fundamental points of Christian have their significance for the ethics of Joseph Sittler.

The history of the doctrines bearing upon and deriving from the first article of the ancient creeds indicates that the primary thrusts of these doctrines have been "Continuing

²²William Hordern, "The Doctrine of Creation", in Alan Richardson, A Dictionary of Christian Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 78.

²⁴Ibid.

Creation" and Creatio ex nihilo. These embellishments were developed as statements about God, rather than about the creation as such. To speak of God's continuing creative activity is to speak against a deistic conception of God who created once at a point in the historic past, and allows the creation to move forward without further interference or influence "as a watchmaker winds a new watch and allows it to run." The doctrine of creatio ex nihilo serves to protect the claim of the monotheistic tradition of Jerusalem that God the Creator is other than creation. Hordern writes

[The doctrine of creatio ex nihilo] denies the Platonic view that God created the world out of pre-existing matter and ideas. This means that Christianity denies all forms of ultimate dualism. God alone is responsible for the existence of all that is. This makes it impossible for the Christian to locate the source of evil in matter and hence in the [human being] as did Neoplatonism On the other hand, the doctrine of creation out of nothing also denies that the world is either God or an emanation from God. As a result Christianity rejects all forms of pantheism.⁵⁵

Luther affirms that God is source and constant preserver of all that is created when in the "Small Catechism" he explains the first article of the apostles' creed as meaning,

I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil. All this he does out of his pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part. For all this I am

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 79.

bound to thank, praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.⁵⁶

Providence is a dimension of the work of God as Creator, and praise is the proper human response to God's activity of creation and preservation.

Julian Hartt outlines the Doctrines of Creation and Providence in their classic formulation.⁵⁷ From scripture he identifies root images of creator and provider. "God is the maker of heaven and earth," dependent for creative action on "nothing but divine power and wisdom." According to Hartt, the classic doctrine of creation teaches that human beings are the "special projects" of divine creativity, for they are the image and likeness of God. God is their Father and all are members of God's divine household. God provides food, creates a world of beauty and wonder, controls the forces of nature, governs history and the cosmos and directs them to consummation. God created ex nihilo, from nothing, all that is, "both essence and existence."⁵⁸ Any speculation concerning the nature of the "nothing" from which God created is suspect: "They corrode the sense of God's absolute distinction from the world; they dim or

⁵⁶The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 345.

⁵⁷Julian N. Hartt, "Creation and Providence," in Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, revised and enlarged edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982, 1985), p. 141.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 144.

weaken the conviction that God's creative action is purely gratuitous as well as all-constituting."⁵⁰

The creation is the inclusive effect of God's action. The creation "is a closed order of finite beings."⁵⁰ Within this closed system everything is related, and God alone is provider for those created. Everything created has purpose and order: "the wisdom and power of God are manifested in a perfection of teleological organization embracing the lowest order of beings and the highest."⁵¹ The claim of teleological organization suggests a hierarchy of being in the world. Materiality is the lowest rung on the ladder, spirituality, the highest. With the hierarchy of being comes the power of being and of moral authority.

Hartt notes that some of the consensus theologians come remarkably close to Platonic views -- some, uncomfortably, others acceptably. Origen, for example, is one for whom "the material" is not real in itself -- a view, Hartt notes, with which Augustine sharply disagrees. Nonetheless the hierarchical scheme itself has been a most influential dimension of the theological consensus concerning creation.

Because God is perfect, God's creation must not be lacking in any way. "The divine purpose and the divine management cannot be violated or even momentarily frustrated by the behavior,

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 145.

⁵¹Ibid.

intentional or unwitting, of any part of creation."²² Here, Hartt notes "stresses and strains" in the consensus. By the High Middle Ages, the Augustinians understood contingency as absolute dependency. Aquinas and his followers, however, saw the world's "ontological integrity" and the "native capabilities" of the human mind to be an authorizing and energizing "basis of authentic natural knowledge."²³

The article concerning the perfection of God's activity in creation and providence is qualified by the problem of evil. Evil is comprehended in creation and providence. Yet God is not to be held as the direct and determining cause of human wickedness. The problem includes the issue of human freedom. According to both Origen and Irenaeus human sin is the price paid for freedom, and human freedom is essential for the fulfillment of the divine plan for creation. Freedom is fundamental to emergence in history of the divine-human community, evil is understood to be part of providence, and pain serves the education of humankind.²⁴

On the other hand, miracles, too, have their place. They are those extraordinary things God does to preserve and enrich the life of humanity. Some miracles may be a local and temporary suspension of the laws of nature; others, historical events of greater significance. One miracle is absolutely crucial: the

²²Ibid., p. 146.

²³Ibid., p. 147.

²⁴Ibid., p. 148.

resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the resurrection the natural forces of both life and death are embraced, along with the historical realities of Israel's proud and righteous messianism and the imperial might of Rome. The resurrection of Jesus Christ guarantees the ultimate salvation of the people of God and the traditional doctrines of the life everlasting holds out hope for the miracle of the reunion of soul and body.²⁵ Liberation from human oppression is only a minor theme in the discussion of miracles.

According to Hartt, the final point of consensus in the doctrine of creation is an eschatological reference: *Endzeit gleicht Urzeit*. There will be a termination, a consummation, of history, and it will be reminiscent of the paradise of the world's beginnings. God, who is the maker of all things, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, will bring about a "new heaven and a new earth."

Within these points of consensus, Hartt identifies two fundamental tensions tending to eliminate anything that would compromise the perfect freedom of God in creating and disposing of the world. One tension that concerns the human creature is the necessity and contingency of creaturely being. The human creature is necessary, for the human creature cannot fail to exist; but the creature is contingent, for the creature is dependent upon God. A second tension concerns the larger arena of the whole creation in which the human creature dwells: the

²⁵Ibid.

"earth," the "world," the "cosmos." The question concerns the relationship of the planet earth to the entire created order. God, it would appear, has a special relation to the earth. It is supposed that sin has not corrupted any other part. Or are sin and salvation played out on a "cosmic stage"? Hartt writes that the New Testament offers strong hints of the cosmic arena, but not many of them figure largely in the Western consensus. Consequently Western theology has tended to present a narrow and provincial reading of God's interest in humanity, while downgrading of the value of other creatures. The cosmic scale of creation, fall, and redemption was, however, pursued in the Doctrine and liturgy of the East.⁶⁶

The consensus concerning the Doctrine of Creation held until the Enlightenment and the dawning modern scientific age began to challenge Christian faith's teleological explanation of nature. Consequently, "religious and antique scientific lore" about the heavens and the earth lost its persuasiveness, seeking asylum "in poetry and vulgar superstition."⁶⁷

It is ironic that Joseph Sittler both uses poetry and appeals to the cosmic dimension of Orthodox theology in his attempt to revitalize the doctrine of creation in the middle of the twentieth century. He uses poetry because he is convinced that poetry highlights the particularity of each dimension of created existence, and shows off their "sacredness" as things

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 150.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 152.

created by the Creator. Sittler appeals to Orthodox theology because its vision is large enough to appeal to the sensibilities of the person living in an age in which the scope of scientific inquiry encompasses both "the vast expanse of interstellar space and this fragile earth, our island home" (The Book of Common Prayer, 1976). There is nothing in the classic consensus concerning creation with which Sittler would disagree. His greatest concern is to draw attention to the creation as such, but to emphasize its priority over redemption. The Reformers were satisfied to affirm creation and the God of creation, and found it more important to speak at length of God's grace demonstrated in the act of redemption. Throughout his career, Sittler insists that the God of Redemption is no greater, lesser, or other than the God of Creation, and that this Christian affirmation is instructive for human life together with all of that which is created.

3. *Attitudes towards Nature in Christian Thought.* Although Christian faith has developed a Doctrine of Creation, attitudes towards nature are at best ambivalent. Rosemary Ruether understands the Old Testament to have an essentially positive view toward nature. She finds that in the Hebrew Scriptures, nature and human society are not alien from one another: "Society and nature cohere in a single created community under the sovereignty of God."⁶⁰ The Patriarchal religion of the Old

⁶⁰Rosemary Ruether, "New Woman and New Earth: Women, Ecology, and Social Revolution", in New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation, p. 187.

Testament does not hold creation to be alienated from human society.⁶² In Biblical religion this shifts in the Judaism of the hellenistic period. In the apocalyptic writings of about 200 BC-AD 130 "the world" is seen as having slipped out of the immediate mastery of the sovereignty of God to be ruled by demonic powers. Salvation, she writes, then required "the destruction of the present created world and the creation of a new spiritual universe where Israel can be redeemed and God reign." At the most extreme, Gnostic radicals asserted that the creator of the world was a demon, not God, and that all creation was therefore evil and subject to divine destruction. This was rejected by the theologians of the early church. Nonetheless, Ruether points out, "Christianity was born through a fusion of apocalyptic Judaism and Platonic dualism"; and "despite the efforts of the Church Fathers to knit together the God of creation and the God of eschatological redemption, cosmic alienation and spiritual dualism triumphed in classical Christian spirituality."⁷⁰

Paul Santmire has attempted to spell out the biblical and theological tradition's ambivalence toward the creation in the biblical and theological tradition in greater detail. Santmire identifies two theological motifs in scripture and theology: the spiritual motif and the ecological motif.

⁶²Ibid., p. 188.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 190.

Santmire also uses the term "root metaphors" to describe and assess attitudes towards nature in Christian scripture and Christian thought. Root metaphors "cluster together and shape a tradition of theological reflection." Within the biblical witness, Santmire finds three: ascent, fecundity, and "migration to a good land." The metaphor of ascent, used persistently, becomes "the spiritual motif" in western theology. Santmire characterizes "the metaphor of ascent" as an attempt

to ascend the overwhelming mountain with my sights fixed firmly on the ethereal reaches above. The way up the mountain is then my way to transcendence, for removal from the mundane things of the earth below.⁷¹

The "metaphor of fecundity," too, includes the dimension of upward movement. Its purpose, however, is not to escape the world, but to survey it and to appreciate it:

My goal, then, is to ascend to the heights in order to gain a new perspective of the whole earth, everything that I can see from horizon to horizon, forward and back, left and right, and around again And I see a vision of enormous diversity of living forms and material shapes charged with wonder and awe.⁷²

The metaphors of "fecundity" and "migration to a good land," however, tend to cluster when "in the same imaginative environment," and when clustered, they become "the ecological motif" in Western theology.⁷³

⁷¹H. Paul Santmire, The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 18.

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 18f.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 16.

When the emphasis has been on ascent, biblical and Christian thought have tended to have a less positive estimation of nature. When the emphasis has been on fecundity and migration, the estimation of nature has been more positive. In a sense, Santmire's attempt to trace these themes and assess the attitudes towards nature in creation may be seen as a response to Lynn White and to Gordon Kaufman, and as corresponding to Lonning's attempt to assign blame for negative attitudes towards nature to any or all strands of Christian tradition. But while Santmire acknowledges the ambivalence of the tradition, his appraisal is on the whole surprisingly positive, at least through the Reformation period. Nonetheless, it is clear from the summary of Santmire's research, and from the research of other theologians who have attempted a careful reading of the Christian tradition's attention to the world of nature, that the estimation of nature is ambiguous at best. "Creation" tends to be a theological category, indicating that creatureliness demands reliance on the God who is Creator. "Nature, too," is a theological term, seldom referring to the natural world of birds and trees and mountains and snowstorms and earthquakes. The high or low regard for this natural world often depends upon the actual environmental and economic circumstances in which a given theologian is at work.⁷⁴

⁷⁴As Maurice Boutin has made clear in his own sharp critique of Santmire. Cf. "La Lecture Ecologique de la Bible et ses Apories" in Environnement et Developpement: Question Ethique et Problemes Socio-Politiques, ed. José Prades and Jean-Guy Vaillancourt (Montreal: Fides, 1991), pp. 209-229.

Sittler is aware of the Christian tradition's ambivalence toward nature. He is also, however, presciently aware (for his time) of the contextual factors that influence theological positions at any time and place of human history. But as a person of faith and of deep and careful theological reflection he is also insistent that in our time, when the very vitalities of earthly existence are so profoundly stressed by human presence on the planet earth, people whose faith is informed by the monotheistic tradition of Jerusalem remember that "the Earth is the Lord's," that the God of Abraham and Moses is the Creator of all that is, and therefore that the people who confess this faith in this God are accountable to this God for the ethical stewardship of the earth. Phrased in this way, Sittler's agenda might still sound unconvincingly pious. It has been his task, however, to rearticulate Christian theology in such a way that there is a clear ethical mandate for the care of the earth.

4. Joseph Sittler's "Elegant Proposal"

Per Lonning put a question to Christian theology: To whom in the history of Christian thought may and ought blame for the environmental crisis be assigned, and why? Without answering the "why" -- an answer too complex for our immediate consideration -- he has made it clear that almost no one is without fault in this matter. Nonetheless it is also clear that almost every Christian thinker has something to offer that is of service to contemporary theology as it seeks grounding in the theological tradition for a

basis for helpful theological reflection in answer to the environmental crisis.

Seyyed Nasr and Al Gore have asked a somewhat different question: How may we restore a spiritual sensitivity that inspires a spiritual core within a person, and recognizes the presence of the transcendent in the world in which the individual is placed. It is more in response to this concern that Joseph Sittler sets forth on his constructive project of putting forth, under the "venerable rubric of nature and grace," a "theology for earth." This is the project that Nathan Scott has identified as an attempt to retrieve the environmental implications of the doctrine of Creation. Gordon Kaufman, however, is uncertain that it is possible to make any "backward move" to find in the theological tradition a resource for an ethic that can be understood to assess nature positively. Kaufman, instead, calls for a constructive effort that rethinks, not the doctrine of creation, but the entire doctrine of God.

Perhaps that is a necessary project. It is not, however, Sittler's project. But Sittler's attempt at a "theology for earth" depends upon a dimension of Christian thought concerning the relationship of God and creation, including both human and extra-human creation, that Kaufman has ignored: that is the claim, made by Ditmanson and echoed by Nasr and Gore, that in the theological tradition, nature is seen as *capax deitatis*. *Finitum capax infinitum*. Carl Braaten identifies this claim as "the sacramental principle" of Lutheran theology, and understands it

to be a fundamental resource for a theology that is, in Sittler's words, "a basis for ethical obedience" in matters of the human creature's relationship with the extra-human creature. Braaten writes,

The incarnational foundation of sacramental presence has connections with the whole of life. The holiness of God appears in human form, and his infinite transcendence arrives within the material matrix of creation. Because of the real humanity of God in Christ, the wall of separation between the holy and the common, the religious and the secular, the soul and the body, this world and the one to come, history and eschatology, the natural and the supernatural has been broken down The Christian view which derives from the incarnation is that the holy becomes common, even commonplace. Holy transcendence becomes lowly immanence. The familiar, ordinary, common, run-of-the-mill things of this world take on special significance when the real presence is manifest not in specially holy things but in the vital universe of material things. In the sacramental vision there is nothing the matter with matter.... The sacraments of the real presence dramatize the bold and holy secularity expressed in the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation, and sanctification.⁷⁵

In his fundamental theological vision Joseph Sittler recognizes that belief in the sacrality of all things is the theological "substance of ethical obedience." He articulates this vision in terms of "the venerable rubrics of Nature and Grace." But he expands these terms beyond their customary use as technical terms in systematic theology so that they finally comprehend all things created. As such, this "theology for earth" is a retrieval of the mysticism that informed Luther's Christology and eucharistic theology -- a retrieval that is

⁷⁵Carl Braaten, Principles of Lutheran Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 98f.

nuanced in scope by questions of modern ethics (particularly environmental ethics and bio-medical ethics) and scientific discovery, and reinforced by attention to literature, to patristic theology, and to ecumenical encounters with Orthodox theologians.

We have already discovered, however, that in the history of Christian doctrine, to speak of "nature and grace" has not always and not necessarily been to speak of "nature" as the world of trees, dogs, and flowers, nor of the cosmos in its vast expanse, nor even of nature as human corporeality. As Jaroslav Pelikan suggests "nature" has generally been thought of as an aspect of human nature, generally regarded as sin or sinful, for which "grace" has been an antidote.⁷⁶ It is instructive that there is no more universal complaint about Sittler's thought than this: that, while he insists that his fundamental theological categories are "nature and grace," he consistently fails to define his terms. Yet even in this (intentional?) deficiency he may have a salutary methodological insight:

The radical either-ors of the academicians are excessively rigid, and achieve their apparent total demolition of opponents by a strange humourless about the richness of the modalities of historical life.⁷⁷

At this point, then, one might simply summarize his observation that "Grace is not nature and nature is not grace." But nature is the arena, the theatre, for God's grace. And grace, classically

⁷⁶Cf. *supra*, p. 66, n. 60.

⁷⁷Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 28.

defined as "God's love and good will, given out of God's largesse and at God's own initiative, to God's creature," is, in Sittler's thought, "always a surprise." To define it precisely, as was done in the Reformation, is to limit its scope. What was said in that emergency was true and remains true, and for Sittler it is absolutely instructive. But Sittler believes that the emergency of our time demands more. The care of the earth requires an articulation of grace as something in God that is large enough to address both the crisis of spirit within the human creature and the crisis of spirit extant in the expanses of the entire world without. It is to this task that Joseph Sittler addresses himself.

Chapter II
THE SCOPE AND GROUND OF GRACE
THE SUBSTANCE OF ETHICAL OBEDIENCE I

Quod non assumptum est,
non sanatum est.
Gregory of Naziansus

Joseph Sittler has written that, even though the Bible is "relentlessly ethical," one cannot begin to speak of "ethics" without awareness of the theological substance which is the ground of ethics.¹ Chapters Two and Three describe the theological substance of Sittler's ecological ethic. Chapter Two presents Sittler's Christology, demonstrating his sympathy with, extension of, and departure from the Christology of Martin Luther. Chapter Three presents the means by which the grace offered by God in Jesus Christ is communicated to the modern person.

1. The "Cosmic Christology" of Joseph Sittler: Its Sources and Critics

Christology is that locus of Christian dogmatics that considers the confession that the God of Israel is revealed finally in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Carl Braaten writes that "Christology is the church's reflection on the basic assertion that Jesus is the Christ of God."² Classic Christology has two concerns: the person of Jesus and the work of Jesus. The question concerning the person of Jesus seeks to reconcile the humanity of Jesus with the divinity ascribed to Jesus in the

¹Cf. The Structure of Christian Ethics, p. 12.

²Carl Braaten, in Christian Dogmatics, ed. Carl A. Braaten and Robert Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), Vol. I, p. 473.

memory and continuing witness of the church. The question concerning the work of Jesus seeks to understand how Jesus effects God's salvation and how that salvation is appropriated by the one who is saved.

Classical Christologies and soteriologies understand salvation almost exclusively in terms of the human individual. Since earliest times Christians have been tempted by one of two theological tendencies concerning the person of Christ. The Church has declared both of these theological tendencies to be heretical. On one hand Christians have seen Jesus to be divine in reality, and human only apparently. This is the ancient heresy of docetism. On the other hand, Christians have seen Jesus to be human, a human of exceptional significance, but human only. This is the ancient heresy of ebionitism. Both heresies stem from a refusal to believe that finite and temporal earthly things can carry within them an infinite and eternal divine presence.

The foundational assertion of Christology was promulgated by the Council of the Church at Chalcedon in 451, CE. It reads,

Following therefore the Holy Fathers, we confess one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, and we all teach harmoniously [that he is] the same perfect in Godhead, the same of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father in Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in manhood, like us in all things except sin; begotten before ages of the Father in Godhead, the same in the last days for us and for our salvation [born] of Mary the virgin theotokos in manhood, one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, unique; acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation -- the difference of the natures being by no means taken away because of the union, but rather the distinctive character of each nature being

preserved, and [each] combining in one Person and hypostasis -- not divided or separated into two Persons, but one and the same God and only-begotten God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets of old and the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught about him, and the symbol of the Fathers has been handed down to us.³

The decision of Chalcedon did not settle controversy concerning the relationship of the human and divine in Jesus Christ, but since Chalcedon, any proposition concerning the divinity and humanity of Christ has been judged in light of this formula.⁴

Joseph Sittler developed his Christology in the course of his work with the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. It had become clear to the Faith and Order Commission, through the work done by its predecessor bodies for ecumenical effort, that the unity of Christian churches depended upon Christology. Christological propositions, in turn, had to respond to anthropological questions concerning the nature of humankind in the twentieth century. A Christology that could present a defensible witness to Christian faith had to be large enough to comprehend the concerns and capacities of the person in the twentieth century. Joseph Sittler's Christology expresses his awareness that the human being living in the middle of the twentieth century has access to unprecedented technologies for the change and development of the place of human habitation; and

³Translated by E. R. Handy, ed., Christology of the Later Fathers, 1954, p. 373; cited by Alan Richardson, A Dictionary of Christian Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 373.

⁴Cf. Carl Braaten, in Braaten and Jenson, Christian Dogmatics Vol. 1, p. 514.

that that human being is also aware that the place of human habitation is a universe of infinite dimension. This vast universe is nonetheless the whole creation that is "lost and groaning" as it waits for its redemption (Romans 8). Thinking christologically, Sittler recognizes that one man, Jesus, is "the incandescence of the grace of God;" but thinking soteriologically, he insists that the salvation offered in this one man includes *ta panta*: all things. Christological thought that fails to expand to this degree is reductive both of God's grace and of the modern human being:

For the piety that could once sing Jesus, Lover of My Soul as an adequate designation of trust, loyalty, and meaning, is not saying enough about Jesus, love, or persons now that portions of interstellar space bear man's footprints.⁵

At the gathering of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi, in 1961, Sittler said,

... the address of Christian thought is most weak precisely where man's ache is most strong. We have had, and have, a Christology of the moral soul, a Christology of history, and, if not a Christology of the ontic, affirmations so huge as to fill the space marked out by ontological questions. But we do not have, at least in such effective force as to have engaged the thought of the common life, a daring, penetrating, life-affirming Christology of nature.⁶

The mandate of the address in which this statement was made was to provide to the assembly of the World Council of Churches the findings of the Commission of Faith and Order, which had been

⁵"The Scope of Christological Reflection" (Interpretation 26, No. 3, July 1972), p. 332.

⁶Joseph Sittler, "Called to Unity" (The Ecumenical Review Vol. 14, January 1962), p. 183.

discussing how the various Christian communions might find a way towards functional unity among themselves. Sittler had begun to sense that functional or organic unity among Christians was still too small a goal:

... it is now excruciatingly clear that Christ cannot be a light that lighteth every man coming into the world, if he is not also the light that falls upon the world into which every man comes.⁷

That world includes the world of nature. The scope of the unity to which the Christian church is "thrust and lured" is as vast as the whole of creation. To claim less than that is, according to Sittler, to court a dualism that denies that physical nature, too, is within the provenance of God's redemption:

The way forward is from Christology expanded to its cosmic dimensions, made passionate by the pathos of the threatened earth, and made ethical by the love and the wrath of God.⁸

Sittler draws heavily on the work of Allan Galloway in support of his vast claim:

Unless one is prepared to accept a dualism which condemns the whole physical order as being not of God and interprets redemption simply as release from the physical order, then one is forced to raise the question of cosmic redemption. Physical nature cannot be treated as an indifferent factor -- as the mere stage and setting of the drama of personal redemption.⁹

⁷Ibid., p. 178.

⁸Ibid., p. 186. Cf. Julian Hartt's observation, *supra*, p. 73, that the New Testament offers "strong hints of the cosmic arena" of the fall and redemption.

⁹Ibid., p. 178f; cf. Allen Galloway, The Cosmic Christ (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 205.

Sittler concludes that the redemption to which the New Testament itself bears witness is not "merely personal." Rather, it includes the whole of everything that God created in the beginning. Therefore, invitations to Christian unity must recognize that that unity is not simply a matter of the "unity in faith" of all who live on the earth. Invitations to Christian unity must recognize the organic unity of the human community with the very earth itself:

... if we are indeed called to unity, and if we can obey that call in terms of a contemporary Christology expanded to the dimensions of the New Testament vision, we shall perhaps, obey into fuller unity. For in such obedience we have the promise of the Divine blessing. This radio-active earth, so fecund and fragile, is his creation, our sister, and the material place where we meet the brother in Christ's light.¹⁰

In an interview given twenty-five years after delivering his address at New Delhi, Sittler claimed that he had used the occasion, not simply to report on the details of the work of the Faith and Order commission, but rather "to try to capture and then articulate the thrust, the direction, in which our common mind had been moving."¹¹ In this interview, Sittler identified two sources of his address:

One was my own preoccupation with the previous work of Faith and Order on the Doctrine of Christ. Discussion of the meaning of Christ for the unity of the church had been carried on in excruciating detail ever since the thirties and, in the fifties, had been expanded to an investigation of the meaning of Christ for the

¹⁰"Called to Unity", p. 187.

¹¹Robert M. Herhold, "Return to New Delhi: A Lutheran Partners Interview with Theologian Joseph A. Sittler" (Lutheran Partners, Vol. 1, No.4, Nov-Dec. 1985) p. 8.

world. But during that same decade in my own life I had been occupied with reading the remarkable materials coming out of the new research into cosmology. As one immersed himself in that material, he could not but be excited by the immensity of the cosmos in terms of both space and time.

I came to feel that and, as a consequence, to think that the traditional statements of the Church on the role of Christ, important and true as they were for the time, somehow missed conveying aspects of immense importance to us. I felt that our speech about Christ had to move in the same huge orbit as our knowledge of the natural world, that creation, and that Christology, therefore, had to move from areas of discourse constricted to personal, societal, or even historical life in order to be regarded as interesting let alone true.¹²

His method in preparation was to begin with his reflection on the cosmos, and then to test the legitimacy of that admittedly "risky" theme against the documents of the New Testament. There he found the scope of the doctrine of Christ and the probing mind of the early church to be particularly expressed in the Pauline (or deutero-Pauline) literature of Colossians and Ephesians. Looking for further development of the theme in the history of the church he was led to patristic scholarship and the thought of Irenaeus. In remembering this process, Sittler supports Conrad Simonson's observation that

'Cosmic Christology' was not born at New Delhi in 1961 These ancient and powerful interior relations (God, man, nature) are, to be sure a voice in Christian theology from earliest times. What is astounding is

¹²Ibid. Note Sittler's distinction of "feeling" and "thought" in his description of the course of his christological reflection. It is evident in Sittler's writing that he is convinced that rigorous thought is always related to intensity of feeling.

the halting way in which Faith and Order discussions came to utilize them.¹³

When Joseph Sittler became part of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in 1952, the Commission had already been engaged in christological reflection nearly since its inception. Conrad Simonson has explored the development and expansion of the Christology of the Faith and Order Movement which Sittler acknowledges as one of the sources of his own thought. Simonson calls the period that began with the meeting at Lausanne in 1927 and concluded with the first meeting following World War II, in Amsterdam in 1948, "The Era of Cooperative Christology." The twenty-five year process was decided upon in Lausanne in 1927 in order that delegates might introduce themselves to each other by first clarifying for themselves how their own churches bore witness to Christ.

There is a clear and undeniable logic, Simonson notes, in the fact that Christology was the concern for comparison: for the churches which confess Jesus as God and Saviour can all be expected to have at least that in common, although there may be great differences in their reflection on that confession, and in the expression of their worship and doctrine. In the course of the years of Comparative Christology, the exercise had not only clarified differences between churches. The churches themselves were challenged to identify and to clarify for themselves their

¹³Conrad Simonson, The Christology of the Faith and Order Movement (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), p. 173.

own Christological assumptions and presuppositions. Simonson summarizes the success and limitations of that exercise:

The great, single problem with the method of comparative theology that characterized nearly all of Faith and Order through its first two conferences was the kind of Christology that inevitably resulted. The Conferences were called precisely to compare agreements and differences. Acting out of a canny sense of the possible, Faith and Order participants centered on Jesus Christ as their one, profound, essential and indisputable fact in common. But because they had gathered to reconcile their own and examine each others' points of view, they tend to stand around like observers of some heavenly being, each telling how Jesus Christ looked to him. They spoke as if Christ could be looked at in himself, purely, clearly, objectively, and then reported on. The Christological statements of the early Faith and Order discussions presupposed a kind of unmediated doctrine, as if each one could look right at Jesus and see what was to be seen.¹⁴

At Lund, in 1952, the Christology of the Faith and Order Movement¹⁵ took a new turn. Already at Edinburgh, in 1937, it was becoming obvious that "no one stands and looks at Jesus Christ all alone."¹⁶ Representatives of denominations each looked at Jesus through the lens of a long tradition. Immediately prior to and directly after the Second World War increasing attention was also given to the significance for theological reflection of "non-theological factors": "Secular facts influence more than Church union negotiations: ideas, too,

¹⁴Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁵The Faith and Order Movement had become an arm of the World Council of Churches organized in Amsterdam in 1948.

¹⁶Simonson, op. cit., p. 56.

are shaped by the culture in which they are expressed."¹⁷ Consequently it became clear at Lund in 1952 that "no talk about Christ is possible that does not recognize that he is not apprehendable apart from the community that calls itself his body" and that "all talk about Jesus Christ is rooted in specific historical, cultural context. The context itself has a great deal to do with the way Christology is formulated." Consequently the "scope of Christological discourse" was "drastically widened," to be contained within the context of the whole Church. But even that context was soon to prove too small. According to the Faith and Order Commission, Christology must encompass the whole of human experience; and in New Delhi in 1961, Joseph Sittler asserted that human experience "includes the whole of man's environment, straight out to its farthest horizon."¹⁸

The nature of Christological reflection as it developed from Lund to New Delhi is characterized by Simonson as movement "from the church to the world," as the members of the Faith and Order Commission sought to reconcile the world as the context in which and by which Christology is to be discussed and comprehended. Simonson argues persuasively that the Christology of the Faith and Order Movement expanded as those on the commission developed their understanding of the human creature. The dynamic that expanded the Christology of the Faith and Order Movement was a "changing understanding of man" -- and human beings in the middle

¹⁷Ibid., p. 128.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 69; cf. "Called to Unity", p. 179.

of the twentieth century, experienced themselves as nearly unbounded. Technological development and the exploration of space appeared to offer limitless potential. It is this dynamic that informs Sittler's plea for a Christology of such size and magnitude, because to the thinking woman or man of the twentieth century, only such a Christology can be credible:

No earlier time has had the knowledge or power to put its manipulative hand upon the dynamics of evolution or upon the molecular structures of matter energy. But our times does [sic], and a Christology that does not propose the power and presence and grace and judgment of God in Christ with an amplitude congruent with these power potentials as an operational mode of life deeply formative of technological man's personhood will be an unintelligible Christology, even an uninteresting one.¹⁹

Sittler admits that the venture of proposing a "cosmic Christology" was risky. He insists, however, that it is supported by biblical sources. The text upon which Sittler had based his address at New Delhi is from the first chapter of the letter to the Colossians, a passage now considered to be the "locus classicus" of "cosmic Christology":

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities - all things were created through him and for him. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20).²⁰

¹⁹"The Scope of Christological Reflection," p. 337.

²⁰Cf. "Called to Unity", p. 177.

The eighth chapter of the St. Paul's letter to the Romans also has a "cosmic" dimension:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; but not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:19-23)

The third text to which Sittler makes appeal is from the letter to the Ephesians:

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

Sittler grants that these texts and their central themes may not be at the core of the New Testament. Jesus and the gospel of salvation are at the core. Yet, Sittler protests, the core is not the circumference.²¹ These texts express a concern that was at least "a legitimate accent" within the community of those whose writings comprise the Greek Scriptures, and they have deep roots in the ancient history of that community. The context addressed informs the content and shape of the address. When the context of the modern person is not only global but interstellar, the address, to be taken seriously, must also in some way reach so far.

²¹ Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 43.

Sittler depends also upon the work of Allan Galloway. Sittler had already gone far toward the formulation of a number of ideas which Galloway developed in his book, The Cosmic Christ, which appeared in 1951. Galloway's purpose in this book is to restore the fullest possible meaning to the word "salvation." Galloway's principle is that

Once a community has accepted a redemptive faith, the impact of their environment upon them forces them either to narrow their concept of redemption by giving it an other-worldly interpretation, or to widen its reference so as to include the whole of their environment.²²

Drawing on H. Wheeler Robinson, Galloway, like Sittler, insists that the scope of redemption as described in Hebrew and Greek Scripture, is "cosmic":

Salvation meant deliverance from any kind of ill, and the specific faith of the Christian increased the intensity, without limiting the extensivity of the general experience of being "saved", by whatever means The modern emphasis tends to fall on salvation from the power of moral evil in present experience. The New Testament, without, of course, denying or excluding this element as an accompaniment or even a condition of salvation, finds its centre of gravity in a cosmic event.²³

Galloway identifies the cosmic scope of redemption in the Hebrew Prophets and the Psalms, and in the apocalyptic literature of the inter-testamental period. The soteriological and eschatological reflection of the early Patristic period, too, rooted in apocalyptic thought, and written in the face of Gnostic

²²Galloway, The Cosmic Christ, p. 9. Cf. also Hartt, *supra*, p. 87. n. 8.

²³H. Wheeler Robinson, Creation and Redemption, pp. 232-233; cited in Galloway, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

dualism, understands Christ's victory over the power of Satan and death to extend to the whole of the environment, to its farthest horizon. Consequently, Galloway criticizes Aulén's discussion of the "Christus Victor" motif in patristic theology as a theory of atonement that is too individualistic, too personal, and therefore reductive in scope. He recognizes, however, as have a number of such historians of Christian thought,²⁴ that already in the patristic period this reduction is increasingly commonplace. Clement's interests, for example, are moral and personal; Origen's thought is cosmic in scope, but spiritualized, a theology for the soul but not the material stuff in which the soul is embodied. Galloway sums up the different attitudes towards the redemption of the whole of creation at the end of the Patristic period:

... the Fathers of the Alexandrine school, who had the philosophic interest to attempt a real reinterpretation of the cosmic eschatology of the Bible, were themselves too much under the influence of the Greek depreciation of matter and thus compromised too far with the dualism which they were opposing. The Fathers of the West, on the other hand, were so extremely conservative that while they preserved the thoroughly physical reference of the apocalyptic symbolism, they merely reasserted it and did not provide the required reinterpretation.²⁵

In his own way, Galloway recites the litany of lament for the reduction of the scope of God's action in the world. He acknowledges that the theology of the Middle Ages did not suffer from the ontological dualism that threatened the theology of the

²⁴Cf. *supra*, pp. 47-49, pp. 75-78.

²⁵Galloway, p. 128.

patristic period. Early Christianity had had to fight gnostics, some of whom, like Valentinus, taught a hierarchy of being in which the ideal or spiritual was superior to the material, and others of whom, like Marcion, taught that matter was created by an evil god and that salvation was a good god's redemption of the spiritual from the material in which the spiritual was entrapped. Medieval theology, by contrast, recognized that spirit and matter were created by one God. Nonetheless, by the time of Aquinas, another dualism had developed, of which the rood screen of the churches may be understood as a prime symbol: the dualism between clergy and laity, the dualism of sacred and secular, and the dualism of the realm of nature and the realm of grace. Grace became a *donum superadditum*, dispensed through the sacraments. It was taught that both sides of the dualism are created by God; but one is superior, while the other is fallen. The distinction between nature and grace is exclusive; salvation, rather than being the restoration of the creation to its original grandeur, is conceived in terms of renewal of the environment. The primary source for these themes is Aquinas, but Galloway points out that Augustine, too, who enthusiastically praised nature for its goodness, nevertheless found the beauties of nature to be "but solaces for man's miseries, in no way pertinent to his glories."

Galloway contrasts this attitude to that of Irenaeus, in a passage quoted by Sittler in his address, "Called to Unity":

In Irenaeus ... there are not two orders of goodness, but only one. All goodness, whether it belongs to this world or to the final consummation, is a manifestation of the grace of God. It is the same grace of God which

sustains nature even in its fallen state and which confers salvation in Jesus Christ. The residual goodness in nature can even be regarded as an anticipation or foretaste of that salvation. The same difference appears also in Irenaeus' attitude toward the sacraments as compared with that of the church of the Middle Ages. For Irenaeus, the union of spiritual and material benefit in the Eucharist symbolizes the ultimate unity of nature and grace implied in Christian salvation. But for Aquinas, the fact that the sacraments are administered in a material element is merely God's gracious concession to man's regrettably sensuous nature. For Irenaeus, the Incarnation and saving work of Jesus Christ meant that the promise of grace was held out to the whole of nature, and that henceforth nothing could be called common or unclean. For the church of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, nature was essentially common, and, if not positively unclean, at least seriously deficient in the shining whiteness of the saints in the empyrean heaven, and essentially incapable of sharing in such glory.²⁶

Galloway recognizes that the real challenge to a doctrine of cosmic redemption comes from the reality of evil and suffering.²⁷ He finds that Kant attempts to comprehend that reality in his distinction between the numinous and the phenomenal, of which the numinous is the truly real and the phenomenal only apparently real. Hegel's solution is the diremption of the self into the not-self. In an admittedly "rough-and-ready way," Galloway considers both of these analogous to the Gnostic solutions of the Patristic period.

Like Sittler, Allan Galloway also identifies Irenaeus as the theologian who best represents the cosmic scope of redemption. Irenaeus, however, is not alone. In the fourth century, Gregory

²⁶Galloway, p. 127-128; cf. Sittler, "Called to Unity", p. 180.

²⁷Cf. Julian Hartt's observation concerning evil and contingency, *supra*, p. 72.

of Naziansus defended the incarnation of God in Christ against Arius by asserting that "whatever is not assumed is not saved." Sittler cites passages from another of the Cappadocians, Gregory of Nyssa, suggesting the extent of that which was assumed by Christ in the incarnation. The first is a commentary on "life-mingling participation in Christ":

Let no one accuse us of seeing two Christs or two Lords in the one Savior. But God the Son, who is God by nature, Lord of the universe, King of all creation, the Maker of all that exists and the Restorer of what has fallen, has not only not deprived our fallen nature of communion with Him, but in His great bounty He has deigned even to receive it again into life. Therefore, at the end of centuries, when our wickedness had reached its height, then in order that the remedy might be applied to all that was diseased, He united (lit., "mingled") Himself with our lowly human nature, He assumed man in Himself and Himself became man By this union He made man what He Himself was ²²

The second develops the theme of "cosmic harmony in virtue of the whole creation as brought within the effectual compass of redemption":

Since He is in all, He takes into Himself all who are united with Him by the participation of His body; He makes them all members of His body, in such wise that the many members are but one body. Having thus united us with Himself and Himself with us, and having become one with us in all things, He makes His own all that is ours. But the greatest of all our goods is submission to God, which brings all creation into harmony. Then every knee shall bend in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10). Thus all creation becomes one body, all are grafted upon the other, and Christ speaks of the submission of His body to the Father as His own submission.²³

²²Essays in Nature and Grace, p. 53.

²³Ibid., p. 54.

Sittler points out that the language of the paragraph is characteristic of Patristic and Orthodox theology. He observes that the confession that Jesus Christ is the Lord uses the dynamic language of ingathering and incohering, gathering about itself "images of the divine energy." Sittler also draws upon Athanasius. Writing in 318 and 320, *Against the Pagans* and *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius elaborates a dynamic and organic "cosmic Christology" against a static "philosophical atomism":

The Greek philosophers say that the world is a great body. And in this they are right. For we see that the world and its parts are sensible things. If, then, the word of God resides in this world which is a body; if He is present in each and every thing, is there anything strange or absurd in our claim that the Word is present in man?

Like a musician who has attuned his lyre, and by the artistic blending of low and high and medium tones produces a single melody, so the Wisdom of God, holding the universe like a lyre, adapting things heavenly to things earthly, and earthly things to heavenly, harmonizes all, and, leading them by His will, makes one world and one world order in beauty and harmony.³⁰

Sittler concludes from this that in Patristic theology, grace has a dynamic of inclusivity reaching to the whole of the creation, and that the creation itself is not only object, but also location of God's grace. For instance, in Athanasius, grace "was both a comprehensive term for the created goodness of all reality, and a term wherewith to specify the incarnated presence and historical focus of that Light which is God."³¹

³⁰Ibid., p. 64.

³¹Ibid.

Critical Response to Sittler's "Cosmic Christology".

At New Delhi, Sittler's christological proposal was received with confusion and criticism. Asian theologians such as Paul Devenanden of India and D. T. Niles of Ceylon understood "cosmic Christology" to mean that Christ was already to be found in other religions, and that the goal of Christian mission was, therefore, to recognize and encounter him there. The Orthodox theologians were enthusiastic about Sittler's movement from Augustine to Irenaeus and about his affirmation of the teaching of the early church concerning the redemption of nature itself. The German theologians, however, were less enthusiastic; they based their criticisms on the constraints of Lutheran dogma, claiming that:

1. Cosmic Christology does not take sin seriously; 2. Creation is affirmed at the expense of Redemption; 3. Cosmic Christology does not bear witness to the coming eschatological reign of God; 4. The cosmic perspective leaves no room for any understanding of the justification of sinners; and 5. Sittler had fallen into a self-enclosed Indian cosmology.²²

Lutheran exegetes have been most sharply critical of Sittler's cosmic Christology and of his interpretation of the scripture from which he takes the motif. Conrad Simonson, commenting on the further discussion of Sittler's christological proposal in Montreal in 1963, writes that

²²Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, Der Weg Jesu Christi: Christologie in messianischen Dimensionen (Munich: Christ Kaiser Verlag, 1989), p. 299; Simonson, p. 179.

It was apparently the intention of Käsemann, Edmund Schweizer, Dinkler and others to shift the emphasis of Christological discourse from a review of "the mighty acts of God," such as were frequently rehearsed by "Biblical theology," and from such abstract grounds as characterized classical ontological discussions of Christology, to such a New Testament understanding of the crucified and risen Christ as would demand a decision and response from the person confronted with the picture of Christ. That intention was most evident in the treatment given to "cosmic Christology" whenever it reared its tender head.²³

Despite attempts otherwise, "cosmic Christology" did manage to find its way into the discussions, but it was finally left as only a footnote:

We are agreed that the grace and power of God is to be found in and received from the world of man outside Church and in nonhuman creation. But we are not agreed as to whether or not these are redemptive works of God, or whether or not they should be called works of Christ as marks of his Lordship.²⁴

While the official report itself does not indicate much discussion of cosmic Christology, most informal reports from the conference do. Cosmic Christology was side-stepped under pressure from the post-Bultmannians to understand the Church as the suffering Church. That was done, Paul Crow reported, in response to protests from Käsemann and Dinkler and others against any form of cosmic Christology on the grounds that cosmic Christology places the Lordship of Christ in a remote mystical realm too far removed from the existential situation in which modern man lives. Gregory Baum made the same observation.

²³Simonson, p. 118.

²⁴Montreal Report, p. 43 n. 2; cf. Simonson, p. 119.

Describing the objections of the German New Testament scholars, he said that if Christ was Lord, then in their view, this could only mean that he was master of the individual conscience, and references to Christ's Lordship over the world could be understood only as the influence of Christ on the world through the conscience of those who believe in him. In the attempt to express Biblical claims for Christ in a way meaningful to contemporary man, these scholars reduced cosmic, ontological, and historical language to the confines of existential terminology. Baum concluded, "Christian doctrine is not to be regarded as a statement about reality as such, but about reality for me now."²⁵

Roy Harrisville criticizes Sittler for not taking seriously the Pauline-Augustinian-Lutheran perspective that in Christ, God justifies the ungodly. Harrisville quotes Ernst Käsemann to that effect:

The Reformation's witness for the prosecution is now hauled out as defense attorney for a Pauline exegesis with a counter-reformation drift this would not have been possible had not the doctrine of justification already been made a side-issue ... in Protestantism itself.²⁶

Harrisville calls the Christ hymn in Colossians, "the most disputed of all the Christological utterances in the canon." A

²⁵Cited in Simonson, p. 119.

²⁶Roy Harrisville, "The New Testament Witness to the Cosmic Christ" in Vilmos Vajta, ed., The Gospel and Human Destiny (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971), p. 48.

brief survey of the history of the exegesis of the text leads him to conclude:

current preoccupation with cosmic Christology or implicit Christianity has been less influenced by specific exegetical work done in the past, ancient and late, than by a general reading of the Pauline corpus (reinforced by only the most recent biblical scholarship) in light of the history of theology and modern philosophy.²⁷

The debate about the "cosmic" or "pleromatic Christ," which since ancient times has been called *Christus Pantocrator*, has, he says,

centered about soteriology and its relation to the cosmos or physical world, construed not merely as the arena or stage of the drama of personal redemption, but as in some fashion constituting a realm of grace.²⁸

This is a direct frontal attack on Sittler's claims to the truth that the physical world is indeed a place of grace.

Responding to Sittler's insistent claims in this regard, Harrisville understands Sittler to be attempting to articulate "an effective response" to "the vision and promises of the Enlightenment" as they have matured in our time. Harrisville worries that theologians who appropriate the Christ hymn from Colossians and similar themes from Ephesians are ignoring the critical studies which call into question the Pauline authorship of these texts in light of their pre-Christian or extra-Christian origins. The scope of the texts, he suggests, are not the cosmos but the church as "body" of Christ, the corporate nature of the community of believers.

²⁷Ibid., p. 52.

²⁸Ibid., p. 39.

Harrisville also raises a larger theological question: the cosmic, ontological scope obliterates the historicity of cross and resurrection; the decision of faith therefore depends upon God's activity in the *Christus extra nos* and *pro nobis*, rather than the *Christus in nos*. He recalls Käsemann's anxiety about the doctrine of justification, and the counter-reformation thrust. In a brief historical survey of the exegesis of the Colossians text, the only support that Harrisville finds for a valid statement of the cosmic Christ is the work of J. B. Lightfoot: "the interpretation of the hymn is to sound the 'absolute and complete reconciliation of universal nature to God, effected through the mediation of the Incarnate Word.'" But Harrisville points out then that Lightfoot's work is not used by those who have propounded this doctrine of "Cosmic Christology." Harrisville refers to Adolf Schlatter's comment on I Corinthians 8:6:

both the eye turned to the world and comprehending everything in a unity and the eye turned inward and sensing the movement of its own life gave content to the name of God, and concluded that in Christ's activity and mission by which he was made Lord of the church, "God gave notice that everything came into being and will come into being through him."³²

Consequently, Harrisville acknowledges that the New Testament supports the concept of "a cosmic, creation-wide deliverance." And he admits that "the neglect of this truth" and the reinterpretation of this truth "in terms of private existence" drives a wedge between what, in the eighth chapter of St. Paul's

³²Ibid., p. 53.

letter to the Romans, is clearly not to be separated.¹⁰ But he reminds his readers of the "true context" of the "cosmic dimension" from which it may not be loosed. The cosmic fulfillment is not evolutionary, as it would appear to be in Teilhard, but eschatological. "Cosmic fulfillment" cannot be seen in terms of an "eternal now"; it is rather "something toward which even God strains, something which he will do, will be, which he has not yet done, not yet been." For Harrisville, Christ is the "pantocrator," the pleromatic Christ proleptically, but not yet. It is true that, in response to all theologies of subjectivity, the New Testament claims that "final things have to do with man's environment as well."¹¹ "Salvation history" is not the "unfolding" of a particular kind of history to which "revelation merely furnishes the clue" but

revelation sets history in motion, gives it 'legs,' drives it onward toward something qualitatively new. Lastly, the end of all things cannot be interpreted as already anticipated in the resurrection of Christ. It is not merely that our future corresponds to his as to a prolepsis. He is our future, for he is the resurrection and the life, and therefore waits -- for that moment "when all things are subjected to him," when "he will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one" (I Cor. 15:28). For, "we do not yet see everything in subjection to him" (Heb. 2:8) -- Christ is not yet Pantocrator.¹²

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 54.

¹²Ibid.

Even this, too, is not yet seen, except as hidden under the cross. According to Harrisville, the context or locus of continuity is promise, and therefore hiddenness:

The discontinuity between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ lay in the fact that although Jesus may have raised no explicit claim to Messiahship, he was nevertheless crucified as Messiah, and as a result his death became the content of the gospel par excellence. The cross made totally unobservable and incapable of historical verification any qualitative change, in history and nature. For Paul, the collapse of apocalyptic conceptuality took the shape of that doctrine of ambiguity.¹³

Thus the cosmic Christ is the victor over death. Now death as meaningless and absurd, Harrisville insists, recurs as a theme in the Old Testament: and "the eschatologically new, renewed existence is one of promise, hence of ambiguity, of hiddenness, something not yet perceptible to the senses."¹⁴

Harrisville concludes, therefore, "Christ, destined to be Cosmocrator, secretly, in hiddenness, enfleshes himself in the world by means of the missionary activity of his body. The cosmos is penetrated by Christ, not because his exaltation has rendered redemption and existing reality one and the same, but rather because his church, participant in the event of his cross and his instrument in its humiliation, its bodily dying, is extended and expanded over the earth ... He is Lord of the powers and head of his church, in process of becoming Pantocrator

¹³Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 56.

through the eschatological event of the church's mission."¹⁵ Gerhard Forde supports Harrisville's position, noting that the idea of cosmic salvation has little basis in scripture "if taken to mean that through Jesus' death, resurrection, and exaltation the present empirical cosmos has undergone or is undergoing some mysterious change."¹⁶ This does not mean that salvation is purely personal, however. For there is a cosmic dimension to the rule of the crucified and risen one. But "the cosmic dimension is eschatological."¹⁷

In his essay, "Creatio, Continua et Nova", John Reumann echoes Harrisville's concerns, and concludes that Biblical speech concerning both creation and new creation is confessional and doxological, using the language and insight of the world of the day, but subordinating the insight of "current opinion" or "science" to God's calling to the human creature and the response intended of the human creature. In the New Testament, further, Christ has a role in creation as well as in redemption. The biblical concern is for the human creature in the context of creaturely existence, and the Bible makes little distinction between creation (*creatio originalis*) and preservation (*creatio continua*). Indeed, the primary concern is for the latter. The language of redemption as well as the language of creation can be

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 56-57.

¹⁶Gerhard Forde, in Braaten and Jenson, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II, p. 93.

¹⁷Ibid.

used by faith to speak of the past, present or future creation and redemption, and the redemption of the creature too looks both to the past and to the future. While he affirms then that creation, and redemption, or new creation, include the whole of creation, including the extra-human creature, it is clear that redemption, according to the account of early Christian experience and reflection, "takes the specific form of self-understanding of believers as new creatures." They are "in Christ," both the first fruits of and nucleus for the age to come, and "free to serve, to work, and to transform the tangled situations that exist in, and as the church under Christ, in and as part of the world under God's universal Lordship."¹⁸

Within this framework, Reumann sees Sittler's New Delhi address as an attempt "to outflank all impasses by staking out the whole realm of humanity and nature as the arena of 'Christic grace.'"¹⁹ But Reumann finds Sittler's attempt to be methodologically problematic. Reumann suspects Sittler of merely elevating a particular passage into prominence in order to expound "the meaning of a doctrine for today."²⁰ Sittler responded to this criticism by appealing to Paul Ricoeur's idea of "the ostensive meaning of a text" despite other issues of exegesis. But Reumann asks, "How does this differ from reading

¹⁸John Reumann, "Creatio, Continuo et Novo", p. 105.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 80.

²⁰Ibid., p.81.

in new meanings 'relevant' for our day, for which we condemn exegetes and theologians of the past?"⁷¹

In his book, Creation and New Creation, Reumann sharpens his criticism of Sittler. Reumann agrees that the church needs the extravagant and "horizon-bursting optimism" of ecstatic faith. But he fears, as noted, that to use the hermeneutics of Ricoeur to find the "ostensive" meaning "in front of the text" in order to use the Christ hymn of Colossians in service of the environmental question, however valid the question itself, is again to make of scripture a subjective hunting ground and give it "a wax nose."⁷² Reumann acknowledges the enthusiasm with which Sittler's proposal has been greeted by Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians, by whom "grace is said to 'perfect' nature." But he fears that, when the trajectory of this reading of the Christ hymn is followed, and one moves with the Faith and Order Movement from speaking of "Christ," through speaking of "Christ and the Church," to "Christ, Church and World," then it is a small step to speak, as Karl Rahner does, of anonymous Christians⁷³ or even to make of Christ only one more mythical redemption figure not unlike Rama Krishna.⁷⁴ Whereas Sittler complains that the history of theology and exegesis has reduced "the extraordinary amplitude" of the Christ-hymn in Colossians

⁷¹Ibid., p. 106, n. 6.

