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14. Environmental Crisis and Christian Identity

Lessons from a Secular Gaia

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Abstract

This essay explores how Bruno Latour’s concept of “A Secular Gaia,” can enter into dialogue with the early Christian theologian Irenaeus of Lyons. By reading Irenaeus through Latour, it may be possible to recover aspects of second century Christian materialism that generally go unnoticed.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, Bruno Latour, Irenaeus, Christian materialism, secular Gaia

Introduction

Academic conversations at times get stuck in ruts, retracing over and over well-trodden terrain, and unable to break free and arrive at new insight. Something like this has happened within the world of eco-theology. Since the late 1960s, theologians who focus on the environment have generally accepted Lynn White’s diagnosis that anthropocentrism is a key

cause, or at least a symptom, of humanity's current dysfunctional relationship with nature. These thinkers rightly believe that we need to reframe our relationship with nature and recognize that we are not at the center of the universe. We need, in short, an identity correction, one in which humanity is de-centered and relocated within the larger earth and cosmic processes. While I agree in principle with this call for correction, I also think that despite several decades of trying, Christian theologians have not quite figured out how to offer a specifically Christian theological response to the problem of anthropocentrism. In my view, the most popular corrective strategies all suffer from some significant challenges that limit their usefulness for the development of a comprehensive ecological theology. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore these strategies in detail, a brief summary of them – and the problems associated with them – will help set up the thesis that I wish to advance here about a possible way forward.

Popular Eco-theological Strategies

Many writers suggest that the best way to escape from anthropocentrism is to replace it with ecocentrism. This approach has become a dominant one, especially among religious environmental authors who are largely post-Christian. Authors like Bron Taylor and David Abram are attempting to push religious environmental discourse in an ecocentric direction by calling for a new animism or a new pantheism where the differences between the human and the non-human are minimized and even erased. They think that increasing our sense of kinship with non-human nature will result in more ecologically responsible behavior. However, many thinkers who still identify themselves as Christian have also been attracted to ecocentrism. This was, for example, the characteristic approach of the extraordinarily influential Catholic priest and self-proclaimed “geologist” Thomas Berry, who died in 2009. As an alternative to anthropocentrism, Berry argued that humans need a new relationship with the earth in which we understand ourselves to be intimately connected to all life processes.

As a corollary to this, Berry developed the idea that our current alienation from the earth can be traced to the collapse of our core religious narratives. Mythic stories, like those contained in the Old Testament, no longer serve as a guide to us and we have become, in a way, lost in the cosmos. Convinced that our core narratives have become dysfunctional, Berry proposed the creation of a “new story,” an ecocentric one, designed to unite humanity around a deep ecological reading of cosmic history. As he wrote at the beginning of his seminal essay on this subject, “we are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story” (1978: 1). In fact, “we are in between stories” (with the old stories not fully buried and the new not yet fully born). Berry's ecocentric turn eventually led him to distance himself from specifically Christian language, and, while remaining a priest, he became increasingly unwilling even to engage in God talk. Thus in his book, *The Universe Story*, which he co-wrote with Brian Swimme, the word God is scarcely mentioned.

It is difficult to overstate the influence of Berry and other ecocentric authors on ecotheological discourse. However, I am increasingly convinced that ecocentrism does not provide an obvious path to a thick Christian ecotheology. First, any perspective that invites us to dismiss core scriptural narratives is by definition problematic for a theologian trying to work within the tradition. Second, ecocentric views are prone to romanticize the world and

understate the problem of suffering. The world is indeed beautiful, but it can also be harsh and mean. We may want to increase our sense of kinship with the earth, but she is an unreliable mother who is often indifferent to us and smites us without warning and, seemingly, without compassion. Ecocentrism does get us beyond anthropocentrism, but it is overconfident in the world's ability to respond to some of humanity's most urgent questions about meaning, suffering and death. We can do better.

Sensing these problems, some Christian ecological authors recommend replacing anthropocentrism with theocentrism, the idea that creation belongs to God, not to humans. On the one hand, there is nothing particularly problematic about theocentrism. Who can argue with the idea that God is ultimately in charge of the world and that the world belongs to God, not to us? Theocentrism could fairly be described as a central theme of the biblical and Christian theological traditions. Indeed, a significant part of this essay is devoted to recovering aspects of the thought of Irenaeus of Lyons, whose theology could be described as a theocentric materialism.

In practice, however, most of the dominant ecotheological voices writing from a theocentric perspective have absorbed to some degree the theological perspective of Teilhard de Chardin. While not a Hegelian per se, Teilhard was very much an idealist who discerned in the evolutionary processes of the universe a story of the gradual apotheosis of matter, which he called "the cosmic Christ." Teilhard's vision, for all its rhapsodic praise of the material world, was far more interested in universal synthesis than in particular things. His thought and the thought inspired by him tend to direct attention away from the earth rather than toward it. If ecocentric theology errs by collapsing God into the world, those writing from a theocentric perspective risk collapsing the world into God. One of the great insights of Christian theology, in my view, can be seen precisely in its resistance to idealism and the emphasis it has placed on the independent – albeit contingent – value of creation.

