The Diversity of Life and the Trinity

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The earth is a place of glorious, abundant and exuberant life. The wildly different species that inhabit our planet have emerged together over the last 600,000 years. They have a common heritage that goes back much further, to the origins of bacterial life more than three and a half billion years ago. They have evolved in relationship to each other, interconnected in delicate ecological systems. They are interdependent not only with each other, but also with the earth’s atmosphere, its seas, rivers and lakes and the land itself.

Human actions, such as ruthless fishing practices, the dumping of industrial and urban waste, the destruction of river systems and uncontrolled land-clearing destroy beautiful and mysterious species of creatures forever. Many of these creatures are unknown. It is likely that among the unknown species there are many that could contribute to human health and wellbeing. If present trends are allowed to continue, the earth will become a far more sterile and dangerous place. Human life will be radically impoverished.

The task facing the human community is clear. We are called to save what can be saved of the diversity of life. This may be the single greatest challenge that humans have ever been called upon to face. It is a task that will require every bit of human intelligence, cooperation, generosity and commitment. There are clearly established scientific, medical, economic, aesthetic and cultural reasons that motivate a commitment to biodiversity.

But for those who stand within the great monotheistic religious traditions, there is a far more radical reason for commitment to biodiversity. It has to do with God, with the Creator who breathes the breath of life into all living things (Gen 2:7; Job 34: 12–15; Ps 104: 29–30). Judaism, Islam and Christianity all profess faith in the one God who creates the whole universe and all its creatures. Together we hold that this creator holds all things in existence, finds all of creation good and enables it to flourish in all its fertility and abundance (Gen 1:20–31). Creation is the work of God. It is something humans must honour if they are to honour God. In this context, to destroy habitats and bring about the extinction of species in an arbitrary way can only be seen as a terrible sin against the Creator.

Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same Creator God, the one God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Moses, the God of Jesus and the God of Muhammad. Conscious of what we hold in common, I will turn to some things that are more specific to a Christian view of God as Trinity. I will discuss two interconnected lines of thought: first, the idea that the diversity of creatures is to be seen as the self-expression of the Trinity; second, the claim that the interrelationships that characterise creation, including the ecological relationships that characterise life on Earth, spring from the relational life of the Trinity.

1. The Diversity of creatures as the self-expression of the Trinity

In the trinitarian vision, God exists only as relational. In the East, theologians like Basil of Caesarea (c 330–79) developed the idea that the divine persons are with each other in a communion (koinonia) beyond all comprehension. In the West, Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) insists that in God, relation and essence are one and the same. God’s being is relational. The Persons-in-relationship are what God is. They constitute the divine nature. The Greek word perichoresis, meaning an encircling embrace, describes this way of being with one another in radical intimacy. Perichoresis points to unity in diversity. Although the word itself does not refer directly to the dance, the divine dance is a beautiful image that brings out the dynamism of the divine relationships that sustain and nourish creation. Perichoresis points to distinction flourishing precisely by being in communion.

Christian theology sees the diversity of creatures as springing from the overwhelming abundance of this divine perichoresis. We are still a very long way from knowing the number of different species on Earth. We have given names to about a million and a half of them. Scientific estimates of the total estimate of species on Earth fall between ten and

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Christian theology sees the diversity of creatures as springing from the overflowing abundance of this divine perichoresis. We are still a very long way from knowing the number of different species on Earth. We have given names to about a million and a half of them. Scientific estimates of the total estimate of species on earth fall between ten and

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one hundred million. But we have identified about 350,000 species of beetles. It is said that the biologist JBS Haldane, when asked by a clergyman what his work revealed about God, replied that God must have an ‘inordinate fondness’ for beetles.

Theologically, it can be said that God does indeed have an extraordinary ‘fondness’ for and delight in beetles in all their diversity and specificity. And this divine fondness extends to all the other species of creatures, to all the birds, for example, from the blue wren to the great albatross. It embraces all the different kinds of hopping creatures we find in Australia, all the species of kangaroos, wallabies, potoroos, bettongs, pademelons and bilbies. It reaches out to include all the diverse creatures that we find in the ocean depths and the thousands of forms of bacterial life we find in a handful of soil from our gardens.

This abundance of life springs from the abundance of the divine communion. It expresses the ecstatic nature of the divine life. In theology, an ecstatic entity is one that goes out from oneself to another. The divine persons are ecstatic, first of all in their being-with-each-other, but then also in the free choice to be with a world of creatures. This idea was beautifully developed by Bonaventure (1217–74), a Franciscan who carried Francis’s love of creation into the heart of his theological work. He was fascinated by the fecundity of God. He saw this fecundity as expressed first of all in the divine life as the one he called the fountain fullness (fontalis pleitud) eternally brings forth the Word and the Spirit. In the fecundity of the generation of the Word there is already contained the possibility of the endless variety of creatures. In creation, this endless fecundity of trinitarian life explodes forth into the diversity of creatures.