⁷²Reumann, Creation and New Creation, p. 54.

⁷³Ibid., p. 48.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 56.

"to dogmatically less embarrassing size by dismissing it as superheated rhetoric,"⁵⁵ Reumann worries that Jesus becomes

just another avatar ... Unless ... it be remembered that the Christ is Jesus, a concrete Jewish man, who was crucified in AD 30. That is the question mark put behind all 'cosmic figures' in Hellenistic hymns and modern theology: Is it of Jesus that we speak, are the figures of the Crucified One clearly discernable?⁵⁶

Wilhelm Anderson is a critic more sympathetic to Sittler's agenda. He shares concern for the earth as the arena of the grace of God, and agrees that the dimensions of christological thought posed by Sittler merits particular attention. He protests, however, that Sittler's appeal to the letter to the Colossians does not correspond to the breadth and the depth of the theological formulations of the letter itself, so that Sittler's theology, intended to encompass the entire cosmos, in fact develops a unilateral and superficial Christology that corresponds neither to the biblical witness to Christ, nor to the human-cosmic reality. Anderson suggests that Sittler is so fascinated by the insight that Christ is the first born of the new creation that everything else retreats; that Sittler has developed an incarnational theology and from that a theory of cosmic redemption that fails to take sin seriously. Referring to II Corinthians 5:19, he protests that Sittler has not considered the primacy of God's decision to reconcile all things to himself "establishing peace through the blood of Christ." This

⁵⁵Cf. Sittler, "Called to Unity", p. 182f., quoted by Reumann, *ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵⁶Reumann, *ibid.* p. 56.

abbreviation of the christological witness corresponds to a doctrine of creation which equates the world as it has become with the original creation of Christ; "Redemption" is only the restorative activity of God.

Anderson insists that Sittler's presentation (along with those of other presenters) at New Delhi must be evaluated from a "Trinitarian" perspective. He outlines this perspective:

1. The world to which we belong and in which we live as human beings, is in its Dasein the constantly new provocation of our faith in the God who bears and has borne witness to himself in Jesus Christ and thus in history. Consequently the God revealed in Jesus waits for us to believe in his creative word and creative being for the continued existence of this world, to praise him over everything and everyone, and to expect all good from him.

2. The world, to which we belong and in which we live as human beings, is in its Sosein always again a new occasion for human beings to become conscious of our lack of faith and our contradiction of God and God's will The salvation of the world as the redemption of humankind from the wrath of God is established only on the unfathomable mercy of God ... Christian faith looks with certainty to the cross of Christ ... Thus the preaching of the redemptive act of God in the cross of Jesus Christ is the most pressing task of the church in and for the world

3. The world, to which we belong and in which we live as human beings, is, for all who set their trust in Christ, in its Vergänglichkeit the daily new occasion to hope and to wait for God's coming lordship. This hope embraces the world too, for the wait for a new heaven and a new earth belong to the expectation of the new life of the resurrection of the dead. Christian faith hopes for this final salvation, not as the result of an internal earthly development, but because of the redemptive act of God's salvation made certain on Golgotha, reckons with the irresistible faithfulness of

the God of Creation who will triumph absolutely at the end of this age ⁷⁷

A "trinitarian view" of the cosmos suggests a missionary effort to "seize" all humanity for God. Anderson sharply criticizes Sittler for his attempt to view Jesus Christ and the Cosmos together. He acknowledges that the thesis, "Jesus Christ and the Cosmos do not belong together" has no basis in the New Testament. Rather, it is a necessary reflection of faith that though the man Jesus is the Christ of God, the same Logos that has assumed form in Jesus Christ has called the world into existence and provides for its continued existence. But to make Christ the mediator (Mittler) of creation, as Sittler has done, is such a dominant theme in his presentation that the centre of Paul's christological expression does not come into focus.

Anderson insists that the expression of the confrontation of Jesus Christ with the real world in its *sosein* is the cross of Christ. The cross shows that the human being and the world are without excuse before God: this is the real situation. At the same time the cross is God's yes to the world, demonstrating God's will for atonement, to human beings and to the world:

Das Ja des Versöhnungswilles Gottes ist die Erneuerung seines ursprünglichen Ja und Amen zum Werk der Schöpfung -- wiederholt gegenüber den Mächten des Bösen, der Sünde des Widerspruches -- verwirklicht allerdings in dieser Welt unter den Zeichen des Kreuzes -- der Passio Dei -- des Leidens Gottes in der Welt und an der Welt und ihren Widerspruch. Darum ist das Kreuz das Signum, das für das Verhältnis, Jesus Christus und

⁷⁷Wilhelm Andersen, "Jesus Christus und der Kosmos: Missionstheologische Überlegungen zu Neu-Delhi" (Evangelische Theologie Vol. 23, No. 9, Sept. 1963), p. 487. My translation.

der der Kosmos -- die Welt in ihr Sosein -- schlechthin kennzeichnend ist. Und das Heil für die Welt hängt ausschliessend an den einen: daß diese Tat Gottes in das ganze Welt proklamiert wird ¹⁰⁰

Finally, Anderson, too, complains that Sittler misses the eschatological sense: looking back to the act of creation he sees Christ as the first born of all creatures -- but not the first born from the dead. Redemption for Sittler, says Anderson, is not hope for the coming reign, hidden now. To say that Redemption must "swing within the wider orbit of creation" is superficial. Christian faith is oriented toward the future, and only in this way can one speak of cosmic redemption.

Sittler is faulted for use of New Testament texts that are disputed and considered by scholars of the Greek scripture to be at the margin, not the core, of the New Testament witness to the salvation offered in Christ. In the cosmic scope of his Christic thought, the particularity of the suffering man of Nazareth appears to be lost. With its universal horizon, this theology loses sight of the reality of present sin and evil and suffering, the redemption of which will finally be eschatological, and is experienced only as hope and as partial in the present age. Most critics find Sittler's christological proposal esoteric, "wispy," "etherial" and removed from the realm of creaturely existence: a curious thing, since Sittler himself had complained throughout his career with the Faith and Order Commission that "evangelical"

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 491.

theology tended to be "angelic" and unrelated to the concrete facts of daily life.⁵⁷

These critics, however, are responding to only one dimension of Sittler's thought. In the course of his theological writing, Sittler holds in tension the universal horizon of the grace of God extended to all things, and the particularity of Jesus as "the incandescence of God's grace" in the world. The most strident critics are also, for the most part, Lutheran scholars whose hermeneutics have been informed by the radical existential hermeneutics of Rudolf Bultmann.

Rudolf Bultmann had come to the conclusion that "the strange world of the Bible" (Earth) had been written in mythological language, making its stories incredible to the mind instructed by the categories of the Enlightenment. Nonetheless, Bultmann remained convinced that the Bible bears witness to a truth about creaturely reality and gracious divine redemption. In his search for categories by which to speak that religious truth now called into question by the critical program of "demythologization," Bultmann appropriated the existential thought of his Marburg colleague, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger, himself influenced by that philosophical tradition that includes Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, wrote of the move from "inauthentic" to "authentic" existence. John MacQuarrie explains that the one who lives an authentic existence "lays hold on his potentiality for being and

⁵⁷Cf. Simonson, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

attains the full stature of his selfhood."⁶⁰ For Bultmann, "authentic existence" corresponds to the "new creaturehood" of Saint Paul. This "new creaturehood" is distinguished from that of "the natural man whose view does not rise above the horizons of the earthly."⁶¹ Even when the cloud of myth is removed, scripture is a kerygmatic word which, when proclaimed, "proffers possibility" and demands a decision for authenticity.

The experienced new reality described by Bultmann and Heidegger as "authentic existence" has in fact a venerable history in Lutheran soteriology and anthropology. Behind Heidegger one finds Søren Kierkegaard, according to whom the individual dares to "leap" from aesthetic or ethical existence to existence in "faith" as absolute reliance in all contingencies upon God who alone is absolute. And behind Kierkegaard one hears the insistent voice of Luther, protesting against every religious pretension that the righteous live by faith: that is, by faith as trust, and by faith which is the gracious gift of God.

Kierkegaard and Luther have been instructive for Joseph Sittler, too. The difference, however, is that in Sittler's theology the individual may not think of himself or herself in isolation, and to be saved is not "to rise above the horizons of the earthly." To be converted to Christ is to recognize that the earthly horizons are themselves the human creature's home, the

⁶⁰John MacQuarrie, "Rudolf Bultmann", in Martin Marty and Dean Peerman, eds., A Handbook of Christian Theologians (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), p. 450.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 451.

garden first given the human creature in which to live, and the care of which was God's first command to Adam. The extent to which this reinterpretation is a departure from Kierkegaard, and from the existential hermeneutics of most continental and American Lutheran theologians of the middle of the twentieth century, is clarified by the Swedish Lutheran theologian, Gustav Wingren:

Kierkegaard actually hated creation faith in the form found in the Old Testament and in Christianity and as developed in the Reformation.

The difficulties which European theology has had in comprehending the biblical understanding of creation come from one single person - Kierkegaard ... Christian action for Kierkegaard implies breaking out of the natural and basic conditions of human existence; therefore he consciously repudiated all spontaneous expressions of life. Such a negation in the area covered by the first article brings with it negative consequences for the entire Creed. This negation has propagated itself in Heidegger, and specifically in his view of "authentic" human existence as being identical with the breaking away of the individual from the universal "man." Spirit is cultivated through separation from the body, as in idealism.⁶²

For Joseph Sittler, by contrast, Spirit is cultivated with recognition that one is embodied, and community is the arena of salvation. That faith to which Luther bore witness, and which Sittler learned from Luther and from Kierkegaard, remains of profound importance to him: it is essential to his ethical stance. But the life of faith as absolute trust in the Creator God who is absolute, is lived in the context of community; and

⁶²Gustav Wingren, Credo: The Christian View of Faith and Life, tr. Edgar M. Carlson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), p. 164.

that community, in Sittler's theology, includes not only other human beings, but the earth itself, as far as the eye can see and the imagination can penetrate. It is part of Sittler's project to search for such theological, historical, and hermeneutical resources as will serve him in his quest for a guide by which the modern person might live as a person of faith in face of the burning questions raised by the current cultural, historical context. The answer begins with his insistence that human beings are not simply historical and cultural beings; they are communal beings, and their community includes the earth: the dust of which they are created, and for the stewardship of which they are held accountable.

2. The Poetics of Grace: Biblical Speech and a Rhetoric of Praise

Joseph Sittler learned from Oswald Spengler to think of language in terms of "morphology." By that he means that language reflects "form" and "shape," and in turn invites "formation" and "shaping." In The Structure of Christian Ethics, Sittler discusses the difference between modern speech and "the strange language of the Bible." Modern speech is specialized; it seeks "to achieve precision in the description of our world as it presents itself to us under a number of forms." It describes the world spatially, and in terms of cause and effect.

The speech of the Bible, however, describes the world in terms of "the inner logic of the living," temporally, of that which is "destiny bound." The speech of the Bible is thoroughly

organic. In contrast to the individualistic nature of a radical existentialist hermeneutic, Sittler observes that according to the organic speech of the Bible, God, the world of God's creating, and the human creature, are all irrevocably and unquestionably interrelated one with the other. This organic speech of the Bible describes God as "the fountain of life from whose eternal livingness all things are brought forth." God is, of course, not the same as the world, for the world is God's creation; yet God is not separate from the world, either, for the world is God's creation. In a world described in these organic terms, God is known by what God does. Sittler offers the aphorism, "God's is-ness is God's does-ness." In a world described in these organic terms, the nature, will and purpose of God are made clear in history: God is alive, demanding and loving.

The human creature, too, is understood in these same terms of organic speech. Speech is also a means of communicating relationship; and as the human creature has being from God, the meaning of creaturely existence is derived from obedient hearing and serving. That the human creature should exist in isolation is inconceivable: "Man has his existence by the Word of God. Who he is is organic with whence he is. How he should live is continuous with where he is -- under God."²² But this organic continuity is also constitutive of human community. The point of the first chapter of the book of Genesis is that a human creature

²²The Structure of Christian Ethics, p. 5.

alone is not human; "Ein Mensch ist kein Mensch": and so God created Eve.

Sittler notes that the organic terms with which the Bible speaks of God and the human community inform biblical speech of nature as well. As God created the human creature, so God created the world: with a Word. Consequently, the Bible looks at the world of nature with wonder and awe, but not as ultimate mystery. The human creature was placed first in a garden, and charged with responsibility for the garden; thus the extra-human creation is the context for human community, and "celebrated [with] the same orchestration of relatedness."⁶⁴

Furthermore, every primary term of the Bible is characterized by this "radical vocabulary of relatedness".⁶⁵ To affirm that the human creature is created in the image of God is to recognize that one cannot become what one is if one "ignores, denies, defies [the] structural God-relationship." Sin is a fracture of this relationship, and apart from this relationship there is no life. "Righteousness" on the other hand is "to be right, vitally related to one's source, to live in such a way as to affirm and celebrate the God from whom one has ... life."⁶⁶ Ethical activity is not obedience to an ideal or to an abstract standard of goodness, but the realization of one's

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 7.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 5.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 6.

existence in relationships on earth and in organic continuity in relationship to the Creator.

The logic of the Greek Testament shares the organic nature of the language of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the history of Christian thought, however, this organic nature has been distorted by the attempt to read scripture through the lens of the spatial and causal language of modernity. Sittler notes that Harnack called this the "acute Hellenization of Christianity."⁶⁷ The end result is that

The organic structure of the New Testament doctrine of the Church has, for most Protestant believers, become so drained of its proper character that the discovery of the living and relational language of the New Testament, due in part to the encounter and studies encouraged by the Ecumenical Movement, come as a positive shock.⁶⁸

The critical response to Sittler's New Delhi address indicates the extent of this shock. But when the reality of the communal nature is posed with relational language in mind, the doctrine of grace gains a striking nuance:

The reality of grace is proposed intelligibly to a generation only when the terms of the proposal are correlative -- even if negatively, judgmentally, or diagnostically -- to the actuality of man in his subjective acknowledgement of how he is and stands and feels and works and thinks and acts in the world. It is a concern of these essays so to describe the actuality of man in his existence in an aggressive and open stance amidst, and even managerially above, the world of nature, as to prescind what unadministered dimensions of grace must again be proclaimed if the

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 10f.

word of the grace of God is to be intelligible or even interesting.⁶⁹

Sittler seeks to clarify the characteristics of the doctrine of grace by describing the reality which grace addresses:

... if grace is to be an intelligible word of redemption, and if the human person to whom that word is addressed defines and knows himself in ever more profound, precise, and fateful transactions with the world-as-nature, then the place of operation of his existence cannot be excluded from whatever redemption is to be meaningful. ... Moral judgment and counsel require clear and challenging relation to responsibilities stated in terms of unparalleled powers, anxieties, terrors, and possibilities. The theological grammar of grace is repertorial of redemption; the language and rhetoric of grace must be made congruent to the potentiality and operational actuality of man in his contemporary placement amidst his own artifactual world of operation.^{70, 71}

In response to his critics, then, Sittler emphasizes first the hermeneutical principles underlying his exegesis of the New Testament witnesses to the scope of grace as he understands it. In Essays on Nature and Grace he addresses the theological impediments to understanding the full scope of grace. In keeping with the organic, living and relational character of biblical speech, Sittler articulates the typologies of his "rhetoric of celebration" to interpret both the scope and the organic integrity of grace in the scriptures.

⁶⁹Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 15.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 15f.

⁷¹Or, as Luther said to his wife, Catharine, "dialectic is knowing how to do the laundry; rhetoric is getting it done."

Sittler complains that most "church goers" have first heard the word "grace" in preaching or in catechetical instruction received as adolescents. In the course of such instruction their reading of the Old Testament is filtered through the reading of the New, inviting the mind "to suppose that before Christ and without Christ grace did not exist."⁷² Furthermore, the trinitarian formulation of creation-redemption-sanctification, when applied to the experience of Israel

pulls into wrong proportions the Old Testament way of understanding God, the power and scope of the greatness of God, and the implications of faith in him for the formal ethics of Israel and for her mode of life in its various manifestations.⁷³

Sittler finds the central term of the Hebrew Testament to be "redemption." This term, he says, draws about itself "the meaning, presence, and promise of God to Israel" as it is disclosed in creation, in historical covenant, and in the interpretation of historical events. While the word "grace," as such, is not used in the Old Testament, he identifies two Hebrew words which may be translated as Grace: *Chen*, which is the grace of divine initiative; and *Hesed*, which is divine faithfulness and loyalty in a covenant relationship based on *Chen*. These terms provide Sittler with a fundamental definition for "grace": "the goodness and lovingkindness of God and the activity of this goodness in and toward his creation."⁷⁴ Observation of the

⁷²Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 23.

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, p. 24.

Hebrew Scripture also informs Sittler's understanding of Nature: "Nature is not an entity or a process set alongside God and having its own autonomy, its own 'insides', its 'laws'. It is, rather, continuous with the reality of God as Creator." This does not mean that God is knowable by natural science or spiritual experience. But it does mean that God may be known to human beings "in the matrix of space, time and matter -- the substance of that mortal theatre in which God deals with his people in their historical actuality."⁷⁵ Thus the witness of the Hebrew Scripture to the grace of God provides the background by which the testimony to Christ given in the Greek Scriptures must be read. What is understood to be the "Christ-concentration" must contain the same scope as that of the Hebrew Scriptures,

for if the doctrine of the divine redemption there centered upon Christ is not assessed as moving toward the same spacial largeness as characterized the Old Testament celebration of the "space of the glory" such a movement will continue to be ignored in Christian theology, or rejected, or regarded as marginal or esoteric.⁷⁶

In his discussion of grace in the scriptures, Sittler makes it clear that, from the beginning, scripture itself refuses to permit the grace of God and the incarnation of the grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ to be reduced to or to give primacy to one christological statement. This is a matter of hermeneutics; it is clear from the New Testament use of the Old

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 24f.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 25.

Testament in light of the experience of Jesus Christ. Sittler identifies three hermeneutical principles to explain this development: Fusion, "the element disclosed in separated episodes are put together in fresh combinations"; transformation, "in which the resultant motif is more than and different from the sum of the components"; and clarification, in which "what was partial, opalescent, and potential in components thus fused becomes more full, transparent and concentrated."⁷⁷

According to Sittler, the New Testament presents a witness to Christ that is "center and intention" of the "substance, texture, referential opulence, or historical solidity" of the "terms, images and symbols of the people of the old covenant." Jesus is seen in continuity with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The christocentrism of the New Testament is not a (blasphemous) modification of the theocentrism of the Old Testament, but rather it is recognized that Christ's doing is God's doing: Jesus offers "a new form of God relationship" and the "articulation of that new form testifies to the old in the very substance of its repertorial and testimonial language."⁷⁸

Despite the great variety of New Testament witnesses to Christ, however, dogmatic response has been

the imposition upon it of an order dictated by concerns foreign to the data, but creative of a hierarchy of importance by which the wildness of the data could be

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 26.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 27.

given the neatness and sequence so satisfying to system.⁷⁴

The vitality described by Sittler troubles the seeming solidity of the system. Sittler, however, asks his readers to recognize the variety, to speak of it, to acknowledge movement and the breadth of "referential amplitude" of christological thought. Differences in motion are not chronological and christological affirmations are different in size of circles of range of reference.

Sittler finds that theological reflection on the range of christological comment in the Greek Scriptures has been hampered by form-critical studies, particularly when "intersected by the evaporation of transcendent categories."⁷⁵ He attempts to respond to this hermeneutical impasse with what he calls a "Rhetoric of celebration" with which he seeks

to break discussion loose from the grip of such language-analysis as would bestow intelligibility and "truth-claim-possibility" upon any such statement as can be shorn of their force-constituting images and reduced to verifiable components.⁷⁶

Sittler recognizes in the language of scripture a "style" of life which suggests an "organic and integral Gestalt down under formation of lived experience and response," which "escapes overly systematic efforts to specify and contain it." There is

a way of praise and glorification that probes for a largeness of language appropriate to its ultimacy.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 30.

This intention describes widening circles of meaning, is a living illustration of that embarrassment of purely designative language in the presence of overwhelming encounters and fully given possibilities.²²

From this he goes on to propose three typologies of this "rhetoric of praise": A Rhetoric of Recollection, a Rhetoric of Participation and Re-enactment, and a Rhetoric of Cosmic Extension.

The first typology, the "Rhetoric of Recollection," draws on the observation that "the testimony to Christ has its ground in, receives its force from, and takes its distance from the rich and various vocabulary for the hope of Israel." It is a way of "testifying forward by recollecting backward."²³ The promises of God were the hope of Israel. Terms such as "Son of God" or "Servant of God" seek to open the mind, shocked by deed or word, to the promise and power already known. Luke, writes Sittler, is filled with such recollection. Even the prologue of John's gospel, with its attention to the Logos, speaks of the work of God in Christ, and not only to the doctrine of "the person of Christ."²⁴ A "rhetoric of recollection" looks back, but sees God at work in the future in startling new ways:

These promises, the hope engendered and sustained by them, and the designations in specific terms of how their hope had been incandescent in Jesus Christ constitute a major strand in the New Testament. The

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., p. 31.

²⁴Ibid., p. 32. Again Sittler acknowledges his debt to Allan Galloway on this point.

terms and the images of these promises and of this hope are recollected, used in fresh continuation with recorded teachings and deeds, fused with one another and welded to present events, transformed in many and sometimes strange, sometimes strained ways.⁸²

The model for the second typology, the "Rhetoric of Participation and Reenactment," is an organic process "whereby redemption is given in and by participation in that One who is in himself the culmination of a process." God, Sittler reminds his reader, has spoken to humankind with a word that is "enpersonalized." The model of redemption is "participation and vital reenactment of that Word in its earthly career." He writes,

This type of rhetoric proposed that in the actual life of obedience, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is concentrated both the reality of alienation and its conquest by the grace of God. The morphology of this divine-human microcosm is the reality and model of redemption; nothing short of a responding reenactment of the dynamic of it, as these are illuminated and exposed by the Spirit is the reality of the Christian life.⁸³

In other words, what Sittler calls "the morphology of Grace" is reflected by "the morphology of life called into new being by Grace." The latter is mimetic of the former. Sittler observes that such rhetoric was developed out of the concrete pastoral situation. The basic text is Philipians 2:5-11, a christological statement written in order to respond to such:

⁸²Ibid., p. 31.

⁸³Ibid., p. 33.

concrete problems as the limitation of the work of Christ.⁸⁷

From this text Sittler observes that

[w]hat God does has a shape; it is an entering into human life, a suffering, a dying, a resurrection from the dead. This lived-out structure of the Christ-deed of grace is identical with the lived-out interior drama of the life of the believer. Faith is participation and participation is reenactment, and the stages of reenactment are the same as the stages of the Act.⁸⁸

Sittler finds that the morphological or mimetic Christology presented in the "Christ Hymn" of Philippians 2 has potential as the core of a Christology for secularity. He describes the relationship of the Christological core and secular circumference in commenting on Philippians 4:8-9:

The grace of God whereby "Christ Jesus made me his own" establishes the center. But the center is not the circumference; the circumference of the grace which is redemption is not smaller than that theatre of life and awareness which is the creation. The grace that came is enpersonalized. Incarnation in Jesus Christ is no other than the grace of God who is Creator, Sustainer, and Law-giver. From the pinnacle of the Grace of God given 'in the desolation and victory of Christ's immolated life, all things are to be seen, evaluated, used, and made the field of grace.⁸⁹

The third typology, the "Rhetoric of Cosmic Extension," speaks of the scope of the power of God with the images appropriate to it at hand to Jewish Christians in the first century. Sittler refers to H. Wheeler Robinson, who writes that the term "nature" has no Hebrew equivalent: "The creative and

⁸⁷This is in sharp contrast to the negative assessment of this pericope as indicated supra, p. 104f.

⁸⁸Essays on Nature and Grace, pp. 34-35.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 35.

regulative physical power which is conceived of as operating in the physical world and as immediate cause of all its phenomena" is God."⁷⁰ Sittler concludes from this that the "modern view of nature as having nothing to do with God is in complete hiatus with the Old Testament view." But in the Hebrew Scriptures,

nature comes from God, cannot be apart from God, and is capable of bearing the "glory of God." Such a view of God and nature makes completely clear why the redemption of God is celebrated in proleptic visions of a restored nature. For the realm of redemption cannot be conceived as having a lesser magnitude than the realm of creation.⁷¹

An understanding of redemption as large as the realm of creation continues in the Greek Scriptures. Christological ascription which expands (in Sittler's words, "swings out") to cosmic dimensions are found in the epistles in particular. These include the texts that Sittler has drawn in service of his "cosmic Christology." They are, however, given marginal recognition, if at all.

Sittler acknowledges several of the objections raised by the critics of his "cosmic Christology." The first is the question concerning the authorship of these passages, and, in the case of the Epistle to the Colossians, its literary integrity. He responds by insisting that, despite these exegetical concerns, the document nevertheless has canonical status. While it is true

⁷⁰H. W. Robinson, Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament; cited by Sittler, Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 36.

⁷¹Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 37.

that the theologian cannot scoop up just any fragment at whim, he reminds his critics that the theologian

is also forbidden to allow open questions of a technical nature to dash from his hand sources which have indubitable standing in the tradition, which have from earliest times been accepted as having apostolic authority, and whose substance is not severable from powerful strands of patristic teaching, preaching, and catechesis.²²

When one hears the Word and does theology, one recognizes the dynamism of the evolution of Christian thought; and one realizes that the emergent Christologies of the first centuries did not reflect all possibilities in the New Testament. The Christology of the Greek scriptures is tentative, themes are probed but not worked out, and, it is true, the gnostic influence is evident. Nonetheless these tentative Christologies are also a legitimate accent in the rhetoric of the earliest community, and they remain available still for use where "the contours of need and interest" meet "the contours disclosed in scripture."

Sittler argues that such bold appropriation of certain texts has been stifled by the hermeneutics of symbolical language, the hermeneutics of existential phenomenology, and the hermeneutics of structure. Sittler complains that the last of these in particular attempts to stop legitimate efforts to use biblical texts for constructive theological efforts. Eliciting support from Paul Ricoeur, he argues that the

...idea that language is a closed system of signs within which each element merely refers to other elements of the system, excludes the claim of

²²Ibid., p. 38.

hermeneutics to reach beyond the "sense" -- as the immanent content of the text -- to its "reference," i.e. to what it says about the world. For structuralism, language does not refer to anything outside of itself, it constitutes a world for itself. Not only the reference of the text to an external world, but also its connections to an author who intended it and to a reader who interprets it are excluded by structuralism.²³

Moving beyond criticism of structuralist hermeneutics, Ricoeur offers Sittler a useful alternative:

The kind of hermeneutics which I now favor starts from the recognition of the objective meaning of the text as distinctive from the subjective intention of the author. This objective meaning is not something hidden behind the text. Rather it is a requirement addressed to the reader. The interpretation accordingly is a kind of obedience in this injunction starting from the text. The concept of "hermeneutical circle" is not ruled out by this shift within hermeneutics. Instead it is formulated in new terms. It does not proceed so much from an intersubjectivity of the reader as from a connection between two discourses, the discourse of the text and the discourse of the interpretation. This connection means that what has to be interpreted in a text is what it says and what it spreads about, i.e., the kind of world which it opens up or discloses; and the final act of "appropriation" is less the projection of one's own prejudices into the text than the "fusion of horizons" -- to speak like Hans-Georg Gadamer -- which occurs when the world of the reader and the world of the text merge into one another.

This shift within hermeneutics from a "romanticist" trend to a more "objectivist" trend is the result of this long travel through structuralism. At the same time, I had to depart from my previous definition of hermeneutics as the interpretation of symbolic language. Now I should tend to relate hermeneutics to the specific problems raised by the translation of the objective meaning of written language into the personal act of speaking which a moment ago I called appropriation. In that way, the broader question, What is it to interpret a text? tends to replace the initial question, What is it to interpret symbolic language? The connection between my first definition and the new

²³Ibid., p. 40.

emerging definition remains an unsolved problem for me...⁹⁴

It was precisely at this point that John Reumann complained that to use scripture this way was, in Luther's words, to give it "a wax nose." That Ricoeur himself is aware of the problem is evident from the citation that Sittler appropriates. Nonetheless, Sittler dares to look at the text and claim that it has an "ostensive," objective meaning. While there may be a "symbolic" meaning, the text also means what the text says. Consequently there is in reading a text what Sittler calls a "fusion of horizons," so that the "objective meaning" is not necessarily the subjective intention of the author. But the author's subjective intention may never be available to the reader; and, on the other hand, the author may never have grasped the full meaning of what has been said, for it is not unusual for the full meaning of a text to be far greater than the original intent of an author. Sittler concludes from this that

"[i]ntention" is no adequate guide for biblical hermeneutics; to see the world as the text speaks of it is a constructive theological enterprise that must not be dismissed out of hand by the too easy demonstration that meanings in an ancient context are not identical with meanings in a present context.⁹⁵

The second objection to which Sittler attempts to respond is the complaint concerning the gnostic influence against which "cosmic" patterns are likely to have been directed. Sittler offers two rejoinders. First, he writes, christological scope is

⁹⁴Ibid, p. 41f.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 42.

not esoteric within the body of epistles; rather, the organic nature of language is continuous with the bold extension of "actual and repeated celebrations of the role and scope of Christ's presence and power."⁹⁶ Secondly, he protests that the occasion for the statement does not invalidate the substance of the argument. According to gnostic thought, the work of Christ was limited. The epistle, however, seeks to demonstrate that nothing further than God's action in Christ is necessary for redemption. Sittler concludes with a characteristically articulate and vigorous defense of his use of the Christ hymn in Colossians:

What is required here is that we permit this christological affirmation to question, profoundly modify, and open to fresh dimensions of interpretation, types of christological truth which have a less broad reference. For the range and interior resonance of this doxological theology is astounding. Nothing less than the vast orbits of natural structure and of historical process and mystery constitute the far-circling of it. Even in this time, when events have tightened human thoughts around the tormented center of the meaning of personal existence, and when, consequently, the church's Christology has focused about a radically existentialist interpretation of Christ the Redeemer, this polyphonic hymn to the scope and energy of the divine redemption sounds to haunt the church's mind.⁹⁷

The Epistle to the Romans displays magnificence comparable to that of the Epistle to the Colossians in its rhetoric of grace and nature. In the conclusion of the eighth chapter of Romans

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 44.

the axis again "swings" from the invisible God to "all things."²⁰ Likewise, the first and fourth chapters of Ephesians also expose "the single massive fact of grace" as the multiple celebrative clauses pile like a fugal stretto to adore and proclaim the mystery of God's grace. Sittler finds these

"In the 1985 Lutheran Partners interview with Robert Herhold, Sittler observes that "the hermeneutical quest" has created an "ear in the theological community" that would find his claims at New Delhi "less of a jolt" than they were at the time. ("Return to New Delhi," p. 10.) It is with a sense of vindication, then, that one finds that Ernst Käsemann, one of Sittler's severest critics at New Delhi, also makes it clear in his commentary on Romans that, for Paul, the whole of creation is the object of God's redemptive work in Christ: "Hence Christianity, which witnesses to sonship and in the fellowship of suffering points to Christ as the coming Lord of the world, seemed to [Paul] to be the great promise for all creation even beyond the human sphere ... for all the mythical form of expression it brings, it concerns here the core of the Pauline message In these verses the justification of the ungodly appears in a new cosmological variation as salvation for the fallen and groaning world. (Commentary on Romans, tr. and ed. by Geoffrey Bromiley [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980], pp. 245f.)

Occasionally, however, one is surprised to find ecclesiastical leadership still contesting the interpretation of such texts as Romans 8 in such a way as to foster care for the environment. At the Lutheran World Federation gathering in Madras, India, September 13-23, 1992, several theological papers were presented as a follow-up to the Earth Summit that had taken place in Rio de Janeiro in January of that year. Herbert Chilstrom, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, protested that "the Apostle Paul didn't have any interest" in ecology, but was "writing about the end of time." ("Theology Central at LWF Meeting [The Lutheran, n. s., Vol. 5, no. 11, November 1992], p. 46). Chilstrom's statements are true enough, but reflect the limited perception of the scope of God's salvation that Sittler contests. It is Sittler's intent to take seriously the fact that it is the Creation, *ho ktisis*, in its earthy concreteness, that groans as it waits for the consummation of this present age. It is this contention that is supported increasingly by such biblical scholarship as that of Käsemann, and by attention to the fact that Lutheran sacramental theology insists that the things of nature are vehicles of grace: *finitum capax infinitum*!

texts to be "conceptually apposite to our time with its radically new understanding of nature and its excruciatingly acute historical consciousness." He concludes that they bear witness to grace of such enormity that

[w]hen, later, a conceptualization of the scope of grace was compelled to give dogmatic precision to these organic images of the energy of grace operating in so wide a range, nothing short of the dogma of the Holy Trinity was adequate to set it forth.⁹⁹

The rhetoric of cosmic extension celebrates the claim that God's grace is so expansive that it reaches the farthest stretches of the universe. One might still ask, however, whether the change in world view from the ancient world to the modern nevertheless qualifies such an extravagant interpretation. Shirley Jackson Case, for example, once observed that

The sky hung low in the ancient world. Traffic was heavy on the highway between heaven and earth. Gods and spirits thickly populated the upper air, where they stood in readiness to intervene at any moment in the affairs of mortals. And demonic power, emerging from the lower world or resident in remote corners of the earth, were a constant menace to human welfare. All nature was alive -- alive with supernatural forces.¹⁰⁰

When the distance between heaven and earth is more recognizably vast one might wonder if the image of such a connection loses its meaning. Sittler says no: the scope of grace is limited only by imagination; and imagination must be stretched by the language of scripture.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁰⁰ Shirley Jackson Case, The Origins of Christian Supernaturalism (Chicago, 1946), p. 1, cited by Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, Vol. I, p. 132.

The problem of "Cosmic Christology" is, according to Sittler, not a problem inherent in the texts of Scripture. The problem is fundamentally that theology wants imagination and creativity. But, unfortunately, the encouragement of imagination in theology is considered to be "going beyond the generally accredited rule."¹⁰¹ He finds it strange, however, that "theological practice in the tradition of Luther should have become suspicious of creative theological imagination":

Imagination among modern men is commonly regarded as a quality of mind expected of poets, artists, and all who out of what is given "create" something that was not. But what other term is adequate to denote that perception, clarification, bringing-into-existence of an insight, a relation, a fresh focus upon the all-generating core-reality in virtue of which an entire way of regarding God and history and human life is powerfully released?¹⁰²

By "use of imagination," Sittler does not mean the "radical rearrangement of the furniture within the unopened and venerable theological house" either by means of "modern theology" or the "modern repristination of confessional theology." He means rather that if theology is to become again a credible form of discourse, it must learn from a variety of disciplines to recognize a vastly enlarged context for theological reflection. In doing this, Sittler insists that he is doing nothing other than what Luther himself did:

Luther did not "discover" anything; he did not introduce into Catholic tradition a single new idea,

¹⁰¹Sittler, "The Presence and Act of the Triune God in Creation and History", in *Vajta*, op. cit., p. 92.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

force, term, concept. All the clay which under his hands was shaped to morphologically novel contours had been lying within the fields of catholic faith and life for centuries. The dynamism inherent in biblical language which, perhaps during his many years as a teacher of Scripture penetrated his entire way of regarding things, emerged in him as a huge power of creative imagination.¹⁰²

Sittler acknowledges that his own creative and imaginative work in theology is at this point not a systematic endeavour; it is only provocative and preliminary. He wants to listen and, having listened, to probe, to provoke, and to stretch the horizons of the theological tradition in order to speak of nature and grace "with a broader frame of reference for those venerable terms."¹⁰³

But this broader frame of reference derives necessarily, he insists, from the need to see nature as the creation. Sittler often quotes Joseph Haroutunian's observation that "Man's mind follows the fortunes of his body with absolute seriousness."¹⁰⁴ The body inhabits the world. Therefore if theology is to be credible, the theological mind must encompass the world of human habitation. This has not often been so in the history of theology, and of modern theology in particular:

The central, operating factor in world-reflection since the Enlightenment has not been the world-as-nature; it has been, rather, the world-as-history as this world, with man its primary agent, has been instrumentally anthropocentrized in fact. ... Nature as the field of

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 91f.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁰³Cf., e.g., The Anguish of Preaching, p. 35; "The Scope of Christological Reflection," p. 332.

intellectual and instrumental operations is, indeed, the focus, both as material for reflection and as productive of a methodology for reflection. But in this process nature as a primal reality is subsumed under nature as resource for historical transformation.¹⁰⁶

Nature, then, not the human being only, and not the processes of history, but the whole of nature, is the object of God's grace as defined by Sittler. But nature, while it is substance and organic process, is not simply a gathering of substances and organic processes. Here, nature, for Sittler, is a dimension of Creation. It is a theological term referring to that which is created by the Creator, and a theology for earth and for the human creature who is created from and inhabits the earth must recognize that fact:

But that man, in such a reflective life inclusive of rationalized, ordered, and used nature is really admitting the creation as such into his reflections -- is a delusion. It is a fallacy to suppose that because we know about and think about atoms, genes, astrophysical space and organization we are thereby thinking about the creation. That fallacy arose out of the ironical fact that human exuberance about knowledge and control of aspects of nature has really nothing to do with nature-as-creation. And until we get this through our heads, and admit nature as the creation into our reflective nexus, and permit nature there to retain its intransigent reality, we shall neither theologize soberly or be theologically guided to act constructively.¹⁰⁷

3. The "Masks of God": Luther's Christology

In his quest to develop a Christology adequate to respond to the questions and possibilities of the human being living in the

¹⁰⁶Sittler, "The Presence and Acts of Triune God," p. 93.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 94.

middle of the twentieth century, Joseph Sittler has looked for biblical themes to serve his constructive proposal, and sought after hermeneutical principles which will give integrity to his claim of scriptural authority for his proposal. His use of the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur to expand the horizons of the interpretation of scripture find their counterpart in Sittler's theological reflection, as he looks to the depth and breadth of the Christian tradition to give additional weight to a vision which has seemed to some of his critics to be too ethereal to be plausible. That there is not a long history of "cosmic Christology" in the theological tradition of the Christian church is for Sittler beside the point. Sittler understands that Christian doctrine is not a matter of the preservation of static categories of religious truth but the ongoing development of a body of Christian thought.¹²⁰ Sittler compares the development of doctrine to the nuanced force of the incoming tide:

Every historian of doctrine has observed that the development of Christian thought is not of equal force and creativity along an entire front. Thought does not move like a wave at full crest. Its movement is rather like that of a slow incoming tide that reaches forward along an uneven beach, pushing forward into low places with long probing fingers. These low-lying or mounded contours are what they are by the working of historical forces which it is the task of research to isolate and describe ... [These and a hundred other influences

¹²⁰Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan's brief and delightful elucidation of "The Development of Doctrine" in Pelikan, The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 52-55.

have a part in the shaping of the undulating life of doctrinal development.¹⁰⁹

With this understanding of the development of doctrine in mind, one can see how Sittler is also able to impress the theology of the Reformers, and particularly of Luther, into service of his christological proposal. Most of the critics of Sittler's address at New Delhi were North American and European Lutheran theologians afraid that the Reformation doctrine of the justification of the sinner would be lost in some kind of "interstellar miasma." Sittler is no less concerned for the justification of the sinner. He is, however, concerned that Reformation teaching be articulated in a way that it is appropriate to an ecological world view.¹¹⁰ To require this of theology is not to deny the truth concerning the grace of God taught by the Reformers. But it is to insist that what was said then of Christ the Redeemer must be heard in light of the biblical claim that the Christ who redeems is the incarnation of the God who is Creator.¹¹¹

When Joseph Sittler asks, "how may a gracious God be proposed as present and active for man?", one hears behind the question Luther's search for a gracious God. Luther's search was essentially personal. Scholarship increasingly clears away the accretions of the tradition of Luther as a human soul in such

¹⁰⁹Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 49.

¹¹⁰"The Scope of Christological Reflection," p. 337.

¹¹¹"A Christology of Function," p. 124.

"existential anguish" as nearly to be non-functional, until the moment of "evangelical insight" dispelled terror and clarified the future with the good news of the grace of God. Nonetheless, Luther, quite within the tradition of Augustine's Confessions and the introspective nature of western Christianity as it has developed since Augustine,¹¹² seeks and experiences the grace of God as personal salvation. Sittler, however, is concerned to expand the understanding of the presence and activity of a gracious God for humanity and the extra-human creation in terms coeval to the human experience in the modern world of self in the world:

If grace, as witnessed to in the New Testament, is to be proposed in fresh ways of address as actually the will and power of God in Jesus Christ for the redemption of men, and if the actuality of contemporary man's formation-as-man in virtue of his life-conditions and transactions with nature is to be taken seriously, then Christian theology must explicate a doctrine of grace in continuity with the Scripture and in such bold and new reformulations as the reality of grace and its salvatory power demands.

To undertake that task of obedience is a large order placed upon the desk of the theologian, and the task falls with both particular urgency and promise upon all who stand within the Protestant tradition. The urgency does not require much amplification. When a tradition announces that its peculiar contribution to catholic Christendom is its clear and permeating witness to the freedom of God in his grace, and organizes its theological systematic around that proclamation, the urgency is in the tradition itself. And the promise lies in the evangelical insight that made it central there.¹¹³

¹¹²Cf. Krister Stendahl's provocative essay, "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in Paul Among Jews and Gentiles (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 78-96.

¹¹³Essays in Nature and Grace, p. 25.

Sittler thus appeals to Luther's imaginative reconstruction of the doctrine of grace. That "reconstruction" is the insistence that righteousness is God's gift given to God's creation out of God's freedom, and that this is revealed by God to the human creature in the humanity of Jesus. There are two dynamic perspectives in Luther's thought that the writers and interpreters of the confessions and the dogmaticians of the seventeenth century have missed, largely because of their own greater concern for other substantial issues that informed the method and content of the medieval scholastics. It is these dynamic perspectives that are reflected in Sittler's own thought.

Luther's Christology is grounded in his doctrine of God. For Luther, God is righteous and "terrible," and cannot be seen by human eyes. This God remains hidden from human view. Luther speaks of God hidden and revealed. God reveals himself *sub specie contrario*, under the sign of the opposite. For Luther, God may be revealed in God's creation, the world of nature. Indeed, only the most faithless can look at the world of nature and fail to see God's imprint and God's presence. Nonetheless, the God revealed in nature may be the creating and preserving God of love and grace, but may also be the God of wrath and judgment, who destroys as well as builds, and who strikes terror in the unrepentant human heart.

Therefore Luther asks where God is revealed in gracious love. He sees that revelation most clearly in Jesus Christ. God's grace is revealed in the innocence and helplessness of the

infant Jesus suckling at his mother's breast. And God's grace is revealed most profoundly in the depths of the suffering and death of the innocent man hanging on the cross.

Luther speaks of creation and Christ as the masks and veils of God, the *larvae* and *involucrum* through which God is encountered in grace, even while God in God's righteousness remains hidden. This God revealed in Christ is, according to Luther, borne witness to consistently in scripture. In the course of his early lectures on the Psalms Luther began to teach that even the Psalmist understood the grace of God christologically.

There is no question but that Luther was, in the words of Marc Lienhard, a "Witness to Christ"¹¹¹ as the One come from God to bring God's gracious gift of salvation to the earth. Luther's concern in Christology is, however, different from that of his immediate predecessors, for Luther is not concerned to spell out exactly the nature of the relationship of the divine and the human in God revealed in Christ. Terrified as he was of the righteousness of God, he was content to be able to see the gracious and loving God revealed most precisely in the innocent child on his mother's breast, and the innocent victim abandoned on the cross. The small catechism simply affirms that Jesus is "true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and truly human, born of the Virgin Mary," and proceeds to identify what

¹¹¹Cf. Marc Lienhard, Luther -- Témoin de Jésus-Christ: Les étapes et les thèmes de la Christologie du Réformateur (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1973).

that means for the human creature. Luther professed his allegiance to the formula of Chalcedon; but until his controversies with Karlstadt, Zwingli and Oecolampadius over the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, he felt no need to clarify with precision and in detail, how "God was in Christ."

Grounded, then, as his Christology may have been in the doctrine of God, Luther's christocentric thought emphasizes not the person of Christ but his work. This is the second dynamic emphasis of Luther and the Lutheran Reformers. The classic statement of this emphasis comes from Melanchthon: "To know Christ is to know his benefits, not to contemplate his natures and the modes of his incarnation." John Macquarrie has pointed out that Luther's Christology, based as it was on soteriology rather than metaphysics, was considered to be inadequate both by his contemporaries and later generations of Lutherans.¹¹⁵ The emphasis on the benefits of Christ has tended to emphasize the individualism of Protestantism: For instance, the sacraments of baptism and holy communion are given "for you" and "for the forgiveness of sins." Indeed, we have recognized already that one consequence of the strong emphasis on the salvation offered pro me has been the development of existential thought emphasizing a human experience of authenticity at the expense of acknowledgement that human participation in the organic processes of the earth is also a constitutive element of the authentic

¹¹⁵John Macquarrie, Jesus Christ in Modern Thought (London and Philadelphia: SCM Press and Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 171.

existence of creaturely being. According to George Hendry, this personal emphasis on the salvation offered in Christ has made Luther's thought inadequate as a resource for a theology that is oriented to the earth.¹¹⁶

But Luther spoke of creation and Christ as masks of God because God in God's righteousness must remain hidden. No one may see the *Deus Nudus* and live. As Marc Lienhard points out, for Luther, "Il est caractéristique pour l'action de Dieu d'agir *sub contraria specie*, c'est-à-dire d'être puissant dans la faiblesse, d'élever en abaissant, de se révéler en se cachant."¹¹⁷ Luther claims that it is a further demonstration of the grace of God that God would reveal God's self in such surprising ways as the helpless child in the manger and in the ignominy of the cross when he states in a Christmas sermon,

Divinity may terrify man. Inexpressible majesty will crush him. That is why Christ took on our humanity, save for sin, that he should not terrify us but rather that with love and favor he should console and confirm.¹¹⁸

The Chalcedonian concern with the person of Christ is not wanting in Luther's Christology. It is presupposed. For Luther the primary concern is the grace of God, revealed in Christ -- and not only in Christ. Lienhard points out that for Luther, even "creation and the law" can be "masks" or "veils" through which

¹¹⁶George Hendry, Theology of Nature (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p. 17.

¹¹⁷Lienhard, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

¹¹⁸Roland Bainton, ed., The Martin Luther Christmas Book (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1948), p. 40.

God's gracious self is revealed. These, however, are the revelation of the *posteriora dei*.¹¹⁹

Sittler's concern with Luther's Christology is not that Luther's emphasis is soteriological. For Sittler, too, this is a primary concern. Nicea, he writes, "operated with the discourse of statics; contemporary discourse is permeated through and through with a world view which is dynamic. For us, persons are not bodies, but units of forms and will."¹²⁰ This dynamic understanding of salvation as the restoration of relationship between God and God's creatures, Sittler writes, was one of the most positive contributions of the Reformers. They were limited, however, by the primary concerns of their time:

The necessary concentration was upon the righteousness of God, the justification of sinners, and the authority of the church. It was Christ in his work as Redeemer, and not Christ in his relation to the Father, which was the central problem.¹²¹

Consequently the Reformation emphasis on the restoration of relationship has been overlaid by the substantialist categories of Nicea.

The problem here identified by Sittler has been exacerbated by the Reformation emphasis on redemption rather than creation. The Reformers overtly acknowledged Nicea and Chalcedon, but without modifying their truth in light of the Reformation insight

¹¹⁹Lienhard, p. 270.

¹²⁰"A Christology of Function" (Lutheran Quarterly Vol. 6, No. 2, May 1954) p. 122f.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, p. 124.

concerning "dynamic biblical realism." The point for Sittler is a matter of emphasis: if Luther looked to Christ to see God's self-revelation, Sittler wants to look through Christ to see God's self-revelation. God is what God does, and Jesus Christ the revelation of God's doing. The Reformers emphasized the work of the Redeemer; Sittler wishes to push them to acknowledge that the work of the Redeemer is the work of the Creator. Sittler finds this relationship most clearly represented in the Gospel of St. John. In a sermon based on John 9, Sittler summarizes his interpretation of Johannine Christology: Jesus said,

"I am the light of the world." This claim of Jesus to be the concrete embodiment of the reality and power of the holy God is characteristic of the Fourth Gospel. The gifts of God are stated in general terms, and Jesus is affirmed to be the effective embodiment of them. God's power in action is called his word. This Gospel has the claim "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." God is light, he is the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world." Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." God is the truth. Jesus says, "I am the truth." God is freedom. Jesus claims to be that action of God in which men are made free in the God-relationship.¹²²

Similarly, Sittler finds that Patristic Christology, too, describes Christ as "the voice of God." Throughout the Fourth Gospel, Jesus points back to the Father, whose glory is his own, and to whose will he remains subordinate. The consequence for Sittler is a servant-Christology, "not yet affected by cosmological or psychological speculation." This Christology recognizes Jesus Christ as, for example, the one foretold "not as

¹²²The Care of the Earth, p. 68f.

a body-less being" but as "a Lamb without blemish and spot."¹²⁷ The emphasis, Sittler writes, is not on "an incarnation but a revelation. He appeared in order that our faith and hope should now be firmly directed to the living God ... who raised him from the dead and gave him glory."¹²⁸

Sittler's essay on "A Christology of Function" was written seven years prior to his far better known address to the World Council of Churches at New Delhi. At the time of the earlier essay, Sittler was already exploring the themes of "Theology for Earth." Relying on the exploration of dynamic relationships both in contemporary philosophy and current biblical scholarship he begins to develop a theology of relationship, and finds the themes alive also in the thought of Luther and other Reformers who speak of grace and the freedom of God, revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In Sittler's theology, these themes emerge with awareness of a dynamic interweave of all things in relationship with all other things. There is nothing that Sittler does not take seriously as a datum of creation and culture. The dynamic of Sittler's theology is informed by the grace of God the Creator in creation and in the Creator's redemption of the creation. The scope of the redemption offered in Jesus is focused as each individual, and as wide spread ~~as~~ "all that is."

¹²⁷"A Christology of Function," p. 128.

¹²⁸Ibid.

4. Universality and Particularity: Dürer and Pantocrator

Lutheran theologian, Kent Knutson, writes that the dogmas concerning the person of Christ and the theories concerning the work of Christ are to be recognized as the teaching tradition of the church: they are the ways that the church has always spoken of Christ. For the Christian "well-versed in the understanding of the Scriptures, these creeds still speak powerfully and adequately." But Knutson also moves beyond the confines of the Chalcedonian formula: "I did not say that they were the only way to communicate the Christ."¹²⁵ A "reductionism" minimizing the historical content of the Scriptures, or a "mathematical theology" which assumes "one perfect systematic theology" with no open questions or ambiguities, may be desirable, but this is not how scripture itself "communicates the faith":

The Bible is not a completely integrated logical system requiring believing because of the perfection of the system, but rather a revelation of God's grace which engenders a response of faith.¹²⁶

In his outline of ways to communicate Christ to the men and women of the late twentieth century, Knutson identifies four factors that are helpful for understanding Sittler's constructive theological agenda in light of the objections of his critics. Knutson writes that: 1) The Bible is not a "completely integrated logical system" but rather, "a powerful witness to the event of

¹²⁵Kent Knutson, The Shape of the Question: The Mission of the Church in a Secular Age (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), p. 71.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 73f.