Examples of Teilhard-style theocentrism are many, but one prominent example is the work of Illia Delio, who has been attempting to rethink core Christian doctrines like Trinity and Christology in the light of recent discoveries in evolutionary cosmology. Delio, and others like her, have been heavily influenced by the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead as it has been appropriated by process theologians like John Cobb and Philip Clayton. Theocentric approaches certainly challenge anthropocentrism, largely by pointing out human tininess in the face of cosmic vastness. Theocentric ecotheologies are not theologically wrong, since God is certainly the source of all existing things, but they tend to change the subject and direct the discussion away from the earth and its inhabitants to the cosmos and its creator. Efforts to explain the processes of evolution in terms of the gradual unfolding of the cosmic Christ may be more rooted in Christian narrative than ecocentric views, but they have difficulty dealing with the problem of suffering. Why is the evolutionary path to glory littered with so much loss? Theocentric ecotheologies escape anthropocentrism, but at a high price.

To complicate things further, some Christian ecological authors do not think our theological framework needs any adjustments. For them, the environmental crisis calls humans to take seriously their role as stewards of creation. Taking Genesis 1:26 as a starting point, these thinkers essentially leave in place the anthropocentric assumptions that the

world belongs to humans as a divine gift. For example, Pope Benedict, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, repeats the classical claim that God created the earth for humans “to till and keep,” as their unique inheritance. In his view, God is clearly in charge, but he also thinks God gave the world to humans to use well or poorly (6.61). Pope Benedict is certainly to be commended for advocating environmental action, but the theology of stewardship, like ecocentrism, can be subject to significant critique.

Theologies based upon stewardship, first of all, rely on an implausible reading of the biblical text (Simkins). Most biblical scholars agree that the Hebrew word *radah* – which is usually translated into English as “dominion” – does not denote the idea of “stewardship.” Others have argued that this text is in itself a bit of an outlier in the biblical tradition, functioning almost as an ironic reminder of what humans do not have. In contrast, the Old Testament as a whole frequently reminds humanity that God is in charge and that God has other projects besides humanity. Second, theologies of stewardship are too anthropocentric, especially in the suggestion that the earth was created only for our use and that it has no intrinsic value of its own. Given what we now know about the age of the earth and the relatively recent arrival of humans, the idea that everything was created for us seems naive and out of touch with reality. It is certainly true that we need to do a better job taking care of the earth, but the urgency of this need derives not from our high status as stewards, but from our utter and complete dependence on this world.

Given the limits of these models, it seems to me that the Christian ecotheological project could use some new dialogue partners to develop a more robust synthesis. In order to make one small step in that direction, I propose to enlist the work of Bruno Latour, a French philosopher and anthropologist with whom theologians do not often dialogue. It seems to me that Latour’s ideas about the rise of what he calls a “secular Gaia” overlap in interesting ways with early Christian conversations about creation and the relationship of humans to it (2013). It seems to me that a dialogue between Latour and the second-century Christian theologian Irenaeus of Lyons can help Christian theologians who are working on ecological themes recover forgotten aspects of our own doctrine of creation and, in doing so, allow us to think more deeply about what it means to be a creature in this particular world. Reading Irenaeus through the lens of Latour suggests a revision of Christian identity that escapes anthropocentrism without recourse to pantheism or theocentric idealism. Instead, such a reading encourages meditation anew on our status as earth creatures, made by God for this particular world, a world with which we are inextricably connected.

Bruno Latour’s Secular Gaia

It is common in some theological discourse, even in the field of Patristics, to enlist the aid of continental philosophy. *The Journal of Early Christian Studies*, for example, has frequently showcased articles interpreting ancient views of embodiment through the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, or Mikhail Bakhtin. This conversation has often produced interesting and insightful results. However, in my years of reading such conversations, I had never run across one that included the work of Bruno Latour. This omission is odd. Indeed, if one happens to be a believing Christian looking for a continental dialogue partner, Latour is ideal: he is a practicing Catholic with a sense of the limits of the post-modern turn. I encountered Latour quite by chance last December when I found a YouTube video in which

he was conversing with Lord Rowan Williams at the London School of Economics on the topic of religion and the environment. Williams, of course is a patristic scholar and the former Archbishop of Canterbury. I had heard Williams speak many times; however, I had never heard Latour and was intrigued, especially by what he was saying in that conversation about a secular Gaia.