Bonaventure sees diverse creatures as works of art as reflecting divine wisdom. He tells us that God created the perceptible world ‘as a means of self-revelation’. Each creature represents the divine wisdom. Each is a work of art produced by wisdom. Like a mirror or a footprint (vestigium), creatures are meant to lead human beings to God the artisan. Bonaventure sees the universe as ‘like a book reflecting,

representing and describing its Maker, the Trinity. Diverse creatures reflect their one Creator in their own different ways, just as one stream light coming through a stained-glass window breaks up into different colours. Each and every creature reflects a different aspect of the Creator. The exuberance of creation represents the infinite fecundity of God.

Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure’s Dominican contemporary, writes something similar:

The distinction and multitude of things come from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For God brought many things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and represented in them; and because this goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, God produced many and diverse creatures, so that what was wanting to one in the representation of divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and diverse. Hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents is better than any single creature whatever.

No one creature, even the human, can image God alone. Only the diversity of life—huge soaring trees, the community of ants, the flashing colours of the parrot, the beauty of a wildflower along with the human—can give expression to the radical diversity and otherness of the trinitarian God. The diverse species we find on Earth can be seen as sacraments of God. They express and represent the one who fills all things and holds all things in existence. Such a view radically

5. Breviloquium, 2, 11–12. He tells us this likeness exists at three levels: ‘as a trace (vestigium), and image, and a likeness. The aspect of trace is found in every creature; the aspect of image, in the intellectual creatures or rational spirits; the aspect of likeness, only in those who are God-conformed’.
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challenges the ruthless human destruction of species and their habitats in the modern era.

Diversity receives its most radical validation from a God who encompasses difference in communion. As Belden Lane has said, all of this summons us to celebrate not only a world that thrives on dissimilarity and difference but also a God who thrives on diversity. This puts an ethical demand upon us: 'the doctrine of the Trinity demands an ethical practice that honours difference within the lively exchange of a loving community.'

2. The ecological relationships of creatures spring from within the relational life of God

Relationships between entities characterise every stage of the emergence of our universe and all the diverse creatures that make it up. New patterns of organisation give rise to new entities, such as the emergence of hydrogen and helium in the early universe, the synthesis of more helium and the other elements in stars, the gathering of atoms into molecules, the appearance of single-celled life on Earth, the emergence of multi-celled organisms, the evolution of the astonishing variety of species on our planet and the emergence of human beings with their highly complex brains.

Science points to patterns of emergent relationships everywhere. Everything in our universe is made of fundamental particles such as hydrogen, oxygen and carbon. Collections of atoms make up molecules. These make up the chromosomes that carry the genetic code. They in turn are contained within the nucleus of a cell, the basic building block of life. While some organisms are single-celled, a human being is made up of about 50,000 billion cells specialised to perform an enormous variety of tasks.

Arthur Peacocke tells us that the natural sciences give us a picture of the world as a complex hierarchy, in which there is a series of levels of organisation of matter in which each member in the series is a whole constituted of parts that precede it in the series. He provides an example that does not pretend to be complete in the sequence: 'atom—molecule—macromolecule—subcellular organelle—cell multicellular functioning organ—whole living organism—populations of living organisms—ecosystems—the biosphere.'

When science looks at anything at all, be it a proton, a galaxy, a cell or the most complex thing we know, the human brain, it finds patterns of emergent relationships. First there is the interrelationship between the components that make up an entity and then there is the relationship between the entity and its wider environment. So a carbon atom in my body is part of a molecule, which forms part of a cell, which belongs to an organ, which is part of my body. I am part of a family, a human society and a community of interrelated living creatures on earth. The earth community depends upon and is interrelated with the sun, the Milky Way galaxy, and the whole universe.

At every level, things are constituted from components, yet not reducible to them. The cosmologist William Stoeger insists that it is a universal feature of the world revealed by the natural and social sciences that entities are constituted by relationships. At every level from fundamental particles to atoms, molecules, cells and the brain itself, one level of reality is nested upon another. At every level, something new emerges with its own distinct properties.

The theological insight that God’s being is relational can provide a basis for a vision of the fundamental reality of the universe as relational. While science tells us that each creature exists in a nested pattern of constitutive relations, theology grounds this in the trinitarian relationships of mutual love. Trinitarian theologians point out that if the Creator’s being is radically relational, then this suggests something about the nature of created reality. It suggests a relational ontology—the very being of things is relational being. Greek Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, for example, states: 'it is communion that makes things be: nothing exists without it, not even God'.

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also all other creatures, in their highly differentiated ways, are seen a radically inter-relational and interdependent. And this world of interrelating entities can be thought of as emerging within and from the dynamic relations of the trinitarian God. The wonderful interrelatedness that ecologists find in the biosphere on Earth, and the interrelatedness that science discovers at all levels from quantum physics to cosmology, is all sustained at every moment by a God who is persons-in-communion. Our interrelated universe, with all its wonderfully diverse creatures, emerges from the embrace of the divine communion in love. This gives unthinkable depth to the importance of ecological interrelationships. It gives us Christians the best of reasons for being committed to the wellbeing of all the living creatures in our global community.