God's revelation in Jesus Christ" by which the Spirit "evokes faith." 2)History is not simply the report of past events to be understood as factual data; rather the events of history are interpreted, and the full meaning of any event may not be exhausted by one interpretation. 3)Language is not a simple entity. Twentieth Century investigation into the nature of language teaches us that one kind of language is used to convey information; another seeks to evoke a response, such as fear, joy, trust or anger. Consequently different kinds of language have "different kinds of logic, different rules of behaviour." 4)The classic Christian confessions were cast in the categories of substantialist philosophy. But these categories are no longer suitable for the communication of the Christian gospel to men and women of the modern period who live "in a world of protons, electrons, energy, matter, not in a world which understands or accepts the language of substance, divinity, universal, ideas, spirit, and being." The current quest for statements of faith must take cognizance of the fact that the language of the historic creeds neither communicates as it once did nor is it exhaustive of all the "communication tools" given in the Bible itself.

It is the constructive effort of Joseph Sittler to attempt a ~~Christology~~ and soteriology articulated in the dynamic categories of relationship that have replaced the earlier and more static categories of essence and substance. To do this, however, he draws not only on modern modes of thought and experience, but he

also appropriates the language of biblical and patristic witness to the presence and power and activity of God and them in service of these dynamic categories of relationship. Furthermore, Sittler draws upon scholarship recovering the vitality of Luther's witness to Christ, which had been buried beneath the scholastic categories of post-Reformation Protestant orthodoxy. Thus Sittler's christological formulations, while faithful to the christological criteria of Chalcedon, expand that formula and, using current linguistic categories of scriptural interpretation, press it into service as a christological position adequate for the emergencies of the present time.

Sittler's "cosmic Christology" has been compared to the christological thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and of Karl Rahner. Sittler's published work betrays little debt to Teilhard although he does acknowledge Karl Rahner's work in the Essays on Nature and Grace.¹²⁷

The affinity between Sittler's thought and that of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and of Karl Rahner has been explored in some depth by Moira Creede. Creede points to the similarity of their concerns and conclusions:

In the final analysis, the work of Teilhard with its almost chaotic diversity and the multifaceted theological interests of Sittler can both be reduced to the same core in Christ and the universe. Both christologies have the same aim: a new apologetic that seeks to find a point of contact between the person of

¹²⁷Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 131, n. 12, p. 133, n. 4.

Christ and the newly observed dimensions of the universe.¹²⁰

She recognizes that both Teilhard and Sittler are concerned, first of all, to make Christians aware of their rootedness in nature, and the continuing effect of physical nature on human self-consciousness, what Sittler calls, "Man's sheer animal fixedness in the world."¹²¹ Both are fascinated by the immensity of the universe, and seek a point of contact between God and the world. Thus they both make "Christ and the world" a principle theme of their theological reflection. Both look to the same sources for the components of their theology: both are grounded in the epistles of Saint Paul; both appeal to Irenaeus; both understand creation and Incarnation as a dynamic, ongoing process in which Christ has intimate rapport with the world. Consequently, redemption is not only repentance of and forgiveness for sin, but a "fulfillment of the universe" which "extends to the whole universe."¹²²

But Creede fails to note that Teilhard's exuberance for the dynamic process is tempered by a note of sobriety in Sittler. Rosemary Ruether offers a sense of that sobriety in her critique of Teilhard's enthusiastic embrace of nature and the process of evolution. Ruether claims that nature and history are not

¹²⁰Creede, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹²¹"The Scope of Christological Reflection," p. 333.

¹²²Creede, *op. cit.*, p. 204. Cf. Sittler, "Called to Unity," p. 184; "A Protestant Point of View," p. 436; The Care of the Earth, p. 89.

dichotomous, but "nature itself is historical."¹²¹ Evolution is therefore not simply a quantitative transformation but qualitative as well: "At each new stage a qualitatively new dimension of life comes into being." But Ruether fears that "the evolutionary view of matter and radical energy in Teilhard ... could lead simply to a new version of the chain of being."¹²² Sittler's thought, by contrast, does not simply lead to a new chain of being. Whereas Ruether claims that "nature is historical," Sittler insists that historical processes must be regarded as dependent upon natural processes: "I am what I am not only as one with, among, and in self-transforming transactions with men; I am who and what I am in relation to the web, structure, process and placenta of nature."¹²³ Consequently, while Sittler considers the embrace and fulfilment of the whole creation he allows for greater creativity both on the part of nature and on the part of the human creature than Teilhard would seem to allow.

Sittler is closer to Rahner than to Teilhard. Creede observes that Karl Rahner's greatest contribution to Sittler's thought is the concept of the "supernatural existential." Rahner uses the term, "supernatural existential," as a technical term to identify the human capacity for self-transcendence of creaturely

¹²¹Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 86.

¹²²*Ibid.*

¹²³"The Scope of Christological Reflection," p. 333.

existence in relationship to God and to the world. Creede identifies a second affinity between Sittler's thought and that of Rahner in the distinction between two kinds of Christology. For Rahner, as for Sittler, spirit and matter are to be seen in unity, because both are fashioned by the same creator, God. Creede notes that "one important christological consequence of this unity of spirit and matter" is, for Rahner, "that the creative will of God with regard to the material order, can be seen as having as its object, the humanity of Jesus."¹²⁴ Jesus, the Logos, is not a subsequent addition to the creation; rather he presupposes creation and is its ontological (and not "moral") goal.

Both Sittler and Rahner assume, with Teilhard, an evolutionary world, and Rahner, like Sittler, takes for granted that Jesus is the Son of God. And both accept the witness to the Incarnation stated in terms of the hypostatic union of the formula of Chalcedon. But both want to understand how that witness to Christ may be understood in terms of an evolutionary world view. Thus, Creede concludes,

Like Sittler also, [Rahner] stresses that this question is concerned with God's presence in that dimension of reality with which the man of today is most familiar, where he finds himself competent, viz., the material world, and not heaven. At its most basic level, Rahner sees this as the problem of the unity of spirit and matter.¹²⁵

¹²⁴Creede, p. 212.

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 214.

Consequently, Creede notes that Rahner identifies two types of Christology: that of "saving history," and that which is "metaphysical." "Saving history" sees Jesus in his fully human reality, in his death and resurrection, and within the context of the individual's quest for salvation. The cosmos is the stage for human salvation. "Metaphysical" Christology, on the other hand, takes as its starting point the pre-existent Logos, the God who has become human, and asks the cosmic implications of the claim that "the Eternal has done a temporal act, the Infinite become a finite fact."¹³⁶

With the terms, "saving history" and "metaphysical Christology," Rahner has given his own terms to what theological reflection has come to speak of as Christology from above and Christology from below. Moira Creede finds these two types of Christology expressed in Sittler's discussion of biblical rhetoric in Essays on Nature and Grace. John Macquarrie notes that for Rahner, Christology and anthropology are very close to each other. He recalls Rahner's formula, "christology is transcendent anthropology, anthropology is deficient christology."¹³⁷ Macquarrie interprets this to mean that

christology shows us in Christ what humanity can be when brought to the fullness of its possibilities, and

¹³⁶W. H. Auden, "A Christmas Oratorio," in Collected Poems, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 353.

¹³⁷Macquarrie, op. cit., p. 306.

at the same time shows us how our everyday humanity falls short of its archetype in Jesus Christ.¹³²

According to Rahner, this "archetype" takes the humanity of Christ seriously, but he regards the human Christ as the climax of God's growing and developing ("evolutionary") self-communication since creation. Macquarrie worries that this might be a rejection of what Kierkegaard and Barth called the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and the human creature. But Rahner emphasizes anthropology:

The God-creature relation is to be understood (so far as we understand it) in terms of the God-man relation. The classical christology asserts the union, without either mixture or separation, of the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ. This becomes conceivable when we recall Rahner's way of describing the spiritual nature of the human being. Spirit is not 'substance,' however subtle, but the activity of 'transcendence,' of reaching out. If we acknowledge that in Christ the spiritual dynamism of the human creature has reached out toward the infinite God who has himself prepared this point of entry into the creation, then we perceive the outlines of what Rahner has ventured to call the 'divinization' of the world.¹³³

Rahner's attention to the "existential," however, maintains a sense of transcendence and scope consistent with Sittler's idea of relationship. The activity of transcendence as "reaching out" is relational; the nuance offered by Sittler's emphasis, however, always has to do with the singular, the unique, the concrete, the

¹³²Ibid. This observation anticipates the discussion, in chapter three, of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who writes in a double sonnet, "I am all at once what Christ is for he was what I am." Cf. below, p. 241f.

¹³³Ibid., p. 308.

specific. The dynamic of the "reaching out" always occurs between specific particularities.

The relationship between Sittler's thought and that of Rahner and Teilhard has not gone unnoticed by other theologians. Jürgen Moltmann, too, makes the connection between the thought of Sittler and Teilhard in the sense that for both of them, "cosmic Christology" is suggestive of the presence and force of the resurrected Christ in the heart, not only of history, but of all created things:

Erst in einer kosmischen Christologie wird Christologie überhaupt vollendet. Alle andere Christologie greift zu kurz und wird den Erfahrungen der Osterzeugen mit dem auferstandenen Christus nicht gerecht. Ist Christus der "Erstgeborene aus der Toten," dann kann er nicht nur der "neue Adam" der neuen Menschheit sein, sondern dan muß er auch als der Erstgeborene der ganzen Schöpfung verstanden werden. All Dinge sind im Blick auf den Messias geschaffen, denn der Messias wird alle Dinge zu ihrer Wahrheit erlösen und auf das Reich Gottes versammeln und so die Schöpfung vollenden. Das aber heißt: der auferstandene Christus ist nicht nur im Geist des Glaubens und im Geist der Gemeinde gegenwärtig. Er ist nicht nur verborgen in der Weltgeschichte präsent. Er ist auch immanent im "Herzen der Schöpfung," wie Teilhard de Chardin ausdrückte, wirksam. Er ist nicht nur in den menschlichen Opfern der Weltgeschichte, sondern auch in der geopferten Natur präsent.¹⁴⁰

The problem of "cosmic Christology," however, is that it emphasizes the cosmic scope of the work of Christ at the expense of human particularity. The strongest critics of "cosmic Christology" complain that this proposal speaks glowingly of universality in scope of God's redemption of God's creation, but fails to take seriously either the particularities of individual

¹⁴⁰Moltmann, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

tragedy or the individual in need of redemption. Roy Harrisville observed poignantly that the cosmic dimension of salvation must be understood proleptically because it is the human individual who dies, after all;¹¹¹ and the exigencies of human existence are suffered by individuals whose particular circumstances may not be subsumed under the glosses of an overarching system.¹¹² Kierkegaard was right to emphasize the scandalous nature of that most singular particularity of Christian faith, the man Jesus Christ. This is a stark contrast to, for instance, the Christology of Paul Tillich, for whom "Christ" becomes a symbol of the "new being": but a symbol divorced from the historical particularity of the man, Jesus of Nazareth.¹¹³ Carl Braaten addresses the problem crassly but pointedly:

In an age of cosmic consciousness and religious pluralism Christ must decrease in order that God might increase. Christ is too cramped a quarter for the infinite God of this vast universe. What a dazzling proposition for Christian theology! These new age theocentrists like to imagine they have discovered something really new, whereas, in fact, it is nothing but the latest version of the old wisdom: finitum non capax infiniti. We must go beyond Christ to reach God, so they say, because God wouldn't be caught dead in the body of one single Jew.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹Supra, p. 106.

¹¹²We will return to this point in the discussion of Sittler's eschatology. Cf. below, p. 359.

¹¹³Systematic Theology, Vol. II (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 97.

¹¹⁴Carl Braaten, "God and/or Christ" (Dialog, Vol. 26, Fall 1987), p. 244.

This comment is a summation of the statements of all the critics of Sittler's address to the assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi. Yet, when seen in light of the whole body of Sittler's christological reflection, it does not apply so precisely to Sittler: for in his thought, the cosmic scope of the redemption of God made possible in Jesus Christ is held in tension with the particularity of the man, Jesus of Nazareth, the infant son of Mary and the man crucified on the cross.

In a late sermon entitled, "The Haunting Allure of Jesus," Sittler relates Krister Stendahl's account of how he came to Christian faith. Stendahl's was not a journey through piety or practice of Christian religion; his family were not "church people." His rebellion against the mores of his family was to go to church: and, according to Sittler, within six months, Stendahl had "fallen in love with Jesus."¹⁴⁵ Sittler, already an old man at this time, does not tell this story in order to indulge in trivia or sentimentality. Rather he is himself fascinated by one who appeared to fulfill the expectations of Israel, and who was greeted by the language of that expectation: "king," "Messiah," "Son of David," "Son of God," "Son of Man." But Jesus, Sittler writes,

never explicitly rejected nor did he ever explicitly adopt that language. He seemed always to acknowledge what the intention was of those who ascribed that kind of language to him, but he was never content to shrink

¹⁴⁵"The Haunting Allure of Jesus," in Trinity Seminary Review (Vol. 4, No. 4, Fall 1982), p. 33.

the dimensions of his reality to the language of our expectation.¹⁴⁶

Jesus cannot be contained or defined by doctrinal or hermeneutical systems: "From Barth and Bultmann and Käsemann to the constructionists and the structuralist and the deconstructionist and the existentialist, Jesus seems somehow to live."¹⁴⁷ In The Anguish of Preaching, Sittler described this irreducible Jesus as "a coiled spring in the mind; its holding-clips may give at any moment."¹⁴⁸

Sittler's response to those critics who protest that "cosmic Christology is removed from the particularity of Jesus" is the more pointed because it is not directed specifically toward his critics. At almost the same time that he was speaking of the need for "a daring, penetrating, life-affirming christology of nature" he could write that the cosmic scope of the One in whom "all things hold together" is none the less one Who is particular. "The sharpest and strongest commentary ... on the New Testament statement, '... we beheld the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus,'" Sittler writes, is a portrait of Christ by Albrecht Dürer. But in Dürer, Sittler finds that the concept of "the glory of God" is nuanced, putting the "cosmic Christ" in new perspective:

The term, 'glory of God' is big and deep and points to meanings that lurk behind all possible statements. It

¹⁴⁶Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

¹⁴⁸The Anguish of Preaching, p. 30.

points to a life in relatedness in all the structures and processes of the physical world. It points to the involvement of the holy with all the whole and all the crippled things of this world. We intuit this reality of God -- or glimpse shadows of his being and power in those things. But [when] we most fully behold it [it] becomes a man with a face.¹⁴⁹

This tension of universality and particularity, between the specific center of the incandescence of grace and the expansive circumference of the scope of that grace is identified as well in a brief discussion of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Sittler presents Bach as a master craftsman, as an imaginative artist, working creatively within the constraints of a received tradition, as an intellectual, and as "a witness to the radical particularity of the Christian faith." Sittler is careful to note a distinction between universal religion and human spirituality on one hand, and "that unique and incomparable historical action of God in Christ which has produced the specifically Christian community and confession."¹⁵⁰ Bach, in his music, bears witness, not to an amorphous spirituality but "to a definite faith that was as palpable for him as the roots of the Church of St. Thomas at Leipzig."¹⁵¹

Sittler complains that we live in an age in which the particularity of the Christian story "is so eroded that we can play both Parsifal and the St. Matthew Passion on Good Friday and

¹⁴⁹"Dürer," in The Lutheran N. S. #7, (March 27, 1967), p. 12.

¹⁵⁰"Johann Sebastian Bach: An Essay in Discovery (Part 2)." Music Ministry, Nov. 1960, p. 7.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

perceive no opposition in content."¹⁵² But Bach's vocation was the "priestly administration" of a specific gift for the glory of a specific God revealed in the anguish and exultation of a specific human being:

The good city of the consummation toward which his soul pressed was not Parnassus but Jerusalem; the songs which drew from him the wonderfully sweet and devout arias of the cantatas were not the songs of Pan but the songs of Zion; the spirit whose might he invoked in his labors was not the Goethean spirit of the cosmos but the Heilige Geist of his stout faith; the river at whose waters he "sings the songs of Zion in a strange land" is not the mythological Lethe, but historical Babylon. And that transcendent realm of the spirit that is called Heaven -- currently supposed to be so much less interesting than some subjective realm of value -- was the good old German Himmel -- replete with angels, beatific with love and peace after toil, and sustained by a very real God. And yet this heaven, the pictorial representation of the consummation of his faith, evoked contemplative offerings from his craft and his daily stint of composition and his adoring intellect that are literally incomparable.¹⁵³

In The Structure of Christian Ethics, Sittler looks to Jesus himself as the source of what Sittler calls "christological" ethics. That is to say, the truth of Christianity is "neither abstract nor propositional; it is the truth of God incarnate in a person." And this person does not teach a set of philosophical principles for living which will demand corollaries flexed to fit a new situation. Rather, Sittler points to the occasional nature of what Jesus says: "They are like lightning flashes of God's love-gift and command." There is no system to Jesus, to his teaching, to his doing. A system, Sittler says, "is proper to

¹⁵²Ibid.

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 8.

the inorganic; the living has a characteristic style."¹⁵⁴ This characteristic and pervasive style is to speak of God and human beings, in isolation and as part of human communities, "in a relational and living fashion." His speech "swoops down, now here, now there"; he notes details, situations, an "instance of human pathos, error, pride, holds it up for a moment, and then moves on."¹⁵⁵ There is no systematizable consistency either to what Jesus says or to what Jesus does. Thus, he complains,

A theological method more concerned with propositional coherence than with the description of historical reality and the communication of personal vitality of Jesus has succeeded in making virtually inaccessible to Christian ethical discourse the actual facts of Jesus' own realization of the God-relationship.¹⁵⁶

Yet what Sittler sees in the words and deeds of Jesus is "the present and pressing existence of the available power of the kingdom, now."¹⁵⁷ "God in a fresh and decisive way is at work in His world."¹⁵⁸ The Johannine affirmation that "The Word has become flesh and dwelt among us" means for Sittler that

the new deed of God in Christ is declared in clearest terms; the involvement of the Holy Will can come to no closer engagement than this: *flesh*, which is what I am, among us, which is where I am.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴The Doctrine of the Word, p. 4.

¹⁵⁵The Structure of Christian Ethics, p. 50.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 52f.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*

In this presence God has overcome everything that separates God and God's creation. "It is within the orbit of this gracious and aggressive overcoming activity of God that the death and resurrection of Jesus is to be understood."¹⁶⁰ Thus, Sittler concludes, "the teaching of Jesus which accompanies these 'signs' has its center in his announcement that a new event no less astonishing than the creation of the Cosmos has occurred."¹⁶¹

Summary and Transition

Sittler claimed that his Christology is in continuity with classic Christology. As "constructive" theology, however, Sittler's work reflects the four categories suggested by Kent Knutson. Sittler, too, read the Bible, not as a systematic proposal, but as a witness to Jesus Christ. He recognized that history is not simply data, but interpretation. Perhaps more self-consciously than any other theologian of his era, he attended to the creative power of language. He sought to reformulate confessional statements made in the static substantial categories of sixteenth century philosophy by thinking in the relational categories of the biblical witness and of the philosophical reflection and linguistic theory of the mid-twentieth century.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 29.

The Cosmic Christ of Joseph Sittler is not "just another avatar,"¹⁶² for the marks of the Crucified One are discernable. Following Luther and Kierkegaard, Sittler too emphasizes the absolute particularity of Jesus, and, while faithful to the constraints of the formula of Chalcedon, he uses a rather different language to speak of Jesus as the one who is "the incandescence of the grace of God." Sittler's Christology moves along three axes of God, the individual, and the whole human community;¹⁶³ and the axis of "community" includes the communion with the earth itself, for it is the dust of the earth from which we are created and to which we surely shall return. In this regard, too, Sittler's thought is organic and relational. And it is in this emphasis that Sittler demonstrates his divergence from the individualistic tendencies of Luther and Kierkegaard that have so powerfully influenced the development of modern existentialism and the theological appropriation of existentialist philosophy.

It is in opposition to a too individualistic theological myopia that Joseph Sittler insists that the redemption offered in Christ "swing," as he said at New Delhi, within the larger orbit of creation. This means, first, that in Jesus God has not only entered into historical processes; rather, because of the organic

¹⁶²Cf. the criticism of John Reumann, *supra*, p. 110.

¹⁶³Lee Snook uses these three "axes" as a paradigm for Christology and soteriology in The Anonymous Christ: Jesus as Savior in Modern Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986).

relationship of the grace of God and the Saviour who comes as the enfleshment of grace, God, the Creator, has entered into the very fundamental processes of the earth itself, and of everything to which the earth is connected: in Sittler's words, "the intercalated web of all that is." The attention given to Jesus is not merely some radical Christocentrism or "Christomonism," however. The grace that comes by Jesus Christ reaches to the farthest corners of the universe, and God must also be thought of in Trinitarian constructs expanded to their farthest potential.

It is, in Paul Santmire's words, an "elegant system," for it is expansive in horizon without losing sight of creaturely particularity. But each creature is invited to transcend itself by recognizing its place in the created community which, through the gracious activity of God in the crucified human being, Jesus, is now a redeemed community as well. Yet there remains the critique of those who recognize that, while God has done what God has needed to do, sin, evil, and suffering remain in the world. Grace may indeed come in Jesus Christ, whose creaturely participation in the whole universal realm of existence makes that grace abound, not only to the "chief of sinners" (John Bunyan), but to the farthest flung galaxy. But there is, in classical theology, an eschatological dimension to creaturely existence that Sittler seems not to have acknowledged. Eschatology is in fact instructive for Sittler's ethics; but before that can be explored it is necessary to examine Sittler's discussion of the means by which God's grace is made known.

Chapter III
THE MEANS OF GRACE
THE SUBSTANCE OF ETHICAL OBEDIENCE II

But we have this treasure in earthen
vessels.

Saint Paul

I think a nice, well-behaved gal in the
singer's seat of a Sunday is a means o'
grace: it's a sort o' drawin' to the
unregenerate, you know.

Harriette Beecher Stowe¹

Sittler's Christology is a development and amplification of Luther's incarnational Christology, giving full attention to the humanity, the particularity, the creatureliness of Jesus Christ, and to their soteriological significance, not for the human creature alone, but for the whole of creation. Sittler is best remembered for his "cosmic Christology." But the universality in scope of his christological thought may not be separated from the particularity of Jesus, and especially the suffering of Jesus on the cross. One can trace in his Christology a continuum from the universal to the particular.

The movement in chapter three is the reverse of this. The "means" of grace are the means by which God's good will for God's creation is communicated to the creature. The movement here is from the particularity of the means of grace in their classical Lutheran formulation to the breadth of Sittler's own constructive formulation of the concept of "the means of grace." In contrast to the Protestant, and particularly Lutheran, insistence that

¹Harriette Beecher Stowe, "The Minister's Housekeeper." The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Third Edition, Vol. I (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989), p. 1543.

"the means of grace" are (1) the word and (2) the sacraments of baptism and holy communion, Sittler, instructed not only by the Reformers but also by Orthodoxy and by Irenaeus, finds that art and literature, and the wonder and terror of nature, also mediate the grace of God.

Definitions and Historical Considerations

The Means of Grace are Preaching and the Sacraments, both of them witnesses to the Living Word, Jesus Christ, present in the life of the congregation. "Grace comes by Jesus Christ" (John 1). In the course of the Middle Ages, however, the grace which came per Jesum Christum was understood to be mediated through the sacramental system of the Medieval Church. This sacramental system had its origin in the thought of Augustine, who formulated the first theory of the sacraments. Steven Sykes describes Augustine's theory as follows: For Augustine, sacraments are "means by which interior meanings are expressed by one agent to another."² Augustine distinguishes between the sacramental sign and that which is signified by the sacrament. There is, for example, a distinction between the bread and the wine, which are signs, and the "act of being united by God in the fellowship of the church." This act is the sacrament itself. Augustine spoke of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, but the number of sacraments was not determined in the Latin west until

²Steven Sykes, "The Sacraments," in Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 281.

Peter Lombard fixed the number of the sacraments at seven. Lombard also gave a precise definition to the word "sacrament" in order to distinguish them from other rites of the church: "Something is properly called a sacrament because it is a sign of God's grace, and is such an image of invisible grace that it bears its likeness and exists as its cause."² This definition obtained through the middle ages of the western church, until Aquinas further defined a sacrament as an "instrumental cause of grace" and the "means through which God acts in people's lives."

As the Protestant Reformers struggled to articulate their renewal of the doctrines of grace and freedom and the relationship of grace and freedom to the authority of the church, they offered a new understanding of the means of grace. Whereas the medieval church spoke of the seven sacraments as the "means" by which the grace of God was communicated to human beings, the Reformers simply spoke of Word and Sacrament as "means" of grace. Robert Jenson has pointed out how the Reformers appealed to Augustine's understanding of the sacraments as "visible words": sacraments are "sacraments of the Word."³

²"Sentences" 4.1,2; cf. Sykes, p. 282.

³Jenson's point is that, for Augustine, the sacraments were "visible" as opposed to God, who is invisible. For the Reformers, the sacraments are "visible" in contrast to that which is "audible": "when God addresses us, he does not speak only in the sentences of language, but also by the kind of signs that are seen and touched -- and tasted and smelled and apprehended by whatever other senses there may be." Robert Jenson, Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 4.

That "Word" is first of all the creative Word of God, the Word which gives life to all that is, in and from the beginning. That Word is, secondly, Jesus, the Word become flesh, the living Word who continues to be God's creative force at work in and through the creation. That Word is, thirdly, scripture: the writings recognized as God's self-revelation and which contain the creative Word and point to Jesus, the Word made flesh. Finally, that Word is the proclaimed word by which Jesus Christ continues to be present in the life of the gathered congregation. When Lutheran theology speaks of this proclaimed word, however, it is properly in conjunction with the sacraments. "Word" and "Sacrament" may not be separated from one another. "Word and Sacrament" both together are the means by which the living Christ is brought to encounter with the gathered congregation.² According to the Lutheran Reformers, "Word and Sacrament" are the ways by which the living God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, is made present to men and women now, inviting them to a living relationship of faith. According to Articles V and VII of the Augsburg Confession, the means of grace are not dependent upon the organic institution of the church for their efficacy. Rather it is the other way around:

Article V: Solchen Glauben zu erlangen, hat Gott das Predigamt eingesetzt, Evangelium und Sakrament geben, dadurch er als durch Mittel den heiligen Geist gibt, welcher den Glauben, wo und wenn er will, in denen, so das Evangelium hören, wirkt, welches da lehret, daß wir durch Christus Verdienst, nicht durch unser

²Cf. Edgar Carlson, The Reinterpretation of Luther (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), pp. 137-138.

Verdienst, ein gnädigen Gott haben, so wir solchs glauben....

Article VII: Es wird auch gelehret, daß alle Zeit müsse ein heilige christliche Kirche sein und bleiben, welche ist die Versammlung aller Glaubigen, bei welchen das Evangelium rein gepredigt und die heiligen Sakrament lauts des Evangelii gereicht werden.

Dann dies ist genug zu wahrer Einigkeit der christlichen Kirchen, daß da einträchtiglich nach reinem Verstand das Evangelium gepredigt und die Sakrament dem gottlichen Wort gemäß gereicht werden^e

This is in contrast to the medieval understanding of grace and faith. In the middle ages, grace was a *donum superaditum*, a gift given by God to men and women to enable them to fulfill their intentions of righteous living. The sacramental system as it developed after Lombard and under the scholastic theologians made the medieval church to be the only legitimate custodian of that gift. Luther's initial protest was against the crass abuse of the church's "custody" of grace. This protest led the Reformer to understand grace, not simply as "substance" but as relationship: God's favour toward men and women, communicated to them through word and sacrament, in order that faith as a relationship of trust in and love for God might be engendered. It was further significant that Luther did not see only the seven sacraments as "means of grace": For Luther, there are "two means of grace," the word and the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper, used by God, "not as a woodsman uses an axe, but

^eDie Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelischen-Lutherischen Kirche (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), pp. 58, 61.

as the soul uses the body"⁷ to communicate God's good favour to the human creature.

1. Joseph Sittler on "the Means or Grace"

According to Joseph Sittler, the medieval church institutionalized grace and the Reformers personalized grace. In the development of sacramental theology there was not only a reduction from grace as relationship to grace as substance, but also a diminished sense of where grace was to be found. There was further a reduction of the sense of the purpose of grace: grace made it possible for one to hope for eternal reward, as opposed to eternal punishment, and grace was antithetical to and medication for the sin of the human being.

Sittler, on the other hand, expands the concept of Grace. In his Christology Sittler asserts that the salvation offered by God in the life, the death, and the resurrection of the particular human creature, Jesus of Nazareth, is universal in scope. Grace is not simply antithetical to and salutary in face of the consequences of "human sin": grace, as God's predisposition of love for the whole of creation, both enables the fulfillment of nature and is present in nature. Sittler follows classical Christian teaching that grace is mediated to human beings in the Word of God as scripture which bears witness to the living Christ and which calls human beings to a dynamic relationship of faith in Jesus. And Sittler also affirms the

⁷Carlson, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

classical teaching that Grace is mediated through the substances of the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. But Grace can be mediated through these things because, in Jesus, the world has known God's real presence; and therefore, since then there is nothing that can be declared unclean²⁰ and nothing that cannot serve as a means by which God's predisposition of love for the world may be mediated to the world and to all who dwell therein.²¹ Thus scripture as "the Word," and water, bread and wine, which, with the "Word" direct us to Jesus who is the concentration of the grace of God come to us, are most certainly and most precisely acknowledged as means by which God's favourable predisposition toward God's creation is communicated.

But the earth itself, and culture, too, may also be means of God's grace. Music, visual art, drama, and literature are particularly highlighted in Sittler's work as means by which God's grace is communicated to God's creatures. On the other hand, these same media may also be vehicles of God's wrath and judgment upon those who fail to respond to God's grace and who refuse to live with God and with God's creation in a relationship of trust and faith.

²⁰Allan Galloway, cited by Sittler, "Called to Unity," p. 181.

²¹"Theology for Earth," p. 372f.

The Word of Grace in Sittler's Thought

Sittler's first published essay on the "means of grace" is The Doctrine of the Word: In Lutheran Theology.¹⁰ In this volume Sittler seeks to explain and defend Luther's understanding of the Greek and Hebrew scriptures as the witness to Jesus as the living Word of God, the deus loquens. In his presentation of Luther's "doctrine of the Word," Sittler discourages a literal reading of scripture which is "foreign to the spirit of true Lutheranism." Drawing in particular upon the thought of Einar Billing and the renaissance of Luther scholarship in Sweden,¹¹ and the work of his instructor, John Olaf Evjen,¹² Sittler defends Luther against any claim that the Reformer's thought lacks systematic clarity. It is true, Sittler acknowledges, that if "systematic clarity" demands a rigorously and consistently

¹⁰These chapters were initially delivered as the 1948 Knuebel-Miller lectures to the seminaries of the United Lutheran Church.

¹¹Sittler (The Doctrine of the Word, p. 61) acknowledges a specific debt to the work of Edgar Carlson in this arena. Cf. Edgar Carlson, The Reinterpretation of Luther (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948).

¹²I have been told by a former student of Sittler's that The Doctrine of the Word was written as a vindication of Evjen, who had been tried for heresy and removed from the faculty of Hama School of Theology for teaching his interpretation of Luther's "dynamic" understanding of the authority of scripture. (Cf. also Linda-Marie Deloff, "Joseph Sittler and the Theatre of Human Existence: An Interview," in Christian Century [Vol. 101, February 1-8, 1984], p. 114.) Evjen refuted a literal reading of the Bible but nonetheless recognized its pages "as the cradle in which the Christ was to be found," and as a call to living faith. It is as such, as we will see, that scripture, as a means of grace, is also a *larvum dei* (cf. The Doctrine of the Word, p. 65).

developed set of theological loci, then Luther's thought cannot be said to be "systematic." But there is a system characteristic of an organism, and a system characteristic of an inorganic structure. A crystal has structure; but a crystal is not a living thing. The systematic and organic nature of Luther's thought is not that of a crystal, or of a set of beads strung along together, but that of the stem which holds the petals of a flower together as they radiate out from a central core. A "system" in this sense is "a central authority, a pervasive style, a way of bringing every theme and judgment under the rays of a central illumination."¹³ The central burning core of Luther's theology is, Sittler writes, "faith." This core is so radiant, and so penetrates the whole of Luther's thought, that there are few whose theology can be said to be more rigorously systematic. It is this dynamic "central burning core" of Luther's theology that illuminates Luther's biblical hermeneutic. Faith is likewise the core of Sittler's biblical hermeneutic.

But the dynamism of Luther's thought was lost in the centuries following Luther's death. Sittler observes that the first generation following Luther fought a theological battle on two fronts: on the one hand, against the Reformed theologians of Switzerland and Scotland on one hand, and on the other, against the theologians of post-Tridentine Roman Catholicism. In order to preserve the content of Luther's doctrine of justification, such theologians of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth

¹³Doctrine of the Word, p. 4.

century as Philip Melancthon, Martin Chemnitz, and David Hollaz reverted to the earlier methods of scholasticism. Sittler claims that if one were to compare the theological statements of the sixteenth century Lutheran theologians to those of the schoolmen, one would readily observe that, while the content of the Lutherans is clearly evangelical, the method is scholastic. Sittler is sympathetic to the plight of the sixteenth century dogmatists: they wrote and taught as they were compelled by the situation in which they lived. Jacob Preuss reminds us of the seventeenth century adage, that, "If Martin Chemnitz had not appeared, Martin Luther could not have stood."¹⁴ But Sittler's sympathy is a critical sympathy, for while the doctrinal content of Luther's faith was explained, ordered, and clarified with precision, the passionate fervour of faith as a dynamic relationship of trust in God made possible by grace was reduced to faith as assent to one set of dogmatic propositions and rejection of another.

Faith, however, remained: and in this period the core of faith was preserved not by the dogmatists but by the piety of those in the pew, and by the church musicians. While dogma clarified with precision the content of faith, the fervour of faith as a relationship of trust was sung; the mystic passion that Luther appropriated from Bernard of Clairvaux and John

¹⁴The seventeenth-century adage, *Si Martinus non fuisset, Martinus vix stetisset*, is cited by Preuss in the introduction to his translation of Martin Chemnitz, The Two Natures of Christ, tr. Preuss (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), p. 9.

Tauler was transmitted through the Halle pietists and social activists, Franke and Philip Spener; through such mystics as the Protestant, Jakob Boehme, and the Catholic, Angelus Silesius; and through the musician Bach, who became, in Sittler's words, "the fifth evangelist."¹⁵ This shift in the understanding of faith, however, gave priority to religious experience over the content of faith: it "was expressed in increasing attention to the *fides qua creditur* (the faith whereby we believe) at the expense of the *fides quae creditur* (the faith that is believed)."¹⁶

Following the Enlightenment the idea that scripture could in any way be considered the self-revelation of the God of Creation and Redemption was increasingly attacked. The beginnings of literary-critical and historical-critical study of scripture called the very textual integrity of scripture itself into investigation. Fundamental convictions concerning sacredness itself were called increasingly into question by movements in philosophy. Political developments challenged ecclesiastical authority over common life. Yet, the challenge to belief in the Bible as the Word of God, Sittler calls, not an intellectual challenge to an absolute tenet of Christian faith, but the "disintegration of a caricature."¹⁷ The "disintegrated caricature" was in fact not what Luther had taught concerning the

¹⁵Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan's dedicatory note to Sittler in Pelikan, Bach Among the Theologians (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

¹⁶Doctrine of the Word, p. 45.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 48.

authority of scripture, but Lutheran Orthodoxy's truncated and circumscribed interpretation of Luther's own doctrine of the Word of God, revealed in scripture:

Luther understood revelation in a personal, contemporary, dynamic, and thoroughly religious manner. Orthodoxy came to understand revelation in a propositional, documentary, static, and thoroughly intellectualized manner.¹⁰

Sittler contends that the Reformers' dynamic and creative Doctrine of the Word had been eroded both by Lutheran orthodox theologians and by the Pietists. Pietism, by virtue of "deepening subjectivism," had emphasized the religious vitalities of the individual at the expense of the creative Word. Orthodox methodology sought to defend evangelical religious speech by substituting static categories proper to "the timeless truth" of philosophy for it. Sittler argues that with a Biblical understanding of the Word, the Word is spoken of always "in organic relationship with the present and creative, the all-powerful and originating activity of God." But when the Word of God is equated with a book, it is limited to "a literary quantum," and is "left hanging on the limb of a historically conditioned, and hence relative, process."¹¹ Sittler concludes therefore that

[w]hen the period of orthodoxy equated the Bible with the Word of God, and hence materialized the Word of God into a historical product, theology played directly

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 50.

into the hands of three forces: rationalism, idealism, historicism.²⁰

Thus later generations who sought to interpret scripture found themselves limited by an understanding of the Word of God caught between two false alternatives, "the one a secularization of the Holy and the other a static materialization of the Holy." Sittler proposes that the correction of this problem is the task of contemporary evangelical theology.²¹

The constructive project for Sittler is to speak of scripture, not as the "literal words" of God, but as the creative and dynamic "Word" which points to Jesus as the presence of God among us. In order to defend this proposition, Sittler appeals to Luther, for whom Scripture is "the mask of God," the *larvum dei*, or the veil of God, the *involucrum dei*. According to Luther's doctrine of God, God in God's self cannot be seen naked. Luther, the scholar of Hebrew Scripture, learned from God's admonition to Moses that to stand in presence of the *Deus nudus* is to die: "no one may see God and live." Therefore God reveals God's self, and God is known by God's self-revelation, through the "mask" of scripture, just as God is known through the "mask" of Jesus Christ.²² Sittler, following Luther exactly at this point, marvels at the confusion among people who insist that scripture is anything other than a veiled witness to the living

²⁰Ibid., p. 52.

²¹Ibid., p. 59.

²²Ibid., p. 66.

Word who is Jesus: for, he writes, we do not confuse the Sacraments the same way.²³

Sittler is concerned to recognize and preserve the mystery of God that stands behind both the Word of Scripture and the Sacraments. Both Word and the Sacraments are, in Lutheran theology, the "means of grace," through which God reveals God's gracious self. The mystery of God refuses ready explanation. Grace, Sittler has written, is always something new and unexpected, surprising, and beyond reach of the human desire for facile comprehension.²⁴ Therefore the means of grace, both Word and Sacrament, always point beyond themselves, not to something that is "perfectly clear," but to a mystery that is, finally, what Rudolf Otto called the *Mysterium fascinans et tremendum*: the Mystery of God, made present to us in Jesus. Even the word "sacrament" has as its biblical correlate in Saint Paul, the word, *mysterion*, "mystery": it is of mysteries that we are stewards (I Corinthians 4:1). While Sittler does not speak at length concerning "sacraments" as such (he speaks of baptism, the sacrament of Christian initiation, almost not at all), he does nevertheless speak of the Lord's Supper primarily as "mystery," that is, as bearing witness to the reality of mystery in a world that both disavows and yet is starved for mystery.²⁵

²³Ibid., p. 68. n. 8.

²⁴Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 19.

²⁵Cf. Sittler, "The Sacraments and Mystery," The Chicago Lutheran Seminary Review, Vol. LVIII, No. 3 (July, 1953), p. 12.

The conceptual reduction of the doctrine of the Word in Protestant scholasticism accompanied the Enlightenment's eradication of a sense of the sacred in the world. Scripture became "mere words," the truth of which could be argued and disclaimed. There was a comparable reduction in the Protestant and modernist tendency to reduce ritual action surrounding the celebration of the Eucharist to a perfunctory and generally uninteresting rite.

In an early essay on "The Sacraments and Mystery," Sittler expresses disagreement with the hierarchical constraint of the means of grace that characterizes the Roman Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, but he affirms the representation of the mystery of God that is characteristic of Roman Catholic and Orthodox worship.²⁶ Worship in the presence of Sacred Mystery has as its consequence something that one does not understand, or comprehend, and that one does not feel constrained to comprehend and to understand. One looks and wonders. When one stands in the presence of mystery, one "beholds." To behold is to stand in relationship to that with which or with whom one is confronted. To behold is to stand in relationship with that

²⁶"Mystery" is not to be confused with the superstitious adoration of the consecrated host that prevailed in popular sacramental practice of the late medieval period and in the Roman Catholic sacramental practice of the Enlightenment. According to this practice, a practice of popular piety that did not reflect official teaching of the church concerning the Eucharist, only the adoration of the consecrated host was necessary, not participation in the sacrament. Cf. Regis Duffy, Real Presence: Worship, Sacraments, and Commitment (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 11.

which presents itself as real but beyond comprehension. Sittler is critical of that tendency of the western mind to reify and to reduce the object of observation and analysis to that which is intellectually comprehensible, whether the "other" which one beholds is a lump of coal, a diamond, a rose, a whale, or another human being. According to Sittler, when analysis is finished, all of these retain their own subjectivity, which means, they retain their own mystery. Because they retain their mystery, they are means by which God's grace may be communicated to human beings. Grace is communicated when human beings behold another creature, wonder at the creature observed, and experience the dynamic relationship between the observer and observed.

According to Sittler's understanding of the means of grace, God uses material things for the redemption and restoration of a material creation. Not only does God make use of the material things which were in the beginning created by God, but, in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, God brings them together with God's own self. In "Theology for Earth" Sittler argues that God, the human creature, and nature, "These three are meant for each other, and restlessness will stalk our hearts and ambiguity our world until their cleavage is redeemed."²⁷ This "cleavage" is brought together in the last supper, in the meal which has become the Sacrament by which the faith of the Christian community is sustained. The Sacrament, which is "the

²⁷"Theology for Earth," p. 373.

Sacrament of the encounter with God" (Edward Schillebeeckx),²⁰ constitutes community. The larger Christian community that is fostered by the joint celebration of Eucharist in ecumenical convergence is a case in point: but the community does not end there. That the Eucharist may establish community in this arena suggests that the celebration of mystery may foster community in the larger cultural context as well.²¹ But this community is clearly not simply the community of human beings with one another and with God; this community includes all the material things of the whole earth:

Here in one huge symbol are God and man and nature together. Bread and wine, the common earthy stuff of our life when we have it, and of death when we've lost it. Both in the hands of the restoring God-man!²²

This was the point of his address at New Delhi, in which he put forth his agenda for christological thought as "cosmic in scope." The unity which is sought by the ecumenical movement is, in Sittler's thought, a unity which will not have been achieved until it includes not only "the churches" or "all people, of

²⁰Edward Schillebeeckx actually speaks of Christ as the "Ursakrament," the primeval self-revelation of God: Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963). Heinrich Bornkamm identifies the same language of sacramental encounter in Luther: "Christ Himself is a Sacrament, namely, whenever He is more to us than a tutor whose conduct we follow, when He is to us the revelation of God Himself." Bornkamm, Luther's World of Thought, tr. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), p. 96.

²¹"Intercommunion and the Cultural Reality," in Bernard E. Meland, ed., The Future of Empirical Theology (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 314f.

²²"Theology for the Earth," p. 373.

Christian faith or not, with their historical development." The unity which Sittler seeks recognizes that the earth itself and its material processes are an essential dimension of that community. This is a "sacramental" reality. The connection between Jesus Christ, the sacrament, and the creation implicit in this observation is made explicit by Carl Braaten, when he writes,

the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ has a deep set of roots in the soil of the Incarnation, but it has another set of roots deeply embedded in the Christian doctrine of creation. For the Body of Christ is continuous with the created body of humanity, being "like unto us in every respect, except without sin." There is continuity between creation and incarnation, and so it is fitting that the sacrament of salvation should use as its means of expression the same earthly kind of stuff from which humanity emerged in its evolutionary journey.³¹

II. The "Masks of God": Luther on Word and Sacrament

In his appreciation of the mystery inherent in the proper celebration of the Lord's Supper and in his protest against any hierarchical circumscription of the means of grace, Sittler follows Luther's own "two-fronted"³² battle with both Roman

³¹Carl Braaten, "The Sacramental Principle." Principles of Lutheran Theology, p. 99.

³²Cf. Robert C. Croken, S. J., Luther's First Front: The Eucharist as Sacrifice (Ottawa: The University of Ottawa Press, 1990). Croken identifies Luther's "first front" as the early controversies concerning the Eucharist, in which he protested the late Medieval Catholic understanding of the mass as a repetition of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The "second front" was Luther's later controversy with Zwingli, in which Luther defended the "real presence" of Christ in the elements of the Eucharist (see below).

Catholic and Protestant theologians concerning the sacraments and the "real presence" of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharistic meal. But just as Sittler's Christology is an expansion of Luther's Christology, Sittler's doctrine of the "means of grace" is also an expansion of Luther's doctrine of "Word and Sacrament." Luther's Christology is understood by Sittler to be "a Christology of function."³³ Sittler follows Melancthon's assertion that "to know Christ is to know Christ's benefits." This particular soteriological emphasis has brought certain limitations to the development of Christology in the history of Christian thought. According to Luther, however, the Christ who makes his benefits known to us is the Christ of the ontological statements of the formula of Chalcedon which holds that Jesus Christ is both human and divine. Luther, as we have seen, does not attempt a systematic defense of Chalcedonian Christology. He is satisfied to assert as a matter of faith "the existence of One Person in Two Natures, which are united unconfusedly, unchangably, indivisibly, inseparably."³⁴

It is from this perception of the two natures united in one person that Luther could describe Christ, "the Word made flesh" as the "mask of God" in the cradle and on the cross, who comes offering redemption. God continues to come hidden "under the sign of the opposite" in the word of Scripture, in the proclaimed

³³Cf. *supra*, p. 147.

³⁴"The Definition of Chalcedon" in The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, Second Edition, ed. F. L. Cross and E. . Livingstone (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 263.

Word of the sermon, and in the "visible Words" of the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist. This Word, hidden beneath the signs of word and water and bread and wine, is not only intended for the redemption of the individual, for the forgiveness of sin, however. This Word is intended "for the care and redemption of the whole creation."

But whereas Luther insisted that the divine presence is to be found in the Word of scripture, in homiletical proclamation, and in the "Visible Words" of the sacraments, Sittler insists that there is a witness to that Word of God which is incarnate in Christ outside of these specific places. In this, too, however, he remains nonetheless curiously consistent with Luther: for Luther says that while God can be found in these places, God is not only to be found in these places. The distinction is that it is only in these places that we may be certain that God, in God's gracious and salutary self-revelation, may be found. Wilhelm Pauck, writing on "Luther's Faith" cites Luther's claim that other places may indeed be a source of recognition of God's presence, although to the unbeliever they may also strike terror:

So it can happen that conscience feels all misfortune that befalls us as the wrath of God, and that even a mere rustling leaf seems to be God's wrath ... There is nothing more worthless and more despised than a dry leaf that lies on the ground; worms crawl over it; it cannot ward off even the smallest speck of dust ... But there comes a time when its rustling will scare man and horse, spike and armor, kings and princes, the power of a whole army, and even such spiteful and angry tyrants as cannot be scared either by the fear of hell or by God's wrath and judgment, but only become still prouder and more hardened by such threats. Aren't we fine fellows? We do not fear God's anger but stand stiffly unmoved by it. But we can be scared and frightened by

the anger of an impotent dry leaf, and the rustling of such a leaf can make the world too narrow for us and become a wrathful God to us.³⁵

In "The Bondage of the Will" Luther amplified his understanding of the presence of God in love and in wrath in the whole of creation:

It makes a difference whether you say that God is present or whether you say that he is present for you. But he is there for you, when he adds his word [to his presence] and binds himself, saying: Here you shall find me. When you have the word, you can grasp him and have him and say: Now I have thee, as thou sayest. So it is with the right hand of God: it is everywhere, as no one can deny; but it is also nowhere, therefore you cannot apprehend it anywhere unless it binds and confines itself for your benefit to one place. This happens when it moves and dwells in the humanity of Christ. There you will most certainly find it. Otherwise you must run through all creation from end to end, groping and fumbling about, here and there, without finding it. Although it is really there -- it is not there for you.^{36, 37}

³⁵Cited in Welhelm Pauck, "Luther's Faith," in From Luther to Tillich, ed. Marion Pauck (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 8

³⁶Ibid., p. 4.

³⁷The point is always that the creation is able to bear transcendence: *finitum capax infinitum*! But one is never certain apart from the real presence of God revealed in Christ, and in the means of grace, that the transcendent presence of God is gracious. That transcendent presence may not be so clearly a benevolent presence. This is the root of Paul Tillich's discussion of the demonic at the depth of being: what is not grounded in the "ground of being" is absolute relationship to something that is other than absolute. Sittler has been accused of failing to see the transcendent revealed in all quanta and processes of nature as anything other than benevolent. There is truth to the criticism; but Sittler himself asserts quite bluntly that natural disaster, especially disasters that are the natural consequence of human degradation of nature -- such as the death of waterfowl because of an oil spill -- can be understood as the wrath of God working itself in nature.

According to Luther, God can indeed be present in anything and in everything, both in wrath and grace, in judgment and in love. The words of scripture and the words that accompany the ritual action and the elements of the sacraments do not localize God's presence in these things only; they only say that the God whom we know to be hidden in these places is God revealed beneath the Word and the elements of the sacraments as a God of love and who comes to us here with grace.

Robert Croken identifies two "fronts" in the development of Luther's sacramental theology.³² The "first front" concerns Luther's reinterpretation of the sacraments in opposition to Roman Catholic teaching as it had developed in the course of the middle ages. In "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," he reduced the number of the sacraments from seven to three, then two: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. According to the Augustinian formula, these two are sacraments because there is a mandate: "do this"; a substance: "water" or "bread and wine"; and a promise: the promise of grace as "forgiveness of sins." In each celebration of the sacrament Luther insists that it is not the substance itself or ritual act that is the means of grace; it is the substance and the act together with the Word, performed in obedience to Christ's command, which graciously engenders faith as a relationship of trust in God revealed in

³²Supra, p. 185, n. 32.

Jesus.³⁰ The Word is the guarantor which localizes and ensures the gracious presence of God in this place.

In restructuring the medieval "sacramental system," Luther insisted that the sacrament is God's doing, not a human activity designed for the propitiation of God's mercy. Any hint that the sacrament of the Eucharist is a human act of sacrifice to God is rejected. The grace of God conferred in the sacrament of the altar is recognized as God's prior act. God gives grace through the spoken word and "in, with, and under" the sacramental sign. The man, woman, and child who receive the word and the tangible sign in faith, receive God's grace in unreserved trust that what God has promised is so for them.

In his early dispute with the Church of Rome Luther sought to follow Augustine by protecting the idea of the freedom of God in God's grace given without human activity done in any way to merit God's favour. In his later conflict with Zwingli, however, Luther sought to protect the truth of God's gracious presence in the world in Jesus Christ. In the controversy with Rome Luther was guided by the doctrine that salvation comes to men and women by grace alone, given in God's freedom. Grace alone is the source of justification. But grace comes through Jesus Christ

³⁰Werner Elert points out that the Lutheran confessions never derived their doctrine of the Lord's Supper from a general definition of the sacrament, even though "general definitions are by no means lacking." According to Elert the fact of greatest importance to the Lutheran Reformers is that the Sacraments were instituted by the command of Christ, and for that reason celebrated by the Church. The Structure of Lutheranism, tr., Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 303.

(John 1): and Luther's "second front" of conflict concerning the Eucharist, his conflict with Zwingli, underscores the fact that, unless God was in Christ, justification as the restoration of a right relationship between God and God's creation could not happen at all.

Zwingli complained that Luther's doctrine of the presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharistic meal was nonsense. Jesus could not be localized in this bread and wine, for the body of the risen Christ could hardly be present in a thousand Eucharistic meals celebrated all at once. According to Zwingli, therefore, the eucharistic meal was a memorial to the absent Christ who had once been with God's people on earth and would one day return to be with them.⁴⁰

Luther responded to Zwingli with what has come to be called the doctrine of ubiquity. The doctrine of ubiquity teaches that the Christ who has ascended to the right hand of power did not ascend to a precise locality. Rather, because God is present in all things, the right hand of the power of God is also present in all times and in all places, in all things, beneath all things, beyond all things, and before all things. Therefore Christ is present "in, with, and under" the bread and wine of the Eucharist, not simply because he "must" be localized there; rather, he is there because he can be there, as he can be "in,

⁴⁰Cf. Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Sacramental Basis for Mission," taped lecture presented to the Lutheran Conference on Worship and Witness, Minneapolis, August 1983. St. Paul: American Lutheran Church Media Services Center, n.d.

with and under" all things: in other words, *ta panta*. The word of scripture that says, "this is my body, this is given and shed for you, for forgiveness," pronounces a word of grace, rather than judgment, for with these words the believer is assured that in these material things, the elements of bread and wine, the God who can be present in all things is most assuredly present here in grace and forgiveness. The words, "This is my body" and "This is my blood," guarantee that the transcendent presence in this meal is a divine presence, and not demonic, as might be the situation in, for instance Luther's forest. And the words, "for you" and "for forgiveness," guarantee that this divine presence comes with grace, and not with judgment or condemnation.

Luther thought Zwingli was claiming that it is logically impossible for bread and wine to communicate the gracious presence of Christ in forgiveness. For Luther, this was to claim that Christology is logically impossible. If Christ cannot be present in the media of bread and wine, then God cannot be present in Christ, and the world cannot know God's salvation given in the freedom of God's grace. Christology, as we have seen, has always sought to steer its course carefully between ebionitism and docetism, and to affirm the two natures of Christ. Eucharistic theology demands the same steerage and for the same reason. Salvation requires that God be present in the human being, Jesus; and the confession that Christ is present in the bread and wine of the eucharistic meal bears witness to the salvation offered in Jesus. For Luther, to deny Christ's

presence in this humble meal is to deny God's presence in Jesus.⁴¹ Therefore Luther is utterly insistent that when Christ says, in the words of institution, "This is my body" he means "This is my body: *Hoc est corpus meum*."

Alister McGrath has expressed surprise that Luther, who was not a literalist in his interpretation of scripture, should insist on the literal rather than the metaphorical truth of Christ's words in this instance.⁴² But for Luther, Christology is the hinge-pin of the interpretation of scripture.⁴³ Scripture is not to be taken literally in every instance, because

⁴¹"Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," tr. Robert H. Fischer, in Luther's Works American Edition, Vol. 37, Word and Sacrament III, pp. 218-224. Thus Heiko Obermann: "So wie Gott wahrhaftig Fleisch geworden und leiblich in die Welt gekommen ist, genauso real ist er auch im Herrenmahl in den Elementen Brot und Wein leiblich gegenwärtig." Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel (Berlin: Wolf Jobst Siedler Verlag GmbH, 1982), p. 247. Also E. Theodore Bachman, "As in Christ the divine and human natures are united, so also in the sacrament in a corresponding way the bread (and wine) and the body (and blood) of Christ are united. Thus the sacrament is placed into the heart of the New Testament Revelation. Indeed, the basic fact of the Incarnation, the indwelling of God among men, makes Jesus Christ himself the primitive sacrament." "Introduction to Word and Sacrament" in Luther's Works: American Edition, Vol. 35, Word and Sacrament I, p. xv.

⁴²Cf. Alistair McGrath, Reformation Thought: An Introduction (Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1988, 1993) p. 180.

⁴³Cf. George Forell, Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954), p. 49: "Luther's seemingly irrational insistence upon the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in his controversy with Zwingli was not an expression of 'biblicism,' but the result of his belief that Zwingli's spiritualization of this sacrament detracted as much from the reality of God's self-communication as the sacramental logic of the Roman mass."

the words of scripture are not in themselves the subject, object, source and truth of scripture. In Luther's theology, it is Jesus Christ, the incarnated embodiment of God who is this truth. Jesus is the Word made flesh dwelling amongst us, the One by whom grace comes: the words of scripture merely point to Jesus as that One. The fundamental principle essential for Luther's interpretation of scripture is the aphorism, *Was Christum treibet*.¹¹⁴

God is present in freedom and grace in Christ and in the Eucharistic meal because God can be present beneath and behind and beyond, "in, with, and under," anything created. This teaching is closely related to Luther's doctrine of continuing creation: God's energizing creative force sustains providentially what God has created. Consequently, Luther writes,

[the power of God] must be essentially present at all places, even in the tiniest leaf. The reason is thus: It is God who creates, effects, and preserves all things through his almighty power and right hand, as our Creed confesses. For he dispatches no officials or angels when he creates or preserves something, but all this is the work of his divine power itself. If he is to create or preserve it, however, he must be present and must make and preserve his creation both in its innermost and outermost aspects.

Therefore, indeed, he himself must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly

¹¹⁴Cf. Philip Watson, Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther (London: The Epworth Press, 1947), p. 175.

present and within all creatures than God himself with his power.⁴⁵

God, for Luther, is creator, and as creator God is absolutely other than creation. Although God is understood as person, God is nonetheless not localized in a distant place. The ascended Christ is seated at the right hand of God, but the right hand of God is God's power present everywhere throughout the whole of creation. God is absolutely other than creation, yet God remains nonetheless infinitely close. Wilhelm Pauck describes Luther's teaching on this point:

God is smaller than anything small, bigger than anything big, shorter than anything short, longer than anything long, broader than anything broad, slimmer than anything slim, and so on; he is an inexpressible being, above and beyond all that one can name or think.⁴⁶

According to Tillich, this teaching has a venerable history in the course of Christian thought.⁴⁷ Tillich interprets this assertion using terminology derived from his study of Kant and

⁴⁵"That These Words of Christ, 'This Is My Body,' Etc., Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics," tr. by Robert H. Fischer. Luther's Works American Edition Vol. 37, Word and Sacrament III, p. 58. Cf. Pauck, op. cit., pp. 3-4; Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther's World of Thought, p. 58.

⁴⁶Pauck, op. cit., p.4. Cf. Tillich, A History of Christian Thought, p. 374.

⁴⁷Tillich, as we shall see, identifies Luther's sources for this understanding of the presence of God in creation in the medieval mystical tradition. But Luther, whose early training and lectures were in biblical theology, supports these ideas by exegesis of Hebrew scripture. Vilmos Vajta includes the following scriptural references as sources for Luther's doctrine of the "Allgegenwärtigkeit Gottes:" Psalm 139:7f., Jeremiah 23:23, Isaiah 66:1, Acts 17:27. Cf. Vajta, Die Theologie des Gottesdienstes bei Luther (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1954), p. 157.

Spinoza. While Kant stressed a principle of absolute distinction and "the principle of detachment, of moral obedience without participation in the divine," Spinoza stressed a "mystical principle of identity, and participation in the divine." Tillich notes that the fifteenth century cardinal Nicholas of Cusa also taught the principle of the "coincidentia oppositorum":

In everything finite the infinite is present, namely, that power which is the creative unity of the universe as a whole. And in the same way the finite is in the infinite as a potentiality. In the world the divine is developed; in God the world is enveloped. The finite is in the infinite potentially; the infinite is in the finite actually. They are within each other."¹

Tillich calls this proposition the engine that has driven all intellectual activity in modern thought, and suggests that, while Luther probably did not know the thought of Cusa, nonetheless, "in his discussions of the presence of the divine in the sacramental materials of bread and wine [he] used similar formulations."² According to Tillich, Luther had the same sources as Cusa: German and early neoplatonic mysticism. Tillich thus summarizes the doctrine of God that supports Luther's doctrine of ubiquity: "God is nearer to everything than anything is to itself. He is fully in every grain of sand, but the whole world cannot comprehend him. He transcends everything finite, although being in it."³

¹Tillich, A History of Christian Thought, p. 373.

²Ibid., p. 262.

³Ibid., p. 374.

Tillich writes that this understanding of God is a significant change from the earlier view that God is far from the earth and far away in heaven, and only active in power on earth. For Nicholas of Cusa and for the mystical Luther, Tillich says, God, that is, the active power of God, and the earth are within each other: "The divine is not in some place alongside of the world or above the world, but is present in everything human and natural."²¹

According to Tillich, Luther's affinity for Cusa's teaching of the tension between the finite and the infinite is the basis of the conflict between Luther and Zwingli at Marburg. "The fight between Luther and Zwingli in Marburg in 1529," Tillich writes, "contrasted two types of religious experience, the one a mystical interpretation of the sacrament, the other an intellectual interpretation."²² Luther had insisted that the incarnate Christ was present on earth both in his humanity and in his divinity. Therefore the divinity and humanity of Christ were both present as well in the resurrected and ascended Christ in heaven. Tillich uses a language of mysticism when he claims that the consequence for Luther is that

Christ is present in everything, in stone and fire and tree, but for us he is present only when he speaks to us. But he can speak to us through everything. This is the idea that God drives toward embodiment or corporeality, and that the omnipresence of God's body

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 260.

in the world is the form in which God's eternal power is present in the world.³³

At the conclusion of the Marburg colloquy, Luther stated that Zwingli and his followers "have not the same spirit with us." Tillich interprets this by pointing out that "it involves the matter of the relationship between the spiritual and the bodily existence." In Zwingli, Tillich says, there is "a humanistic intellectualism which separates the spirit from the body." For Luther on the other hand, "spirit is present only in its expressions. The interest is incorporation." Tillich cites Oetinger: "Corporeality is the end of the ways of God." Consequently, according to Tillich "a great interest in the bodily reality of Christ, in history and sacrament" develops from the mystical perspective of Luther:

The second spiritual difference has to do with the religious meaning of nature. In Zwinglian thought nature is controlled and calculable in terms of regular natural laws. By contrast Luther's dynamic naturalism often goes into the demonic depths of nature, and is not interested in any laws of nature.³⁴

³³Ibid., p. 261.

³⁴Ibid., p. 262. Cf. Douglas John Hall, Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship (Grand Rapids and New York: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. and Friendship Press, 1986), p. 203: "The Protestant ascription of mystery to God tended, together with the impact of modern secularity, to rob God's creation of its mystery. But there was an older Protestantism that did not take that route and, wherever it has been imaginatively grasped, has continued to engender Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben ('awe before life' or 'reverence before life'). I mean the Protestantism of Luther. It would be a good thing if Protestants reared on the leavings of a rationalized Calvinism and a pragmatized Wesleyanism could return to the classroom at Wittenberg. Luther, for reasons that are as obscure as they are fascinating, never was touched by the bug of humanism that stung both Calvin and Zwingli, and introduced strangely un-Lutheran nuances into the

An increasing amount of attention is given to the "mystical" aspect of Luther's thought, an aspect which has such profound implications for his Christology, his Eucharistic theology, and also for his doctrine of Creation. While Tillich assumes Luther's mysticism, Bengt Hoffman is a forerunner in this research. Hoffman protests a tendency to generalize "mysticism," pointing out that even medieval mysticism must not be understood as a "graded ascent to the heavenly world" in the manner of Dionysius the Aereopagite or as an attempt to "obliterate the self" through union with God.⁼⁼ That Luther should have awareness of mystical theology comes as no surprise. Frederick Copplestone points out that there had been a flowering of mystical theology in the German lands, particularly in the Rhine Valley, already in the thirteenth century. It was mediated through, among others, Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, Henry Suso, Richard Rolle, and John Gerson. While mystical theology was

Lutheran reform through the ministrations of Philip Melanchthon. I suspect that Luther was utterly perplexed by Erasmus. For while he was infinitely beyond the superstitions of late medieval ecclesiastical life, Luther remained at heart a mystic. He found the more 'reasoned' approaches of his associates flat, though he perhaps admired Master Philip, as intuitive persons often admire the more meticulous. In the famous colloquy at Marburg, he had, one guesses, no idea of what Huldreich Zwingli was talking about. It was, I think, one of those conversations where the words of each fly past the other. For Zwingli, the more Modern man, bread was bread; for Luther, bread -- even in its unconsecrated state -- was brimful of theological meaning, was 'our daily bread'! *Finitum capax infiniti*. Nature does not resist grace, only human nature does. And above all, human nature at its most promethean, its most 'rational,' its most willful."

⁼⁼Bengt R. Hoffman, "On the Relationship Between Mystical Faith and Moral Life in Luther's Thought" (Gettysburg Seminary Bulletin, Winter 1975), p. 24.

speculative enough, Copplestone finds that it was primarily experienced as a practical and profoundly affective piety, "issuing in a desire to draw others to closer union with God."⁶⁶ In Eckhart, German mysticism became nearly pantheistic, and for this Eckhart was condemned as a heretic. For John Gerson, however, mystical theology is "the experimental knowledge of God, in which love, rather than the abstract speculative intellect, is at work."⁶⁷ In contrast to Eckhart, mystical union for Gerson "is a union which does not dissolve the human personality in the Godhead."⁶⁸ Gerson is close to Tauler on this point; and Tauler becomes familiar to Luther through Luther's edition of the *Theologia Germanica*,⁶⁹ a book attributed to Tauler. In the *Theologia Germanica* the fundamental experience is not one of dissolution of the self, but of *Gelassenheit*, or relinquishment, the "carefree serenity" of submission to God.⁷⁰ *Gelassenheit* is the opposite of *concupiscentia*, or desire. But the God before whom one relinquishes any pretension or possession is neither subjective nor removed. In Luther's mysticism, then, one's soul does not

⁶⁶Frederick Copplestone, S.J., A History of Philosophy, Vol. III: Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy (New York: Doubleday Image, 1993), p. 182.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Cf. The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther, translated, edited and with commentary by Bengt Hoffman, introduction by Bengt Hägglund (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 88, p. 175, n. 101.

collapse into an immanent God, nor does one "soar" into the presence of a God "far off." Christ is objective in history and experienced as present in the objectivity of the word addressed to the hearer as object of the word "for you." And in the objective presence of Christ, God's own self is present, masked by the child in the manger, by the crucified man on the cross, and with the words "this is my body," in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Heinrich Bornkamm observes that no other mystic "expressed the idea of God's immanence in the world more forcefully than Luther did."¹

Sittler does not refer explicitly to Luther in this regard, nor does he explicate this position with the thoroughness of Tillich. He does, however, presuppose it; and, like Seyed Nasr, he finds this theological presupposition removed from the actual experience of modern life. It has been eradicated by processes that are bent on eliminating any sense of mystery from the modern experience of existence in the world. Sittler cites Wilhelm Stählin in this regard:

What we in the Evangelical Church call 'Sacraments,' are the last existing remains of the world of mystery which once embraced and filled the whole life of the Christian Church, in its breadth, length, depth and height [sic] ... So now they stand, these boulders from primitive rock, in a landscape completely changed, alien and strange, as the uncouth witnesses of a world

¹Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther's World of Thought, tr. by Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), p. 113. I have heard it reported that Luther reportedly said at Marburg that he had no difficulty seeing Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist because he could see Christ in his cabbage soup! Unfortunately, I have never been able to verify this report in any of Luther's writings.

that has vanished into the beyond. And a humanity that hankers after mystery, after the mystery of the divine Presence in the world, presses toward these rocks as to the Isles of Deliverance which have not been submerged by the fearful flood.⁶²

But the mystery that is defended by theology is articulated neither in the modern world nor in the life of the Christian community. The want of awareness of "mystery" in the worship of the Christian church, and the lack of any sense of the sacred in the world, feed on each other in such a way that "after fifty years of recovered biblical theology with its strong accent upon the uniqueness of the Christian faith" it is still reflected only weakly in "its practice in word and its celebration of Sacrament."⁶³ Sittler describes the life of the Spirit as manifold, and the Sacraments bring God's action to human need. This action of God is an action "related to human life ... but ungrounded in it, a strong unconsulted Act which shatters and recreates in a new dimension of meaning all things." But with characteristic reference to concrete everyday experience, Sittler identifies two ways in which this is threatened by the modern world:

A new way of living which has so emptied old permanencies as to make them juiceless shells, and a new mode of working which makes personal activity meaningless for millions, unsustaining to the hungry imagination. When bread is the end-product of planting and tilling and nurturing the fields of one's ancestral

⁶²Wilhelm Stählin, The Mystery of God (London: SCM Press, 1937), p. 79, cited in Sittler, "The Sacraments and Mystery," in The Chicago Lutheran Seminary Record, Vol. LVIII, No. 3 (July 1953), p. 13.

⁶³"The Sacraments and Mystery," p. 13.

home, and when wine is the domestic product of vines pruned and cared for by our hands and by the hands of remembered fathers under the suns of home -- then heavenly investiture of these common things with Divine meaning is a possibility. [But] it comes very close to becoming an impossibility for a generation which buys its bread in shining wrappers in a super-market, and procures its wine (if it does this at all) at the corner liquor store.⁶⁴

For Sittler, the end of the environmental crisis is the judgment of God working itself out in nature's reaction to human abuse, because of the human incapacity to see that the earth contains the glory of God. The concept has aesthetic significance, also; for artistic expression as well as bodily expression bears witness to the presence and reality of God, and is able to glorify God. By contrast, the expeditious quick and easy packaging of goods and services in a consumer culture betrays little evidence of the transcendent glory of God.

But to note that now is to move too quickly. Rather, to summarize: according to Luther, the late medieval mystic, nature can express both the demonic and the divine, both God's mercy and God's judgment: *finitum capax infiniti*. For Zwingli, the early modern, this is a logical impossibility: *finitum non capax infiniti*. Their difference becomes transparent in their doctrines of Christology and of the Eucharist, "the whole of sacramental life and the relationship to nature."⁶⁵

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Tillich, op. cit., p. 262. Tillich also suggests that these perspectives are informed culturally and sociologically as well as theologically. Zwingli, Calvin, and the Swiss Reformation were shaped in the context of early urban industrialism; the Lutheran Reformation, by contrast, flourished

Robert Croken suggests that if Luther should be able to speak so compellingly about the presence of God in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, perhaps he should also be able to be less strident about the presentation of the Eucharist as offering.⁶⁶ But for Luther it is justification that is of paramount consideration, and justification is always a matter of the priority of God's grace given in God's freedom. Luther and Lutheran theologians following him are quick to dismiss any hint of synergism and synteresis. Their primary concern is to assert not only the activity of God in the ongoing, continuing preservation of creation, but the priority of God's grace in the support of that preservation, and the extension of redemptive grace to the creation. Geoffrey Wainwright has written that this intensive emphasis on the priority of God's grace is a singularly Lutheran emphasis, and has reminded me that the Wesleys quoted Augustine, for example, as saying that "God who created us without ourselves will not save us without ourselves."⁶⁷ But because Luther refuses to admit to any human effort in salvation, in his own theology there can be no hint of offering of anything other than prayer, praise and thanksgiving. The human can only

in the rural, pastoral, agricultural communities of northern Germany and Scandinavia.

⁶⁶Sittler, interestingly, suggests that ethical activity ought to be related to the offering of gifts in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the words of the Eucharistic prayer, "not as we ought, but as we are able." Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook, p. 61.

⁶⁷In private correspondence.

"let be" before the grace of God, and recognize God's presence in the creaturely things God gives in order to come to us in salvation.

Justification is the gracious activity of God who, in Jesus, establishes a new and right relationship between God's self and the world of God's creating. But a tension arises in Lutheran theology concerning the manner in which justification, the free gift of the grace of God who initiates reconciliation between God and creation, is lived out. Joseph Sittler does not invite a synergistic idea of human participation in the gracious activity of God; he affirms that "the Reformation was a vehement witness to the freedom of God in his grace."⁶⁷ But he protests, on the other hand, that "the precision of the reformers and the Reformation-born confessions about grace restricted the scope of that very grace which they so faithfully specified as central to Christian faith and life."⁶⁸ The scope of grace includes nothing less than the whole of creation; and it is the consequence of God's justification that not only the human creature is reconciled to God. The whole creation is reconciled to God, and the human creature and the extra-human creation are reconciled to each other as well. Therefore Sittler writes, as already noted, that God, the human creature, and nature are "meant for each other," and that redemption includes these three

⁶⁷Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 76; cf. note 3, p. 126.

⁶⁸Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 76.

dimensions.⁷⁰ Instrumental in this redemption is the recognition that the Spirit of God which hovered over the creation in the beginning continues to be manifested in the particularities and processes of the whole of the creation, in its beauty and in its brokenness. To come to this recognition is a matter of conversion; it is to recognize in faith that one's trusting relationship with God who is the source of life will effect a corresponding relationship of respect for and trust in the created world. Again: to say this is not to identify the created world with the divine Creator. As Sittler points out, the earth is not the human creature's mother - "which is a pagan notion - but, as St. Francis profoundly surmised, [our] sister, sharer of [our] sorrow and scene and partial substance of [our] joys."⁷¹ The means of grace are not only the most precise locus of God's gracious presence, but also a lure to engender the conversion of the human creature away from self to God and to God's creation. In this way Sittler moves from a restricted sense of the "means of grace" as Word and Sacrament in its classical Lutheran formulation to a broader understanding that encompasses human experience, the artifacts of culture, and the world of nature itself.

⁷⁰"Theology for Earth," p. 373; cf., supra, p. 184, n. 27.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 370.

III. The Poetics of Grace: "The Unaccredited Witness"

Nathan Scott has written that the literature of the modern world reflects, if not the presence of transcendence in all things created, at least a longing for that transcendence. Scott uses the words of the poet, W. H. Auden, "The Wild Prayer of Longing,"⁷² to describe that yearning for a sense of the infinite in a world that has heard too much the claim that the finite is not capable of the infinite.⁷³ The longing itself bears witness to what Scott calls a "sacramental vision." Using the formula engaged by Luther, *finitum capax infinitum*, and drawing on such diverse sources as Donald Baillie, Archbishop William Temple, and Alan Watts, Scott suggests that bread and wine can be "sacramental" because in some way trees and rivers and spinning wheels can also be sacramental.⁷⁴ Scott's discussion, however, points beyond that literature in which there is clear reference to sacramentality to discussion of more subtle awareness of the sacred in common life, particularly as presented in the poetry of the common life.

⁷²W. H. Auden, "A Christmas Oratorio," in Collected Poems, p. 392.

⁷³Nathan Scott, The Wild Prayer of Longing: Poetry and the Sacred (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 59. Scott calls the "sacramental vision" for which the world "longs," the *philosophia perennis*. According to Scott, this term indicates the attempt to recognize that "the finite is capable of the infinite." Scott himself moves toward the thought of the late Martin Heidegger in order "to offer some indication of how a sacramental vision may indeed define itself without resort to supernaturalist figuralism." *Op. cit.*, p. xvi.

⁷⁴Scott, The Wild Prayer of Longing, pp. 51-58.

In Sittler's thought, too, grace is not simply communicated, as in the classic tradition of Lutheran theology, by the Word of God in Scripture and Proclamation, and of the "Visible Words" of the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. Grace may also be communicated by the "unaccredited witness"⁷⁵ of the cultural life of the community, through music, visual art, and literature. Sittler makes regular reference to all of the artistic media, but it is to the literary artist that he devotes his greatest attention. By giving this attention to literature, music, art, and architecture, Sittler shows affinity with such theologians as Soren Kierkegaard, John Henry Newman, and Paul Tillich, for whom art is, in the words of Nathan Scott, part of "the fecundating matter of theology."⁷⁶ Theology is enriched by giving serious attention to various forms of art and impoverished without them. Sittler is clear about his debt in this regard to Nathan Scott who

has confirmed my conviction that theological anthropology steadily and almost profoundly starves its perception and thins out its categories by neglect of the human dialogue with the natural world as this dialogue is movingly alive in so very large a sector of literature, old and new.⁷⁷

The subjects of literature are not simply illustrative, in homiletical fashion, of theological points. Rather literary

⁷⁵Essays on Nature and Grace, p.18f.

⁷⁶Nathan Scott, The Poetics of Belief: Studies in Coleridge, Arnold, Pater, Santayana, Stevens, and Heidegger (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p.11; cf. 171, n. 50.

⁷⁷Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 131, n. 15.

subjects, and the very processes and techniques of artistic creativity themselves, are "integral to the development of [the] theologian's central idea and provide the ethos for the entire piece."⁷⁰ Unfortunately, as Nathan Scott laments, Sittler has not taken the time to describe precisely how poetry shapes his theological vision and "orders experience at the concrete level of sensibility and direct percipience."⁷¹ Sittler himself recognizes in Essays on Nature and Grace that not everyone will share his enthusiasm for "the admittance of literary modes" as a component of the sources of theological reflection. But

as theologian and as preacher, literature has never been for [him] merely a mine of felicitous articulation of things that have been elsewhere learned; it has itself been a place of listening and learning.⁷²

The Literary Instruction of the Theologian

Literature, writes Sittler, gives the theologian a "different sense for the world."⁷³ Literature is a place for the theologian to listen and to learn first of all because

⁷⁰Jerrold Brauer, "In Appreciation of Joseph Sittler." The Journal of Religion, Vol. 54, No. 2 (April, 1974), p. 99.

⁷¹Scott, "The Poetry and Theology of Earth: Reflections on the Testimony of Joseph Sittler and Gerard Manley Hopkins." The Journal of Religion, Vol. 54, No. 2 (April 1974), p. 111.

⁷²Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 19.

⁷³Gravity and Grace, p. 84. In much the same way, the Eucharist properly celebrated and shared will give the communicant and the community "a different sense for the world." Cf. Regis Duffy, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

"Grace is always a strangeness, a gift, a surprise."⁸² One may not see it readily. But one may be sensitized to the reality of grace in human speech "because in another, a prior, and a more splendid place he had already been found by grace and attuned to its motions." Sittler suggests that this is a "working-out of the prevenience and the invenience of the grace of God." Nonetheless the attribution of the discovery of grace in language to the prior grace of God may not "diminish the debt one owes to, or modify the integrity and particularity of the literary act." Sittler describes literature as "life and truth 'drawn heavy and dripping from the waters of sentiency.'" Therefore "its mode of recognition, so different from theological discourse, dramatizes that strangeness, makes that gift the more astounding and that surprise the more sudden."⁸³ Literature serves his theological agenda in that he refuses simply to "argue ... that the presence of grace is beheld and celebrated in and through the creation, and is specifically named as a grace." He intends, rather, to "adduce the direct evidence of literary art."⁸⁴

Sittler's theology refers not only to literature but to a wide range of cultural life. The literature of Shakespeare, A. E. Housman, W. H. Auden, Joseph Conrad, Nicholas Monserrat, and Herman Melville, the music of Bach and Thelonius Monk, the architecture of Wright and Saarinen, all have their place in the

⁸²Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 19.

⁸³*Ibid.*

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

formation of Sittler's thought, for all of them have their place as witnesses to the creative and redemptive grace of God. Some do so because of a positive statement of the presence of God; others bear profound witnesses to grace by virtue of the absence of grace in much the same way that Tillich called "Guernica" the greatest Protestant painting.²²

Of the manifestations of culture, however, it is poetry to which Sittler gives greatest attention, for poetry, in particular, informs theology by using words and images to offer a "different sense for the world." In support of his claim, Sittler quotes a sonnet by e e cummings:

i thank You God most for this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

Poetry actually serves theology better than propositional language, because it is closer to the dynamic and fundamentally functional language of the Bible.²³ Sittler laments the

²²Cf. Tillich, "Existential Aspects of Modern Art": "Now Picasso has painted this immense horror -- the pieces of reality, men and animals and unorganic pieces of houses all together -- in a way in which the 'piece' character of our reality is perhaps more horribly visible than in any other of the modern pictures. During one of my lectures I once was asked, 'What would you think is the best present-day Protestant religious picture?' I answered almost without hesitating, Guernica. I named this picture, because it shows the human situation without any cover ... And if Protestantism means that, first of all, we do not have to cover up anything, but have to look at the human situation in its depths of estrangement and despair, then this is one of the most powerful religious pictures." In John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger, eds., Paul Tillich on Art and Architecture (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 95f.

²³Gravity and Grace, p. 83.

tendency of theology to repudiate such "factic speech" as that of cummings, for propositional language fosters "a stupefaction that contributes to the problem rather than a sterile purity of intellect that might help toward a solution."²⁷

Literature, on the other hand, helps toward a solution, first by heightening awareness of the world around us. The night sky cannot look the same to one who has read those lines from The Merchant of Venice in which Lorenzo sings to Jessica

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
... Look how the flow of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.²⁸

Similarly, the introductory lines to Keats' "Eve of Saint Agnes," which describe the winter chill, the freezing owl, the trembling hare, the stillness of the flock of sheep, will find resonance with "anyone who has lived in the country or small town." Walt Whitman's "Song of the Exposition" gives expression to "the rich variety of the American landscape" which Sittler claims always to have passionately loved. Thus the literature that so precisely describes and heightens awareness of the world in which we live helps us to go, in Sittler's words, not only from "beholding to language," but also "from language to beholding." And it is in the act of beholding that one is changed by that which is beheld.

But secondly and more profoundly: it is not only that such poetry heightens sensitivity to and appreciation of the features of the earth itself. In so doing, Sittler says, poetry points

²⁷Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 90.

²⁸Gravity and Grace, p. 84.

also to what Calvin called "common grace." Literary art serves as "evidence of the general point that the presence of grace is beheld and celebrated in and through the creation, and is specifically named as a grace."²² "Is it not possible," Sittler writes,

that we can learn to regard the world as a place of grace, because there have been those among our fellows who have celebrated in such language that the transcendent grace of God resonates and is reflected in the common grace of the creation?²³

In other words, poetry enables the reader and the listener to recognize the fact that, while creation is not God, it is "a mask of God."

Poetry further serves theology by drawing attention to the particular. It is inherent in the poet's task to pay careful attention to particularities, to the concrete and the specific, in sharp and precise detail. When Richard Wilbur calls upon his readers "to guard and guild the common,"²⁴ the most ordinary of things begins suddenly to exhibit the dimension of the extraordinary. Wilbur's poem, "Advice to a Prophet," addresses the ineffective thunderings of an anti-nuclear activist who inspires fear but without promise or hope. The activist is terrifying but ineffective because he speaks in cataclysmic generalities. But Wilbur counsels the "prophet" to

²²Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 19.

²³Gravity and Grace, p. 85.

²⁴Richard Wilbur, "Objects," in The Poems of Richard Wilbur (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1963), p. 195.

Speak of the world's own change. Though we cannot conceive
 Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost
 How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are blacked by frost,
 How the view alters. We could believe

If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip
 Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,
 The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,
 The jack-pine lost its knuckled grip

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn
 As Xanthus once, its gliding trout
 Stunned in a twinkling ⁷²

According to Sittler, whose own writing and speech is alive with reference to "factic" particularities, the transformative power of this poem is its careful attention to the specific data of events, objects, and feelings that are part of the experience of any attentive human being:

The force of this poem is its absolute concreteness. The poet does not speak of the care of the earth in general; he speaks of the loosened pine, the stunned trout, and the burning river.⁷³

The literary artist also bears witness to the reality of grace by presenting the human situation in its moral and ethical dilemma.⁷⁴ Joseph Conrad's novel, Lord Jim, illustrates the failure of courage. In Conrad's description of the Belgian exploitation of the Congo, The Heart of Darkness, when Colonel Kurtz returns up river, his grandiose vision of the

⁷²"Advice to a Prophet," in Wilbur, op. cit., p. 6. Cf. Sittler, "Called to Unity," p. 187; The Care of the Earth, pp. 89ff.; Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 111; "Spirituality and Discipline" (Word and World Vol. III, No. 2, Spring 1983), p. 127.

⁷³"Spirituality and Discipline," p. 127.

⁷⁴This will be demonstrated more fully in Chapter Four.

"civilization" of the African continent is reduced to a recognition of "the horror."²⁵ In Dostoevsky's novel, The Brothers Karamazov, Ivan articulates protest atheism in the face of gross human injustice. In The Cruel Sea Nicholas Monserrat describes "the loneliness of command" (Conrad) of a naval captain in a war in which no alternative solution to a dilemma is without its own horrible consequences, but in which nonetheless a decision must be made.

By presenting convincing portraits of human beings in such situations, the artist also bears witness to grace by liberating the reader from what Sittler calls "the tyranny of solitude." Literature enables the reader to understand that "he was not the first ever to burst /into that silent sea."²⁶ One finds oneself among a great company of vital selves: according to Sittler, one's world includes Captain Ahab at the helm of the *Pegquod*, obsessed with the great white whale; one finds oneself frustrated by the "dullness of heart" of Captain McWhirr of Conrad's Typhoon (a "gray character, wanting in imagination") and one recognizes in that setting one's own times of frustration and impatience in the presence of those lacking imagination, or spirit, or a sense of the sacred.

²⁵Al Gore gives another example of what one can learn from literature concerning the world as a preparation for grace when he quotes from Conrad, "The conquest of the earth is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." Gore, op. cit., p. 224.

²⁶The Ecology of Faith, p. 38.

Literature also compels the reader to recognize that the world is broader and more complicated than one's own parochialism wants it to be: literature "disorganizes and complicates the stifling simplicity of the purely personal."²⁷ One does not grow into one's full personhood or as a person of faith simply by going "off to some desert island and finding one's self." One grows when one lives in community and conflict with others; and in this community "one is pushed, pulled, shoved, dumped into growth." In the same vein, Sittler refers to the words of the poet, Theodore Roethke: "I wake to sleep and take my waking slow I learn by going where I have to go." The human experience that is the raw material of literature is also the raw material of theology. Theology is "a bringing to articulation" (Sittler's words) of "the faith of the church" (Aulén's words). That faith, Sittler writes,

has both that which calls to faith and that which is evoked by the call to faith from responding people. And these people have had life experiences, language development, ideas which cannot be kept out of their theology.²⁸

Theology includes, for Sittler, a profoundly experiential dimension that is informed not simply by the privacy of one's own personal experience, but by the sum of the experience of the community. Literature sheds light on this experience and informs it. Sittler does not apologize for his use of representations of

²⁷The Care of the Earth, p. 143.

²⁸Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook 1977-78 (Valparaiso: Center for the Study of Campus Ministry, 1978), p. 31.

human experience in his theological reflection. We have already noted the regularity with which he appeals to Joseph Haroutunian's aphorism that "The thoughts of the human mind follow the fortunes of human bodies with absolute rigour." Sittler supports this by citing Schleiermacher's admission that "My deepest feelings are not severable from my clearest ideas."⁹⁹ Literature as a source of theological reflection points Sittler towards a deep searching place. In The Anguish of Preaching, Sittler likens this "deep place" to the temptations from which Luther learned his theology: "I did not learn my theology all at once; I went where my temptations took me."¹⁰⁰

The literary artist also "serves grace" by liberating the reader from "the tyranny of boundlessness." The tyranny of boundlessness is, according to Sittler, a singularly American problem.¹⁰¹ Walt Whitman exemplifies the "officially

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 39; cf. "Spirituality and Discipline," p. 126. In a recent article written for the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the ordination of women to the ministry of the Lutheran churches in North America, Jane Strohl attributes the same thought to John Calvin: "The Knowledge of God and That of Ourselves Are Connected." Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Vol. 1, p. 35, cited in Strohl, "Twenty-Five Years Ago -- Twenty-Five Years from Now: The Ministry of Women" (Word and World Vol. 15, No. 3, Summer 1995), p. 252.

¹⁰⁰The Anguish of Preaching, p. 33; cf. Luther's Works American Edition, Vol. 54, Table Talks, p. 50; supra, p. 24, nn. 24, 25.

¹⁰¹Cf. Seyyed Nasr, ch. 1, supra, p. 40, who cites Sittler on this very point. The significance of this concept as a dimension of Sittler's eschatology will be presented in Chapter Five.

optimistic"¹⁰² character of this tyranny when he writes of America's vast resources of space and land. Herman Melville, on the other hand, while uncritically supportive of the promise of American democracy, proves to be a most severe critic of an American optimism that is convinced that "the sky's the limit". The literary heritage compels one to reckon with the reality of human boundedness:

If one really responds to old Shakespeare's invitation, "For God's sake let us sit down upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings" he is moving toward a comprehension that the tragic boundedness of all mortality and given a sense for the reality of evil man demonically majestic than the episodes of his own life may sound ...¹⁰³

The artist is a witness to historic continuity of the current generation with generations who have gone before. Sittler cites a poem by A. E. Housman as an example. In the poem, "On Fenlock Ridge, the Wood's in Trouble," Housman makes the reader aware of continuity with a long history of observers of the storms that devastate the place.

With a curiously different emphasis, Sittler also finds that the artist bears witness to the reality of grace "by painting the pathos of the life in which grace is not present." Sittler writes that in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," for instance, the poet's voice "laments its effects and harkens to that longing for a lost wholeness that enables one to celebrate the glimpses of

¹⁰²Cf. Douglas John Hall, Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 43ff.

¹⁰³Care of the Earth, p 143.

recovery."¹⁰⁴ Sittler cautions that what the artist presents in doing this is not yet grace. But the artist's work is nonetheless an articulation of an "arena of grace." The artist prepares one for grace in literary work that even excruciatingly describes the absence of grace. Such an artist assumes the "role of negation," a role which has antecedents in the thought of Kierkegaard, and even in the experience of Moses who, Sittler posits, "knew more about what Israel meant than most men in Israel. But he died outside the land."¹⁰⁵ When poet George Barker writes hauntingly of the absence of God in the modern world, he does more than enable the reader to long the more for the real presence of God. More important, the longing bears witness to the reality of that for which one longs. With an aphorism that brings to mind Tillich's claim that a "Protestant" work of art speaks the truth of the human condition in its existential nakedness, Sittler draws the conclusion that "[t]o want to have may be a strange way of having."¹⁰⁶

Nonetheless, while the artist may bear witness to the reality of grace, Sittler acknowledges a strange tension between the artist and a church that continues to define the means of grace too narrowly. The artist, he says, carries on "a lover's quarrel" with the world, for the artist is fascinated by the "vivacity, variety, conflicts, delights and taunts of life." The

¹⁰⁴"Called to Unity," p. 181.

¹⁰⁵The Care of the Earth, p. 84.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, p. 87. Cf. *supra*, p. 212, n. 85.

artist is "maddened" into creativity, working as a patient and alert evocation of a secret out of the "living stuff of natural life." Rightly or wrongly, however, the artist is generally assessed negatively by the "community which is Christ's church." The artist is often rejected or, worse, used by a community that is more interested in "spirituality" than in the concrete materiality of the artist's lonely place of struggle at desk, in shop or theatre. Consequently, the "spirituality" of the church appears to the artist as an abstraction when affirmed apart from the "spirituality" enfolded in things and persons and natural vitalities.¹⁰⁷ Sittler suggests, therefore, that the artist who has

... heard inside each mortal thing
its holy emanation sing

is not a preacher of the gospel of the divine grace:
it is quite possible [however] that he may be the
tongue to that living voice for and of "common grace"
which, in tenable knowledge of what will not suffice,
"goes before the Lord to prepare his way."¹⁰⁸

Consequently, Sittler observes, "all that serves to lighten darkness, inform intelligence, sensitize callousness, and pierce

¹⁰⁷Once again, this position has its root in a Christology that recognizes that God is in Christ because finitum capax infinitum. The modern church's inability -- it is a modern problem, not such an ancient problem -- to value artistry, because the artist is not sufficiently "spiritual" is one more indication of the church's truly ancient temptation to Docetism: a temptation that the church seldom has been able truly to resist.

¹⁰⁸Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 73.

hardness serves grace -- without the motive or intention to do so."¹⁰⁹ For

the place of grace must be the webbed connectedness of man's creaturely life. That web does not indeed bestow grace; it is necessarily the theatre of that anguish and delight, that maturation of longing and hope, that solidification of knowledge that can attain, as regards ultimate issues, not a crisp certainty but rather the knowledge that

We who are about to die demand a miracle ...

This turning to experience is not a way to account for grace, it may well be a prologue to the possibility of what Karl Rahner calls "transcendental anthropology" by a way the artist affirms his own concrete and earthly existence.¹¹⁰

The work of the artist is a representation of nature, and in service of grace, even though the artist may not be consciously aware of this. Sittler writes concerning the church's historic tendency to show disregard for the world of nature,

When a Christian theology, exclusively concerned with God and God's creature man turns her face from God's other creature, the world of nature -- these ignored and hence vilified vitalities cry out in anguish. Nature will assert her significance -- and the mind of our time has made it clear that if Christian understanding will not articulate a theology for nature -- unsilenceable nature will take matters in her own hands and create her own.¹¹¹

The stones themselves will cry (Luke 19:40).¹¹² The artist, too, if despised by the church, will lift a voice and speak in

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 72.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 94.

¹¹¹"The Meaning of Nature," p. 2; Cf. "Theology for Earth," p. 370.

¹¹²Cf. Richard Wilbur, "A Christmas Hymn" in The Poems of Richard Wilbur, p. 56.

protest for the sake of the earth, and of the artist's co-creative effort on behalf of the earth -- but not necessarily with the community which claims to bear witness to Christ. The church may allow the artist to "serve grace" by celebrating grace, or the artist will serve grace by rage, lamentation, and protest at the absence of grace which remains, nonetheless, ever strange and ever redemptive. That Sittler should value poetry as he does is another manifestation of his theological method, reminiscent of his point concerning the dual vocation of the theologian, to attend to the theological tradition of catholic christendom, and to be attentive as well to the world in which one is given to live. But poetry is more than a means of attending to the world. As language shaped and charged by image and experience, poetry itself is a mode of theological truth.

The Poet as Theologian: Inscape and Sacrament in Gerard Manley Hopkins

In the theology of Joseph Sittler, the arts "serve grace" in ways that theological propositions can not. Sittler holds one poet in particular up above the others as singularly instructive for him. Sittler quotes poetry with great regularity, but there is no poet so frequently quoted as the English Victorian Jesuit priest and poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Of all the poets, then, Hopkins merits attention because of his significance for Sittler. Sittler acknowledges that

When these [Essays on Nature and Grace] were in process of formulation I had thought to include among them an extended discussion of the poetry of Gerard Manley

Hopkins, not as a contribution to literary studies (for this I have not the competence), but as an acknowledgement of the debt I owe to that amazing poet for his contributions to theological reflection.¹¹²

That Sittler identifies Gerard Manley Hopkins as the poet whose artistry he finds speaks most to his theological sensibilities is the more interesting when one looks at the poetry itself and considers its sources in the life and thought of the author. There is perhaps no other nineteenth century poet for whom poetry was itself so transparently an address of God, an expression of prayer; and there are few whose poetically expressed love of the beauty of the world is so intensely interwoven with praise of the God of Hebrew and Greek scripture, revealed in Christ.

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born into an upper middle class Victorian Protestant family. His father, an Average Adjuster, was a himself poet of some small talent. His mother was an artist and musician. The oldest of five children, Hopkins was himself drawn to music and to painting as well as to poetry. He matriculated at Oxford, where he came under the influence of the Oxford movement, and, while still an undergraduate, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church by John Henry Newman. But at Oxford he also studied under Walter Pater and was influenced by the ideas of John Ruskin.

Ruskin was the foremost English art critic of the Victorian age, and the painting and drawing of English romanticism cannot

¹¹²Essays in Nature and Grace, p. 131, n. 15.

be understood without him. With such painters as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites, Ruskin shared both an attraction to the artistry of the middle ages and an insistence that one must paint with most intense attention to detail. This scrupulosity is the most pronounced characteristic of his aesthetic concern: "If you can paint one leaf," he wrote, "you can paint the world."¹¹⁴ Hopkins shared this attention to detail. But both Hopkins and Ruskin felt that the sense of being within what is observed and painted was more important than the external detail. In his discussion of Hopkins' appreciation of Ruskin, a recent biographer observes that for both Hopkins and Ruskin, "Natural data must be felt, not learnt."¹¹⁵ As an adolescent and as a first form student at Oxford it would almost have seemed as though Hopkins should have become a painter, not a priest and poet. Perhaps painting could not express for him all that he saw in the world of nature. Another recent biographer notes that beyond the Ruskinesque care for detail

there is at the same time a sense of being within [the object of the artist's observation], of being both observed and the observer. Such words as *swell* ... invoke an anthropomorphic force projecting the reader into the very sensation of being part of the weir itself. This is the blood relative of the immediacy that most readers feel in his poetry.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴Cited in Norman White, Hopkins: A Literary Biography (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 76.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 79.

¹¹⁶Robert Bernard Martin, Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1991), p. 65.

Gerard Manley Hopkins is regarded by current critics as one of the most prominent voices of early modern poetry. This claim is made despite his obscurity in his own time. Under the lingering influence of Wordsworth, the popular English and American poetry of the period was characterized primarily by the formal sentimentality of Tennyson and Longfellow. Hopkins' closest friend, Robert Bridges, the medical doctor who became Great Britain's poet laureate, was simply unable to understand Hopkins. The poetry of Hopkins did not receive wider attention until the turn of the century, when Bridges finally published a complete edition of the poems. Even then, so prescient a critic as T. S. Eliot still thought Hopkins obscure and secondary because of his idiosyncratic use of language to clarify with words what he saw when he looked, under the influence of Ruskin, into the inner depth of things. But it is precisely this capacity to attend to the particular, "to be within" a thing, and to describe what he sees and feels there, that makes him so interesting to Sittler, who interprets him as a visionary already sensitive to those cracks in modern industrial culture that portend cultural fragmentation.¹¹⁷

Hopkins wrote letters to Bridges seeking to defend and to interpret his poetry. In these letters he offers a clue to his poetics. Hopkins gives specific technical terms for what it is that he is able to see within the object so intensely observed:

¹¹⁷The Anguish of Preaching, p. 60.

inscape and instress. Hopkins' defense of his poem, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," suggests the meaning of "inscape":

No doubt my poetry errs on the side of oddness ... But as air, melody, is what strikes me most of all in music and design in painting, so design, pattern or what I am in the habit of calling 'inscape' is what I above all aim at in poetry. Now it is the virtue of design, pattern or inscape to be distinctive and it is the vice of distinctiveness to become queer.¹¹²

"Inscape" is the inherent and distinct design of a unique thing. An 1871 Journal entrance further clarifies the term, and indicates the relationship of "inscape" to "instress":

What you look hard at seems to look hard at you, hence the true and the false instress of nature. One day early in March when long streamers were rising from over Kemble End one large flake loop-shaped, not a streamer but belonging to the string, moving too slowly to be seen, seemed to cap and fill the zenith with a white shire of cloud. I looked long up at it till the tall height and the beauty of the scaping ... had strongly grown on me. It changed beautiful changes, growing more into ribs and one stretch of running into branching like coral. Unless you refresh the mind from time to time you cannot always remember or believe how deep the inscape in things is.¹¹³

The distinction between "inscape" and "instress" in Hopkins' poetics is subtle. It is indicated by that scrupulous attention to detail, learned from Ruskin and comparable to that of the pre-Raphaelites, that shows itself in his painting as well as in his poetry. Walter Ong writes of the relationship of "instress" and "inscape" to each other:

¹¹²Catherine Phillips, ed., Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Letters (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 117.

¹¹³Catherine Phillips, ed., The Oxford Authors: Gerard Manley Hopkins (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 204. Italics mine.

The "inscape" of a being is the distinctive controlling energy that makes the being itself and connects it distinctively with all else. "Instress" is the action that takes place when the inscape of a given being fuses itself in a given human consciousness in contact at a given moment with the being ... "Instress," it will be noted, brings the human self, this particularized human being, into the dynamics of the otherwise "objective" inscape. ... [P]ersonal identity, self-consciousness, is "what Hopkins' poetry of inscape is about." The given being possessing inscape and generating instress might be virtually anything ... Inscape can refer to an individual existent, to *haecceitas* ... (a Scotist term, the "thisness" of any being), but it can refer also to species, a common nature, as caught in an individual or group of individuals ... Inscape, with its corresponding instress, refers to distinctive use of being not as simply analyzed but as inherited in an insight deeper than analysis can go.¹²⁰

However obscure Hopkins may have been in his own time, and however influential he may have become fifty years after his death in 1889 at the age of 44, Walter Ong argues convincingly that this strange Victorian Jesuit was without question a person of his own time. He may have been able to think through certain issues in advance of his time, but he was a person of his own time. According to Ong, while Hopkins may have coined the terms, "instress" and "inscape," the concepts are not so unprecedented in the intellectual world of the mid-Victorians as might be thought to be the case. Ong finds "instress" suggestive of Coleridge's "well-known unifying, detail-fusing 'imagination' as contrasted with mere fancy as fantasy." A deep sense of inwardness was common to Victorians, but came as a part of a development of inner awareness, and the ability and desire to

¹²⁰Walter J. Ong, S. J., Hopkins, the Self, and God (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 17.

describe with intense scrupulosity the exact details of both the internal and the external reality.

But, as Ong has indicated, another source of the concepts of "instress" and "inscape" is Hopkins' engagement with the thought of the scholastic theologian, John Duns Scotus. Scotus uses the Latin term, *heccaeity*, to speak of the "thisness" or the particularity of a given thing. For Hopkins, the concept of *heccaeity* further intensified that early sense for the particular that had been reinforced by Ruskin's concern for attention to detail. Hopkins brings Ruskin and Scotus together in this journal note of 1872, "When I took in any inscape of the sky or sea, I thought of Scotus."¹²¹ The concern for detail, *heccaeity*, and particularity is the energizing force behind the poem, "Pied Beauty":

Glory be to God for dappled things--
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pierced -- fold, fallow, and plough
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour, adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.

But it is not only the concern for detail that makes Hopkins' poetry so singular. It is his capacity to see the sacredness inherent in what he describes so vividly. From Ruskin, as noted above, he had learned to see the "inner core" of

¹²¹Phillips, ed., The Oxford Authors: Gerard Manley Hopkins, p. 211.

what he observes, and Scotus has reinforced this attention to the particularity of what he sees. From his training as a Jesuit, instructed by the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, he had come to recognize that what is encountered within the core of the thing observed is its inherent sacredness. This is particularly clear in "God's Grandeur," which is perhaps Hopkins' best-known poem, and the poem that Sittler quotes with greatest frequency:

The World is charged with the Grandeur of God
 It will flame out like shining from shook foil;
 It will gather to a greatness like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do not men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
 And all is bleared, seared with toil;
 and bears man's smudge and wears man's smell. The soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel being shod.

And for all this nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black west went
 Oh! morning off the brown brink eastward springs--
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright
 wings.

Commenting on this poem at his address to the assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi, Sittler says that Hopkins sees the world as a "God-haunted house."¹²² Sittler claims that here, as in other poems of Hopkins, the earth is no longer "just" the earth, because in Christ it has known God's real presence.¹²³ J. Robert Barth, another commentator on the poetry of Hopkins, underscores the point: "There is no created

¹²²"Called to Unity," p. 182.

¹²³The Anguish of Preaching, p. 61.

thing -- the dirt that smudges our face, not the smell of our body, not the earth beneath our feet -- that is not instressed by God's presence."¹²⁴ The poem offers an echo of Luther's insistence that the earth can hold within itself the sense of holiness: the point of Eucharistic theology is not that Christ must be in bread and wine, but that he can be, for nature is, as Harold Ditmanson claims, *capax deitatis*.¹²⁵ Sittler writes that for Hopkins the theologian, the "whole creation is a realm of Grace," a claim made specifically in his poem, "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe": "I say that we are wound/with mercy round and round."¹²⁶ But, Sittler continues, in the poetry of Hopkins

grace is made explicit, it is released, it lures, it is called into the open by Christ -- who is the personal concentration of the grace of God. And when grace as Christ, God for us and for the whole world, is known and lived by, all things became permeable to a new vision and demand a holy evaluation.¹²⁷

In Sittler's own theology this "new vision and holy evaluation" is the recognition of the whole creation as theatre and arena for the grace of God. This is consistent with his appropriation and expansion of Luther's doctrine of the means of grace, and is a significant theological premise for his ethical

¹²⁴J. Robert Barth, The Sacramental Vision of Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Centennial Tribute (Regina: University of Regina, Campion College, n.d.) p. 5.

¹²⁵Cf. *supra*, Ch. 1, n. 14.

¹²⁶The Anguish of Preaching, p. 59.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

stance. But, while we have been arguing that Sittler's doctrine of the world of creation as realm of grace is an expansion of Luther's Christology and Eucharistic theology, it is interesting to note that Hopkins' theological source for this vision is the Christology of Duns Scotus.

According to Scotist Christology, Christ does not come as an antidote to human sin. God had Christ in mind from before the foundations of the beginning, for the spirit tends toward incarnation; and the world was created as the place into which Christ should come.¹²⁰ The classical theological tradition concludes that "the Word was made flesh" because of Adam's sin; the divine decision that the Son would become human was God's free and generous response to humankind's plight after the fall. Scotus taught otherwise. He did not believe that the Son assumed human nature simply as a generous divine response to sin. The Scotist view of the Incarnation which so attracted Hopkins links creation and redemption more clearly and makes Christ more the center of the cosmos than do other Christologies. The Incarnation of the Son was God's first intent in all of his creation. In creating the universe and humankind, God was creating the setting into which the Son of God was to come in the fullness of time. The coming of Christ into the creation is the coming of one who shows the perfect design of all creation as intended by the Creator from the beginning. In the terminology

¹²⁰Ong, *op. cit.*, p. 108. Cf. Paul Tillich's comment on the incarnational dynamic in the thought of Luther, *supra*, p. 198f.

of Hopkins, the Son incarnates the perfected "inscape" of all creation. Anyone who so intensely contemplates Christ as to recognize that "inscape" will be "instressed," or shaped, by the One who has been "beheld." One cannot behold a thing without being transformed by what has been beheld. Sittler links Hopkins' poetics of "inscape" with the transformational potential of "beholding" when he writes,

As a name for that individually distinctive form which constitutes the rich and revealing oneness of the natural object, he coined a new word. When the eye falls upon a large view we have a landscape; when, to use his own phrase, the eye sinks into the surprise and particularity and interior gift-quality of things we behold them as inscape. In such a beholding (not looking, but beholding! -- "behold the lilies of the field") one becomes aware of that natural but ultimately supernatural stress which determines an inscape. For that quality in things disclosed to and calling forth wonder and praise in the beholder -- he coined the word, instress.¹²⁹

For one to behold Christ is also to be shaped by "Christic instress." In a more classically Lutheran phrase, what is in relationship with Christ is "moulded to the cruciform."¹³⁰ In Hopkins' poetry, one begins to recognize a "Christic"¹³¹ inscape in anything in the world of nature. Another sonnet demonstrates more clearly this appropriation by Hopkins of Scotist Christology in service of this theological facet of his poetry:

¹²⁹The Anguish of Preaching, p. 60.

¹³⁰For use of this phrase, cf., e.g., Roy A. Harrisville's commentary on Romans 6:1-14 and 8:14-39, Romans (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), pp. 87-96, 127-141.

¹³¹Sittler uses the term "Christic" in "Called to Unity."

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring, as each tucked string tells, each hung
 bells
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves -- goes its self, myself, it speaks and spells,
 Crying What I do is me, for that I came.

I say more: the just man justices;
 Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is--
 Christ! For Christ plays in ten thousand places
 Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father to the features of men's faces.

In this sonnet the two themes converge: the "inscape" of each particularity; and Hopkins' adaptation of the Christology of Duns Scotus according to which, in Hopkins' language, the observer and the observed have both been "instressed" by Christic presence. A third theme emerges, too: the concept of "selving," which is the idea that one is most authentically Christic when one does most authentically what one is.¹²² The emphasis on particularity comes from Ruskin and from the heccaeity of Scotus. But Hopkins makes clear that there is more to authentic "selving" than simply doing "what is me." The authentic creature is "moulded to Christ." Commenting on another sonnet, "Spring," Sittler writes that Gerard Manley Hopkins

came finally to regard all this factic world as the residency of Christ. He is not found there; but when by his work in earth we are found, his eyes become ours

¹²²This is in fact a reflection of divine presence: often Sittler writes aphoristically, "God is what God does." Cf. Gravity and Grace, p. 83.

and this place of his finally become a Christic mystery, a veritable cosmic display.¹³³

According to the poetry of Hopkins there is no thing in nature or no creaturely experience so mean that it cannot bear witness to Christ. Clark Brittain has written that for Hopkins

[w]e receive the grace of Christ through the so-called trivialities of life. It is through these trivialities that Hopkins discovered symbols for the unseen world of the spirit.¹³⁴

This is most startlingly so in the sonnet (not cited by Sittler),

"The Windhover: To Christ our Lord":

I saw this morning this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon in
his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and
striding
High there, how he rung upon the rim of a wimpling wing

In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend; the hurl
and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, -- the achieve, the mastery of the
thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a
billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
No wonder of it; sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

The windhover, or kestrel, is a raptor, but a bird which has the capacity to hang motionless in the face of the wind before diving for its prey. For Hopkins, the bird is Christic most precisely

¹³³The Anguish of Preaching, p. 42

¹³⁴Clark Brittain, "God's Better Beauty: Hopkins, Pusey and Tractarian Aesthetics." Christianity and Literature, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Autumn 1990) p. 15.

when it makes its dive,¹²⁵ for in that moment it is acting out its "inscape." In its dive it is "selving;" and Christ is the One human being who in his singular divinity and humanity most acts out his own inscape. According to J. Robert Barth, this sonnet demonstrates Hopkins' understanding of the relationship of the finite and the infinite in a particularly striking way:

A poem about a bird? Yes, clearly and triumphantly so -- about a bird and a poet. And yet, lest our reading stop at this, in his last revision Hopkins added the dedication: To Christ our Lord. It is as if he would draw our attention beyond the beauty of a stained-glass window, asking us to be aware of the light it mediates. But the window and the light cannot be perceived separately; they have so "interpenetrated" that they must be seen together. So too with the windhover and Christ, in the poet's vision of them: Christ and creation have so interpenetrated that they cannot be separated; as in the *Contemplatio ad Amorem*, God and his creation are distinct but not separate.¹²⁶

The Hopkins that Sittler so appreciates and from whom he has taken instruction, is a poet who has learned from Ruskin to pay

¹²⁵Hans Urs von Balthasar sees in this dive an expression of the kenotic Christology so interesting to nineteenth century theologians, and particularly to such German theologians as Gottfried Thomasius. Cf. The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. Vol. III: Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles. tr. by Andrew Louth, John Saward, Martin Simon and Rowan Williams, ed. by John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 394. That point is the more worthy of note for its relationship to the theme of *finitum capax infiniti*, for Carl Braaten finds in the kenotic Christology of Thomasius a new accent: not only is "finite capable of the infinite," but the willingness of Christ to pour himself out in the incarnation indicates also that "the infinite is capable of assuming the finite" (Braaten and Jenson, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1, p. 510). This thesis would be supported by Tillich's analysis of the relationship of the finite and the infinite as described above, pp. 191-195.

¹²⁶Barth, op. cit., p. 12.

such close attention to the detail of the natural world that he is able to see into the heart of each object of his observation. What he sees at the heart of a thing is its "inscape." But the experience of observation does not end with the sense of "inscape"; inscape is reflected back into the beholder so that the heart of the beholder, too, is "instressed," or transformed by inter-communion with what is beheld. So, even as Christ and creation are "distinct but interpenetrated," the creation and the beholding human creature suffer a comparable experience of interpenetration and transformation. To Hopkins as poet and painter, the product of transformative observation was his artistry.

But Hopkins was not only a poet and painter. He was also a Jesuit priest. In taking orders in the Society of Jesus, he rejected the doctrine of his Oxford Tutor, Walter Pater, of "art for art's sake." In submission to the will of his Jesuit superiors, Hopkins stopped writing poetry for about nine years, until, at their request, he began, "The Wreck of the Deutschland." This poem, with the eccentric imagery, rhyme scheme and metre that have become the hallmark of Hopkins' poetry, begins as an address to the transcendent Other before whom the human servant must submit: "Thou mastering me God! ...". This, the first line of the entire body of Hopkins' mature work, marks the distinction between the artistry of Hopkins and that of the artists from whom he learned: for his poetry and the subject of his poetry are not simply his, but are conformed to Christ

according to the doctrine of Christ as taught to him by Duns Scotus and the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. The Jesuit whose spiritual discipline includes the development of the imagination learns in meditation to shape that imagination around the image of Christ in the world. The artist whose training teaches such attention to detail that the object of observation reveals its innermost being, is transformed by that same object of observation. So attentive a poet as Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the leaf, the tree, or the man or woman attended to and described, all take on Christic form, because Christ, as the (in Sittler's word) "incandescence" of God's grace, has taken on creaturely form. Hans Urs von Balthasar makes this clear as he writes of the significance of the doctrine of grace for the poetry of Hopkins:

This doctrine of grace changed the natural doctrine of instress and inscape, for the true inscape of all things is Christ; God's grace is the stress within them, by which indeed ... the arguments of our self-taste against mythical pantheism are not rendered powerless but are, rather, transcended. For now it is really God who has the true taste of the human self in his mouth ...¹²⁷

But this is simply a different articulation of Luther's own claim that God's justification of the ungodly is the "joyful exchange" of God's grace for human sinfulness: the human and the divine are, in Luther's words, "baked in the same cake together."¹²⁸

¹²⁷Balthasar, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

¹²⁸Sermon from 1523 on I Peter: "Since you are one with Christ, as baked into one cake with Him, and His good are yours and your misfortune His misfortune and He takes upon Himself everything that is yours, for this reason you should follow Him."

In the incarnation and crucifixion God has assumed mortality, and the righteous, unrighteousness, in order that creaturely being might share in divine transcendence.

Sittler's attention to Hopkins serves Sittler's own sense of concreteness and particularity. To recognize and be transformed by the "Inscape" and "Instress" of a thing is to acknowledge the truth made clear by Richard Wilbur in the poem, "Advice to the Prophet": that the things we see in nature tell us something about ourselves. We see ourselves in "the rose of our love" and in "the clean horse of our courage."¹³⁹ To see this is "instress": the meeting of the awareness of the kernel of that which we see and that which we find to be most true about ourselves.

Furthermore, each thing is its own energy centre; and Christ is the "energy centre" par excellence, which gives Christic shape to the inscape of every created thing. Added to this is the element of the Spiritual Exercise of Ignatius of Loyola by which the imagination of Hopkins the Jesuit was shaped as he learned to

Cf. George Wolfgang Forell, Faith Active in Love (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954), p. 166. Ecumenical dialogue between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland and the Orthodox Church in Finland and Russia has found Luther's doctrine of the fröhliche Wechsel to be akin to the Orthodox doctrine of "Theosis" or "divinization," the interpenetration of the believer with the divinity of Christ. Tuomo Mannermaa, ed., Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus: Rechtfertigung und Vergottung. Zum ökumenischen Dialog (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1989), p. 9.

¹³⁹Wilbur, op. cit., p. 7. Cf. supra, p. 213, n. 92.

pay attention to detail, and to "wrap" that detail, as it were, around Christ.

The concentration of details around the image of Christ do not make life in the world more simple. The proliferation of details serves actually to complicate life. In a sermon on the theme of "Knowledge and Liberation," Sittler refers to lines from one of Hopkins' late "dark sonnets":

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fell,
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there

These lines are cited to support Sittler's conclusion that "all knowledge complicates as it expands; it generates ambiguity as it multiplies; its clarity is illustrative of even deeper and intractable imprisonment."¹⁴⁰ Sittler postulates in The Anguish of Preaching, that it is the fact of this fragmentation, taking place already in mid-nineteenth century industrial England under the reign of Queen Victoria that gives impetus to that drive of Hopkins to look for and find the deeper unifying reality of "inscape":

... just as Picasso took apart and unfolded reality so that he might reorder it to do fuller justice to itself and to the sensibility of the artist, so Hopkins mobilized a bewitchingly abstract combination of images and rhythms to order a world to the inscape of grace.¹⁴¹

The poem and Sittler's comment indicate a darker complexity with the God-charged world of Hopkins who otherwise seems to be so

¹⁴⁰The Care of the Earth, p. 146; cf., supra, pp. 217-218.

¹⁴¹The Anguish of Preaching, p. 60.

positive and cheerful, who uses even the predatory kestrel to illustrate the Christic inscape of a creature "selving," acting out its "inscape." But for Hopkins, as a product of his time, oblivion is a real possibility, and death, a transparent fact. And yet, for Hopkins, in face of and because of the reality of the transitory, the resurrection is the more powerful. In no poem does Hopkins speak more compellingly of his concern for the particular and its mutability, and of his confidence in the redemption of the particular through the resurrection of Christ, than in the late double sonnet, "That Nature is a Hereclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection":

Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt
 forth then chevy on an air --
 Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they
 throng; they glitter in marches.
 Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash | wherever an elm
 arches,
 Shivelights and shadowtackle in long | lashes lace, lance,
 and pair.
 Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles,
 beats earth bare
 Of yestertempest's creases; in pool and rutpeel parches
 Squandering masks and manmarks | treadmill toil there
 Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns
 on.
 But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-
 selvèd spark
 Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!
 Both are in an unfathomable, all is an enormous dark
 Drowned. O pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone
 Sheer off, disseveral a star, | death blots black out; nor
 mark
 Is any of him at all so stark
 But vastness blurs and time | beats level. Enough! the
 Resurrection,
 A heart's-clarion! Away grief's grasping, | joyless days,
 dejection.
 Across my foundering deck shone
 A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash
 Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but
 ash:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
 I am all at once what Christ is, I since he was what I am,
 and
 This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, I patch, matchwood, immortal
 diamond,
 Is immortal diamond.

Sittler describes this complex poem as an articulation of the classic catholic confession

that God chose to work through the bloody business by himself recapitulating the full and common actuality of our lives; therefore the world, the theatre of that ghastly and glorious work, is never after just the world. It is God's place; it has known his real presence.¹⁴²

With this comment we have returned to Eucharistic language and the presupposition of Luther at Marburg, that bread and wine can mediate the "real presence" of Christ because the man Jesus could be the incarnation of the grace of God. Finite things can be bearers of transcendence: *finitum capax infinitum*.

Scholars have given much attention to the sacramental nature of the poetry of Hopkins. Hans Urs von Balthasar finds the sacramental character of Hopkins' poetry inherent in the concepts of "instress" and "inscape." His commentary recapitulates the concerns of sacramental theology, and therefore merits being quoted at length:

For an understanding of the way the mystery of God takes form in the world, the concept of the sacramental is at hand, which certainly contains within itself the power of the 'symbol,' while it goes far beyond it; the form of the image is a likeness to the primordial form in that it has the 'stress' of the latter in itself; sacramenta continent que significant.

¹⁴²The Anguish of Preaching, pp. 60-61. Cf. supra, p. 175 n. 8.

But the mystery incorporated in the inscapes is not to be grasped as a straightforward picture, as, it might be, a simple allegory. The mystery of Christ is, on the one hand, of infinite depth, penetrating all the levels of being from flesh to spirit and beyond into the abyss of the Trinity; on the other, it is an infinitely dramatic event that in the kenotic descent into man and matter exalts and changes them, redeems and deifies them. The poet of the cosmic rapture will be, if he is a Christian, at the same time the poet too of the intimate dialogue between the lost sinner and the crucified Redeemer; as one who beholds he will be also the obedient believer, in the analogies he must always consider and express the reversals and the erasures. The image that should interpret the mystery of Christ is, in itself as an image utterly overtaxed, but in so far as it is grounded in Christ as the presupposition of nature, it is allowed to say by grace of the archetype what it cannot say of itself.

So it is the mystery of the sonnet, 'The Windhover' -- dedicated 'To Christ our Lord' -- to draw out the image in an immense, ascending intensity, which starts by spiritualising the bold soaring of the wild bird in order then to interpret the utmost, now motionless, suspension at the highest point, with outstretched wings, as the final unfolding of power from which the embers drop down: a sacramental image of the Cross.¹⁴³

In his Nash lecture, J. Robert Barth, too, identifies three ways by which the poetry of Hopkins may be understood as thoroughly sacramental. First, there is the fact that the Eucharist is central to Hopkins' own religious life, and it is through the sacrament that the Christian personally encounters God "mediated through the person of Christ in the sharing of the sacrificial meal."¹⁴⁴ Secondly, however, Barth suggests that the poet is himself "clearly sacrament," for the poet who both shares human nature and lives, like every Christian, in the life

¹⁴³von Balthasar, *op. cit.*, p. 393f.

¹⁴⁴Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

of Christ, is a sign of God's presence in the world.¹⁴⁵ But there is a third sense of sacrament; and that is that "the world itself is sacrament for Hopkins." God is, for Hopkins, present "under the world's splendour and wonder," but present also as mystery. Thus the operative word for Hopkins as for Sittler, is, mystery.¹⁴⁶ And mystery, writes Barth, is to be "pondered and plumbed," not because it is utterly incomprehensible, but because it is "inexhaustible to meditation." Barth, too, claims that the foundation for the sacramental vision is the Incarnation of Christ, which he calls the "prime sacrament," the (in the words of Edward Schillebeeckx) "sacrament of the encounter with God."¹⁴⁷ But this "foundation" which makes the sacramental vision recognizable is possible only because the Creation itself is the primal sacrament, "the first sensible sign of God's presence" outside God's own self.¹⁴⁸

That is to say, again, in the words of the Tractarians as identified by Nathan Scott above, that the universe described poetically by Hopkins and as understood theologically by Sittler, is a "sacramental universe." Clark Brittain, too, has argued persuasively for this perspective in Hopkins, and finds his sources for it not only in Ruskin, Ignatius and Duns Scotus, but also in the aesthetics of the Oxford Movement. For Hopkins,

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶Cf. "The Sacraments and Mystery," *supra*, p. 178, n. 25.

¹⁴⁷Cf. *supra*, p. 180, n. 28.

¹⁴⁸Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

Brittain writes, the world as sacrament was "an epiphany of God's beauty, and apprehending that beauty was the reception of grace." Brittain cites Pusey: "God is beauty from which is all created beauty."¹⁴⁹ To speak of the sacramental character of the cosmos is thus to recognize the world as "a type or symbol of Christ fully disclosed only in the Incarnation." And symbol as used here means, for Pusey "not absence but something which is present in a hidden manner."

But Brittain asserts that Hopkins is influenced not only by his contemporary artists and scholars of aesthetics, Ruskin and Pater, and by scholastic theologians such as Scotus. He argues that the double sonnet, "That Nature is a Hereclitean Fire," betrays Hopkins' reliance on Irenaeus and Athanasius as mediated through Pusey: "Hopkins's [sic] sacramental vision has its roots in patristic, not scholastic, theology, and it is beyond question that the Tractarians led Hopkins to the Fathers."¹⁵⁰

Thus Sittler's own sacramental vision, informed as it is by Luther's understanding of The Word of Scripture and the Eucharistic Meal as "masks of God," and by the poetically stated theological vision of Gerard Manley Hopkins, is rooted in the theology of the earliest of Christian theologians. Sittler makes this claim himself, although for somewhat different

¹⁴⁹Brittain, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*

reasons.¹⁵¹ This is not to deny the truth of Luther's understanding of Word and Sacrament as interpreted by the sixteenth century theologians. But it is, Sittler writes, to recognize that the conceptual reduction of the means of grace as a vehicle only for personal salvation, and the radical christocentricity which attends this reduction, is not adequate for the time in which we live. Hopkins, with a poet's intuitive prescience, must have recognized this. Sittler, the eclectic poetic theologian, attempted to sketch it out. That reduction of the scope of grace that followed in the wake of the particular emergencies of the period of the Reformation and the enlightenment, he claims, had its roots in a narrow interpretation of Augustine's doctrine of grace. The argument, he writes,

is simply that the Augustinian pattern for the explication of grace and [human] freedom in nature is an exhausted pattern because human fact has outrun it. When the force and reality of grace are proposed to man in terms of a *gratia preveniens* that acts, *gratia operans*, to renovate the soul via *gratia cooperans* to the end and effect that *gratia subsequens* shall prevail and become a new principle of life in the converted man -- the power and truth of what is said about God is unintelligible because of the partly untrue things that are said about [the human creature]! For the [person] who is presupposed in Augustine's schema simply does not exist.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹Cf. "Called to Unity," p. 180f.; "Nature and Grace: Reflections on an Old Rubric," p. 255; Essays on Nature and Grace, pp. 56-65.

¹⁵²"Nature and Grace: Reflections on an Old Rubric," p. 254.

The change in the Augustinian-Reformation human self-understanding, to which Sittler here alludes, and which obviates the too personal Reformation understanding of human nature and divine grace, is spelled out more precisely by Gustaf Wingren. Even though the Reformation was a time of the foundering of medieval church, Christendom could still be presupposed. One of the consequences of the breakdown of episcopal authority, particularly in northern Europe, was the increased empowerment of secular authority, both by theological endorsement and increased wealth at the expense of the churches. For the next four centuries, the church and the state were, at least officially, still mutually identifiable with one another. This is no longer the situation. In this era of secularization and real and recognized religious pluralism, a minimal doctrine of creation and of the human place within creation is not adequate. Wingren asserts that the most important point in the Bible, in the early church, and for Luther, is that "it is faith in the Creator that is being gouged away;" we are losing sight, Wingren complains, of "the fact that God acts directly in the running of the world - creating and giving life - without going through the church."¹³³ The current religious situation, Wingren writes, in the face of the current political reality, and of the environmental reality, is more like that of the church in its first three hundred years of existence than it has been since.

¹³³Wingren, "The Doctrine of Creation: Not an Appendix but the First Article," p. 370.

Therefore it is "to the theologians of the undivided church that modern theology must turn."¹⁵¹ It is in this direction, too, that Sittler turns in his quest for a Christology that offers more than a narrow soteriology. Sittler writes that

as early as Irenaeus in the West, and as early as Gregory of Nyssa in the East, a christology was elaborated according to which the meaning, presence and power of God in Christ was proposed as adequate to a total view of man in himself, man with his fellow man in history, man in his residence in nature. The dramatic recapitulation christology of Irenaeus, operating with a biblical typology that is admittedly sometimes strained, nevertheless accomplishes a declaration of the total dimensions of God's redemption that discloses popular contemporary Jesus-piety as the shrunken thing that it actually is. And Eastern liturgical forms from the third and fourth centuries disclose that the common mind of the church had very early been able to envision an amplitude of christological meaning in language seldom matched in the following one thousand years.¹⁵²

But the theological journey for which Lutheran theologians Sittler and Wingren both call has in fact already been begun by the attention given to the patristic tradition by the early theologians of that movement which captivated the imagination of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Clark Brittain makes the connection clear:

In the works of Pusey and Liddon, Christ is understood to be not only redeemer but the pantokrator (ruler and creator), so that even the atonement of the cross has cosmic significance. Like Athanasius, these Tractarian leaders believed Christ to be the Light of the World whose illumining presence makes everything transparent to the reality of grace. And although sacraments are only fully manifest in the life of the Church, the

¹⁵¹Ibid., p. 371.

¹⁵²"Nature and Grace: Reflections on an Old Rubric," p. 255.

perichoresis between God and creation is not limited to the bread and wine laid upon the altar at the Mass but extends to the entire universe.¹⁵⁶

The appeal of Gerard Manley Hopkins for Joseph Sittler is obvious for a number of reasons. Hopkins' idiosyncratic language gives clarity to his vision; and Sittler admires a clarity of language that gives precision to one's vision of the world. Hopkins celebrates the world of nature, as Sittler does, and senses within it that mystery inherent in creation that remains despite both the consequences (understood theologically) of the fall and its erosion (quite literally) at the hands of the forces of modernity. But because mystery inheres in the creation itself, the creation serves sacramentally to mediate to the believer the gracious presence of God. This theme is consistent with Sittler's own attempt to expand a muted Christology and limited doctrine of the means of grace. Furthermore, as a "means of grace" itself, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins serves to awaken the reader both to his perception of the presence of grace in the world and to the reality of grace wanted in those places and experiences where it is most needed. That the teachers from whom Hopkins learned the most were making their own appeal to earliest sources of Christian thought makes him all the more interesting in light of Sittler's interest in patristic theology as a source for a theology for earth. It might appear, perhaps, that Hopkins and the tractarians did not have the urgency for their appeal that Sittler and our time does. And yet it is clear

¹⁵⁶Brittain, op. cit., p. 19.

that Hopkins, too, mourned the ingress of modern efficiencies into the world of natural beauty. "God's Grandeur" complains of the barrenness of earth trod, the unfeelingness of foot shod. "Binsey Poplars" is a lament for old trees removed for the sake of human habitation. It might well be that Hopkins, like so many who have grown to mistrust the modern world, turned to something like the Oxford Movement in his own search for a "useable past" that might forestall the cultural -- and environmental! -- fragmentation that he saw around him.

In his article, "Nature and Grace: Reflections on an Old Rubric," Sittler writes, "When the fellow creature is lost the self is shrunk; and when the earth as fellow-in-creation is lost, the self is perverted."¹⁵⁷ Hopkins' poetry, and the traditions upon which it draws, serve Sittler in part as corrective to this loss and perversion, particularly that perversion that comes of the "technizing of nature" and the "actual transformation of [humankind] dealing with nature."¹⁵⁸ As such they move us increasingly to the moral considerations which are the final consequences of the way the human creature looks at its relationship with nature, whether that way be perceived as merely "neutral" (an impossibility), rational, utilitarian, supportive, or aesthetic. Sittler observes that

The command of God is not that [one] should simply utilize the given, but that [one] should care for it.

¹⁵⁷"Nature and Grace: Reflections on an Old Rubric," p. 254.

¹⁵⁸Ibid.

And the suggestion is more than faint that if [one] does not rightly care [one] shall neither rightly enjoy nor sanely use.¹⁵⁹

But the ethical mandates that may be derived from Sittler's theology for earth cannot be discussed without consideration of Sittler's own appropriation of patristic thought in service of his discussion of the cosmic scope of Christology, and of creaturely and cultural existence as arena for God's action and as means of God's grace.

4. Universality and Particularity: Irenaeus and Orthodoxy

Joseph Sittler's ecological theology is fundamentally an appropriation of Luther's recognition that Christ and the Means of Grace are "masks" of God's gracious presence in the world in judgment and redemption. But because of the breadth and depth of the terror and wonder of thought and experience in the modern world Sittler writes that it is not possible to speak only of the salvation of the human soul, and the "masks" through which God plays his saving *mummerei*¹⁶⁰ may not be limited only to those specific means of scripture and the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, lest the scope of the redemption offered by God in Christ be conceptually truncated and vast horizons of human experience be left unattended to by Christian faith. These "vast horizons" are not "grace" any more than the pages of scripture

¹⁵⁹Ibid., p. 255.

¹⁶⁰Luther's word for "a costume party" or "masked ball." Cf. Wingren, "The Doctrine of Creation," p. 363.

are grace or the bread and wine of the Eucharist are in themselves grace. But they become both the arena in which the fullness of God's grace is revealed on behalf of God's creation, and the means through which God acts. This is an extravagant claim: and in support of this claim, Sittler appeals to the earliest theologians of the Christian faith, and to the strange (to Western sensibilities) traditions of Orthodoxy.

The shape and scope of Christology in Irenaeus, the first of the Christian theologians, is the connection between Hopkins, Sittler, and Luther. To look at Hopkins and the sacramentality exemplified in his art, and the themes which surface in this poet who speaks most winsomely to Sittler himself, is to push beyond Luther and into waters that may seem foreign or alien to him. Irenaeus, however, is the root that promises coherence. It has been said that the Reformation was the triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the church. But the controversies between Augustine and the donatists, and Augustine and Pelagius, were, after all, still struggles within what was becoming early catholic, western christendom. For his discussion of grace and the-world-as-nature, Sittler searches for something that is earlier, and deeper, and that affirms Creation itself in a way that even Augustine does not. For even though Augustine can celebrate the beauty of creation, in his introspection and in his doctrine of the radicality of human sinfulness, Augustine has begun the reduction of the scope of grace from the whole of creation to the words, "for you - for

forgiveness" in the Word and Sacrament in their classic and particularly Lutheran emphasis.

The theology of Irenaeus, however, emphasizes that the God who offers salvation in Jesus is the God who created all things in the beginning. Irenaeus writes against a gnosticism that calls the creation "bad," and understands salvation as redemption away from the "bad" creation. Irenaeus, the first theologian to attempt a systematic theological reflection of the entire biblical witness, insists that salvation is not distinct from creation. Acknowledging that St. Paul speaks of a distinction between Adam and Christ, Irenaeus attempts to point out the human, creaturely unity of Adam and Christ. The incarnation of Jesus is a recapitulation of the creation of Adam. The life of Jesus is a struggle between the God of creation who is the Lord of Life, and Satan, God's adversary and the Lord of Death. Christ's crucifixion and death is his real participation in the suffering of humankind and of the whole creation. His faithfulness to God in life and his resurrection from the dead are the triumph of God over the power of death. Through this triumph the acts of God in creation are recapitulated and the sin, suffering and death, the effects of the fall, are healed.

In the theology of Irenaeus, redemption and creation are not antithetical, for they are both the action of one God, the God of creation. In his study of the theology of Irenaeus, Gustav Wingren points out two dimensions of the theology of Irenaeus that are particularly interesting. First, because the sacraments use

such material elements as bread and wine, the Eucharist is an extension not of the incarnation but of the creation, just as the incarnation is itself a recapitulation of the creation.¹⁶¹ Secondly, just as the effects of the fall first penetrated the disobedient man Adam, and through him, the rest of creation, so the effects of redemption come into the world first through the obedience of Jesus, and through him are mediated to the whole creation.¹⁶² The creation is created in the beginning by God through the Word. As the incarnation of the Word, Jesus recapitulates the creation, and by his faithfulness in life and death he redeems the creation. To attempt to put this into the categories of "Nature and Grace" as Sittler understands them, both nature and grace are created by God; created nature continues to be a means by which God's grace is communicated in incarnation and sacrament; and the grace of God's love in death that is stronger than death restores nature to its original state.

Sittler reminded his listeners at New Delhi that according to Irenaeus, and in contradistinction to Aquinas, bread and wine could become the vehicles of God's grace because, since Christ, nothing earthly could be considered unclean. Paul Tillich has written that the bread and wine of the Eucharist is made transparent to the transcendent, so that the holy shines through

¹⁶¹Gustav Wingren, Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus, tr. by Ross MacKenzie (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg Press, 1959), p. 15.

¹⁶²Ibid. p. 72.

it.¹⁶² Tillich's thought is reminiscent of Luther's observation that the bread and wine of the Eucharist remain bread and wine as an iron rod remains an iron rod when heated; but the bread and wine are nonetheless charged with and communicate God's holiness just as the red-hot iron communicates heat. For Tillich, the same is said of a saint: a saint is nothing more than an ordinary person transparent to and radiating the same transcendent holiness.¹⁶⁴ When one encounters the holy, one is one's self touched and transformed by the encounter.

But in Orthodox theology that in the Eucharist which has generally been localized in that bread and wine is expanded. In Orthodoxy, it is the whole world that is transformed by this encounter as it comes to the community in worship. While the Eucharistic meal is the heart of Orthodox worship as it is among all sacramental communions,¹⁶⁵ among the Orthodox it is the entire liturgy that is transparent to the holy and the transcendent. The icon is vital to the religious life of the Orthodox Christian, for through the icon one encounters the whole communion of those saints alive in the world to come as well as

¹⁶²Tillich, "Nature and Sacrament" (The Protestant Era, abridged, tr. by James Luther Mays [Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1948], pp. 94-112, esp. pp. 101 and 111. In this essay Tillich expresses his indebtedness to Schelling, Goethe and Rilke, p. 101.

¹⁶⁴Cf. Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol. III (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 237f.

¹⁶⁵The Eucharist is celebrated in some form in every Christian communion; but those who identify themselves "sacramental" are Roman Catholic, Anglican and most Lutheran communions.

in this world. The icon is not worshipped. But the icon is venerated as one more means by which, in the words of the ancient Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer for the liturgy of the Feast of the Incarnation, "that which is visible draws us to that which is invisible." Orthodox worship is communal and its goal is the establishment of community. But in Orthodox worship, within the expanse of the church one is surrounded by the sight of dimly lit icons, by the smell of incense, and by the sound of the ancient chants. These experiences touch all of the senses, so that the worshipper "beholds" (to use that word which is so important to Joseph Sittler), or (to use the curious word of Sittler's poet, Hopkins) is "instressed," by the Glory of God. When one has beheld God's glory one cannot help but go out into the world and see it differently. The objective of Orthodox worship is not simply the salvation of the individual, but, to use the phrase of Alexander Schmemmann, "the life of the world." In Orthodox worship, grace uses nature for the transformation of nature. Or to put it a bit differently, Creative Grace ever creatively uses all the material stuff and dynamic interweavings of creaturely reality for the redemption of the Creation.

Summary and Transition

In the theology of the tradition of Jerusalem, God's self-revelation is not direct but mediated. According to the Hebrew Scriptures God's self-revelation is mediated through the words of the prophets. According to the Greek scriptures, the final self-

revelation of God is through the teaching, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. Christian theological reflection sees this final self-revelation of God made proximate to later generations through the media of the proclaimed word and the meal of thanksgiving, known variously as the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, or the Holy Communion. One of Luther's contributions to this conversation is his insistence that Word and Sacrament are media by which the God of self-revelation is hidden in that self-revelation itself: these media are masks or veils. This insistence is a corollary to Luther's Christology: God's self can be revealed in one inasmuch as God's self can be revealed in the other. But there is a third dimension to this assertion, and that is that God may be revealed, although more subtly, and in both grace and judgment, through other creaturely things as well.

Instructed by Luther, Joseph Sittler was instrumental in the retrieval for his own generation of Luther's doctrine of the Word, and in offering a proposal for the retrieval of Luther's doctrine of the sacraments. But in light of growing concern for the care of the earth and instructed by literature and the arts, and in particular by the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Sittler insisted that grace might be mediated through other things as well. Trained to give attention to the particular, he grew to see all particularities, not as Christ, but certainly as "Christic," that is, as "moulded to the cruciform." This assertion recalls Luther's admonition that one be able to see Christ in one's neighbour; the neighbour, too, is the mask of

God. For Sittler, there is nothing that is not one's neighbour, and therefore there is nothing that can not "be Christ." All creation glows, Sittler might say, "hot" with "christic presence."

The language Sittler uses is closer to the metaphorical language of poetry than to the rhetoric of the classical dogmatic tradition, and Sittler has been roundly criticized for this. Yet Sittler has found that language in its capacity to give expression to and to shape human experience is itself a vehicle by which grace is communicated. That the experience that is the subject of literary artistry itself often appears to be a graceless experience is no argument to the contrary: using a sort of *via negativa*, Sittler would argue that according to the witness of scripture, God can be revealed and present, and grace proffered, even in the most profound experience of pain and abandonment. The Glory of God expressed so stunningly in the iconic portrayal of the Pantokrater is not removed, for instance, from Marc Chagall's "Crucifixion in Yellow," or Picasso's "Guernica." But if it is not removed, it is certainly hidden. This claim is one answer to those critics who complain that Sittler's theology does not attend with sufficient seriousness to the reality of sin and radical evil. To the contrary, the intensity of evil bears the greater witness to the power of grace made perfect as Luther said, *sub specie contrario*.

In order to respond to Seyyed Nasr's complaint that a sense of the sacred has been removed from the world of nature, Sittler

draws on three large resources: the spirituality of Luther, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the theology and worship of Orthodoxy. Each of these offers a vision of the creation itself as transparent to the glory and wrath of God. The complaint remains concerning eschatology and the final consummation for which "the whole creation still waits and groans" (Romans 8). But we will give priority now to discussion of Sittler's theology for earth as an adequate foundation for the ethical life of Christians in an increasingly complex modern world.

CHAPTER IV THE AUTHORITY OF GRACE

To Guard and Gild what's common ...

Richard Wilbur¹

James Gustafson observes that Sittler's primary contribution to ethics is in the field of environmental ethics.² Sittler's initial foray into the field of ethical reflection, however, is The Structure of Christian Ethics, an appropriation of Luther's ethical stance. In this book he asserts that ethical activity derives organically from Christology and that decisions are made by faith as trust in God in the context of ambiguous situations. Just as Sittler's theology is not a "theology of nature" but "Christology applied to nature," Sittler's constructive revision of the ethical tradition toward environmental ethics is best understood as an application of the Christian ethical tradition to the environmental situation. Sittler shows concern for the environment because it is from his constructive revision of Lutheran theology that he insists on seeing all ethical activity within the framework of the redemption of creation. Creation has priority in that it is God's creation that is the object of God's redemption. The doctrine of redemption must "swing" (Sittler's phrase) within the broader orbit of the doctrine of creation.³

¹Wilbur, The Poems of Richard Wilbur, p. 195.

²James Gustafson, Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Proposals for Rapprochement (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 121.

³Sittler never articulates dependence upon Gustav Wingren for this point but he and Wingren share this concern. Wingren insists "that creation belongs in the first article of the Creed and serves as the basis for the following two articles" ("The

But while the earth and its care are the primary contexts and concerns for ethical activity, the world in the twentieth century has become complicated, and real ethical decisions, less clear. By contrast, the historical ethical traditions, however instructive they may continue to be, are inadequate to respond fully to the situation as described. In this situation, Sittler complains, Lutheran theology has not sought to be helpful:

Contemporary efforts to articulate an ethic for social life have had to travel a very jolting road among us. We have not, with theological ease and naturalness, been able to go from God to man to statements about man and man -- nor to go from the secure and clear realm in which we speak of the grace of God in Christ to practical dealings with the realm and operating theatre of grace among men involved in the social groups which so largely shape their selfhood.*

Nonetheless, the changed situation demands response from thoughtful men and women. Sittler suggests two responses. The first is a response by now familiar to the student of Sittler's thought: The changed situation demands a vast expansion of the notion of nature itself. Sittler's second response, however, begins with his familiar and more clearly theological appeal to the categories of nature and grace:

Doctrine of Creation: Not an Appendix but the First Article," p. 353.) James Gustafson and Conrad Simonson both note that at the 1963 meeting of the World Council of Churches in Montreal, Wingren and Sittler jointly convened an "informal discussion of the need to rethink the relations of creation and redemption, of nature and grace for theological ethics" (Gustafson, Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement, p. 183; Cf. Simons, The Christology of the Faith and Order Movement, p. 119).

*"Urban Fact and the Human Situation," p. 15.

What is required is nothing short of a doctrine of grace elaborated as fully under the article of God the Creator as a doctrine of grace has been historically developed under the article of God the Redeemer a doctrine of grace related afresh to the dynamics of man's transaction with nature ... If Christian theology does not take responsibility for the way in which the transformation of nature into the historically changeable artificial form of human society by means of technological civilization is to be judged and administered, it disavows the peculiar task of theology in our time.²

Thus the categories of "nature and grace" are of particular ethical significance. With characteristic specificity and concreteness, Sittler describes the expanded arena of "nature" upon which his attempted theological reconstruction of "grace" is brought to bear. The clarity which Sittler seeks is always tempered by the real ambiguity of any given situation in its complexity. This ambiguity is almost always reflected in the examples Sittler isolates in his attempt to describe and interpret the "changed situation."

1. Technology and Ethical Ambiguity

Joseph Sittler's observations of the complex situation in which men and women are currently called upon to make ethical decisions betray the extent to which he has been instructed by poetry as well as theology. Speaking in 1985 to a group addressing the dramatically changing situation of the rural agricultural economy, Sittler used the metaphor of ripples,

²"A Protestant Point of View," p. 426f.

tides, and deep currents of change.⁶ The ocean surface is marked by ripples, constantly changing, but superficial; tides are significant but predictable movements in and out from the shore of the land; but "deep currents" are those less clearly visible but more profound shifts that slowly or suddenly but always irrevocably alter the fundamental structures of common life. Sittler is convinced that the time in which he lives is different from that of any generation that has lived before. The changed situation is made most poignantly clear by those dilemmas raised by technological advances in the medical profession for which the "old ethical guides are no longer illuminative."⁷

The Topography of the New Situation

Anthropologically, Sittler interprets the expansion of "nature" as a fundamental change in human self-understanding. He describes the human being now as no longer simply *homo erectus* or *homo faber* or *homo ludens*, but *homo operator*. *Homo operator* is the human being who operates tools. But the modern *homo operator* is also one whose tools of communication and manipulation serve to isolate the operator from the world, rather than to establish an experience of community with the world; for despite advances in communication, the world of *homo operator* is itself the object

⁶"Theology of the Land," audio-taped presentation. The Wisconsin Council of Churches, 1985.

⁷Gravity and Grace, p. 89.

of operation and manipulation. In the sonnet so frequently quoted by Sittler, Gerard Manley Hopkins lamented that

... all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil
And bears man's smudge and wears man's smell. The soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel being shod

For Sittler, the situation described by the poet has compounded exponentially in a world in which travellers move transglobally in sealed compartments and workers spend their days in boxes of glass and concrete, breathing recycled air.

For Sittler, the "classic" paradigm of the modern person in automated isolation removed from the community of creaturely existence is the lone pilot of a solo aircraft, flying through the darkness of night, kept in contact with the earth only through lit dials and a monotonous electronic radio signal. That one is isolated does not mean, of course, that one is not in communication with others. The pilot is not devoid of human contact. But contact in a technological age is maintained mechanically through an intricate web of communications systems. The phenomenon has its sociological and economic expressions as well. For instance, a person was raised in Minneapolis and trained in New York, has worked in Houston, but lives and works now in Chicago, poised to relocate at a moment's notice at the convenience of company which demands accountability but without pretence of loyalty. The person contracts by telephone to buy potatoes raised in Idaho and have them delivered to a distributor in Denver. The combination of transiency and communicative potential forms a vast web of interconnectedness nearly

unimaginable to the individual's parents. The problem, however, is not "the web of interconnectedness." The sense of interconnectedness is fundamental to Sittler, for whom "ecology" is a metaphor for a theological understanding of the interrelatedness of the whole of God's creation,⁶ and both the pilot and the potato contractor are certainly participating in an interconnected web of communication. But the problem is complicated because this interconnectedness is "rootless":

Contemporary humans are diminished because their roots are not as deep or as widely spread as were those of our forebears in the field, the forest, the woods. They do not touch the flowers, the animals, the daily tasks on the farm ... This increasing distance from the natural world has made our vocabulary bereft of natural images, has almost stripped us of the possibilities to talk of ourselves in relation to God's creation.⁷

Sittler's ecological theology includes God, the creator, the human creature, and every form of the extra-human creature, too. Sittler's *Homo operator* may be in contact with others, but has, nonetheless, lost connection with a sense of place.

⁶The Ecology of Faith, p. 3. Cf. also Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 3: "The 'web' apart from which I cannot think, or think about thinking, is the ecological structure of the human reality. The term 'ecology' has a transphysical meaning. It points with undismissable stubbornness to the context of things; it insists that no thing exists apart from all things. All orders have uncertain edges, all categories leak, all propositions conceal a presupposition, or an aware or unaware limitation within which alone they are accurate or represent truth.

"The recognition that one is in deepest nature vehemently ecological is a recognition that cannot without betrayal be distorted or denied "

⁷Gravity and Grace, p. 14.

In his presentation to the Center for the Study of Campus Ministry, Sittler expands his description of the increasingly more demanding nature of the modern "life-world" of homo operator as homo operator is affected by external stimuli of greater intensity. By "life world" Sittler does not just mean

interiority but the multiple contacts with the world outside whereby the interior is enriched and questioned and opened up and refined, the world of literature, social fact, political life, urban life, the rise of science and its child technology, the quick-food world of MacDonal'd's, the quick-satisfaction world of the entertainment industry, the mechanical processes of state education, the whole mass culture. I mean by "life-world," then, everything that impacts upon the organism as sensitive and intensive.¹⁰

According to Sittler, one is to "behold" the world in which one lives. Because the sentient organism is impacted upon by what is around it, the self-conscious human being is not simply to look, or to see, but to behold, that is, with a sense of wonder to stand before what is around one's self. But drawing in part on the poetic awareness of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Sittler further claims that the beholder is changed by what is beheld. Sittler understands, therefore, that that which one beholds may be a means of grace. But he understands as well that the change in the beholder may not be a "gracious" change. In his discussion of homo operator, Sittler describes a new experience which, when observed, profoundly shapes the interior life of those who dwell in the modern world. This "new experience" is the consequence of the "deep currents of change" to which he

¹⁰Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook, p. 30.

alludes in his address to the Wisconsin Farm Crisis Team. In his 1978 Campus Ministry Lectures Sittler offers a phenomenology of these "deep currents of change" which shape interior life of the contemporary beholder by identifying five characteristics of the "new experience" of homo operator.

1. The shift from historical awareness to awareness of the world as nature. Sittler says that in his youth the "real world" was the world of history. Referring to Dilthey he observes that "[n]o one can understand the perturbation of our time unless he feels the terrifying dynamic of the historical."¹¹ The historical was the fundamental focus and periphery of human inquiry, speculation, reflection. But since 1900 the world as nature has occupied the mind of modernity as much as or more than the world of history. This move is not necessarily a problem. Sittler finds this "move forward" also to be a move back to a biblical awareness of reality as conditioned both by nature and history:

The life-world that characterizes our time and to which an adequate christology must be proposed includes both the world as nature and the world as history ... So does the biblical world Our time has a scope of reflection that includes both the worlds of nature and the world of history, but we know more about nature than the Psalmist did...¹²

2. The world as nature is also a world of infinite space. Even the child in elementary school recognizes that "not only do they live in the world whose actuality is equally history and

¹¹Ibid, p. 32.

¹²Ibid.

nature, but it is also a world of apparently infinite space."¹² For Sittler as a child, the stars and galaxies were objects of wonder. But the modern child wanders among them "with a kind of factual familiarity" made even more credible to a generation informed by the "dumbed-down version of astrophysics" that is Star-Trek.

3. The Dimension of time is exploded in the same way as is the dimension of space. History is not simply a matter of events in time recorded and remembered, but is qualified exponentially by time understood within the intellectual contexts of nature and infinite space. Children who have visited the Grand Canyon have seen fossil formations and geological evidence of increasing complexification of orders of life through long stretches of time. The explosion of the dimension of time presents a challenge for the interpretation of Scripture. Within this framework it is impossible, writes Sittler, and even silly, to speak of the creation story literally.

4. The philosophical problem of the origin and end of creation has been eliminated. Increased knowledge of the world as nature now leads the modern person to understand the world as a "closed system." The modern person recognizes that

the world as nature has locked within it the energies which have constituted it, has locked within it the potentialities to account for its own structure and change and explosive energies.¹⁴

¹²Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 33.

This creates what Sittler calls a "new humanum," living peacefully and serenely with no concern for the ancient questions of origin and cause. Sittler contrasts this observation with Mercea Eliade's claim that "all people have created stories of the primal time, the beginning-time, the 'egg of the universe.'" But to give "intellectual acquiescence" to a closed universe is to speak of physics without metaphysics. Philosophy is no longer part of the quest for light, illumination, first principles but rather, an "analysis of the meaning of sentences, propositions, training in logical analysis." Anyone who preaches an ancient gospel to those who dwell in this time must recognize the terms of discourse which are becoming common language.

5. How things appear in one's mind and how things are in reality do not necessarily correspond. In support of this final characterization of the current situation, Sittler quotes Percy Bridgeman: "We have come to a moment in the development of contemporary science where we must entertain the possibility that there may be no correspondence between the thoughts in the head and the way things are."¹⁵ This claim is counter to the great philosophical tradition of Platonic idealism: "It is really the postulation that the beholding, learning, knowing, reflecting mind has the interior capacity to find models corresponding to the way things are." Sittler develops Bridgman's observation:

The way things are (that is the way God the Omnipotent knows them to be, who knows all about the small

¹⁵Ibid., p. 34; cf. Walker Gibson, ed, The Limits of Language (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962).

particles and the wenzlinea and the quirks and the quarks) may have no correspondence to the possibilities of the mind. The world may be unimaginable in its complexity and its ultimate structure.¹⁶

One may still look for correspondences, and one will still "seem experientially to secure them hypothetically well enough that they give the next step forward." Nonetheless, for the human mind not to know everything does not mean that one cannot act officially with what one does know. (Sittler likes this factor of "noncorrespondence." It is consistent with his sense of the "blessed messiness of creaturely reality.")

Illustrations of the Dilemma

These five characteristics of modern experience shape the new self-understanding of homo operator by expanding the arena of decision-making and by relativizing the basis for decision-making. Homo operator thus described is the new humanum for whom grace as forgiveness of sins is no longer adequate. Sittler describes the modern medical profession as an example of the immediate human context in which "ethical life, decision-making, is going to get more difficult, not easier."¹⁷ Three instances drawn from his participation on a hospital board of bio-medical ethics serve to illustrate the situation. The first: Federal funding for medical research on a group of children with a rare congenital disorder is reduced; an arbitrary decision must be

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook, p. 61.

made to determine which children will continue to participate in the research project and which will not. The second: A woman in her sixties who has led a rich life is hospitalized with a seriously debilitating heart condition. Medical equipment and procedures exist to prolong her life, although without the richness that she and her family have known. She requests that her treatment be discontinued. The third: A child is born with significant mental and physical challenges. A delicate surgical procedure will keep the child alive, although the child will never live a life considered to be "normal," and will always require extraordinary care. The parents elect to forego surgery, and simply to allow the child to die quietly. Sittler describes these three situations without judgment. In the first of these ethical dilemmas, he advocates that a way be found for all children in need of the treatment offered by the research project to receive that treatment. In the second and third, his sympathies are with those who would allow life to end "naturally," even though the procedures and technologies exist that would maintain vital signs.

Despite his own position, however, Sittler claims that there is no immediate and clear scriptural guidance for these and other issues. Matters of population control, human sexuality generally and the particular issue of homosexuality, and the relationship between society and the individual have become "embarrassing to traditional ethics;" they cannot be handled within the terms of traditional ethics. "The base line of the human has been

broadened," he says, citing his friend and colleague, Bernard Meland. This means that "the agenda of what is right or good or proper or acceptable or permissible, what is necessary for the unfolding of human energies, needs, desires, and goals, has been much extended."¹⁰

Sociological Issues: Mass Culture and Urban Communities

The five characteristics of the "changed situation" describe an arena of ethical reflection that alters the philosophy, the historical consciousness, and the theological reflection of the "new humanum" along a "cosmic" perspective. The dilemmas posed by bio-medical ethics are poignant in their radical particularity. This is the expanding continuum along which Sittler's new understanding of "nature" develops in a fashion analogous to his expansion of the "scope" and "means" of grace. This ethically complex "arena" is the more complicated by sociological changes and by the economic factors at work in them, as the modern world is increasingly urbanized.

Sittler does not intend an unqualified criticism of urban life in contrast to a celebration of rural life. He does not romanticize rural reality. Sittler recognizes that attitudes about rural life have often been subjected to a sentimentalization not justified by the rural situation. The city, on the other hand, has a venerable history. The city was

¹⁰Ibid., p. 55.

the locus of the rise and spread of christendom. Although nineteenth century Americans often thought of urban areas as centres of sinful distraction from which rural areas were exempt, Sittler recalls that the first Christians were actually urban, while rural communities were "pagan." Luther's world, while it was that of agrarian north German peasantry, was also an urban reality, however different it may have been from that of the Swiss Bürger cities of Zürich and Geneva. By identifying the prominence of the city in western culture, Sittler intends to emphasize that the problem of modernity is not a problem inherent in urban life.

But there is a problem with the modern city because it is no longer permitted "an organic and intelligent evolution" and so it is being destroyed. Sittler complains that the city is most often criticized and judged, not by those who live in the city, but by visitors from outside, for whom the city is "feared and unknown" and "feared because unknown." Sittler further protests that the city is becoming homogenized, and its sections, standardized "according to the sole norms of profitable land use and commercial conformity" which are bringing about an urban destruction "vast in scope, fierce in pace, and ruthless in human hurt."¹² This process began with the industrial revolution and has gathered speed ever since. It has now, he says, grown fierce. Sittler assesses the situation thusly:

¹²"Urban Fact and the Human Situation," p. 12.

The rationalization of all forms of life to those situations and arrangements proper to economic efficiency is the fundamental datum of the great city. The human reality has been brutally oversimplified, human needs have been ignored, and "the human scale," even in architecture, has been utterly forgotten in the management of urban growth.²⁰

In a healthy, organic, and "intelligently evolving" urban situation, however, one would know, recognize, and support one's neighbours. The contemporary demand of ethics includes "an ethics for social life."²¹ As Sittler understands the sociological urban issue anthropologically, the destruction of the city is the destruction of common life, and it is within the context of common life that the self-understanding of the human being is defined. Consequently the destruction of the urban community is the destruction of the human creature. Understood theologically, Sittler would recognize an "ethics for social life" applied to the city as "the grace of creation" applied to "the structures of creation."²²

Related to the problem of urban decline is the problem of mass culture. Sittler identifies three tendencies of mass culture that exacerbate the dilemma of ethical complexity. Mass culture tends to oversimplify, to banalize, and to moralize. It oversimplifies, because the modern person "has short patience with history, conflict, behaviour and reflection." It tends to banalize in its desire to be "relevant." And it is tempted to

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., p. 13.

²²Ibid., p. 14.

moralize because "American" religion demands unambiguity in relationship to the moral."²³ This tendency is the more complicated because of the pace of mass communication: "one hooks the entire train of substance" to the engine of moralization.

Technology and Urgency: Beyond Human Consideration

The situation is the more complicated in the modern era of advanced technology. Sittler was impressed by Nicholas Monserrat's novel, The Cruel Sea. In the novel, the Captain of the Corvette, "Rosebud," articulates the change in the ethical situation as it developed in the course of the advance of technology, in this instance, in service of warfare:

It was he who dealt mostly in the principle of numbers, not people; and he could not help being aware of the change. He could even feel guilty about it, like a man forced by circumstances to replace twelve trusted workers with twelve mechanical grabs. The answer, of course, lay in the extra amount of work the grabs could do; but that did not solve the general wound to humanity ... Without doubt, however, that was the way the war was going; the individual had to retreat or submerge, the simple unfeeling pain of hands must come to the fore. The emphasis was now on the timeless machine of war; men were parts of this machine, and so they must remain, till they fulfilled their function or

²³This has been particularly true of American Protestant Evangelicalism, especially as it developed under the influence of the nineteenth century evangelist, Charles Grandison Finney. Trained as a lawyer, Finney was convinced that the insights of both Luther and Calvin concerning human ambiguity could not be supported by "rational" nature of Enlightenment thought, and that when a person had been persuaded intellectually of the truth of Christian belief, both the affects of one's "heart" and one's will for ethical activity would follow intellectual conviction exactly. Cf. Keith J. Hardman, Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

wore out. If, in the process, they did wear out, it was bad luck on the men -- but not bad luck on the war, which had had its money's worth out of them. The hateful struggle, to be effective, demanded one hundred percent from many millions of individual people: death was in this category of demand and lower down on the list, the cancellation of humanity was an essential element in the total price.²⁴

The primary issue is winning the war, not moral considerations about what must or must not be done. Captain Erickson concludes that there is "No room for mistakes, no room for mercy -- no room for love or gentleness, either."²⁵ In Sittler's thought, there are three causes for this diminishing of the human being to little more than a creature in service of a machine. "Economism," as distinct from materialism, has become a way of life: a system of values and judgment is determined by the unreflected "production, distribution, and use of material stuff."²⁶ "Instrumentalism" oversimplifies every dimension of human existence "under the pressure of instantaneous use."²⁷ And language is dominated by "Man-as-Nature" rather than by "Man-as-History:" the human creature is defined according to exterior realities rather than the historical sensibilities of human interiority.²⁸ Sittler calls the consequence of this reductive diminishment, "depersonalization," which is "to diminish,

²⁴Nicholas Monserrat, The Cruel Sea (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p. 341.

²⁵Ibid., p. 357.

²⁶"Depersonalization," p. 162.

²⁷Ibid., p. 165.

²⁸Ibid., p. 167.

distort, or evacuate a person of that human particularity which constitutes him a person."²⁹ Sittler uses a poem by Randall Jarrell to illustrate the depersonalization and disposability of human beings in service of a war machine:

THE DEATH OF THE BALL TURRET GUNNER

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a
hose.³⁰

When the efficiency of technology in service of economism becomes paramount, human life is depersonalized, instrumentalized, and disposable.

Ethical Traditions and Environmental Consciousness

In attempting to expand the theological category of "nature," Sittler identifies and describes the phenomena of the experiential world in which modern men and women live. Sittler calls the modern human being, *homo operator*. *Homo operator* is the pilot flying alone at night, isolated by glass and steel from the world of such natural phenomena as trees and water, and connected to other human beings only through radio contact. It is *homo operator* who is faced with medical dilemmas of an unprecedented nature. It is the same *homo operator* who is aware of the cosmic expanse of the creation in which the human creature

²⁹Ibid., p. 161.

³⁰Cited in *ibid.*, p. 162.

lives and of which the human creature is a vital part. *Homo operator* is the "new humanum," the base lines of whose creaturely existence have been broadened, who no longer asks philosophical questions of origin and goal. And *homo operator* as "new humanum" also recognizes that the world of human experience is so complex and multifaceted that any one way of describing the world is not necessarily correspondent to another person's experience of the world.

But *homo operator* is frustrated by the depersonalization of mass culture and economically driven organization, and by technological urgencies that discount human affect. "Nature" so described is where *Homo operator* lives and participates with all other creaturely life, despite the mixed experience of control of and isolation from it. This description of the human person and the ecological context of the human person is Sittler's expanded definition of "nature" as a theological category to be set in relationship with "grace." "Nature" so described is both the object and arena of "grace." But "nature" so described is also characterized by fact of the "environmental crisis." Because the expansion of the category of "nature," is, for Sittler, theologically necessary, the ethical response to the environmental crisis, and to all other unprecedented ethical questions, is necessarily a theological response. It is for this response, however, that Christian theology has lacked imagination.

Secular Responses to the Ethical Dilemma

In spite of increasing ethical ambiguity and the failure of Christian faith to present a clear response, Sittler acknowledges that the general public has made ethical judgments on the environmental crisis. These judgments and mandates, however, he appraises generally as "cop-outs," or evasions of responsibility, rather than truly constructive responses. Furthermore, he observes that the world of science recognizes these popular attitudes to be precisely that: evasions of responsibility.

The first evasion of responsibility is technological. The appeal to technology easily assumes that ways can be found to deal with the problem, because the momentum of scientific knowledge has no limits. But a conference at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on "The Responsibility of the Scientific Community in the Environmental Crisis" concluded that there would be no technological way forward without change in human attitude and behaviour:

As a result of our consideration, we want to say that there is much that the scientific community can do to come to the assistance of our culture in this moment; there is much more that we ought to do; but unless there is profound change in the uncriticized way of dealing with the natural world, there is no possibility that any scientific effort can solve this problem.³¹

The real need, Sittler insists, is for intellectual and spiritual conversion. He quotes St. Paul, "we must be changed by the spirit of renewal of our minds."

³¹Ibid., p. 39.

Sittler identifies a second secular evasion of responsibility as "legal": the environmental problem will be dealt with by adequate and appropriate legislation. Legislation has "a certain appeal" because the problem is by definition a matter of "the ecological status of things," and this status is determined legally by a federal or even world order. Moreover, a problem in the environment is by nature intricate, an ecologically-structured point within an endless web. It cannot be seen or managed just locally. The strategy to solve such a problem must include the establishment at a higher than local level of laws that attack stupidity and correct it by legal means. Legislation works; heavy fines are effective. But Sittler finds legislation nonetheless an evasion of responsibility, because what is needed is a reorientation of the hearts and minds of human beings who continue to think of the earth as a resource for endless rapacity. Sittler finds that the conclusions reached by a conference at the law school of the University of California are "virtually a copy of the MIT statement": much can be done, much more should have been done, but "the problem fundamentally is not one of law. It will require a change in our American way of life." Laws may help, but the pace for change of statutory laws does not match the pace of environmental degradation.

Sittler identifies a third evasion of responsibility: It is not secular, but an attitude that is a "hazard peculiar to the church," because it arises out of the piety of the faithful. The

faithful want to trust that God will take care of God's creation and God's people, because, in the words of a Christian hymn, "This is My Fathers' World." Sittler compares such a piety to trust in a "jovial God who will let you romp all over the garden and [then] clean up the mess." But this attitude is neither faithfulness nor faith; it is the abuse of piety as justification for environmental irresponsibility.

According to the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, the purposes of God are not necessarily accomplished through the people of God. Given this observation, Sittler suggests that there is theological truth to the suggestion that the environmental crisis is an experience of the judgment of God upon unrepentant human beings. Some environmental thinkers speak of the earth as the "agent of its own healing." Those who do, generally subscribe to environmental theories such as the "Gaia Hypothesis" or "Deep Ecology." Sittler never discusses these theories as such. But Sittler's theology asserts an organic and relational understanding of creaturely existence on earth and of human placement within the universe. Deep Ecology and the "Gaia Hypothesis"³² both suggest that the earth might well heal from environmental degradation with human assistance. But both of these ecological positions state that the earth will heal itself despite human opposition to the care of the earth and at the expense of the human creature who refuses to assume responsibility for the care of the earth.

³²Cf. *supra*, ch. 1, p. 35.

Thus Sittler interprets the earth's ecological destruction as an expression of the judgment of God on the failure of human willingness to care for the earth: "The reprisals of God's creation against its abuse may be slow and invisible for generations, but God is just. Sooner or later nature reacts against its exploitation."²² The justice of God demands justice, not only for the inhabitants of the earth, but for the earth itself. The care of the earth, on the other hand, is not simply a matter of aesthetics or sound fiscal management of natural resources. Because God created the earth in the beginning, and entered into the creation in the incarnation of Jesus, the care of the earth is "Christic" responsibility.²³ Therefore it is a theological affirmation, as well as an ecological assertion, to say that the earth, created by God and sustained by God, can itself be the agent of its own healing, even at the expense of human inhabitants. Sittler observes that when Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem, he is unwittingly God's servant, while those who claim that they are chosen actually stand in the way of the will of God. Sittler contrasts this with the

kind of piety about an indulgent God, who will simply smile with fatherly mercy upon the endless egocentricity and wastefulness and rapacity and

²²Gravity and Grace, p. 17.

²³"Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," p. 179.

stupidity of his children. [But the God of Hebrew Scripture] is also a God of judgment.³³

It is a strong statement to say that the earth will do what the earth will do with or without the help of the human creature who may or may not love the earth and who may or may not assume "Christic" responsibility for its care. The statement is intensified by the complexity of the ethical situation in which men and women in the modern world find themselves. Because "christological ethics" is love active in concrete historical circumstances, the discussion of Sittler's "christological ethics" as they are applied to the care of the earth will begin with Sittler's observations of the complex situation in which men and women are called upon to make decisions. Sittler describes the ethical situation of the modern American as typified by mass culture, urban reality, and depersonalization as the subordination of human concerns to technological urgencies.

The Inadequacy of the Historic Ethical Traditions

Sittler complains that Lutheran theology has not sought to be particularly creative in its reconstruction of the ethical tradition in light of the expansion of human self-understanding and of the human creature's awareness of the extent of the universe which is the place of human habitation, and therefore its ethical light has not been adequate to address the environmental crisis. In the "Campus Ministry Lectures" of 1978,

³³Ibid., p. 42.

he addresses more precisely the problem with the historic ethical traditions.

Natural Law identifies patterns of behaviour as "natural" or "not natural." One can, by one's own reason, have adequate knowledge of what is right and what is not right without appeal to God's self-revelation. Sittler identifies Aristotle's ethics as an example of ethics concluded from rational reflection on the data gleaned from the observation of nature. Natural law looks into the structure of nature itself to determine whether structures and processes of nature offer guides rooted in primal areas of natural activity resonate in the human. Sittler illustrates Natural Law with the statement that "nice boys" and "nice girls" "don't do that," whatever "that" might have been. The natural law tradition, he writes, was never developed "in such a pure way that it was always the imperatives of nature that were being appealed to." But in an age of multicultural pluralism and urbanization, he finds "natural law" limited because often what was specified under the guise of natural law "was simply an appeal to the opinion of the neighborhood."

Semitic Morality is, according to Sittler, the ethical answer of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the other great ancient moral codes. The Hebrew Scriptures make statements about God and the people of God, whose destiny is intertwined with the destiny of God. That portion of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the fundamental law demands that people live in obedience to this

fundamental law. In this way they work with God to fulfill their election and destiny as God's people.³⁶

Sittler calls this law "Prophetic": it addresses a matter of decision and of interior contract and covenant. Particular actions may appear to be neutral, but are examined to see whether they incline toward fulfillment of the intended destiny of God for God's people, or if they bend toward "an unhappy direction." Actions are judged according to their expression of "firmness of confidence in Yahweh" or for their interior meaning "as possibilities for Torah." But under such scrutiny the law develops in "enormous proliferation," yielding eventually what Sittler calls the "increasing rigidity and humorless gravity" characteristic of Jesus' trouble with the Rabbis.

The Christian ethical tradition does not abandon Semitic morality, but arises out of the Torah in the teachings of Jesus and is developed through the "evangelical counsels" of the Medieval Church. Sittler identifies Martin Luther's "Small Catechism" as a most superbly concise blend of the components of the ethical tradition. The moral law is stated, but its negation is filled with "a positive evangelical content." Sittler observes that in Luther's "Small Catechism" the form for the interpretation of the commandment is always "You should so fear and love God as not ... but rather ..." The "rather" is always "loaded with the kind of constructive, positive, caring, evangelical counsel that Luther gets from the teachings of

³⁶Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook, p. 57.

Jesus."²⁷ Ethical activity in this tradition has positive content and is always predicated on the fear and love of God.

According to Muslim theologian Seyyid Hossein Nasr, the ethical tradition of Christianity is different than that of both Judaism and Islam, because Christianity is a matter of a dynamic relationship to Jesus, and not subscription to a revealed written code of conduct. Nasr argues that both Judaism and Islam have a "Sacred Law" which is "inseparable from the revelation" of each religion. In both, God's will is "manifested in concrete laws which theoretically govern all aspects of human life and are the blueprint of the perfect society."²⁸ Nasr contrasts the "Sacred Law" of Islam and Judaism to "The Way" of Christianity. The "Christian Way" is esoteric, not of this world, and can only be followed fully by a select society of saints. Because the "Christian Way" is a higher law, Nasr contends that it is actually subversive of attempts to establish and legislate a social order, and has even fostered social upheaval and "facilitated the disruption of nature through its unrestricted and unlimited exploitation."²⁹ Nasr grants the place of "charity" as a supreme virtue in the Christian community, and indicates understanding of the debate between faith and good works. But theological views, he writes, are not the same as revealed law. And

²⁷Ibid., p. 58.

²⁸Nasr, op. cit., p. 133f.

²⁹Ibid.

[t]he very fact that there was not within Christianity a detailed instruction about social structure and economic practices led, with a weakening of Christianity in the West, through economic practices and applications of technology to an amassment of wealth which knows no bounds and limits.⁴⁰

Nasr's critique of the "Christian Way" focuses the discussion of Sittler's attempt to demonstrate continuity and discontinuity between Torah and the "Christian ethical tradition." On one hand, Nasr's observations reflect an understanding of sharp discontinuity between the revealed law of the Hebrew Scripture and the evangelical content of, for instance, Luther's interpretation of that law. On the other hand, Sittler writes against that same sharp discontinuity as he perceives it expressed in the thought and action of other Christians:

When faith ... is understood exclusively in terms of an alternative to works, it is both reduced and intellectualized. It is reduced because it is imprisoned within the category of the individual relation to God and there effectually stifled, so that it may fail to exercise its creative power throughout the whole of the Christian ethical life [T]he assertion that the just shall live by faith means that by faith the just shall live!⁴¹

The law has its place in the current ethical situation: it informs difficult judgments. But judgments must be made, not according to "the letter of the law" (St. Paul) but within "a larger context of sensibility and concern."⁴² Decisions based

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 135.

⁴¹The Structure of Christian Ethics, p. 61f.

⁴²Center for the Study of Campus Ministry, p. 58.

on such judgments are made in the freedom of faith, not the certainty of revealed law.

Sittler finds the ethical situation is changed because of the increased isolation of the modern person from other human and extra-human creatures; because of the development of mass culture; because of growing industrialization, mechanization, and increasingly utilitarian ways of looking at all of life; and because of the movement of the population from rural to urban communities and concomitant degradation of urban communities. Technology generally and medical technology in particular have made ethical decision the more complicated. These developments reflect and support human attitudes that have had a devastating impact on the environment, and neither technological development nor legal action are adequate in and of themselves to change the situation. But appeal to the ancient moral codes of Hebrew scripture or natural law finds them also inadequate for the complexity of the situation of the human being in what Sallie McFague has called the "ecological, nuclear age." Nor does "faith" merely as trust in a jovial and benevolent God serve God's creation. For the modern situation, with a "cosmic" world-view and its capacity for technological manipulation of the world, has, according to Sittler, wrought a new self-understanding of the human creature: "the base-lines of humanity have been broadened" (Meland).⁴²

⁴²Cf. *supra*, p. 272.

Nonetheless Sittler continues to hold, if somewhat tentatively, that in the Christian theological tradition there is a basis for a theological ethic to meet this new and profoundly changed situation. It is not an ethic that proposes absolute and clear answers. It is rather a way forward in an ambiguous situation. But it is a way forward that demands that modern men and women live responsibly. To live responsibly is to be responsive to God and neighbour, and to have a sense of responsibility for the care of one another and for the earth itself. To learn to live with this sense of responsibility is to have been "converted in one's mind." It is to live by faith which, again, Sittler defines as absolute relationship to the Absolute.⁴⁴ The Absolute is the God of creation, whose grace has come in the particularity of the man Jesus, but whose grace, in Sittler's view, extends to the outer reaches of the whole creation: and whose faith-engendering grace is given to women and men, certainly through the word of scripture and through bread and wine, but also in the context of a relationship of love and trust with the whole creation itself. With this as the theological ground, Sittler proposes his theological ethic.

2. The Poetics of Grace: Doxology, Aesthetics and Ethics

Sittler gives a great deal of attention to Percy Bridgman's theory that "the way things are may not correspond to the notions

⁴⁴The term is from Tillich, although Sittler never acknowledges this. Cf. Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol. I, p. 215.

of human minds." Sittler also believes that the source of environmental ethicality is the transformation of one's mind. In Sittler's thought, art, music, and architecture particularly serve to transform the mind. Sittler develops the idea that the mind can be shaped or formed by art, music, or architecture, from Oswald Spengler's concept of "morphology." "Morphology" is a matter of shape and form. Therefore, art, music and architecture can serve a "poetics" of grace. By "poetics" of grace, Sittler means that there is a "shape" of grace that is reflected in the worship, architecture, art, and music of the culture, and that this shape informs both the human (ethical) question and provides a form by which we begin to see the answer to the question. The answer to the ethical problem demands attention to the shape of the question.

Again, Sittler underscores the ambiguity of the situation as he experiences and understands it:

In contemporary ethical reflection, we are absolutely required to make absolute decisions between absolutely given options in the midst of absolute indeterminacy ... The options are usually absolute, too, because "no decision" is a kind of decision. And these decisions are made often in the midst of absolutely indeterminate factors.... We are working with more and more wide-open indeterminacies in social, political, medical, and personal decisions. And the old way of trying to go from a general principle to a casuistically-arrived-at sub-principle for decision in this particular case has become almost useless. I could ask ... "What is the will of God?" That is the question for the Protestant Christian. But I do not know. There was no possible way, by ever so devoted reflection, to find out. I do not know what God's will was in that case. So the ethical light by which my feet should be guided has gone out. The law by which I might have made the decisions is now so complicated by other options that

it no longer has directive urgency or categorical imperative.⁴³

It may still appear, however, that there are no principle aids in making careful decisions despite the complexity and ambiguity of the situation as we face it. The question is the more acute given Bridgman's premise that the mind may not be compared to external reality, and Meland's observation that "the base line of the human has been broadened." Joseph Sittler's theological ethics attempts to address the problem by asserting that the real ambiguity of the human situation is resolved, however tentatively, by the conformation of the mind to an "ordering" of life -- a "morphology of grace" -- that in-forms the Christian way of living in the world despite its complexity. This "in-forming morphology of grace" is the infinite at work within the finite. It is a way of describing grace at work within that which is tentative and uncertain, while recognizing that all human actions are at best ambiguous.

A Matter of Style

In the face of ethical ambiguity, action is first of all a matter of style. Sittler defines "style" by quoting J. Robert Openheimer: "Style is the deference that action pays to uncertainty."⁴⁴ For Sittler, this means that

The uncertain cannot be made more certain at the time,
the action cannot be deferred. So the action is taken

⁴³Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook, p. 61.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 47.

with a kind of acknowledgement which is not revealed but lies in the way the action is taken ... But to act in that situation deferentially, which is a kind of moral acknowledgement that one's perception is not identical with the omniscience of God -- this is a personal quality; it is a gesture which will make an otherwise unacceptable action acceptable.⁴⁷

Style is not ethics, and ethics are not merely a matter of style or taste. But style is "prefatory" to ethics. The style of our action, whether tentative, or decisive, is qualified by the nature of the time in which we live:

Our reflections upon style prepare us for what I think will be central in ethics as we move now into a time in which, in the midst of indeterminacy, we must make judgments. And "style" is the word and the things that point to how we may find our limited redemption in the midst of that.⁴⁸

Sittler is attempting to develop a "poetics of grace," or a "morphology of grace," that shapes our life together as one grows in continuing awareness that one encounters the presence of God as "Other" in the other person whom one meets. He identifies Abraham Lincoln and John Fitzgerald Kennedy as leaders who had style, and complains that our own time is impoverished by the want of style, by the "bland and indeterminate nature of the style" of some leaders, and by the "absolute certainty that lacks comprehension of ambiguity" on the part of others. He observes that there is, by contrast, a New Testament style that can instruct ethical decision in the course of encounter with an "other." Jesus acts "now here, now there;" his action is always

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 48.

specific, and directed toward the particular. His action is precise and decisive.

A Matter of "Faith and Form"

The idea that ethical activity has style and form leads Sittler to a discussion of aesthetics. This is not surprising, given Sittler's interest in poetry, art, and music. But while ethics is, for Sittler, always theological, to ask if there is a Christian ethic is comparable to asking if there is a Christian aesthetic. Sittler answers, in effect, "not necessarily." He describes the results of a student's attempt to press Aristotelian principles of causality into service as the foundations of a theory of Christian art. The "efficient" cause would suggest that a thing is Christian if it is designed by a Christian. Sittler finds this to be absurd, as if a pair of trousers made by a Christian tailor might be "Christian" trousers. The "material" cause for art would demand that the subject matter is Christian. But Sittler protests that content, Christian or otherwise, can be "betrayed, banalized, trivialized" by form. A "Final" cause for "Christian" art insists that the work of art serve a "Christian" purpose. But art and action need not necessarily be Christian to serve the community of faith. And a "formal" cause for Christian art would demand that form, movement, structure, is "for the moment," and static in Christian story.

The point, for Sittler, is that, just as there can be no dichotomization between "Grace" and Nature," neither can there be any dichotomization between "Christian" and "not Christian." "Christian" as a word to describe a thing is incapable of being enclosed in historical categories. Rather, what is important is the particularity of the "forms that the artist creates," as they are "derived from immersion with the historically exhibited practices of existing communities." The adjectives, "Protestant," "Roman Catholic," or "Lutheran," do not "eliminate the Christian ground of historical formation of a peculiar force and clarity" but open a historical objective to designate a historical product. To attempt to categorize and distinguish along these lines is akin to the inappropriate separation of nature from grace.

Art, for Sittler, is historical and natural. But all art, in its historical particularity "aims at a universality which shall transcend the occasion of its work." The artistic way to the universal is by way of the particular: "what is most universal is achieved as a result of precise attention to and effort to articulate the particular." In art, as in theology, Sittler refuses to formulate a general theory about "nature and grace." Instead he gives absolute and rigorous attention to the concrete and the particular, and to the relationship of particulars to each other. Therefore, Sittler concludes, "The way to make a thing significant is to make it precise; the path

to excellence is the lowly path of artistic obedience to the historically particular."⁴⁹ There is, Sittler writes,

a rhythm in all creative work. It is born in generality, it takes on flesh and blood in particularity, and it so manages the particular as to suggest the abiding generality with which it became first aware. One has a feeling, let us say, for humanity -- its scope, possibility, variety, contrariness, pathos, and delight. But training in the humanities is a course of study which does not deal, cannot deal, with creativity, musicality, poeticality, aspiration, or dread, or delight. It must deal with actual creation, actual musical and poetic and dramatic products, articulations by particular people of dread and anxiety and common boredom and delight.⁵⁰

But important as art, poetry and music are to Sittler, they are not yet ethics. One discovers in his thought, however, that the work of the artist, who shapes particularities and allows the new shape of a particularity to give nuance to recognition of the form, corresponds to the work of the person "in-formed" by faith who seeks to act faithfully in the complex and ambiguous ethical arena.

A Matter of Shaping Space

Sittler devotes his reflection to poetry and art because he recognizes that the artistic endeavor shapes thought and action. Thought and action are shaped as well by the space by which one

⁴⁹In saying this Sittler betrays the influence of the thought of Gerard Manley Hopkins who derived his concepts of "instress" and "inscape" from his study of Ruskin and then, through Ignatius and Scotus, learned to "wrap them around" the trans-formal particularity of Christ. Cf. *supra*, pp. 226-240.

⁵⁰"Faith and Form" (1962), p. 210.

is surrounded. To suggest a "poetics of grace" that influences the shape of ethical activity is also to speak of architecture:

Architecture as actual product is to theology as our actual ethical decision is to the commandment of God to love the Lord and the neighbour as one's self. What this means in terms of actual deeds for the neighbour will never be known in advance or in abstraction. The shape of the need determines and demands the shape of the deed. So it is with a building to endure and collect the actuality of a community called a congregation. There is no simple and direct road to simplicity. No theologian, nor anyone else, operating with general categories can tell the architect the precise deed appropriate to the need. This answer, or alternate answer, will be generated in the rich potential of the life of the imagination. Theological clarity may point, and ought to.⁼¹

Theology may not dictate matters of design and construction suitable to all times and places to the architect who is commissioned to plan a church building. The design and structure will be determined by specific local criteria. But theology can and must be clear about certain theological affirmations that can and ought to instruct the architect's imagination for the design of the structure. It can only

supply to the mind of the architect affirmations characteristic [to the] community, knowledge of cultic acts, peculiarities and practices, and it may even transmit in a general way the group's understanding of how its working relates to its environment's culture. To attempt to do more, it seems to me, is to confuse categories, to require that theology shall exude aesthetic norms. That it cannot do.⁼²

As an instance of this relationship between theology and architectural aesthetics, Sittler describes Saarinen's Christ

⁼¹"The Matrix of Form in Church Architecture," p. 16.

⁼²Ibid.

Church in Minneapolis. The brick and the light are singularly suited to the light and to the climate of that city, and in such a way as to bear witness in that particular neighbourhood to the Christ who has given the church its name. One must recognize that a church is Christ's church; but Christ is served best in a particular place when the architecture of the place of worship reflects the surrounding community.²² Similarly, in the chapel of the Illinois Technical Institute, the altar railing is made, not of wood, but of stainless steel, a material appropriate to the community of metallurgists that worships in this place. Such details are not only a matter of aesthetic principles. They are incarnational principles applied to ecclesiastical architecture, for they hold architecture accountable both to the particularities of the place and of the people dwelling there, and to the purpose for which the building is intended. The particularity of the incarnation forbids both that ecclesiastical architecture be generic, and that theology dictate prescriptive norms, even for ecclesiastical architecture.

To speak of ecclesiastical architecture in this way is, however, to ground the discipline which shapes the space of ritual action in the incarnation itself. Incarnational theology demands that architectural form be appropriate to context. The Incarnation, Sittler writes,

is the only possible character, guide, and animation for the work of the architect as he seeks to give form to faith. For he must dare and be free to do [in] his

²²"The Architectural Implications of Theology," p. 7.

own way the astounding thing that God did in his own way in the thundering paradoxes of the "Word become flesh and dwelt among us."⁴

God's creativity in the freedom of God's grace becomes the model for the creative activity of the architect whose work will shape space which will form and inform, as well as be formed and informed by, the faith of the believer. Again, Sittler is consistently incarnational in his emphasis on concreteness and specificity. For Sittler, this, too, is a matter of nature and grace:

If grace can become nature, then nature can ever after that embody, celebrate, and refract grace. Nature does not do this by trying to denaturalize this and become grace; it can do it by a kind of tender, free, exulting willingness to accept and use nature (now cleansed of demons!) to the glory of God and the amplest requirements of the human.⁵

Because grace has now made nature "the theatre of its gift," Sittler concludes, "all of nature is free and able to offer its redeemed self as a kind of transparency to the reality of grace."⁶

According to Sittler, the incarnation is the most specific instance in which "nature" is the form in which the character becomes, is transparent to, and is communicative of, the grace of God. Sittler makes the point in a short article:

"The word Became Flesh and dwelt among us." This statement puts one at the central place for pondering what the form of a Christian church should announce.

⁴"Matrix of Form in Church Architecture," p. 214.

⁵Ibid., p. 215.

⁶"The Matrix of Form in Church Architecture," p. 215.

"The Word is Christ. He is the concentration what God is, demands, gives.

"The Word became flesh" means that this reality, this saying, this requirement and this gift has occurred in history where we live. The Christian faith is not the bowing of men before a dream of religion; it is the adoration of men before the gracious act of God's Christ given and alive within man's history-house.

"And dwelt among us" means that this new reality is alive here and now. This dwelling creates a community that responds to it, lives by fact of it, calls itself the very "body of Christ" in the body of the world.

The Lutheran tradition is Christocentric through and through. The knowledge of God is what is offered in Christ. The worship of God centers in the entire Christ-deed, from birth through death and resurrection, to His real presence in the household of God, the Church.⁵⁷

The church is the place of Doxology, of worship, and praise. The doxological witness of the church, expressed in worship, has been, "that it is our duty and delight in all times and places" to praise God and out of the expression of praise to assume responsibility for the care and redemption of creation. Sittler insists that every detail of worship point to Christ as center and object of worship. The christocentric focus gives Christian faith palpable and declarative force, for the concreteness of God revealed in Christ prevents worship from degenerating into general religiousness, unspecified spirituality, or a mood of "cosmic otherness." Religious behaviour alone is unredemptive. The sole redemptive act is God's deed in Christ, in his historical actuality and in his real presence in the life of the

⁵⁷"Worship and the Arts in the Lutheran Tradition," pp. 190-191.

church. Incarnation is a matter of substance, and substance has form. But to confess the incarnation is also a matter of faith. Thus relating faith and form, Sittler asks if "the substance, the content, the thick material of Christian affirmation" might have

a form which celebrates the particularity of this substance, and which does it in such a manner that there is a continuity, and not a break, in what it says at the center and what it announces in a formal way?⁵⁵

Form, he insists, ought not belie function; "insofar as possible, the form ought to duplicate and announce the function and not just enclose it."⁵⁶ The nature of faith is substantial, and faith is declared and transmitted through substances. To suggest otherwise is to suggest a theological untruth. Consequently, faith, too, will have a form, and "the form ought to seek to set forth and celebrate the substance of the faith as amply, opulently, and graciously as possible."⁵⁷ This means that space will be shaped and the substances used in that shaping will reflect the concrete realities of the proclamation of the Word and the Celebration of the Eucharist:

Our belief is that God comes to His people primarily through the Word and Sacrament, and the Sacrament is not something more than, or added to, the Word. It is a material actualization of the promise of the benefits of the grace of God. Therefore, if one preaches wherever people are together -- and given the modern mobility of the population and the strange working hours -- the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper ought to be

⁵⁵"The Architectural Implications of Theology," p. 5.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁷Ibid.

available wherever there is a meeting of the congregation.⁶¹

When a church is built, "Everything that is there is there for a reason that grows out of a solid theological analysis of what we are doing and why."⁶² Sittler concludes from this that "The form ought organically to unfold from the reflection of the function, the purpose, the particularity of this race, this people, this moment."⁶³

According to his essays on architecture Sittler understands incarnation as the basis of aesthetics, giving something new to the elemental substances of life in a particular place.⁶⁴ Although the elemental substances may be highly ambiguous, nonetheless even tentative action can be taken; and the influences that form the character of the individual who take this even tentative action are aesthetic; if we are formed in relationship to what we "behold," then art or aesthetics has a formative and ethical function. Speaking theologically, the "raw materials" are a matter of nature; the design applied to them in the shaping of space is a matter of grace. Sittler explains this more precisely in his discussions of beauty and holiness.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 7.

⁶²Ibid., p. 8.

⁶³Ibid., p. 9.

⁶⁴This perspective is shared by Hans Urs von Balthasar, for whom reflection on the Incarnation makes it possible to understand "beauty" as a point of departure in theological aesthetics, rather than arrival, as in philosophical aesthetics. Cf. The Glory of The Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. I: Seeing the Form, p. 17f.

Beauty and Holiness

Gerard Manley Hopkins certainly knew the poetry of Wordsworth, and must have known of Wordsworth's observation that "nature is red in tooth and claw." Nonetheless he wrote lines that became dear to Sittler: "The World is charged with the Grandeur of God." The affirmation that the world holds God's grandeur recalls the doxology of the Seraphim of Isaiah's vision: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Power and Might: Heaven and Earth are Full of Your Glory." These words have become the Sanctus of the canon of the Great Thanksgiving of Christian liturgy for celebration of the Lord's Supper. The praise of God is a counterpoint to the growing ambiguity of the ethical situation. There is correspondence between concern, and the claims of Christian faith against that concern. Again, this is a contextual and incarnational concern. The task is to find language to address the cultural reality; but the priority of Christian faith and thought is to shape that language.

This is a particular problem for preaching. The anguish of the preacher, Sittler has written, is to have his or her own thought and heart "wrapped absolutely around" the source and content of the proclamation. Jesus came as a particular person in a particular place. The proclamation of grace given in Jesus must also be made in forms and words suitable to each particular time and place of that proclamation. But the forms and words must be suited to the grace proclaimed, too. Sittler understands the gospel to be a living, dynamic force; and "The living must

have form to set it forth, to invite its substance toward apprehension, achieve clarity, transmit power."²⁵ Nonetheless the forms through which the grace of the living God is proclaimed are transient. The grace of God is timeless, but the forms through which grace is communicated are not:

all forms that confess, focus, and clarify are tempted to enclose, restrict, reduce. Forms appropriate to substance do indeed illumine interaction, focus force, sharpen point. But all forms are culture-fashioned and tend toward tyranny.²⁶

The difficulty and promise of Christian proclamation is to say what is most needed in the language of the time and place of proclamation but in such a way that the substance of the proclamation itself is not comprised by the forms of proclamation. Once again, this is incarnational. And again, Sittler illustrates both the problem and the solution by appealing to architectural achievement: He identifies Chartres as a great Cathedral, not because it conveys all that can be said about Christian faith in every time and place, but because it says what was most necessary for a particular time and place in the materials and in the architectural language of that time and place. Sittler laments that in our own time there are no longer ordered patterns, such as those of Chartres, by which the proclamation of grace can be clarified to the current context:

There is a single and specifiable crisis that is reflected in all of these crises: the world of ordered law, formally available to men's intelligence has

²⁵The Anguish of Preaching, p. 45.

²⁶Ibid.

dissolved into a world which is no world at all. It is conceived to be ordered, if at all, by patterns or laws no longer clearly and certainly proposed to men's minds.⁶⁷

As Percy Bridgman wrote, there is no correspondence between the human mind's perception of reality and the way the world is. Sittler attempts to demonstrate this lack of correspondence by appealing to the difference between the Baroque composer, George Frederick Handel, and the contemporary jazz musician, Thelonius Monk. Sittler identifies Handel as a composer of the eighteenth century who lived in England and practised his craft among the ruling class. The sources of Handel's artistry were the styles and modalities of those people and of that place. It was the music of the ruling class and reflects a different reality than that of those less favoured; nonetheless, his music was as recognizably familiar to Colonial Williamsburg as to Whitehall. But Handel and his artistry in their historic context are, according to Sittler, to be sharply contrasted with the artistry of jazz musician Thelonius Monk in his world:

Handel's music is the product of a magnificent sensibility shaping to musical form the clear realities of his world; Monk's music is a product of a fine sensibility searching for a form appropriate to the declaration that all art forms are bankrupt because reality is in transit! Handel could interpret reality with a craftsman's serenity because he shared a general agreement that there was a basic reality waiting for revelation and celebration; Monk has no choice but to construct and impose upon life however strange and arbitrary his work may sound, his own reality -- which is for him the only one there is. In this sense modern music is the product of a radical tentativeness made audible. The available acoustical possibility of sound

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 46.

and rhythm are used, not to declare one man's variations on an agreed consensus about the world, but to work out in sound and rhythm one man's behavior in a world without form.⁶⁰

Not everyone would judge Monk's music to be beautiful in the way that Handel's music is judged beautiful. Yet Monk's music is both as true and formative for his time and place as Handel's is for his. Truth offers its hand in service of beauty; and the notes of both are, as it were, "graced."

If style, as Oppenheimer wrote, is the deference of action to uncertainty, then the uncertainty must be the greater in our time because of the tentative and relative nature of "reality" as it is observed and described. But Sittler raises yet another consideration in the face of this tentativeness: Although relativity itself is a profound dimension of the late twentieth century and of the self-understanding of those who live in this time and place, relativity is, nevertheless, not an absolute. Only God is absolute. Writing as a Christian theologian, Sittler claims that God gives shape to a random world. The Hebrew scriptures begin with the report of God's creative act of bringing order out of chaos. But the form toward which we move within a world of random particularities is "the cruciform shape of creaturely existence." The "cruciform" both shapes and describes the life of all creatures.

The counterpoint of artistic expression and Christian proclamation, as Sittler presents it in The Anguish of Preaching,

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 50. Italics mine.

yields a radical assertion of the tentative relying absolutely on the grace of God. For the artist, whether a poet such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, a prose writer such as Gertrude Stein, a jazz musician such as Theolonius Monk, or a painter such as Picasso, the creative act is

an act of bestowal; it is an action in which he confers a form on a pattern or a formal relation upon what he sees or handles. Michelangelo could speak of sculpture as "releasing" a truth from a block of marble; the contemporary artist is more likely to understand his work as the imposition upon matter -- which is itself unknowable and not related necessarily to anything certainly known -- of a pattern that seems to him pleasing and possibly significant.⁶⁹

The artist's "bestowal" of form onto an otherwise formless world offers a form that faith may address. This form is, as it were, the "earthen vessel," into which the treasure of grace may be poured and by which it will be shaped (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:7).⁷⁰ Sittler acknowledges that anyone to whom the task is given to proclaim the grace of God may feel cheerless and oppressed by this seeming formlessness. This need not be. It is true, Sittler complains, that the church has tended to try to clean up "the mess" cosmetically. He would prefer that imaginative people of faith see the end of old forms which are no longer of use as an opportunity for the construction of something new that is itself informed by nothing less than the grace of God:

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 54.

⁷⁰"The Treasure and the Vessel," p. 191.

But is it not possible that the acknowledgement of an end is the precondition to the arising of the new? That a known debacle may be the occasion for decision? That the mind's recognition of the limits of its correspondence to reality may constitute the moment for a fresh apprehension of reality? That the exhaustion of religious vitalities has historically been and may again be the moment for the gospel? That faith may create a clearer, harder, more integral form for itself when it has only itself and its object to draw upon?⁷¹

That Faith might do this is conceivable because faith itself is not grounded upon transient forms but relies instead on God. It is for this reason, Sittler reminds his readers, that God forbade Israel from making "graven images" -- lest faith become a reliance on form rather than on the God of grace. Form offers security and eases the mind, to be sure; and one may be distressed by forms too unfamiliar. But form is itself not ultimate: God is ultimate.

This attribution of ultimacy to God and not to created forms is not intended as a denigration of the earth itself or of "stuff" which is shaped by graced imagination. The artist, Sittler writes, is one who celebrates the world -- often in ways that the church has not celebrated the world. Sittler insists that people of faith are not to live "half-asleep, dull, unaware, unmoved, and bestial within the wonder and vitality of the world." It is true that Saint John admonished the early church "not to love the world." But Sittler interprets this as a warning against idolatry which must be preceded by

⁷¹The Anguish of Preaching, p. 54f.

the supposition that the lure and delight and wonder of the creation shall have caught the eye, aroused the sense, excited the mind, caused the heart to bloom into such images as characterize, for instance, the 104th Psalm.⁷³

Sittler admonishes his readers to celebrate a world of wonder and delight which is, in the imagination of the contemporary artist, novelist, poet, and painter, abstract; and which is as tentative as the world of ethical ambiguity, fraught as it is with the tough decisions of biomedical ethics, the organization and reorganization of common life, and the challenge of environmental devastation. Sittler suggests that in the artistry of Picasso and Joyce, with its fractured forms and fractured grammar, "consecutive awareness of multiple levels of consciousness" are reordered into "patterns closer to the flux and interceptions of experience of the actual life of man."⁷⁴ But these abstractions only assert a deeper truth which is attested to by both natural science and personality science: their is-ness is their relatedness.⁷⁵ Or to put it another way (quoting Joseph Haroutunian), their ontology is an "ontology of communion." The idea of a thing is determined by its formal relations.⁷⁶

This relational tentativeness has its ethical concomitant in the ambiguity of the ethical situation described earlier.

⁷³Ibid., p. 56.

⁷⁴Sittler made much the same judgment about Hopkins' use of sprung rhythm and creative vocabulary. Cf. *supra*, p. 240.

⁷⁵The Anguish of Preaching, p. 48.

⁷⁶Ibid.

Nonetheless, grace is, in Sittler's word, "formful." Grace shapes common life as one lives by faith even in the face of refractive relativity. The poetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins become useful as the theologian attempts to describe how grace forms common life. Hopkins sought to use the theologically informed concepts of "inscape" and "instress" to shape his non-propositional articulation of faith in the Creator whose handiwork he beheld, even in the fragmented world of nature and whose shaping force he saw behind the transient reality of Victorian industrial England. Hopkins's world was "ordered" according to an "inscape of grace." Sittler, too, seeks to order common life, by characterizing ethical life as life in community formed by the glory of God and by the cruciform shape of human existence.

The Glory of God.

Pleni sunt coeli at terra gloria tua is an ancient confession of both Israel and the church. The formative character of grace is a reflection of the glory of God. At times Sittler finds almost perverse pleasure in identifying disorder as an attribute of creaturely reality, an observation which he defends by asserting that the temptation to order is always part of the temptation towards idolatry. Order goes against the grain of a sense of humour and what he calls, the "wild a-systematic of all there is." In a sermon for the festival of Epiphany he links the "Glory of God" with the mundane details of Chicago's 63rd

Street.⁷⁶ In this sermon he reports that he finds it instructive that the Oxford English Dictionary gives six and one-half columns for the definition of that Glory of which the people of God have always said that heaven and earth are filled. "Glory" carries the meaning of majesty, honour, pride; it is a "state proper to accumulated accomplishments"; it may be a "vulgar" expression of delight in worship; it may be a "delightful, half-embarrassed aside, a "household term." A "glory-hole," Sittler notes with delight, may be "a box, drawer, receptacle, in which things are heaped together without any order or tidiness." The precision of that image Sittler calls "the precision of the vulgar"; all kinds of classification-defying stuff come together without order, so that "glory" is "transcategorical."

The text upon which this sermon is based is Isaiah 60:1-6, a lesson appointed for the festival of Epiphany. Sittler suggests that in these verses, the prophet is "reflecting backward and imaging forward."⁷⁷ Using this metaphor of looking both backward and forward, Sittler is able to summarize his extensive survey of the nature of "Glory" in the Hebrew scriptures. God is originating, creative, absolutely holy, "the ground, the source of life, the core intention of all that is. And the glory is the light the holy gives off." Glory "is the effulgence of that

⁷⁶The Care of the Earth, pp. 121-130.

⁷⁷Cf. the discussion of the "rhetoric of recollection" as an aspect of Sittler's biblical hermeneutics, *supra*, p. 128.

utter nucleus which is in and through all things but captured by none."

Looking backward, "Glory," partakes of the character of a secret, of the hiddenness of God revealed in a name. Because a name is always a symbol of the self and a disclosure of the self, when Moses is told of the name of the Lord, he sees God's glory. When in Israel's battle with God, she is forced to define her reality in that relationship, glory appears. In her recalcitrance, Israel is smitten by glory. In quiet devotion, glory is the term for health and righteousness. In exile and despair, glory is deported but nonetheless unforgettable and living, and shapes the songs of Babylon. Again at home in Israel, glory dwells in Zion.⁷⁸

Looking forward from Isaiah's prophecy, Sittler finds that glory "thrusters toward restoration." Thus Sittler finds it affirmed that there is "in nature and history"

a holy possibility for the fulfilment of all things; that that possibility is, and is Holy, because all things exist in the ultimate placenta which is God the creator and sustainer. And the comprehensive term for that perception and that faith is glory.

.. but this glory, uncontrollable in category and concept, is nonetheless that which formed and forms this people Israel to the mad faith that neither nature nor history has slipped nor been snatched from holy hands.⁷⁹

Sittler asserts that for the Christian, however, the full measure of "Glory" is in its identification with Jesus.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 125.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 126.

According to Saint John's gospel, "we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth." His life, "luminous with glory," was not smothered by the darkness of his death, and it was "the glory of the Father" which raised Christ from the dead. This is the ground and goal of that glory with which heaven and earth are full, of that grandeur with which the earth is charged. Sittler argues thus for the ontological significance of God's glory by which the earth is filled:

The glory is the reality that fills the space that ontological inquiry marks out; it is the ultimate ambience in which the mystery of our restless lives swing to and fro; it is the persisting allure that draws and drives all things beyond the vain glory of penultimate meanings. It sings in nerve and blood in D. H. Lawrence, in the arching speculations of Plotinus, and it meets us as a gift, as evocation and a demand in every dirty street, every hurt upturned face, every failure of fulfilment on the streets of this world.²⁰

Sittler categorizes glory under the typologies of gift, evocation, and demand. As Gift, Sittler understands it to be "the stickiness of the possible as it meets him in the ever-so-hopeless stasis of the actual," a "creative fusion and vision and form and emerging pattern," and a "vision of fullness and authenticity and justice and of a possible goodness." As evocation, it recognizes God's presence in the most ordinary of created things. And as demand, the glory of God requires that morality begin in the context of the holy.²¹ It is, then, the

²⁰Ibid., p. 127.

²¹Ibid. Sittler's source for this last observation is G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy.

glory of God, as encountered and expressed in manifold ways in the worship of the community that orders life together.⁸²

The Parabola of Grace

Grace is the glory of God encountered in worship and hidden in the world. Such grace has its own shape, described in various ways. In his essay, "The Shape of the Kerygma," Sittler identifies the shape of the "Christ-event" as parabolic. Reflecting on the Christ-Hymn of the second chapter of Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians, Sittler identifies God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ as the downward movement in the incarnation and death of Jesus;⁸³ the corresponding upward movement is his resurrection and ascension. According to the sixth chapter of Romans, Christian life is incorporated sacramentally into this parabolic movement by participation in Baptism and Eucharist. And Christian life in community and in communion with the world will reflect this parabolic movement. Death rules in history; the parabolic downward movement incorporates the creaturely experience of death and restores life to the individual and to the community through "faithful

⁸²Cf. Sittler's "Introduction" to Worship in Scripture and Tradition, ed. Massey H. Shepherd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 5f.

⁸³Cf. *supra* the discussion of the doctrine of kenosis as presented variously by Hans Urs von Balthasar and Carl Braaten, p. 236, n. 135.

reenactment in human life of the morphology of God's deeds of grace -- death, burial, raising up, and glory."²⁴

In The Structure of Christian Ethics, Sittler identifies this parabolic movement as "the shape of the engendering deed." That which "engenders" is God's love, God's gracious deed in Christ. It is God's downward movement, toward the object of God's creation and redemption: and, in the life of Jesus, this downward movement is active "now here, now there" in specific encounters with unique human creatures in the particularity of their predicament. God active in Christ makes no generic "clean sweep": God comes in Christ, teaching, speaking in parables, eating and drinking, healing and forgiving: but always the object of Christ's attention in this downward movement of grace is individual, in the particularity of the individual's life.

Human Existence as Cruciform

The shape of the human existence in which divine life participates, is, however, not parabolic but cruciform. It is cruciform existence that is incorporated into the divine life by Christ's incarnation into the world. And it is this cruciform human existence that is caught up in the parabolic deed of divine grace. Creaturely existence has the shape of the cross, and it is into this cruciform existence that the divine reality enters and transforms (and, one would expect, is transformed as well). The cross, Sittler points out in an early essay, is blunt,

²⁴"The Shape of the Kerygma," p. 34.

graceless, indicating incompleteness, brokenness, ambiguity, and tension, rather than unity, harmony and rest.⁸⁵ According to Sittler the cross is an "inexhaustible symbol for creaturely existence" because it is "descriptive of the innermost character of human existence." It is profound and redemptive "because it is true." Its shape is that of contradiction, and human life knows itself to be in contradiction with itself. It is contradictory in its experience of time: it is not simply that in the course of time something passes, irreversibly; something is lost, irrevocably. Life is contradictory also in the human experience of moral reflection: One senses that there is some ultimate significance beyond one's self, and yet one is never quite able to dethrone one's self from the position of centrality in one's focus of concentration. Self-transcendence, however altruistic it may seem to be, is always illusory.

Life is also cruciform in the human experience of self-realization. The dynamic of life is "upward" and "expansive." Yet everything caught up in this dynamic is inevitably cut off abruptly. Across the upthrust of life in its creativity there runs just the other member of the cross: the fact that all realization is more precisely along the way of limitation, rigid salutation, the forcible throttling of possibilities.⁸⁶ Yet it is precisely in this place that God's grace is revealed, "not

⁸⁵"The Cruciform Character of Human Existence," p. 18.

⁸⁶Cf. *ibid.*, p. 19.

because God loves crosses" but because God loves the human being whose life is lived in this nexus.

Sittler's "morphology of grace" is focused in these two images: the parabola of God's downward sweep of love, and the cruciform shape of human existence in which that love reveals itself, in order that human existence might be incorporated into the upward sweep of the other arm of the parabola.²⁷ The actual topography of human existence changes, of course; it becomes infinitely more complicated as the upward thrust of the human drive toward self-transcendence and creativity takes on new and more powerful, more expansive dimensions. But the recognition of inevitable limitation remains. Human experience at the end of the twentieth century is characterized by a heretofore unimaginable relativity and by technological advances that raise sometimes incomprehensible ethical questions. Nonetheless, Sittler asserts that there is still an Absolute, of which -- of Whom! -- humankind is still aware, and whose central position in life the human creature seeks to deny. The cruciform character of human existence is therefore not changed, even in our time. It is expanded, made more complex and, consequently, more anguished. To use the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the fundamental "inscape" of human existence remains cruciform. But the surface of creaturely existence has in recent times been altered profoundly, so that existence itself is at times nearly

²⁷This is, of course, another description of the transaction that Luther called, the "joyful exchange," and that the Orthodox call "theosis." Cf. *supra*, p. 238f., n. 138.

not recognizable. The experience may itself be "excruciating." Casting theology in metaphorical language, Sittler characterizes grace as having the shape of a parabola with its downward sweep and redemptive upward movement. But the "parabola of grace," too, is expanded, so that the whole "topography" of the current experience of reality, with its technological development and the philosophical (and theological!) presuppositions that both support and are challenged by this development, is also caught up into that parabolic movement that reveals itself on the cross. This, for Sittler, is nothing more than an appropriate extension of the Johannine proclamation that "the word became flesh and dwelt among us": "Flesh! - because that is what we are. Dwelt among us: because that is where we are."²² And there, in the mundane messiness of it all, "we have beheld his glory." The metaphor is also an application of Irenaeus' doctrine of "recapitulation."

Grace has shape: the downward movement of God's self-revelation. Creaturely existence also has a shape: the upward sweep of ascendancy cut off by creaturely limitation. In the Incarnation, the two come together. But since the Incarnation, the shape of grace informs all human attempts to mould human environments, particularly those environments that are intended as places in which to encounter the God of grace. But grace is grace because it makes something happen: it is divine force, holy ingress, the energy of God's initiative, coming down and

²²Ibid.

showing itself in the cruciform particularities of daily existence in a vast and more complex world of cosmic dimension and technological advance.

In this cruciform situation, the parabolic deed of God in Christ engenders a response. That engendered response is the ethical behaviour of the human creature within the increasingly complex contingencies of creaturely existence. Just as the "inscape" of grace remains parabolic, however, and the "inscape" of human existence remains fundamentally cruciform, so does the content of the human response to God's engendering deed remain constant as it informs ethical activity: the content of the engendered response is faith. Faith is an absolute relationship with the Absolute. This relationship of faith instructs all human deeds and informs all human relationships with other creatures, both human and extra-human. According to Bengt Hoffman, faith is the root of the moral life, and some experience of the "mystical presence" of God is the foundation for ethical activity.²²

3. The Masks of God: Creation as Neighbour

The fundamental change in the modern understanding of existence is to see that existence is a matter of relationship, rather than substance. With this insight, the Cartesian understanding of reality, to which so much blame has been

²²Hoffman, op. cit., p. 32. Cf. Sittler's citation of G. K. Chesterton's observation, *supra*, p. 312, that "morality begins in the context of the holy."

assigned for the human willingness to participate in the degradation of the environment, is called into question. This makes the modern person nervous, for it means whatever is the "Other" which might be an individual's object of study at a given moment is really not standing still long enough to be absolutely categorized.²⁰ It is a clear perception of the dynamic and transient nature of relationships - including one's own introspective interior relationship with one's self - that has informed modern music, literature, and painting which sees not just "objects" (as Richard Wilbur's poem suggests) but parts of objects in strange relationship with each other. This is the awareness that informs Sittler's description of the earth, not as the object of inquiry, exploration, development and exploitation, but as "our sister, fragile and fecund, demanding our care."

We do not live alone, and we do not live for ourselves alone. This assertion is fundamental to Joseph Sittler's theology and ethic. For this point Sittler relies on Augustine's confession that God has made the human creature for God's self, and apart from God the human heart is restless. The human creature lives in community, and in community human beings are called to live in relationship with God who is the creator of community. This community includes the earth:

That man is independent is a plain lie. He comes from nature, he is by the processes of nature, he lives in every moment in absolute dependence upon nature. Man

²⁰Cf. supra, p. 227, the beginning of Hopkins' attempt to describe "inscape": "What you look hard at seems to look hard at you."

can live five weeks without food, five days without water, and about five minutes without air. Man cannot be man against nature; he can only be man with nature. If out of ignorance or apathy or aggressiveness he tears the fabric of which his own life is a part, he destroys himself as well as the mighty structure from whose womb he was born, in whose web he has had his unfolding history, and whose support and companionship-in-life is the primal place and ground of his existence.²¹

To be is to be in relationship. Sittler quotes the German proverb, *Ein Mensch ist kein Mensch*, a person alone is no person at all. Ontology is not a matter of substance but a matter of relationship. To defend and expand this claim, Sittler quotes Joseph Haroutunian at length:

We must take another look at "human nature" upon which the grace of God or God himself is said to act. It is not at all obvious that human nature or humanity is what a man is born with, so that one can study and describe it as the individual's private equipment. We know human beings in actual intercourse with their environment and in their actual communion with their fellowmen. Characteristic activities of human beings, such as speech, thinking, willing, loving, and hating, do not occur and are unthinkable apart from an interpersonal setting. Even perceptions, feelings, emotions, and actions occur in a social context, and these are what they are as responses in the common life men have with their fellows.

... We have no ontological status prior to and apart from communion. Communion is our being: the being we participate in is communion. The old controversy between the realists and the nominalists about universals and particulars is incongruous with the ontology of communion. We have to do, not with universals, but with our neighbors, not with particulars, but with particular fellow-men. We do not participate individually in Being, and Being is not by our own being individually. There is no individual to participate in Being or to make Being be. In the beginning, by God's creation, is the fellowman, and the fellowman is by loving his neighbor. The apparently

²¹ "Two temptations -- Two Solutions," p. 21.

universal notion, at least in the Western world, that one man can be and that he can have a nature suggests an alienation that gives us, not a human ontology, but one from which the human manner of being is excluded. In the beginning is communion and being or Being. For this reason, in Christian philosophy, traditional ontology is a source of misunderstanding and confusion.²²

Sittler echoes Haroutunian when he writes elsewhere, "selfhood is neither a product of the accumulation of modes of individuation, nor the product of acquiescence in homogenization ... The self is the aware center of grateful participation."²³ This idea of "intersubjectivity" prohibits one from thinking that one can find one's self or develop a sense of identity in isolation. Sittler argues against, for instance, college students who insist that they must take time off to be by themselves in order to "discover themselves." This tends to be mere individualistic, solipsistic, egocentric "navel-gazing," ultimately fruitless and even damaging: "The self is not an isolated entity," he repeats; "the only self-knowledge we can have is the knowledge that comes by virtue of the self being among other selves."²⁴

But the community of other selves within which one comes to self-knowledge is vast and complicated. Sittler uses a citation

²²Joseph Haroutunian, God With Us: A Theology of Transpersonal Life. Cited in Essays on Nature and Grace, pp. 106-107.

²³"Dogma and Doxa," p. 15.

²⁴Robert M. Herhold, "Probings by Joseph Sittler: Published in Honor of His 75th Birthday" (The Christian Century, Vol. 96, December 19, 1979), p. 915f.

from Henry James to describe more precisely the nature of this complex reality:

The real world as it is given objectively at this moment is the sum total of all its being and events now. But can we think of such a sum? Can we realize for an instant what a cross-section of all existence at a definite point of time would be? While I talk and the flies buzz, a sea gull catches a fish at the mouth of the Amazon, a tree falls in the Adirondack wilderness, a man sneezes in Germany, a horse dies in Tartary, and twins are born in France. What does that mean? Does the contemporaneity of these events with one another, and with a million others as disjointed, form a rational bond between them, and unite them into anything that means for us a world? Yet just such a collateral contemporaneity, and nothing else, is the real order of the world. It is an order with which we have nothing to do but to get away from it as fast as possible. As I said, we break it: we break it into histories, and we break it into arts, and we break it into sciences; and then we begin to feel at home.²⁵

Yet thoughtful women and men can no longer responsibly "break things into precise sciences." The complexity of the world prohibits such precision. Therefore it is difficult for responsible men and women to feel comfortably "at home." That with which people live in relationship, and which gives a source of identity, leaves them now with a fragmented sense of identity. Sittler is keenly aware of this complexity and the hazards inherent in the acknowledgement of it. But it cannot be denied. Sittler claims that his entire career has been spent in search of a form of theological discourse which would be "obedient in style" to the "collateral contemporaneity" described by James. The task of theology is therefore the more formidable:

²⁵Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 4.

when one seeks ... to articulate the immediacy of grace, to interiorize the objective reality of the dogma so that it shall become forceful for our time's need to stand within the creation as we receive redemption, the difficulty becomes enormous. For theological exposition itself is ordered, sequential discourse, but the gifts of grace whereby grace is apprehended, acknowledged, and allowed to focus sensibility and excite reflection -- these are not ordered or sequential. The life-liveliness of a thing-becoming is not the same as the static status of a thing-become. And a way must be found to reenact in the style of the report the wild unsystematic of the occurrence.⁹⁶

Knowledge, Sittler has written, liberates. But knowledge also complicates. As knowledge of the world increases and becomes more complex, so does knowledge of the self seem to fragment and shatter and become the more complicated. Thus he writes in the Beecher lectures that "the self exists within an ecological matrix; and the address to, the description of, and the evangelical promises to the Christian self are embedded in that ecological web which is the faith of the Christian church."⁹⁷ With so vast a frame of reference he protests the extent to which interiority interferes with the objective declarations and affirmations of the historic faith.

It is not enough to talk about the human creature in terms of history, philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences. Sittler acknowledges that the "force and importance of the convulsive and disclosive historical events of this century are not to be discounted" as dynamic forces contributing to that

⁹⁶Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁹⁷The Ecology of Faith, p. 13.

"fractured sense of self" so characteristic of the contemporary man and woman.⁹⁸ But to see the human creature as a historical and social creature only is insufficient for understanding the totality of human identity:

Social psychology is a true descriptive discipline. But not true enough. I am what I am not only as one with, among, and in self-forming transactions with [other human beings]; I am who and what I am in relation to the web, structure, process, and placenta of nature.⁹⁹

The "communion" by which human identity is established is a communion which includes other human beings and the world of nature as well. It is through beholding the world of nature that the human being comes to see and understand the human self more precisely. In the poem so frequently cited by Sittler, Richard Wilbur gives exquisite expression to the theological and anthropological affirmation that one understands one's self as one recognizes one's place in relationship to a community of others:

.... What should we be without
The dolphin's arc, the dove's return,

These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken?
Ask us, prophet, how shall we call
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all
Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
Horse of our courage, in which beheld

⁹⁸We saw in Chapter three how Sittler already identifies this fragmentation in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and the painting of Picasso. Cf. *supra*, p. 308, n. 71; p. 240; The Anguish of Preaching, p. 60.

⁹⁹"The Scope of Christological Reflection," p. 333.

The singing locust of the soul unshelled,
And all we mean or wish to mean.¹⁰⁰

Sittler observes that the "burning core" of Luther's "unsystematic" theology is faith. Likewise, the "burning core" of the asystematic matrix of creaturely existence within the human being discovers the human self is also faith: that is, a relationship of trust in God who is "creator of heaven and earth, and of all things, seen and unseen" (The Nicene Creed). The self is constituted in a self-contradictory, cruciform, and multiplex matrix that includes relationship to the deepest processes of the very earth itself. But its very complexity shapes, refracts, and finally reconstitutes our identity as individual human beings in community. The core of one's identity is faith engendered by God's self-revelation in the incandescence of grace in Jesus Christ.

The Neighbour as the Mask of God

In Luther's theology, Christ is the mask of God, by which God's self remains hidden in the process of self-revelation. The Word as scripture and proclamation and the bread and wine of the Eucharist meal are also masks through which the hidden God reveals God's self. A third mask through which God's self is revealed is, according to Luther, the neighbour. Luther, like Bonhoeffer, sees "Christ in one's neighbour," and he also insists

¹⁰⁰Wilbur, loc. cit.; cited by Sittler in "Spirituality and Discipline," p. 127; "Called to Unity," p. 187; Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 111; The Care of the Earth, pp. 89ff. Cf. supra, p. 213, n. 92.

that one must be "Christ to one's neighbour." Although Gerard Manley Hopkins has different sources than Luther, he echoes Luther in the sonnet in which he proclaims that

... Christ plays in ten thousand places
Lovely in limb and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of [human] faces.

According to Hopkins, however, it is not only the human creature through which a masked God may be revealed. In this sonnet, it is also the kingfisher, the dragonfly, the rock tossed into the well, the tolling bell. Likewise, in another sonnet, the Kestrel, swooping down upon its prey, is reminiscent of Christ: for it is christic in its "selving," in doing what it is intended to do.¹⁰¹ Hopkins' painstakingly studied world is a world of wonder. In "beholding" the wonder and terror of all of it one may encounter the presence of God.

Luther, too, beholds the world with a sense of wonder. He marvels, for instance, at the mystery of an egg, which, he says, should we never have seen one before we would have thought it brought to us from Shangri-La.¹⁰² But we fail to see the wonder of it because it is too familiar to us. At the same time, Luther complains of a lack of a sense of mystery in Erasmus, who looks at the things of nature "as a cow looks at a freshly painted fence."

¹⁰¹Cf. *supra*, pp. 232-234.

¹⁰²Luther's Works, American Edition, Vol. 54 (Table Talks),
p. 200.

This may seem to be a strange and almost too easy simplification of what in earlier paragraphs has come to be seen as a detailed description of the world in its nearly incomprehensible complexity. By way of summary, however, three affirmations may be drawn from Sittler's thought that afford distinctive nuances to the apparent simplicity of the language of "beholding" and "mystery." First: according to thought informed by deep scientific inquiry and by awareness of systems of human community, one's being is inherently relational. Being is a matter of being-in-relationship. Secondly: scientific inquiry has given a sense of the interwoven complexity of all with which the human creature is in relationship. Because the discovery of self-identity comes from the encounter with that with which one is in relationship, self-understanding and ethical inquiry are both made profoundly complex. But thirdly: Sittler affirms that that with which we are in relationship contains, in the language of Hopkins, a "christic inscape." When one "beholds" that with which one might be in relationship, that which is beheld alters, or "instresses" the "beholder" according to that "christic inscape." Then the multiplex becomes simple once again. The "christic inscape" consists of the curious interweave of the parabolic form of grace moving downward and upward again, incorporating in the movement the cruciform shape of human existence. Because what is beheld, whether person, bird, or mountain, is a mask of God, that which is beheld is a vehicle by which God's grace is mediated to the beholder. Just as Christ

points beyond himself to the One who sent him, the neighbour as mask of God also engenders faith. That is not to say that the neighbour is the object of faith. But the neighbour invites the beholder to live together in a relationship that is grounded in faith in the Creator who is masked behind the neighbour. There is an absolute dimension to this relationship: but the absolute relationship of faith is not with the creaturely neighbour but to the Absolute who is the Creator of all that by which the Creator is known.

Faith is the content of the human creature's response to the love and grace of God "incandescent" in the man Jesus.¹⁰² Chapters Two and Three sought to clarify Sittler's vision of the scope of that grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ, and the means by which that grace continues to be mediated to humankind (but not only to humankind). The Word of Scripture, the "visible words" of the tangible, material bread and wine of the Eucharist, and the world as the object of God's creating and redeeming, are all "means of grace" for Sittler because of the nuance that he gives to his understanding of nature and grace. Nature is not grace: but nature is, in Sittler's words, the field of grace, and it is through nature that grace is communicated to the human creature.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰²The Structure of Christian Ethics, pp. 45, 46.

¹⁰⁴So also Luther: "Grace does not entirely change nature but uses nature as it finds it. So if somebody is kind when converted through faith, he becomes a gentle preacher like Master Hausmann. If he is by nature irascible and severe, like Cordatus, he preaches after this fashion. On the other hand, if

In The Structure of Christian Ethics, Sittler asserts that Christian ethics is theological ethics.¹⁰⁵ Morality and ethical activity are grounded organically in the faith relationship of the Christian person to God. One lives in relationship with one's neighbour according to the primacy of one's faith-relationship with God. When Sittler writes that "faith" is not a dimension of relationship between human beings or between a human being and any other creature,¹⁰⁶ he follows the Lutheran Confessions exactly. Faith is a relationship of ultimacy between the human creature and the One who is Ultimate:

Faith is a term with which to designate that comprehensive or total trust of myself with all the

he is fitted by nature with some slyness, intelligence, and power of reason, like Philip [Melanchthon], he uses these qualities for the benefit of mankind." Luther's Works American Edition, Vol. 54 (Table Talks), p. 24.

¹⁰⁵Cf. also George Wolfgang Forell, Faith Active in Love, p. 77. Here Forell articulates Luther's distinction between philosophical ethics and theological ethics: "Luther complained that philosophical ethics spoke always of our natural light, our reason, our free will, our natural powers. Against such an emphasis upon human abilities, a theological ethics had to stress the all-importance of faith for Christian conduct, Luther said: "The first and highest, the most precious of all good works is faith in Christ" This was to be contrasted with Aristotle, following whom "scholasticism had emphasized the natural abilities of man to live the virtuous life." Faith Active in Love, p. 75.

¹⁰⁶Martin Luther's explanation to the first commandment in the "Large Catechism" identifies anything in which one places one's trust as one's god. To place one's trust in money, for example, or in another person, is idolatry. Cf. Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche, pp. 560ff.

need of the self, in the self's Giver, no less than God himself. To trust God -- this is faith.¹⁰⁷

Faith so understood, placed elsewhere -- in the neighbour, for instance -- is, he writes, "both idolatrous and cruel: idolatrous because no man can bear the weight of this absolute trust or be expected to; and cruel, because every man knows this."¹⁰⁸

Faith, writes Sittler, is active in love.¹⁰⁹ The phrase, "Faith active in love," is not original with Sittler. For his appropriation of the term he has drawn upon George Forell's exposition of the social teachings of Martin Luther.¹¹⁰ Relying on Forell, Sittler argues that Christian ethics are christological ethics. Sittler, however, supplements Forell's exposition of Luther by emphasizing that ethical demand is always made of specific individuals, and the arena for ethical decision is always a specific time and place. "Ethicality," he writes in his presentation to the World Council of Churches at New Delhi, is "that actualization in the decisions of the common life of those commands, calls, gifts of God which are affirmed and celebrated in theology and worship."¹¹¹ By christological

¹⁰⁷"The Faith Situation" (Motive Vol. 26, No. 5, Feb. 1966), p. 40.

¹⁰⁸"Precision and Culture" (Motive Vol. 16, No. 2, Nov. 1955), p. 3.

¹⁰⁹The Structure of Christian Ethics, p. 60.

¹¹⁰Ibid. Cf. Forell, Faith Active in Love.

¹¹¹"Called to Unity," p. 185.

ethics Sittler means that ethics are not correlates of "propositions about Christ."¹¹² Nor are christological ethics the expression of love as obedience to a moral principle taught by Christ.¹¹³ Rather, Christological ethics are "faithful re-enactments" of the life of Christ.¹¹⁴ Christ is the love of God come to a particular place in a particular time. Faith is the human response to this love. One lives in relationship to the love of God incarnate in Jesus Christ "by faith." Faith is lived out in the world as the enactment of love in particular places, among specific creatures, in concrete circumstances, just as, in the life of Christ, the love of God was active in the world in a particular place (Palestine), among specific creatures (the men and women, the lillies and fig trees of that place), and in a concrete set of historical circumstances (the Roman occupation). Human love, too, is enacted within a matrix of particularities, and this active love is engendered by faith in the God who is revealed in Jesus. Therefore ethics, for Sittler, is organically connected to Christology.¹¹⁵

¹¹²The Structure of Christian Ethics, p. 48.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, p. 43. On this point Sittler is pointedly criticizing both Harnack and Reinhold Niebuhr, for whom, he says, ethics is "The absolutism and perfectionism of Jesus' love ethic."

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 47.

There is in Sittler's christological ethics a pattern that reflects the pattern of divine initiative and human response.¹¹⁶ The God of creation is love, and God's love is made known to the creature in the acts of creation and incarnation. God's love engenders the response of faith as absolute trust. The faith relationship between the divine creator and the human creature is lived out in the world as the enactment of love of one creature for another. But the world in which we live is increasingly complex and ambiguous. Therefore decisions made in love must always be entrusted in faith to the creator. In the "a-systematic eco-logic" of Sittler's "christological ethics," God's love engenders faith, and the enactment of love in the world requires faith. It is the faith relationship that keeps ethical action from being merely a pious *imitatio Christi*.¹¹⁷ Rather, as Bengt Hoffman has put it, it is the experience of an organic relationship with the God of life that is "the root of ethical activity."¹¹⁸

The love for the world that is the enactment of faith in particular historical circumstance is not sentimental affect. Love is not always experienced as a "warm affection" for the

¹¹⁶James Gustafson identifies "Jesus Christ, the Pattern" as one approach to Christian ethics. Cf. Gustafson, Christ and the Moral Life (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 171-176.

¹¹⁷Gustafson, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

¹¹⁸Cf. *supra*, p. 318.

things and the people we find close to us.¹¹⁹ The love engendered by faith is enacted as a willed exercise of obedience that may demand a seemingly arbitrary decision with ambiguous consequences.

The nature of "Christic responsibility" is love. The relationship of the human being to the earth is not to be one of faith, any more than the relationship of one human being to another may be characterized by the ultimacy of faith. The earth and the human creature are interdependent, but the human creature, theologically speaking, is not ultimately dependent upon the earth. The interdependent nature of the earth and the human creature is not even analogous to the relationship of parent and child that has become increasingly popularized. Sittler asserts, in "Theology for Earth," that the earth is not our mother. That claim is pure paganism.¹²⁰ But the earth is our sister, fragile and fecund, demanding our care.¹²¹ Faith in the One who is creator and sustainer, however, engenders love for the other who is also creature.

4. Grace and Order: "To Guard and Guild What's Common"

For Sittler, Christian ethics are theological, or, better, christological ethics. They are informed by natural law and the

¹¹⁹"Love Is not Enough," videotaped lecture. St. Paul: Seraphim Communications, n.d.

¹²⁰"Theology for Earth," p. 370.

¹²¹"Called to Unity," p. 187.

semitic code; but they are christological in that they are the reenactment of Christ's own ethical activity, and determined in the freedom of faith in the God of creation. In Sittler's idiosyncratic way, they are described in terms of shape and form and style. Grounded in the principle of the incarnation, they are appropriate to the particular context of time, place, and person. Informed by an expanded understanding of grace, they invite the Christian to behold the "other" as neighbour, and to see revealed in the neighbour, the presence of God. It is now possible to phrase Sittler's theological stance "dialectically" and to demonstrate how it functions ethically.

Righteousness and the Care of the Earth

Sittler asserted that the earth is "our sister," fragile and fecund. The earth and the human being share the same Creator. For this reason it is the task of the human creature to care for the earth. But there is a second reason to care for the earth: it is through the stuff of the earth that we encounter the christic presence of the Creator. Sittler's theology suggests several distinctions that are useful for discerning the proper care of the earth in a complex situation.

1. To Use and To Enjoy. Sittler recalls the Augustinian-Thomistic distinction between "use" and "enjoyment." That is, that it is in the nature of human sinfulness that the human being uses what is to be enjoyed and enjoys what is to be used. Abuse,

writes Sittler, is graceless use.¹²² In a universe in which being and identity are determined by relationship, abuse is indicative of a relationship that is "out of joint". The corrective for abuse is justification. Theologically, "justification" is the restoration of relationship between the human being and God. In the penultimate relationship between creatures, justification is the restoration of "right use" by human creatures of extra-human creation. This relationship is restored by Christ, the "incandescence" of grace. Therefore abuse as "graceless use" is not only expensive, destructive, and aesthetically offensive; it is, in Sittler's judgment, Christianly blasphemous.¹²³ Right use, on the other hand, is response to the steadfast love of God which is prior to all relationship. One dimension of the "right use" of the stuff of the earth is enjoyment. For example, wine rightly used "gladdens the heart" and facilitates community. Wrongly used, however, wine is destructive of both human community and personal identity.¹²⁴

2. To Behold and to Trust. Sittler emphasizes repeatedly that a person must learn to behold the world in which one lives. To behold another creature is to stand before it, to observe, and

¹²² At this point one harkens back to Al Gore's complaint that the earth, like all creatures of lesser power, is vulnerable to abuse.

¹²³ "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," p. 179.

¹²⁴ The Care of the Earth, p. 95.

allow one's self to be changed by it. On one level, Sittler's frequent use of the word, "behold," is an indication of the significance he gives to precise use of language:

With our minds we look at things, but in the spirit of our minds we behold things. The difference here is not only linguistic. To look at a thing is what the psychologists call an act of perception. To behold a thing means to regard it in its particularity -- its infinite preciousness, irreplacability, and beauty.¹²⁵

On a deeper level, the language of "beholding" moves the beholder toward that experience of faith known as trust. The attitude with which one approaches nature in order to "behold" is one of "Gelassenheit." Here Sittler follows Nathan Scott's discussion of Heidegger's critique of "rechnendes Denken." The creatures of the world, both human and extra-human, are not to be seen as objects to manipulate, but recognized as "other," each with its own subjectivity, and with whom the beholder dwells. It is from the ability to let the other be, without intent of objectification and control, that one begins to discover one's own "self as the aware center of grateful participation."¹²⁶ Sittler, instructed on this point by Nathan Scott's use of Martin Heidegger, offers this counsel as a critique of our "advanced technological culture" which, in its attempt to objectify and control the world, reduces even the human subject to a quantifiable and manipulable datum. Such a reduction denies the

¹²⁵Gravity and Grace, p. 16. Cf. *supra*, pp. 232-237, 262, 321.

¹²⁶"Dogma and Doxa," p. 15; cf. *supra*, p. 321.

human creature the full scope of human identity by "flattening out" the multidimensional nature of the individual in relationship with many other subjects. By contrast,

it is only when we consent to approach it in the spirit of what Heidegger calls *Gelassenheit* (that is, surrender, abandonment, acquiescence) -- it is only then that the voice of Being begins to be heard.¹²⁷

The experience of *Gelassenheit* which is fundamental to the ability to "behold" the neighbour is, in Luther's thought, an expression of trust in the Creator. To encounter the creation with *Gelassenheit* is to live out of the trust which is mandated in the first commandment. It is out of the position of trust in the Creator that each creature is able to recognize the other and to hear the "call of being" from the other to the depths of one's own self.¹²⁸

The exploitation of the creation is an expression of human failure to trust the Creator. But, Sittler writes, when the Psalmist says, "The eyes of all wait upon thee and thou givest them their meat in due season," the biblical witness indicates "a holy naturalism, a matrix of grace in which all things derive significance from their origin, and all things find fulfillment in praise."^{129, 130}

¹²⁷Nathan Scott, The Wild Prayer of Longing, p. 67; cited in "Dogma and Doxa," p. 17.

¹²⁸Cf. *supra*, pp. 200-202.

¹²⁹"Theology for Earth," p. 372.

As pointed out in Chapter Three, the concept of *Gelassenheit* in Luther comes from the mystical side of Luther's thought.¹²¹ This concept too, along with the concept of the *coincidentia oppositorum* that Tillich specifically identifies with Cusa, was developed through such German romantic poets as Hölderlin, who is in turn a source for Heidegger; and Heidegger's use of the idea of *Gelassenheit* is transmitted to Sittler through Nathan Scott. *Gelassenheit*, we have learned, is total self-abandonment in trust before that which is beheld:¹²² it is part of the experience through which the beholder recognizes that what is beheld points beyond itself to the One who is the Source of Being. In this way, too, one recognizes Christ in one's neighbour, whoever the neighbour might be: for the Christic model serves as a reminder of Christ's absolute self-abandonment in obedience to the Absolute whom he called "Abba, Father."¹²³

¹²⁰Here, too, Sittler is reminiscent of Luther as Luther speaks of the faith of his dog, Tölpel. The dog sat watching every morsel of food that went from the master's plate to the master's mouth, trusting that he, too, would get his due. Luther said, "Ah, see with what faith he watches me. If only I should have such faith as Tölpel." (That Luther fully expected to meet his faithful dog in heaven suggests that Luther, too, saw redemption in broader terms than the salvation of the individual.) Cf. Bainton, Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971), p. 33.

¹²¹Cf. *supra*, pp. 200-202.

¹²²*Supra*, p. 201.

¹²³The themes identified as "trust as *Gelassenheit*" and "use and abuse" have developed a wide currency in popular culture through literature and programs concerned with "addictive" use of substances and patterns of behaviour. In Earth in the Balance, Al Gore has drawn on the work of psychotherapist Anne Wilson Schaef to describe the abuse of the earth and the resources of

3. Recognition and Righteousness. The essence of justification is the reestablishment of righteousness, the right relationship between God and the human creature. According to Sittler, the Hebrew word *Tsedeq* means also that the human creature is living in right relationship with the extra-human creature.

Sittler illustrates the doctrine of justification by telling a story of driving a car from Jerusalem to a neighbouring town. The car begins to malfunction; Sittler recognizes that the problem is with the distributor. The Jewish mechanic who repairs the distributor pronounces the properly functioning distributor, "*Tsedeq*." A distributor is "righteous" when it functions as it was designed to function.

To be is to be in relationship. To be justified is to be in right relationship, not only with God, but with all that is. Just as the words of institution at Eucharist, "for you, for forgiveness" declare a new relationship both between the grateful and believing communicant and the species of bread and wine, and through them a new relationship between God and the human creature, the conversion of the human creature toward God includes a new relationship between the human and the extra-human

the earth in order to support an overly consumptive life style as a matter of "addiction." There is a great deal of truth in this literature, with its analysis of the problem as systemic. It is an analysis that finds support in Sittler's thought too, particularly in his own description of creaturely existence as a "web" and his concern that there is enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed: "there will never be enough both for love and lust." ("Theology for Earth," p.373.)

creature. The two are justified when their relationship is such that one beholds the other with wonder, joy, respect and recognition.

4. Justice and Justification. To speak of justification in such a way, however, is a problem for the classical Lutheran distinction of law and gospel, however. In classical Lutheran theology, the two are distinct: *lex semper accusat*; but the gospel is the good news that relieves the repentant sinner from the accusation of the law. According to Gerhard Forde, this is the "functional," rather than the "material" sense of the law. The law is demand, and the demand can never be met.¹²⁴

According to Sittler, however, this is not the only reading of the use of the law either in St. Paul or in the Psalms. Sittler observes that the Hebrew Psalms, for example, speak favourably of the law: the Psalmist says, "Oh, how I love your command." This is the essence of Paul Tillich's observation that

The law is not fulfilled until it is fulfilled joyfully. The law is not foreign to our being. The law is being itself, expressed as command. And the fulfilment of one's being is joy.¹²⁵

This interpretation of the law is in concert with Luther's own teaching. Luther began his theological career as a commentator on the Psalms, and his theology was developed first in the course of his exegesis of the Psalms. In these lectures he asserts that the law must be fulfilled *hilaritas and plena voluntatis*.

¹²⁴Forde in Braaten and Jenson, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II, p. 400.

¹²⁵Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol. II, p. 80.

This is not to say that one may justify one's self before God by any kind of religious attitude or ethical behaviour. Forde is right when he writes that "Justification is always God's doing."¹²⁶ But Sittler's accent is that justification is a matter of a right relationship with God initiated and established by God in the creation, and in the incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The grace of God offered in the act of creation and in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus "engenders" (Sittler's phrase) the faith relationship by which the individual is justified. But for Sittler, justification and the life of faith are never simply an individual matter. Justification is lived out in community, for it is in community that one has one's being. *Gelassenheit* is the experience of "being" passively before God and the creaturely neighbour. The life of faith includes the acknowledgement that one is, one's self, creature. But the righteousness of God conferred upon the believer is lived out actively in the doing of justice, the enactment of God's love for the world in the world.

Justice is the ethical consequence of justification in a theological framework that presupposes an "ontology of communion". In the "ontology of communion" described by Haroutunian, one's being and one's self-understanding are matters of relationship. A shift in the relationship is an ontological shift. The claim of the resurrection demands recognition that there is now something new afoot in the world, despite all

¹²⁶Forde, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

evidence to the contrary.¹²⁷ Sittler argues constantly that "reality for me now" includes awareness of the self not only in history but in nature. The conversion engendered by the grace of God is a conversion of the self toward God. Conversion is a matter of faith, made possible by the grace of God offered through the resurrected Christ. But in order that Christ may rule the creation through the lives, the speaking, and the acting of converted women and men, conversion is also a reorientation of the self in relationship to God and neighbour. Thus conversion is a reorientation of the self in relationship to the earth, too, and all that dwells therein, recognizing that all creatures of the earth are neighbours, that God is the Creator of all, and that through Christ God wills to be and is the ruler of all. The cosmic extension of the rule of Christ -- all things are under Christ's dominion -- happens as individuals are converted, not only away from self and not only toward God, but also toward the neighbour, including the extra-human neighbour. To behold, to see the glory of God, behind the "masks of God" is to see God's glory in all things. William James, for example, reports an account of a nineteenth century farmer converted during a rural revival meeting

¹²⁷Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggeman, posits such a position, in light not only of the resurrection, but also of the Exodus, when he writes that in the Passover, as in the crucifixion of Jesus, "there is something going on in the darkness that not even the Prince of Darkness knows about." The Prophetic Imagination (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 23.

who testified to the sudden perception of glory in his hogs: "When I came to myself ... ah how I was changed, and everything became new. My horses and hogs and even everybody seemed changed."¹³⁸

5. Nature and Grace. In a sermon devoted to Mary, the mother of Jesus, Sittler observes that Christianity is the most materialistic of religions, that it affirms that nature is real, that nature is not evil or the realm of the demonic, and that Christianity recognizes that nature can be "the field of Grace."¹³⁹ He suggests that Mary is a symbol of the relationship between nature and grace, for to say that Jesus Christ is natus ex Maria is to say that God's grace and love and power are available in natural action, a real place, a human being, and yet that God's love and power and grace are not contained, limited to, and exhausted by natural and historical processes. Nonetheless, it is by so natural and historical a process as a woman giving birth to a child that grace moves anew in and into the world.

In Essays on Nature and Grace, Sittler claims that his insight to the continuity of nature and grace is sympathetic with that of Karl Rahner.¹⁴⁰ Ethicist James Gustafson articulates this sympathy in his discussion of growing rapprochement between

¹³⁸James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 245, cited in Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, p. 390f.

¹³⁹The Care of the Earth, p. 63.

¹⁴⁰Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 133, n. 4.

Protestant and Roman Catholic ethics.¹⁴¹ Gustafson recognizes that Sittler has moved from an understanding of "law and gospel" or "creation and redemption" as mutually exclusive, to speaking, as Rahner does, of the "universal presence of grace in all of creation."¹⁴² For both Sittler and Rahner, "nature is within grace." Redemption is not only the forgiveness of penitent sinners but redemption is actually "penetrating all of the world." Gustafson observes that this theological position affects the "practical matters of human action and values," for it affirms "possibilities for responsible human participation in the moral and redeeming work of God in the world."¹⁴³

In his "Campus Ministry Lectures," Sittler protests the tendency of Protestant Christianity to emphasize that one comes to worship "mindful of all those things of which we are ashamed," and so to use worship as a sort of "dry-cleaning operation" against the results of sin and failure.¹⁴⁴ Sittler suggests that attention to "those things of which we are ashamed" be matched against "those things in which we are delighted." Life, he writes, "is a theatre of grace." That one is justified by grace means that one's righteousness before God is passive. Nonetheless, by faith to live in the world is to be able in love

¹⁴¹James Gustafson, Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

¹⁴²Gustafson, op. cit., p. 121.

¹⁴³Ibid.

¹⁴⁴Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook, p. 15.

to act freely, decisively, and responsibly. Thus to see the world of nature as the theatre of God's grace serves to expand the scope of Luther's summary statement concerning the freedom of the Christian:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

... Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved.¹⁴³

The Pathos of Decision

The ethical situation, nonetheless, is at best ambiguous. Sittler uses an episode from Nicholas Monseratt's novel, The Cruel Sea, to illustrate the pathos of ethical ambiguity. The action takes place on a corvette, a small boat that is part of a fleet accompanying ocean liners, to protect them against submarine warfare during the second world war. The corvette has one assignment: to locate and destroy submarines. A submarine has attacked and destroyed a ship of the fleet each night. One day the sonar operator has the submarine on radar; but the submarine is located immediately below a group of about one hundred survivors of the last night's sinking. They see the advance of the Corvette as an indication of rescue. The captain must make a decision: if he strikes the submarine with a depth charge, he will subject the surviving sailors to a quick but

¹⁴³Luther's Works, American Edition, Vol. 31, Career of the Reformer I, p. 344.

nonetheless brutal and excruciating death; if he rescues the survivors floating on the sea, he will leave the submarine loose to sink another ship the following night. The captain, knowing that no solution is a good solution, orders the depth charge. Afterwards the captain stands alone on the deck. The First Officer comes up to him but says nothing. Finally the captain walks away, saying, "One must do what one must do and say one's prayers."

The incident as described is filled with pathos: but even Sittler does not articulate the depth of the pathos. Despite the real carnage wreaked by the decision, there is in the novel no indication that the depth charge hit its target. With this added dimension of uncertainty, not even of consequent justification for one's actions in a complicated ethical situation, Sittler's judgment of the situation nonetheless holds. Sittler follows Kierkegaard's position, that before God all human decisions are flawed, inadequate, and in need of adjustment. All knowledge is partial and no one can do anything with an unqualified sense of certainty. The best that any one does demands repentance and confidence, not in one's own wisdom, but in the grace of God. To live in the ethical situation is always to trust, not in one's self, but in the creative power of God to make something out of the best that one does despite one's best intentions in an impossible situation.

Sittler underscores the point, that "one must do what one must do": for a decision is to be made, and not to decide is

also to decide. And one must do "what one must do," for there are things that one must do, and the consequences of a decision may be inevitably tragic whatever decision is made. Then one must say one's prayers: that is, one must commit the situation in faith to God.

Bengt Hoffman observes that for Luther, as a matter of trust, ethical activity is always commended humbly to God with prayer.¹⁴⁶ In corresponding spirit, Sittler suggests that ethical action in an ambiguous situation be understood within the context of worship. In one of the eucharistic prayers of Lutheran worship, praise is offered to God, "not as we ought but as we are able". Likewise, Sittler suggests that ethical decision at its best be so offered as "a way of acting devoutly but not absolutely, a way of offering a judgment without the conviction of its certain righteousness."¹⁴⁷ Thus he again connects ethics intimately with incarnation and eucharist.¹⁴⁸ As the body of Christ is broken for the redemption of the earth, and as the bread and wine of the eucharist are offered humbly that they may be vehicles for the communication of grace, so ethical action in the most ambiguous situation is offered to God in faith that even here the grace of God may somehow nonetheless be operative. The chalice of the Eucharist is, for Sittler, "a

¹⁴⁶Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 32. Cf. *supra*, pp. 312, 318, 332.

¹⁴⁷Gravity and Grace, p. 90.

¹⁴⁸Cf. Robert Croken's concern for the significance for ecumenical conversation of the relationship of Eucharist and sacrifice (*supra*, p. 186, n. 32, p. 190, p. 205, n. 66).

toast of terrible joy," for in eating and drinking the consecrated bread and wine, the believer "proclaims Christ's death until he comes again."¹⁴² The potential of grace in the ambiguity of ethical decision is suggested also in Sittler's review of a collection of the sermons of the poet and priest, John Donne: "All occasions invite God's mercies."¹⁵⁰

In the tradition of Jerusalem there is a dimension of the word "glory" that Sittler has failed to identify. The Kawod Jahweh is to be found in a cloud, and in deep darkness. The "Holy of Holies" was the heart of the temple: but it was dark and silent and empty.¹⁵¹ Although Sittler does not identify this as a dimension of "glory" as such, he is certainly aware of this as a dimension of Christian experience. He cites Moses as an example of one "who knew more than any other in all Israel what the promised land meant; but he was not permitted to enter." The history of women and men of faith includes many with such an experience. Food can perhaps best be described by those to whom little is given to eat; Kierkegaard was never given the joy of love, but few have written so movingly about love as he. The deprivation of grace in the experience one who longs for grace

¹⁴²The Ecology of Faith, p. 104.

¹⁵⁰"All Occasions Invite God's Mercies," p. 252.

¹⁵¹This theme looms large in Lutheran theology. Cf. the Advent hymn of Johan Klepper: Gott will im Dunkel wohnen/und hat es doch erhellt./Als wollte er belohnen,/so richtet er die Welt./Der sich den Erdkreis baute,/der läßt den Sünder nicht./Wie hier dem Sohn vertraute,/kommt dort aus dem Gericht. Evangelisches KirchenGesangbuch, nr. 14.

may give raise to the most profound articulation of grace: "to want to have may be a strange sort of having."¹²²

The Tragic Sense of Life

Informed by Otto Spengler, Sittler began to sense that there is a "morphology," a shape to God's action that informs the life of the believer. In The Structure of Christian Ethics, Sittler calls this "the shape of the engendering deed." God's deed is cruciform and parabolic; God comes down to earth in the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ, the human particularity who is the "incandescence of God's grace among us." This deed "engenders" a response from the human being who is drawn to this human particularity: and the "content" of this response is faith, the absolute trust of the human creature in One who is Absolute. In faith one turns in love toward one's neighbour. This is consistent with Luther's own ethical teaching. It is Sittler's concern, however, to emphasize that the neighbour is the whole of creation. Out of love for the whole of creation, which Sittler understands to be "one's sister," one acts even in the most ambiguous of situations in faith, trusting that the God who is the object of one's faith will redeem the situation. But that action is nonetheless in-formed by the grace of God, the shape of which is, as noted, parabolic and cruciform.

The downward movement of the grace of God impels the believer, too, irrevocably toward the earth. Then one does not

¹²²The Care of the Earth, p. 87.

merely "see" the neighbour; one "beholds" the neighbour. In beholding the neighbour one realizes that the neighbour reflects back to the beholder something about the beholder's own self. As the poet e.e. cummings claims, "I am through you so I." It is thus that one's being, one's self, is revealed in the course and context of relationships with other creatures. It is thus that the rose, in the words of poet Richard Wilbur, bespeaks our love, and the horse our clean courage.

But the horse goes to pasture and the rose fades. To behold the other is to encounter human finitude. Much of human behaviour in the face of the world of nature is an expression, not of care, but of domination: because the human creature, Sittler writes, refuses to recognize the confines of creatureliness. Sittler's theology for earth, which informs the ethical activity of the human creature in an ambiguous situation, demands this recognition. To be converted to the earth, is to be converted to acknowledgment of human mortality. This observation points Sittler's thought to the eschatological; and in the earth-oriented theology of Joseph Sittler, awareness of the eschatological is also fundamental to the ethical action of people of faith committed to the care of the earth, "our sister."

Chapter V FINITUDE AND THE FULLNESS OF GRACE

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore we are saved by love.

Reinhold Niebuhr¹

Joseph Sittler's theology for earth moves towards a valuation of the creation grounded in awareness that the earth is the Lord's, beloved of God because it is the object of God's creating and redeeming. Sittler follows the incarnational and therefore earth-affirming emphasis in Luther's Christology and eucharistic theology. This affords the Christian a foundation from which to live creatively in an increasingly ambiguous and complex ethical ethos: for the basis of ethical decision is the affirmation of life and a sense of responsibility for the whole of Creation as neighbour, as sister, in whose presence one sees Christ, before whom one "is" Christ. Responsibility for the "other," both human and extra-human, is the response of one created subject to another, for it is in relationship with the other creature that one realizes one's own identity, not only as human, but as creature. Recognition that one is creature, however, implies recognition that one is created and therefore living in a relationship with the Creator. To live as creature in relationship with the Creator is to admit that one is

¹Justice and Mercy, ed. Ursula Niebuhr (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1974), p. v.

dependent for life on the One who is, in the words of John Calvin, "the fountain of life." For the human creature to do so is to acknowledge that to be creature in relationship with the Creator is to be finite in face of the One who is infinite.

A profound dimension of self-understanding as human and as creature, therefore, is the shock of finitude. This is somewhat different than the "shock of non-being" that is foundational for the theology of Paul Tillich, who contemplated the possibility that one might never have been ("Why is there something and not nothing?"). The "shock of finitude" is the realization that there will be a time when one will not be.² The most startling dimension of creaturely existence is the recognition of limits, and the most severe limitation is the reality of death. Sittler appeals to Michael Harrington to support this point:

One important aspect of Utopia is to understand its limits [T]he function of socialism is to raise men from the level of a fate to that of a tragedy ... That is to say, Utopia is not going to solve everything by any means. As a matter of fact I have thought for a long time about Marx's prediction that in a society where men are no longer murdered or starved by nature, but where nature is under man's control, there would be no need of God because God is essentially man's projection of his own fears and hopes -- a curious image. In contrast to that, I wonder whether, at precisely the moment all economic problems disappear, that there could not be a great growth in religion rather than a decline. It is a possibility, because we would have a society in which men would not die from ... idiocies about the economy. They would die from death. And at that point the historical shell around

²Cf. Richard Wilbur, in "Advice to a Prophet": "How should we dream of this place without us?"

the fact of death would be broken. For the first time society would face up to death itself.²

Chapter Four presented Sittler's contention that in the realm of ethical decision-making, the most crucial decisions are always made with insufficient understanding: decisions must be made before all the facts are in. This awareness is also a dimension of the recognition of creaturely finitude. The person of faith makes all decisions with a sense of humility and repentance, recognizing that knowledge is always partial, and no solution is perfect. Thus one's decisions and the consequences of one's decisions are committed always to God, trusting that the grace of God may be transformative in the most ambiguous ethical dilemma.

To place one's trust in God as the source of grace in such a time, however, is not license to be flippant with one's decisions. In the tradition of Jerusalem, the God of creation and redemption is a God of wrath as well as of grace, and a God of judgment as well as of mercy. This God will not readily act in grace and mercy to redeem the actions of the human creature who has forgotten or ignored the ultimacy of the real limitations of creaturely being in relationship with other creatures in their own finitude, or attempted irresponsibly and self-servingly to transcend them.

²Michael Harrington, Cacatopias and Utopias, pp. 20-21. Cited in The Anguish of Preaching, p. 19; Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 100.

To be aware of one's self as creature, as "being-in-re-relationship" with other creaturely being, is to be aware of one's own mortality. This is the truth of the medieval counsel, *Memento mori*. But it is in the nature of human self-understanding to resist this recognition.⁴ For Sittler, however, the fact of human mortality is, finally, a chief factor in the process by which one makes ethical decisions: "Granted that as a creature bound to and fragile in both nature and history I must die, how shall I live?"⁵ Chapter Four presented Sittler's theological ethics within the framework of Christian faith understood as an absolute relationship with the Absolute. Chapter Five will explain how this framework is expanded as faith and ethical action are, in Sittler's thought, understood within the wider scope of Christian eschatology.

1. The Tyranny of Boundlessness and the Fecundity of Darkness

In The Ecology of Faith, Sittler suggests that Christian proclamation in North America at the end of the twentieth century must address three tyrannies: The tyranny of the self, the tyranny of opaque language, and the tyranny of boundlessness.⁶ The "tyranny of the self" is that classic tyranny of self-preoccupation identified by Augustine as "the heart incurvatus in

⁴Ernest Becker has explored this fact of human nature at length brilliantly in The Denial of Death (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

⁵Sittler, "Dogma and Doxa", p. 20.

⁶The Ecology of Faith, pp. 11-26.

se." If to be is to be in relationship, then human identity and human self-understanding are derived, not from introspection and self-exploration, but from encounter with the other who is not only the human other but also the extra-human. The "tyranny of opaque language" is in part the tyranny of mass culture, which, in spite of pretension to individualism, shapes all human self-understanding in its own image. Precision in language is a way by which individual integrity is protected and preserved as individuals seek to live together responsibly in community with one another and capable of response to one another. The tyranny of boundlessness, however, is a singularly American experience that has informed American self-understanding and a correspondent ethical posture, from the beginning of the colonial experience until our own time.

The Tyranny of Boundlessness

In his essay, "Errand into the Wilderness," Perry Miller argues that the first English settlers in New England intended to stay on the "newly discovered" continent only long enough to preserve Puritan religion until such time as it might be restored in England. When it became evident that this was not about to happen, the Puritans found themselves "alone with America."⁷ America, and the westward expanse of the American wilderness, was, according to Sittler, a new datum in human experience.

⁷Perry Miller, Errand into the Wilderness (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 1-15, esp. p. 15.

European history had been characterized by awareness of spacial limitation. Always the human experience had been one of geographical boundedness: "The North Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean, were unrelenting borders. And to the east, the non-European peoples ... constituted an effective barrier."¹³ The American reality, from the colonial period onward, was different. The aboriginal inhabitants posed some threat, but that threat was to be dispatched with relative efficiency. The wilderness, too, was threatening, but it became part of "the American character" to be able to rise to the threat of the wilderness, to overcome it, to tame it, and, in a sense, to transcend it. When a "developed" area became too crowded, there was no need to live with spatial limitation: one could always, in the words of Horace Greeley, "go west."¹⁴ The new waves of westward movement of immigrants from Europe and of earlier settlers now in search of new opportunities produced a kind of "rootlessness" that continues to thrive in that way of living characterized by the entrepreneur encountered in Sittler's description of the ethical situation.

Sittler acknowledges that the "rootlessness" and "mobility" of westward expansion "required courage, decisiveness, resolution, ingenuity, and a huge output of activity ... [and thus] the development of these qualities in the American national

¹³The Ecology of Faith, p. 16.

¹⁴And not only Greeley. So also Henry David Thoreau, who wrote, "Eastward I go only by force; westward I go free."

character."¹⁰ But these qualities were developed at the expense of awareness of another "spirit-educating force" that enters into play when one is forced to recognize that one cannot move on or start anew but "must come to terms with life where it is and is bound to remain."¹¹ These spirit-educating forces include the realities of boundary and limit. The literature of the United States, however, celebrates the infinite nature of westward expansion. American literature is, in Sittler's words, "the clearest confessional of our national self-consciousness, ... permeated through and through with the vastness of the setting of the American enterprise."¹² In the poem, "Starting from Paumonok," for example, Whitman celebrates the "Land of Coal and Iron! Land of Gold! Land of cotton, sugar, rice!", the "Land of those sweet-air'd interminable plateaus!", in which

Expanding and swift, henceforth,
Elements, breeds, adjustments, turbulent, quick and
audacious,
A world primal again, vistas of glory incessant and
branching,
A new race dominating previous ones and grander far, with
new contests,
New politics, new literatures and religions, new inventions
and arts.

There have been other voices. Whitman's elder contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, wrote compellingly of the darker underside of the Puritan heritage in New England. In his novel, Moby Dick, Herman Melville writes of a demonic creature lurking in the

¹⁰The Ecology of Faith, p. 24.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 17.

depths of the sea, and of the obsession of one willing to destroy himself and all his company in his passion to annihilate the whale. Moby Dick is among those novels most appreciated by Sittler, who identifies Melville as the writer

who almost alone among mid-nineteenth century men of letters in America pierced through the general moral optimism of the expansive spirit of the time, revealing in powerful fictional characters the ambiguities, the tensions, and the dark depths of evil and delusion.¹³

But even Melville celebrates the expansion of American democracy as the way by which "the illimitable frontier character of the American experience" would reshape the moral character of humanity. Of all the American writers of the nineteenth century, perhaps only Abraham Lincoln, the single most biblically informed of all American public figures, could recognize and articulate the human limitations that challenge the official expansiveness of American self-understanding.¹⁴

Sittler derives his interpretation of the history of American expansion from the turn-of-the-century historian, Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner's thesis is that the frontier is the most prominent motif of American imperial development, as "a symbol of the illimitable."¹⁵ Sittler, the theologian, acknowledges that Turner's thesis has been both demonstrated and disproved many times. For instance, in a study of the novels of

¹³Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴"A Sense of Limit," p. 54f.

¹⁵"Space and Time in American Religious Experience" (Interpretation, Vol. 30, Jan. 1976), p.44.

the Norwegian-American, Ole Rolvaag, and the journals of the Scots immigrant environmentalist, John Muir, literary critic Harold Simonson argues that

to consider representative immigrant writers highlights other persons, largely neglected, who brought to America strong ideas that did not fit into what Frederick Jackson Turner said was the country's evolving process of civilization associated with Westering. The problem with Turner's metaphor of process was that it failed to work experientially. It served the historian who, in taking his cue from Hegel and Emerson, saw history as projecting cosmic order. It served the poet, especially the Romantic elegist Walt Whitman, who, in gazing upon the grass of graves, rhapsodized, "O perpetual transfers and promotions." But it failed the Dakota farmer watching grasshoppers destroy his wheat or the mother hearing that her son had been killed at Shiloh. The metaphors of process neglected the exceptional in favour of the general and led to a historical perspective in which the concerns of individuals, including their motives, decisions, and anxieties, were submerged into the myths of garden and frontier.¹⁶

Simonson's criticism of Turner does not compromise Sittler's interpretation of American history, however, but actually supports it. Sittler too, if not critical of Turner's thesis itself, recognizes the same limitation as Simonson: that the myth of the frontier does not take into account the pathos of the particular. Nor does the myth acknowledge that the frontiersman (the gender-specific term may be used advisedly) who celebrated the expanse of geographical space and seemingly limitless natural resources nonetheless knew the limitation of time. The traverse of such vast space could never be accomplished with sufficient

¹⁶Harold P. Simonson, Radical Discontinuities: American Romanticism and Christian Consciousness (Rutherford, Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1983), p. 13f.

speed. As railroads and river traffic developed across the growing country, speed was valued over safety.¹⁷

Another casualty of the tension between the illimitability of American space and the shortage of American time has been compassion. Sittler cites an entry from the journal of Francis Parkman, who attempted the Oregon Trail in 1846. Parkman describes shooting an antelope for food and then reflects,

When I stood by his side, the antelope turned his expiring eye upward. It was like a beautiful woman's dark and bright. "Fortunate that I am in a hurry," thought I; "I might be troubled with remorse, if I had time for it."¹⁸

¹⁷Cf. Daniel Boorstin, The Americans: The Colonial Experience (New York: Vintage Books, 1958).

¹⁸Sittler, "Space and Time in American Religious Experience," p. 48. Compare Parkman's response to that of Sittler's early contemporary in environmental and ecological thought, Aldo Leopold (A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There, with an introduction by Robert Finch. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949; introduction copyright 1987), p. 130:

In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf ...

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes -- something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

Cf. Peter Bakken, Ultimacy and Environmental Ethic in Joseph Sittler and Aldo Leopold. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Chicago, 1991.

"Safety" and "compassion" were immediate casualties of the celebration of limitless American expansion.¹⁹ In spite of the constraints of time relative to the expansiveness of space, eschatological awareness has "not deeply entered into the American national consciousness."²⁰ This has had a profound consequence for the American spirit and the religious and ethical ethos of the American people. The idea of the frontier and its correspondence to the sense of limitlessness continues in American thought and practice. Even though the American "frontier" as a potential place of settlement, development, and civilization has formally been closed since the beginning of the twentieth century, the political program of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, for instance, during whose administration Sittler's Beecher lectures, The Ecology of Faith were presented, was characterized as "the new frontier."

¹⁹Sittler, an American theologian, is rightly critical of the ethos of his own country. It is true that the "frontier" and its sense of "illimitability" is characteristic of the American experience, but not the entire North American experience. The Dominion of Canada has more geographical territory, and as vast a reserve of natural resources; but Canadians have endured a more severe climate and greater periods of darkness. Consequently the Canadian ethos has been characterized not by the frontier, but, in the words of Margaret Atwood, "survival" (cf. Atwood, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature [Toronto: House of Anansi Press, Limited, 1972]). But if the spirit of expansionism was most extreme among the American people who, during the first century of their national experience, were building their trans-continental empire, it was thriving at least as well among such European nations as England, France, Germany, and Belgium, as they built their inter-continental empires across Africa and Asia -- sometimes with a brutality that made the Americans look like sentimental pikers. Cf. Joseph Conrad's novel, The Heart of Darkness.

²⁰The Ecology of Faith, p. 24.

The idea of the limitlessness of the frontier has also been applied to developments in technology, implying that there is no problem that cannot be solved by technological advance.²¹ During the period of American history in which Sittler was most active, the frontier grew to include "outer space" and an American walked on the surface of the moon. Sittler, however, notes sardonically that the technological conquest of "a new frontier" has not eliminated the pressing need of the poor who raid neighbourhood garbage cans in search of enough to eat: "Pathos scrounges in trash cans for food while arrogance rides among the stars."²² A sense of illimitability without regard for eschatological reality is bound to result in an imbalance of the appropriate use and enjoyment of what is given in the creation: "There will never be enough", Sittler writes, "both for love and lust."²³

The Fecundity of Darkness

Paul Scherer is critical of Sittler's application of "eschatology" as a sense of limitations to the American context. Reviewing The Ecology of Faith, Scherer challenges Sittler's interpretation of American culture as suffering from "intoxication of the illimitable." Instead, Scherer identifies

²¹Cf. Sittler's discussion of technology as an evasion of ethical and ecological responsibility, *supra*, p. 274.

²²"Man on the Moon". The Lutheran (n.s., Vol. 7, no. 16, August 20, 1967), p. 17.

²³"Theology for Earth," p. 373. Cf. *supra*, p. 338, n. 130.

the problem as "an unapostolic and spineless defeatism which is as alien to the gospel of Jesus Christ as the grin on the face of the Cheshire cat that stayed behind when the cat was gone!"²⁴ But his criticism is actually a different perspective on the doctrine of eschatology:

the seeming irrelevance of the gospel in our generation stems not so much from its eschatological character as concerned with "limits and boundaries" but from its eschatological character as concerned equally with the presence in this world of the powers of the world to come.²⁵

It was for want of an eschatological perspective that Sittler was most stringently chastened by the early critics of his "cosmic Christology." Gerhard Forde, for example, relies on the exegesis of Roy Harrisville in his assertion that the cosmic rule of the crucified and risen One is eschatological.²⁶

In his discussion of creation and providence, Julian Hartt points out that the final point of consensus concerning the doctrine of creation is the eschatological reference: *Endzeit gleicht Urzeit*.²⁷ In the theological tradition, the reign of God in the world is hidden. Eschatology as a locus of theology has a future thrust, and is characterized by faith and hope, not by sight. In his compendium of the theology of the seventeenth century Lutheran scholastic theologians, Heinrich Schmid puts the

²⁴Paul Scherer, Union Seminary Quarterly Review (Vol. 17, January 1962), p. 199.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶In Braaten and Jenson, Christian Dogmatics Vol. II, p. 93.

²⁷Supra, p. 72.

accent succinctly: "Man attains his final aim, not in this life, but in that which is to come."²⁰ But as future towards which creation tends is not the only way in which biblical eschatology may be interpreted. Jürgen Moltmann, for instance, distinguishes between *futurus* and *adventus*.²¹ *Futurus* is the eschatological sense of movement towards God's reign; *adventus* is the sense of God's future reign moving into and transforming the present. It is this eschatological perspective that understands God's transforming power to be at work in the world *sub specie contrario* and *sub specie crucis*.²² It is an overt expression

²⁰Heinrich Schmid, The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, tr. by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1875), p. 624.

²¹This future thrust has resonance also in the first question of "The Shorter Catechism": "What is the chief end of man?" "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." (The Book of Confessions [Philadelphia: The Office of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1966], p. 7.001) But the thrust of this question and its answer is also teleological: and because the purpose of the human creature is praise, this question and its answer have real significance for how one is to live, not only at the end of time, but in the present as well.

²²Jürgen Moltmann, The Experiment Hope, tr. and ed. by M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 52f.

²³Carl Braaten offers a comparable distinction with his observation of the movement within biblical eschatology of "prophetic" to "apocalyptic" eschatology. Prophetic eschatology looks to the realization of the reign of God on earth; apocalyptic eschatology, a later development, looks forward to the establishment of the reign of God in an age to come. Braaten points out that apocalyptic eschatology was never discontinuous with the historical nature of earlier prophetic eschatology, and that both were critical of the evil dimensions of the present age. In the history of eschatological thought in Christian doctrine, however, various forms of "chiliasm" or "millennialism" have tended to emphasize the destruction of the present age in God's establishment of the future reign to come. Luther himself

of eschatology described in this sense that Paul Scherer misses in Sittler's theology. For Sittler, however, as for Luther, eschatology as concern for the future is not the point.³² In order to recognize God's future as the power of the Creator to break into and transform the created present, the creature must honestly recognize the reality of creaturely limits. It is out of this perspective that Paul Scherer would ask how life in the present is characterized by the inbreaking of God's future. It is thus related to the idea that the infinite breaks into and transforms the finite, or that nature (in Sittler's phrase) is "cracked open" and transformed (not destroyed!) by grace.

discounted every form of millennialistic apocalypticism. (Althaus, Die Theologie Martin Luthers [Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1962], p. 339.) The other extreme, however, has been that of the "realized eschatology" of liberal Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth century, with its emphasis on ethical achievement, the "social gospel" and the establishment of (in Richard Niebuhr's words) the "Kingdom of God in America." (Braaten, "The Kingdom of God and Life Everlasting," in Hodgson and King, Christian Theology, pp. 328-352.) Using Sittler's typology of "nature and grace," the first would be the triumph of grace over nature; the second would be an assertion of the development of nature with little or no recognition of the place of grace in the eschatological process. Sittler, emphasizing that grace is in nature and not destructive of nature, places greater emphasis on the significance of eschatological awareness for the transformation of this world, which, of course, includes the world of nature. It will be demonstrated that he is consistent with Luther in this emphasis, although, as usual, expanding Luther's concern.

³²Hans Schwarz writes, "Eschatology, or the doctrine of the last things, has long been regarded as a dubious enterprise. Martin Luther claimed that as little as a child knows in the mother's womb about this life, so little do we know about life eternal." In Braaten and Jenson, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II, p. 475.

Sittler acknowledges dependence upon two theologians who define eschatology in terms of finitude. According to R. C. Calhoun, "eschatology" is "the doctrine concerned with the limits and boundaries of our living, in time and existence, toward which at every moment of our whole lives tend."²² And Sittler finds that according to Albert Schweitzer, eschatology is "a sense of the boundedness, the pathos and promise of historical life under and within the brackets of the powers of the divine life, however these are manifested and apprehended."²⁴ The eschatological is the presupposition of the world view of the Bible. But presented in this way, eschatology is not so clearly a concern of the second and third articles of the creed as it is a first article concern, for it has to do with defining the relationship of the creation with the Creator. Julian Hartt sounds this note, in contradistinction to the concern for the future and post-historical sense of eschatology, when he writes that "modern theological treatments of creation" emphasize increasingly that creaturely being and divine power and righteousness coexist in an interlocked relationship. To be creature is to be "rooted and grounded in finiteness," and yet to have (in Schleiermacher's language) "a taste for the infinite."²⁵ But in the history of

²²The Ecology of Faith, p. 23. The Citation is from R. Calhoun, "Christ: The Hope of the World," published in the Official Proceedings of the World Council of Churches, Second Assembly (Evanston, Illinois: August 15, 1954).

²⁴"Dogma and Doxa", p. 9.

²⁵Hartt, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

human experience, that "taste for the infinite" has been a matter of religious experience, not the material experience of an infinite abundance of resources. With this in mind Sittler asserts that the "entire experience of the peoples of America has created and nurtured a world view which stands over against the world view of the Bible in sharpest possible opposition."²⁶ Thus the eschatological perspective of Christian faith is the most significant theological resource for criticism of the human abuse of the environment:

The eschatological as the Christian preunderstanding of the nature of things has no equivalent in all the data of the history of religions as such. It can therefore be postulated as a unique component in western culture which it is the duty of a theological criticism to recognize and employ as men seek for truth and reality.²⁷

Disregard for eschatological reality leads, not to freedom, but to that "tyranny of boundlessness" described above, which leaves human creatures to be (in the words of the Irish poet, Derek Mahen) "the prisoners of infinite possibility." As long as one senses that one can always "move on" or find an "easy" or "technological" or (one remembers the rhetoric of the Third Reich!) a "final" solution to a difficult situation, without regard for limits, the human spirit remains tyrannized and imprisoned because it has never "come to terms with life where it is and where it is bound to remain." It is only within the constraints of limits which are recognized ultimately as the

²⁶The Ecology of Faith, p. 23.

²⁷"Dogma and Doxa," p. 12.

realities of sin and death, that one's spirit can become "educated" and permeable to God's word of grace.³⁹

Eschatology as orientation to a future life beyond this life is in fact of little concern to Sittler. In his discussions of death and life beyond death, Sittler remains consistently oriented to the created world of the earth itself. In "Theology for Earth" he observes that

One finds nowhere in the Bible that strange assertion which one hears almost everywhere else -- that God is concerned to save men's souls! How richly, rather, is restoration there presented in terms of men's material involvement in the world of nature.⁴⁰

Sittler insists that Christian theology teaches, not the immortality of the soul, but the resurrection of the body. With that affirmation, however, he refuses, even as an old man in the face of his own death, to speculate about life beyond this life. "Heaven," he writes, "is a metaphor for the fulfillment of life in God."⁴¹ The Christian gospel speaks emphatically of "eternal life in God." Eternal life in God is "life with that which does not die." But the biblical writers avoid any specificity about life after death.⁴² The fact of transiency as the most profound characteristic of creaturely finitude begets for Sittler a sense of pathos.⁴³ The hope of the Christian

³⁹The Ecology of Faith, p. 23.

⁴⁰"Theology for Earth," p. 377.

⁴¹"Gravity and Grace," p. 125.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 122.

tradition is, he writes, "some kind of eternal residency with the Eternal."⁴³ But he (rather wittily) considers it to be a "depressing lack of ambition" to fill that hope with such content as "reenactment, eternal recapitulation, a living with one's adorable selfhood for ever and ever."⁴⁴ Saint Paul claims that "If we live we are the Lord's; if we die we are the Lord's; therefore, living and dying we are the Lord's." Citing Charles Hartshorne, Sittler writes that this means that it is enough to know that "in the mind of God we should never not have been."⁴⁵

In his refusal to speculate on the nature of life beyond death, Sittler is again consistent with Luther. Paul Althaus observes that Luther affirmed life beyond death, but had relatively little to say about it. Luther was content to recognize that there is eternal life where there is forgiveness of sins, or in the words of Sittler, the restoration of a right relationship between creature and Creator.⁴⁶ Luther makes his most profound statements about death and human finitude in his commentary on Psalm 90. There Luther strikes a note that is indeed missing in Sittler: according to Luther, death is punishment for human sin and an experience of the wrath of God,

⁴³"The Last Lecture: A Walk around Truth, Eternal Life, Faith," p. 65.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Althaus, Die Theologie Martin Luthers, p. 339. Cf. the observation made by Hans Schwarz, cited *supra*, p. 354, n. 21.

and therefore death strikes terror in the heart of the faithless.⁴⁷ But because God works always sub specie contrario, even death can become for a person of faith, a "mask of God." Accordingly, Luther writes in his Sermon on the Song of Simeon that death is "only sleep." Althaus identifies another metaphor in Luther's "Sermon on Preparation for Dying." Here, death is only

"die enge Pforte, der schmale Steig zum Leben," entsprechend dem engen Ausgang, durch den das Kind aus dem Mutterleib in diese Welt hineingeboren wird; so ist das Sterben durch Enge und Angst hindurch Geburt in die zukünftige Welt.⁴⁸

Within the context of the fact of finitude, and of death as the most personal expression of the eschatological as creaturely finitude, Sittler raises the question cited above, "knowing that I shall die, how shall I live?"⁴⁹ As background to this question Sittler connects the "tyranny of the boundless" to "the tyranny of mass culture." In his essay, "Dogma and Doxa," Sittler describes mass culture using the categories of "nothingness" and "darkness."⁵⁰ Characteristically, Sittler does not define "the experience of nothingness," but attempts to illustrate it.

⁴⁷Luther's Works, American Edition, Vol. 13, Selected Psalms, Vol. II, p. 124.

⁴⁸Althaus, p. 342.

⁴⁹Supra, p. 348.

⁵⁰Sittler draws these terms from Michael Novak, The Experience of Nothingness (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). Cf. the earlier discussion of Sittler's analysis of mass culture, pp. 268-271.

The "experience of nothingness" in a culture influenced by cinema is nonsequential, fluid, and protean. Consciousness is dispersed as reality is measured by undisciplined "feeling," and unformed action determined affect. Boredom leads to "killing time;" helplessness and a sense of no control over one's destiny are intensified by the perception that those who wield power are vacuous and the experience of the possession of power fails to fill any sense of void.⁼¹ Sittler acknowledges this as a harsh judgment; but "the price exacted by the quest for the best is a steady look at the worst."⁼² When looked at honestly and described accurately, however, the "experience of nothingness" as illustrated translates into recognition of darkness, and darkness offers possibility for the coming of the light: "When darkness drives reflection deep it is a germinating darkness. Remember the fecundity of darkness and the night in the story of divine redemption."⁼³

⁼¹This analysis is more like Paul Scherer's description (cited *supra*, p. 356) of the American spirit, not as an arrogant attempt to transcend bounds, but as "unapostolic and spineless defeatism." For Sittler, this is not an "either-or" analysis. The development of "apostolic spine" and the "education of the spirit" depend upon living with, and sometimes against, the real resistance of a real boundary. To make his point, Sittler uses the analogy of a baseball being hit against a brick wall as opposed to a baseball hit into a bale of cotton. The brick wall offers resistance, and the baseball makes a noise and bounces back. The bale of cotton offers no resistance, and the baseball disappears without sound. Cf. The Ecology of Faith, p. 15.

⁼²"Dogma and Doxa," p. 19.

⁼³*Ibid.* Cf. Walter Brueggeman's similar claim, cited *supra*, p. 341, n. 134.

In a mass culture characterized by "nothingness" and "darkness," Sittler suggests that the person informed by eschatology is first of all to live with honesty, aware that in a situation charged by relativity and ambiguity, relativity is nonetheless itself not absolute. Facts, Sittler writes, are not in themselves values; but the fact that relativity is not absolute -- for only God is absolute! -- can inform "a value that controls ethical activity." Secondly, with an eschatologically informed value, one can live with freedom to act. In language reminiscent of his emphasis on "style" he asserts that decisive action turns facts into values. To act decisively is, for Sittler, a creative act; and when its starting place is "the fecundity of darkness," decisive action is a *creatio ex nihilo*:

For there is a sense, sharper and more profound as one matures in the faith, in which he comes to know that the spirit that hovered over chaos, darkness and old ancient might in the creation, operates with equivalent cruciality in the realm and reality of redemption.⁼⁼

Thirdly, one lives with courage. Courage is necessary for honesty lest one avoid the truth. Courage is necessary for freedom, or "one lacks the heart to create." Courage, however, is not simply a mandate. It is, for Sittler, a gift of the spirit who is "the Lord and giver of life."⁼⁼ Citing St. Paul's letter to the Romans, Sittler claims that it is as such a gift that the "spirit bears witness with our spirit" that we are to "be of good courage." Sittler invokes Saint Paul at this

⁼⁼Ibid., p. 21.

⁼⁼Ibid.

point because he understands that in helping to name the darkness, the Spirit does not destroy the darkness, but illuminates the darkness. The darkness may be understood as a dimension of nature; and in this sense, too, grace does not eradicate nature, but irradiates nature.

Sittler interprets this passage from Romans consistently throughout his career. Already in "Theology for Earth," he claims that there is

a sort of negative congruence between the felt antinomies and ambiguities of man's spirit, and the ingressive activity of the Holy Spirit. The people that walk in darkness behold a great light. That light is not squeezed out of darkness by virtue of determination to transform darkness into light by the sheer alchemy of aspiration and felt need. But darkness realized is creative of a receptive theater for the drama of God's salvatory action in Christ; there is a dynamics of damnation, a process of perdition that may be used of the Spirit in such a way as to constitute of it a positive preparation for the Gospel.²⁶

Here, too, Sittler is consistent with Luther. Luther articulates this theme poignantly in a sermon devoted to St. Matthew's account of the encounter between Jesus and a Syro-Phonician woman. The woman had asked that Jesus heal her daughter. Jesus said nothing. She asked again; Jesus said that it was not proper to give dogs bread that belonged to the children of the household. The woman responded by saying that even dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table. Jesus praised the woman for her faith and healed her daughter. In his sermon, Luther says that although Jesus made a point about dogs and

²⁶"Theology for Earth," p. 369f.

children, he did not call the woman a dog. In faith, beyond the experience of negation, she heard the possibility of promise. In his sermon Luther concludes from this that the woman heard, "beneath and beyond the no, God's deep secret yes."⁵⁷

The theological construct behind this interpretation is the claim that God works *sub specie contrario*. This is the operative principle in Luther's theology of the cross as summarized in the Heidelberg Disputation, Theses 20 and 21:

20: He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.⁵⁸

Grace is at work beneath and beyond nature, *Gratia operans sub specie natura*. Luther's *theologia crucis* is the theological foundation of Sittler's claim that "Darkness, eschatologically understood, has a strange, truth-bearing power."⁵⁹

⁵⁷Quoted in Day by Day We Magnify Thee: Daily Meditations from Luther's Writings, compiled and translated by Margarete Steiner and Percy Scott (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg Press, 1950), p. 129. This interpretation of the gospel has the ring of a theological truth learned by Luther through his experience of *Anfechtung* (tentationes, temptations): "I did not learn my theology all at once, but I went where my temptations brought me" (Luther's Works American Edition, Vol. 55, Table Talks, p. 50). Luther's confession may also be heard as a precursor to the aphorism of Haroutunian which Sittler so often cites: "The thoughts of the human mind follow the fortunes of the human body with absolute rigour."

⁵⁸Luther's Works American Edition, Vol. 31, The Career of the Reformer I, p. 40.

⁵⁹"Dogma and Doxa," p. 23. It is movingly instructive to note that, by the time when he wrote these words, Sittler had almost entirely lost his sight.

2. "Negative Capability": Everything "Means"

Awareness of the eschatological as recognition and acknowledgement of creaturely finitude, by which the spirit becomes permeable to the grace of God, is therefore fundamental to Sittler's understanding of the relationship of "nature" and "grace" as the "redemption of all things" becomes a category within "the creation of all things" by the One who is the Creator of all things. "All things," however, is a large and comprehensive category. For Sittler, it is essential precisely in and for that comprehensiveness. This is why he takes seriously that question of the student who asked, "How can anything mean unless everything means?"

Once again, the issue is in part one of theological method. Sittler uses this question in protest against those theologians who contend that there is a distinction between "theological" and "non-theological" factors in systematic theology. For Sittler, "systematic theology" is nearly an impossibility, if by "systematic theology" one intends to spell out an intellectual set of propositions and categories in which everything is neatly ordered, labelled, and dispatched. In "A Theology for Earth" Sittler confesses wryly that what he has

of intellect is so permeated by its involvement with sense, emotion and remembrance -- a feeling for the blend of consonance and dissonance in life, an intuition wholeness, and a sense of humour called forth by vigorous proposals of the particular, that it will be forever beyond my compass to produce a system about anything!⁶⁰

⁶⁰"Theology for Earth," p. 367.

Theology must consider the whole, all the teeming stuff of the world within a closed system of limits and balances, the "intercalated bundle of all that is", as well as the "joyous thud of ideas in collision."⁶¹ Sittler's friend and colleague, Nathan Scott, offers a phrase that might serve as a name for such discipline. He finds in the correspondence of the early English romantic poet, Keats, the phrase, "negative capability:" "Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."⁶² "Negative Capability" is the discipline of attending to and articulating human particularities in wildly unsystematic conflict with each other. It serves to give shape and content to the deeper spiritual experience of people in communities who find this "thud" of conflict sometimes joyful, but often painful.

Sittler's methodological consideration of "all that is" was often criticized by his contemporaries and by early commentators on his thought. More recently, however, his concern finds echo

⁶¹One remembers that one of the definitions of "glory" is the spectacular "mess" of things that exist together but resist coherent categorization.

⁶²Nathan Scott, Negative Capability: Studies in the New Literature and the Religious Situation (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969, p. xii. Cf. Scott, "The House of Intellect in an Age of Carnival: Hermeneutical Reflections" (Journal of the American Academy of Religion Vol 55, No. 1, Spring 1987), p. 3f.

in, for instance, the constructive proposal of Mark Kline Taylor.⁶² Kline Taylor's recent methodological and constructive effort calls contemporary theology to take account of the experience of the marginalized, not only for matters of ethical praxis, after the fashion of much of Latin American liberation theology, but also as the source of theological reflection that is more closely related to the praxis of Christian community in the reconstruction of Christian communities as communities of hope and transformation. Kline Taylor's work is the more interesting when placed beside that of Joseph Sittler, for Kline Taylor also sees literature as part of what Nathan Scott has called, "the fecundating matter of theology." In Kline Taylor's thought, "cultural-political theories of a literary aesthetic" bring otherwise negated and contradictory voices out of the shadows, so that we are compelled to realize that the world as some have experienced it is not the world as all have experienced it. The contradictions, however, may lead to what Kline Taylor calls "cool theorizing" in which

we theorize as within a shadow -- not as a place of evil darkness ... but as a place of coolness, indeed of refreshment. A theory characterized by a hot rhetoric seeks a radiance for the theorists' positions untainted by the problematics they study, and is intoxicated by the drive for clarity that exposes every dynamic to "the light of day." A cooler rhetoric in theorizing works in the shadows, but it can be just as committed to theoretical description and analysis, even to the

⁶²Mark Kline Taylor, Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990).

tracing out of shapes and forces making up the oppressions about which we theorize.⁶⁴

Within the eschatological framework that calls the human creature to awareness of finitude, there are myriad voices, many of which have been suppressed for the sake of louder and, until this time, culturally more predominant voices. Among these voices are those of the earth itself and the extra-human creatures who dwell on the earth. These voices cannot be suppressed forever. Even Jesus said that if the voices of the people were silenced, the very stones themselves would sing his praise. It is in this spirit that Sittler writes,

When Christian orthodoxy refuses to articulate a theology for earth, the clamant hurt of God's ancient creation is not thereby silenced. Earth's voices, recollective of her lost grace and her destined redemption, will speak through one or another form of naturalism.⁶⁵

"Negative Capability" as an understanding of theological method serves to give articulation to those "clamant voices," and to facilitate the "cool theorizing" of which Kline Taylor speaks. It is a good phrase also, for it recognizes that within the confines of the eschatological framework, the matrix of negation that characterizes voices in contradiction begins to serve a grace that breaks into the world of creation as "clamant voices" and other voices engage in conversation, hear one another, attend to one another.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 85.

⁶⁵"Theology for Earth", p. 370.

3. Nature and Grace: The Force of Eschatological Awareness

It was noted in the Introduction to this dissertation that Joseph Sittler claims that his theology for earth is not a theology derived from nature, but "an application of christology to nature: a very different thing."⁶⁶ Christology and Eucharistic Theology derive from recognition of the relationship between the finite and the infinite, between "nature" and "grace." Grace has always been characterized as the good will of God for humankind. In the thought of Joseph Sittler this basic affirmation is simply expanded as the good will of the Creator for the Creation. To speak of recognition of creaturely finitude in face of the infinite and the absolute in order to affirm that fact as a source of value upon which to base ethical decision is simply to remember the First Commandment: I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other God. It is to remember as well Luther's interpretation of that commandment: We are to fear, love and trust God above all things. But to speak of "negative capability" within the framework of eschatological awareness is to remember the complexity of the interrelationship of the totality of voices within that eschatological framework. It is also to remember the ebb and flow of life, and the potential of the demonic to wreak utter destruction within that eschatological framework.

It may be that "the sea" can be recognized as an appropriate metaphor for the relationship, in the thought of Joseph Sittler,

⁶⁶Gravity and Grace, p. 67; *supra*, p. 12.

of nature and grace as this relationship applies to the care of the earth itself as given by God as garden for human use, enjoyment, and protection. The sea figures prominently in the literary sources of Sittler's theology. Joseph Monserrat, in The Cruel Sea, identifies the Atlantic Ocean as the only villain in a novel in which the ships and the men that serve on them are the heroes; the sea is the hiding place of the enemy; the weather on the sea is in constant and unpredictable, now stormy, now deadly calm, now hot, now brutally cold. Herman Melville's great white whale, Moby Dick, in the novel of that name, is the object of Captain Ahab's destructive passion as he sails the surface of the sea, and remains the uncapturable symbol of the fact that, when the human creature arrogates "idolatrous pride in control and mastery," the "malignant and unmastered always swims around in the sea of [human] life."⁶⁷ Joseph Conrad, too, is unrelenting as he describes the sea as a place both of splendour and of unspeakable destructive force.

Yet, it is in response to Rachel Carson's description of the sea that Sittler began, as a self-consciously Christian theologian, seriously to think of nature, not only in classical theological terms but in terms of the world of nature as such. Rachel Carson published The Sea Around Us in 1950.⁶⁸ In this

⁶⁷"The Wood's in Trouble," p. 151.

⁶⁸Rachel Carson, The Sea Around Us, special edition with Introduction by Ann H. Zwinger and Afterword by Jeffrey S. Levinton (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1950, 1979, 1989).

book Carson speaks of the sea both with the acuteness of careful scientific observation and the wonder of a poet growing to appreciate the transforming mystery of that which is the object of observation. She describes the abyssal depth of the sea and the vitality of the creatures of the sea. She writes of the sea as a primeval source of creaturely existence in the later stages of the earth's formation. She describes the sea as it rises and falls with the daily ebb and flow of the tides, and through the course of millennia covers and reveals islands and continents. And she calls the sea a transient boundary, both defining and changing the outline of the land. This statement is a reversal, undoubtedly unconscious, of one of Luther's metaphors for the eschatological understood as a sense of boundedness. Althaus describes the metaphor movingly:

... auch im Sterben erreichen wir das Ende der Welt und den Jüngsten Tag, weil vor Gottes Ewigkeit unsere Zeitabstände nicht mehr gelten, gleichsam wie der Ozean rings um die Insel des zeitlichen Lebens herum. Wo immer wir auf die Grenze dieses Lebens stoßen, ob im Sterben oder heute oder einst, ob am Ende der Welt -- überall bricht der Jüngste Tag an in der großen Gleichzeitigkeit der Ewigkeit. Dieser Gedanke, des überall im Sterben schon nahen, ja gegenwärtigen Jüngsten Tages ist die Einheit, in der die beiden Linien der Erwartung, die wir schon bei Paulus finden, sich nicht ausschließen sondern zusammenlaufen.⁶²

One must be careful neither to romanticize the sea nor to make it too concrete an image for and too close an identification with the Creator. Monserrat and any who have suffered in the face of such natural forces as earthquake or cold would not

⁶²Althaus, *op. cit.*, p. 348

permit the first; Sittler will surely not permit the second. In the Hebrew scriptures it is not the sea which gives life, but the Lord of creation who parts the waters of the sea, that land might arise and life flourish both upon the land and in the sea. Yet to remember that the sea is recognized as the source of animal and vegetable life on the planet earth is to suggest that the sea itself in its wonder and terror is a primeval place of that creative grace which wants life.

In her preface to the 1961 edition of The Sea Around Us, however, Carson laments that the human creature, the source of whose life is the sea, should now be returning barrels of radioactive matter to the sea: the source of life is being done to death by that creature which considers itself to be the most advanced of creatures.⁷⁰ In this circumstance, to think of the sea as an analogy of that eschatological boundlessness which circumscribes creaturely finitude is to give rise to the chilling thought that human recalcitrance might actually succeed in destroying what Calvin called "the fountain of grace." This is why Sittler suggests that pollution is not only "biologically disastrous, aesthetically offensive, equally obviously economically self-destructive, and socially reductive of the quality of human life"; it is "Christianly blasphemous."⁷¹

⁷⁰Carson, *op. cit.* p. xi.

⁷¹"Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," p. 179. Cf. *supra* p. 335.

But in faithfulness to the Christian tradition and to the Lutheran expression of that tradition, Sittler continues to affirm faith as trust in One who creates, and who uses the stuff of creation as the vehicle for the redemption of creation. The means of redemption is recognized most concretely and precisely in Jesus Christ, the "incandescence of God's grace among us," whose grace comes to us still as the spirit of God's grace interpenetrates the bread and the wine of the Eucharist.

For his understanding of the interpenetration and transformation of nature by grace Sittler is dependent upon the thought of Karl Rahner. But Sittler's critics are right when they protest that the interpenetration and transformation of nature by grace does not happen automatically: it depends upon the changed relationship of the believer and the object of the believer's beholding. If one is to understand biblical ontology as an "ontology of communion," one must recognize that the gracious transformation of the particularities of that communion is requisite for ontological transformation. Roman Catholic theologian, Regis Duffy, expresses both pastoral wisdom and ontological truth when he writes that in the consecration of the eucharistic elements "it is not bread and wine that are changed, but we who are changed." The communicants are changed in their relationship to the bread and wine, in their relationship to those who communicate with them, and in their relationship to the world. A profound dimension of that transformation is the believer's ability to recognize, not only Jesus Christ and the

bread and the wine of the Eucharist, but also the human neighbour and the extra-human creature as "mask of God" and therefore means of grace.

There is another dimension to Sittler's thought, however: and that is his clear-sighted recognition of the complex and destructive nature of ethical situation of our period. Consequently he demands that the person of faith act in trust of the God who is the God of life, but make decisions in faith, always at best with only partial knowledge, trusting that the God of life will use our limited best for the sake of life. To say this is not, of course, to let the human creature "off the hook." It is to remember that the Christian confession that God raised Jesus from the dead thereby claims that the source of life is nonetheless at work in the worst and darkest of situations, that, in the words of Walter Brueggeman, "something is 'on the move' in the darkness that the prince of darkness does not even know about."⁷² To speak of grace interpenetrating and transforming nature is to claim that grace is God's love for God's creation; and that the suffering love of God in the crucified Christ is "the unity of life and death to the advantage of life."⁷³ Recognizing the creative power of God in the heart of darkness, Sittler quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins:

⁷²Brueggeman, *op. cit.*, p. 23. Cf. *supra*, p. 342, n. 137; p. 371, n. 52.

⁷³Eberhard Jüngel, cited in Geoffrey Wainwright, Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life. A Systematic Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 210, 273, 456, 480.

I say that we are wound
With mercies 'round and 'round.⁷⁴

As a matter of theological reflection, however, and not just poetic imagery (although the poet would never want to say, just poetic imagery!) the sense of this world as "bounded" by mercy recalls Sittler's concern that people of faith recognize that to be human is to live with limits. Within those limits the whole webbed network of relationships develops and changes: one thing is connected with another. Nothing is autonomous and independent from another thing. The actions of one affect and give identity to the other, and the agent is itself, or himself, or herself, changed. To acknowledge this complex interweave is to recognize

that the seeming tough life of the earth is bound into a delicate system by a million threads of inter-relatedness; that assumptions of inexhaustible resources and energies is a fateful illusion; that finitude is a cosmic fact before it is personal knowledge; that beginning, maturing, ending, or radical transformation is in the structure of things, and not only a phenomenon of sentient life; that a kind of natural "judgment" is built into the natural-actual as well as to the personal-historical. Ecological fact is but the eschatological operating as nature.⁷⁵

Here Sittler gives a theological twist to scientific understanding of nature. Sittler's description suggests a complex interweave of relationships contained within an immense but not infinite sphere. This is nature. But for Sittler, the fact that it is at all is a fact of grace! Beyond this,

⁷⁴Hopkins, "The Blessed Virgin, compared to the Air we Breathe," in Phillips, ed., The Oxford Authors: Gerard Manley Hopkins, p. 158; cited by Sittler, The Anguish of Preaching, p. 59.

⁷⁵"Dogma and Doxa," p. 13; italics mine.

however, nature so described is not static: it is still in the process of becoming something that it is not yet. Understood theologically, nature so described is "transparent" to grace, and grace enters, interpenetrates, and transforms nature. That which nature is becoming is something good, for the agent of transformation is the "fountain of goodness." Nature is not grace; but grace is in nature and transforming nature. The transformation of nature may be likened to the work of such an artist as Brueghel who honours the ordinary and thus makes of the ordinary something both extraordinary and enduring.

To care for the earth is to care for the ordinary. Loving care of the ordinary comes from a change of relationship enabled by the grace of the Creator who takes the initiative in creating and preserving a world of infinite variety, and takes further initiative in moving into the world of human experience in order to transform it. Sittler is consistent with the classical tradition of the *theologia crucis* in his recognition that God works *sub specie contrario*. His theology does not offer "too positive" an appraisal of the world. He acknowledges that the signs of God's presence are not clear to all or at all times. On the other hand, however, he refuses to delay recognition of God's grace until some future time. For Sittler, a theologian who lives in the world, God is close to the world, God's grace creates the world, and God continues to sustain the world through the hands of human beings who have been illuminated by that grace and moved to care for the least of that which God loves.

CONCLUSION: THEOLOGY FOR EARTH

Joseph Sittler has made it his task to address the issue of environmental degradation and ecological disaster with a "theology of earth" that is articulated in the ancient categories of "nature" and "grace," "expanded to the farthest horizons": for this is where the modern human creature lives. Yet, although his horizons are expansive, his real interest is in the myriad and complicated but nonetheless ordinary particular. He is justly criticized for his failure to specify what he means when he uses the terms "nature" and "grace." The criticism is just, because he uses the terms loosely throughout his work. But in his admitted incapacity to articulate theological insights in any kind of rigid and fixed and rigid category, this looseness, in itself, is a part of Sittler's way of doing theology. Thus the refusal to state categories carefully makes a greater statement about the experience of grace in the created world of nature than any precise and rigidly held category possibly could. Nature and grace are not objects but experiences of relationship, and, in Sittler's thought, in the world of human experience, "relationships" can never be categorized and articulated so precisely.

Nonetheless, there are places in which Sittler does attempt a more careful description, if not definition, of what he means by "nature" and "grace." In his taped address, "Components for Ecological Reflection," he draws upon the descriptions of the writer of Psalm 94 to demonstrate "nature." Nature includes more

than history; it includes a place, and the creatures that inhabit the place: human beings, the cattle on the hills, the creatures of the depth of the sea. Instead of following the tendency of theology and philosophy to articulate a new (or improved?) definition for "nature" as a theological or philosophical category, Sittler "expands" the "venerable rubric of nature" by returning to an insight of Hebrew scripture. He finds it "significant that there is no Hebrew word for the notion nature. They simply had no word for what we take for granted -- nature as over against man, aside from God."¹

Likewise, his attempt to define grace is not conceptual but descriptive. In an address presented to the graduating class of the Chicago Lutheran Seminary in 1959, he writes,

By grace is meant all that God does to crack nature open to its God, to restore it to his love and to its intended destiny. This grace, according to the New Testament, is not simply a proposition about grace set over against a proposition about nature. This "grace and truth" came by Jesus Christ." The Act of this coming, and that it came into the theatre of nature, means that it is the will of God that there should be a fusion of nature and grace. In him all nature, including human nature, is transparent to grace, is the invaded field of grace. In him all grace has nature for its field, its fellow, and its material purpose.²

This description of grace is characterized by a lack of precision identified by nearly every commentator as problematic for Sittler's theology. But perhaps it is precisely in this lack of precision that Sittler's genius begins to shine through.

¹"Components for Ecological Reflection," Thesis Theological Cassettes, Vol. 2, No. 7, 1970.

²"Commencement Address," p. 36.

Nature and grace are not collapsed. Grace is not nature, and nature is not grace. But neither are they disjunct one from the other. There is grace in nature and there is an experience of grace that is added to nature. To speak theologically, the grace in nature is the grace of God at work in the making and preserving what is. That there is anything at all is a fact of grace, and the shock of recognition at the "beingness" of "what is" is yet another grace. That the One who creates and preserves should also be at work in the healing and restoration of that in the world which is in need of healing, restoration, redemption -- of salvation! -- is only another dimension of grace: "grace upon grace," as St. John the Evangelist would put it.

This may not make sense to a mind that insists on understanding nature and grace in substantial categories. A shift must be made in the theological imagination comparable to the shift made in the scientific imagination at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sittler himself suggests as much when he describes his own shock at having the presuppositions of his "Newtonian" world view routed by one of his nuclear physicist sons. Sittler had described an atom as "enclosed" in the reactor of a submarine. His son had replied,

"You talk ... as if atoms were a pile of hot marbles that could be dumped in a box! No man ever saw an atom, let alone dumped them into a box. An atom is a term to express a relationship existing between foci of energy."²

²The Anguish of Preaching, p. 48.

From this insight concerning "how things are" Sittler begins to shift his understanding of the realities of faith as well. God, the grace of God, reconciliation, the sacraments, he writes, "are just quite possibly more accurately set forth according to this relational way of speaking about reality and things."⁴ In the Zimmerman lectures presented to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, which was the occasion for these observations, he had not the time, he says, to enlarge upon their significance for theology. But in his Essays on Nature and Grace he appeals to Joseph Haroutunian's doctrine of an "ontology of communion" in order to support his own biblically grounded understanding of creaturely existence, including both the human and the extra-human, both nature and "graced," as constituted by relationships.⁵ In his essay, "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," he makes the point the clearer: "Reality is known only in relations 'Being itself' may be a relation, not an entitive thing."⁶ Admittedly flying in the face of both Augustinian individualism and a post-Enlightenment emphasis on isolated entities, instances, forms and processes, he writes that ecology, communion, and community all point to a common way of thinking about ontology as inherently a matter of "being-in-relationship."

⁴Ibid.

⁵Essays on Nature and Grace, p. 106f.; cf. supra, p. 315.

⁶"Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," p. 174.

With the "ontology of communion" as a fundamental presupposition of creaturely existence, nature and grace are not opposed to each other but complimentary to each other. This is a theology for earth because it recognizes that there is something inherent in earth that invites the wonder and respect -- the beholding and the care -- of the human creature for the earth: not because the human creature is mandated to do so, but because in so beholding and caring, the human creature encounters the voice of being-itself, much as Moses, in beholding the burning bush encountered the One whom Tillich called the "ground of being."

While Sittler is identified as a constructive or "revisionist" theologian, his theology is in fact an old theology. He is rooted in the Reformation's witness to the grace of God, but he insists that God's grace is more than forgiveness of sin: it is the empowerment of freedom in relationship with the One whom Christian faith has called the "Fountain of Life." The Reformation witness is a call to faith: and Sittler is consistent with the Reformation's understanding of faith as a relationship of absolute trust in God who alone is Absolute. It is in faith in this One that the human creature beholds and cares for the other creatures which, in amazing variety, reflect the handiwork of the Creator. It is out of the experience of this relationship of faith that one dares to act decisively on behalf of the all creatures, human and extra-human, recognized theologically as the objects of God's love in creation,

preservation, and redemption. But while Sittler is responsible in his commitment to the Reformation tradition, he is not limited by it. The Reformation accent was on redemption, the grace of God given freely to the sinner in need of forgiveness. Sittler speaks on behalf of the grace of God given in God's act of Creation and Preservation. Sittler is an ecumenical theologian, and both in his "theology for earth" and in his ecumenical perspective he appeals to the Christian tradition at its most ancient and most Catholic. Thus his theology for earth is a resource for ecumenical conversation, both in itself and in pointing to the resources from which Sittler draws as he outlines his theology for earth.

Sittler is also a theologian "of the Spirit." But spirituality for Sittler is not a matter of "a gaseous spirit with no relation to chipmunks and corn and wine and oil."⁷ Spirituality for Sittler is a matter of the focus and primary orientation of one's life, and it is to be developed within the matrix of the concrete relationships within which one finds one's identity and through which one has one's being. It is in this sense that Sittler might be called (in the words of Al Gore) an "environmentalist of the spirit." From this perspective Sittler is able to sense (like Seyyid Nasr) a "spiritual significance to all created life" drawing not upon a "sentimental mysticism," but, following in the train of the Church Fathers, Eckhardt, Tauler, and Böhme, recognizing nature as "transparent" to the

⁷Ibid., p. 178.

holiness of God the Creator.¹² Because of these accents Sittler's theology may be a resource, not only for Christian ecumenism, but also for inter-faith dialogue, and particularly for inter-faith dialogue around ecological issues.

Sittler's theological vision is elegant and expansive. It is unfortunately more often provocative than substantial. Much of my work in the exploration of his thought has been, as it were, to pick up an idea that he has tossed out and to try to run with it. Occasionally a small idea has moved toward something so huge that to develop it to the full extent of its promise would have been to move far beyond the constraints of a dissertation: this has been the case, for instance, with his appreciation of the significance of Orthodox and Patristic theology, and particularly the theology of Irenaeus, for a Christian ecological theology and environmental ethic. Occasionally a shared enthusiasm has expanded into something nearly unmanageable. This has been the case, for instance, in his high estimation of art and culture and particularly literature as a manifestation of and witness to the reality of grace wanted by, in, and transforming the world. Occasionally his ideas have led to awareness of theological positions in tension with, and even in violent contradiction with, one another: this has been the case, for instance, in his position as a theological heir of the Reformation insisting that the Reformation witness to the grace of Christ's redemption must defer in our time of ecological and

¹²Cf. Nasr, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

environmental crisis to a prior witness to the grace of divine presence in the Creation itself.

At this point Sittler's own thought is still confusing and at times appears contradictory because, as we have seen repeatedly, he refuses to see nature and grace as disjunct categories, just as he refuses to see, for example, nature and history as disjunct categories. In New Delhi he acknowledged that "nature and grace are categories necessary to do justice to Christ the Saviour of the world." But he asserts almost in the same breath that if nature and grace are "absolute and contradictory categories they distort and reduce the doctrine of creation."⁹ Comparably, in pointed response to Johannes Baptiste Metz's assertion that "every attempt to reconcile nature and man is utopian in its core and therefore historically dialectical in character,"¹⁰ Sittler writes,

That I am nature as well as history is fact, not only history.

There is for me always something strange and strained in theology's frequent efforts at total historicization. God must have been about something before and during that complex operation, concentration, complexification, and cerebralization which are the stages of my passage from sea water to this podium, and if my career as man should much longer humorlessly forget that and continue my bawdy historical performance as regards creation, I may,

⁹"Called to Unity," p. 180.

¹⁰Johannes Baptiste Metz, "The Future Ex Memoria Passionis" (in Ewart H. Cousins, ed., Hope and the Future of Man [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971]), p. 123.

under judgment, become an early leaver as I was indeed, a late arriver in the creation.¹¹

Sittler acknowledges a distinction between the human creature as nature and the human creature as history. But they are not opposed to each other. And because they are not opposed to each other, redemption is not simply "a historical drama which leaves untouched and has no meaning for and cannot be celebrated in terms of the care of Creation."¹² The whole creation is the object of God's redemption, and not just the arena for salvation history.

Sittler's theology is nonetheless a political theology, not because he avoids the questions of history but because his theology is a *theologia crucis* as was Luther's. Sittler is too acute an observer of culture to be vulnerable to the accusation that he has no sense of human placement in history, and of salvation as God's act in and redemption of history. But Sittler insists that history be grounded in the factic reality of the material stuff and organic processes of the created earth as nature: that is, as "nature" before the word is loaded with the freight of a philosophical or theological construct. In his report of conferences on science and the environment at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and law and the environment at the University of California, Sittler said that they both

¹¹"Response to Johannes Metz" (in Cousins, *op. cit.*), p. 133.

¹²"Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," p. 177.

concluded that neither science nor law could accomplish much unless the American mind were changed in its understanding of its relationship to the environment and the limits to environmental sustainability. To acknowledge this fact is to be "converted" to the earth. But to be "converted" to the earth in this way is to embrace the fact of human mortality. To be human is to be an organic part of ecological processes. To know this is to know that we will die. To admit this is the initial component of Luther's *theologia crucis*: the "theology of the cross," Luther writes, "calls a thing what it is."

Regin Prenter identifies in Luther's theology of the cross a theology of history and of creation. Somewhat in contrast to Wingren, Prenter writes, "Luther sees the creative work of God in close connection with his redemptive work in Jesus Christ the crucified. He knows nothing of the modern division between the theology of the first article and of the second."¹³ Developing his interpretation of the *theologia crucis* in light of Luther's commentary on the Magnificat, Prenter asserts that the *theologia crucis* as a theology of history and creation drives the Christian into the world, to the place of those who not only spiritually, but physically, hunger and thirst.¹⁴ Thus the *theologia crucis* invites, in the words of Matthew Lamb, "solidarity with

¹³Regin Prenter, Luther's Theology of the Cross (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 16.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 17.

victims,"¹⁵ for it serves as a critique of every political and social reality that benefits the oppressor at the expense of the oppressed. The environmental crisis adds the earth itself to the list of the oppressed; but, grounded as it is in the rock and soil of Golgotha, the cross actually asserts humanity's essential solidarity with the earth.

Larry Rasmussen pushes this further when he writes that the Lutheran position that *finitum capax infinitum* asserts not only humanity's solidarity with the earth, but God's solidarity with the earth.¹⁶ Rasmussen cites Augustine and Luther in his claim that it is in the nature of human sinfulness to ignore and to seek to transcend human creatureliness. Lutheran theology, however, teaches that God is hidden in the historical events of incarnation and the crucifixion, and the earthly substances of the humanity of Jesus. Hidden in the humanity of Jesus, God is also hidden in the suffering of all humanity and in the suffering of the earth itself. Thus, because Luther's eucharistic theology, like his Christology, teaches the presence of God hidden "in, with and under" earthly substances, the celebration of the Eucharist has political significance, for the celebration of the Eucharist invites the communicant to be converted to God revealed beneath the bread and the wine, and to be incorporated

¹⁵Matthew L. Lamb, Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

¹⁶Larry Rasmussen, "Returning to Our Senses: A Theology of the Cross as a Theology for Eco-Justice," in Dieter T. Hessel, ed., After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 42.

into the body of Christ. To be converted to God is to have compassion -- in the sense of Mitleid, "suffering with" -- for the earth itself "in its travail" (Romans 8). According to Rasmussen such a conversion is also an experience of affect requiring that human beings acknowledge their own bodies, too, in their very sentiency, suffering, and dying. Sittler has anticipated this observation in its concreteness with his appeal to Joseph Haroutunian, that "the thoughts of the human mind follow the fortunes of the human body with absolute rigour."

The theology of the cross as a theology of incarnation is most clearly a political theology, however, when it recognizes and criticizes every political, economic and technological attempt of the human being corporately and individually to deny humanity by denying mortality. Rasmussen names biotechnology as one instance of the scientific mind's attempt to retain mastery over the human body. Understood theologically, it might be called a "techné gloriae."¹⁷ Regin Prenter counters this when he asserts that it is only when the human creature experiences real hunger and real poverty that the creature learns faith in God who alone is powerful.¹⁸ Just as Rasmussen attends to the political significance of the ecological dimension of the formula, *finitum capax infinitum*, Prenter intends it as a political statement when he writes, "*Omnia bona in cruce et sub cruce abscondita sunt.*" Rasmussen observes that much

¹⁷Rasmussen, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

¹⁸Prenter, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

environmental thought verges on romanticism and a nature mysticism in which nature itself is too closely or completely identified with a divinity. Christian attention to the cross prevents this, but it does give theological weight to the political significance of the claim that in the incarnation and suffering of Jesus, God is hidden *sub specie contrario*. Sittler himself never enlarges upon the political significance of an "ontology of communion," but clearly he points us in this direction when he writes,

Eucharist is not ethics; but if there be no clear relation between sacramental presence and the operational world of things and potentials and persons, the entire matter will be dismissed, not on the ground of untruth, but on the equally effective ground of disinterest.¹⁹

Finally, Thetis Cromie has written of the affinity of Sittler's theology with feminist thought.²⁰ She finds his thought to be a resource for feminist theology, not in spite of his perceived failure to define "nature and grace" precisely, but, in fact, because of it. His concern for relationship emphasizes the need and value of "the Other" for recognition and definition of "the Self." Furthermore, "the Other" is not simply another human being or a member of the opposite sex; "the Other" includes the rose, the horse, the hillside, the sea. It is a feminist concern, she writes, to say that to be human is to be in

¹⁹"Intercommunion and the Cultural Reality," p. 317.

²⁰Thetis Cromie, "Feminism and the Grace-full Thought of Joseph Sittler." The Christian Century Vol. 97, April 9, 1980, p. 406.

organic relationship with other creatures. Sittler's acknowledgement of humankind's "solidarity with the earth" corresponds, she finds, to the feminist repudiation of the patriarchal objectification and domination, not only of women, but of everything not "masculine" and (therefore) not "human." Finally, she finds his lively insistence that "everything means" and his acknowledged inability to fit his theology into the constraints and categories of classical theology, not a liability, but the "clear articulation" of an "organismic theology" offered by a "man with a placental mind."²¹

Joseph Sittler is an intuitive and synthetic theologian who brings together what dogmatic theology has tended to separate. There is nothing for him that is a "non-theological factor." "Everything means." While his theology is not spelled out with substance and rigour, his thought is amazing for its scope and for its attention to particularity. His description of the interweave of things in surprising and trans-formative relationship to each other within the boundaries of the eschatological yield awareness of an "ontology of communion" that is a gift to the community of those who engage in theological reflection. His vision of the significance of Jesus Christ for the care of God's creation is salutary, and we do well to attend to his careful articulation of what he has seen.

²¹Ibid., p. 408.

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