After doing some research, I discovered that Latour is quite famous in his own right, especially for a book he published originally in 1991 called *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). He is also known as one of the developers of Actor-Network Theory, which argues that non-conscious objects possess a kind of agency in human social networks. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour used this theory to analyze how moderns use the word “nature.” He was especially interested in exposing the habit of modernity to speak about nature and human culture as if they were two different things. Through Actor-Network Theory Latour and others have been exploring how non-human entities can be actors in social systems. For example, humans may have created smart phones, but now smart phones have become *agents* and are *acting* on human culture and shaping it in a way that parallels human agency.

For Latour, modern thought has tended to construe nature as a passive stage upon which humans act out the drama of history. He thinks this distinction is in the process of collapsing, and he argues that the environmental crisis is causing the collapse to accelerate. Now, entities we previously assumed to be passive and inert are asserting themselves as active subjects. Latour’s idea of a secular Gaia is an extension of this argument. We humans are pushing million of tons of carbon into the atmosphere and the earth is now reacting as an agent. This newly active earth is causing changes to our culture, our history, and possibly to our ability to survive as a species.

The best source for understanding what Latour means by a secular Gaia is not a print publication but a series of lectures he gave in 2013 at the University of Edinburgh and now available on YouTube. He gave these lectures as part of the storied Gifford Lectures, which have been exploring themes in natural theology since 1888. In presenting here, Latour clearly stands among giants. As the Gifford Lecture website points out, past lectures have included, Hannah Arendt, Noam Chomsky, Stanley Hauerwas, William James, Jean-Luc Marion, Iris Murdoch, Roger Scruton, Eleonore Stump, Charles Taylor, Alfred North Whitehead, and Rowen Williams. In 2013, Letour’s topic was the notion of a secular Gaia.

The word “Gaia,” of course, is the Greek word for “earth.” Gaia was also a goddess, the earth mother in classical mythology. In recent decades the word “Gaia” has been repurposed by ecological thinkers trying to find a way to rekindle a sense of kinship with the earth in the human community and, in doing so, perhaps goad us into environmental action. One of the earliest examples of this effort is that of James Lovelock, an English chemist. In the 1970s Lovelock created the now-famous Gaia Hypothesis, and theorized that the earth is a self-regulating system, similar to a living organism. According to Lovelock, living and non-living things are constantly interacting to sustain the life systems of the earth in a symbiotic dance. Although Lovelock argued his case from the point of view of a chemist and a scientist, his Gaia Hypothesis has been taken up by many environmentalists with religious sensibilities and especially pressed into the service of ecocentrism. In this discourse, Gaia is emerging almost as a goddess. As Bron Taylor explains in his book *Dark Green Religion*:

What I term Gaian Spirituality is avowedly supernaturalistic, perceiving the superorganism – whether the biosphere or the entire universe – to have consciousness, whether this is understood as an expression or part of God, Brahman, the Great Mystery, or whatever name one uses to symbolize a divine cosmos. Gaian Spirituality is more likely to draw on nonmainstream or nonconsensus science for data that reinforces its generally pantheistic (or panentheistic) and holistic metaphysics (2010: 16).

Defenders of a religious Gaia think the solution to our ecological problems can be solved, at least in part, by re-animating the world and recovering the earth's sacred character.

Latour is aware of this pantheistic use of Gaia, but he thinks the term can be useful in the secular context. In his Gifford Lectures, he argues that talking about the earth as Gaia can help us name the reality that the environmental crisis has changed humanity's relationship with the planet in significant ways. Again, according to Latour, western modernity has tended to understand nature (and the earth) as the passive stage upon which the human drama is enacted. He thinks this is no longer true because the earth is no longer passive. Latour likes the word Gaia not for its religious overtones, but because of the way it helps focus our attention on the planet as an actor in the drama and not simply the stage upon which our lives play out.

Latour is careful to point out that he is not using Gaia religiously. Instead, he wants the word to express an essentially secular concept. His Gaia rising is not a goddess emerging, but a shift in anthropology, where humans are beginning to see their relationship to the planet differently. Hence, Latour suggests that the secular Gaia is a cross-cultural fact, more like a scientific observation than a religious commitment. However, Latour also describes this secular Gaia as possessing agency in a way that traditional scientific method would disallow. For him, the environmental crisis, especially climate change, is exposing this agency and causing humans to realize that they are at the mercy of this newly animated planet rather than its master. We now see with painful clarity that when we move Gaia moves too, and when Gaia moves, we are impacted by that movement, for good or for ill.

Latour accepts an idea increasingly popular in environmental and scientific circles that the earth is entering a new geological age called the Anthropocene, which is replacing the Holocene, the geological epoch that began after the Ice Age. In the Anthropocene humans will be, for a season, the dominant force, much like the dinosaurs were in the Mesozoic Era. Ironically for Latour, one of the impacts of this shift to the Anthropocene is a growing realization in the human community that our planetary dominance has increased rather than decreased our awareness of dependency. We now see more clearly even than our ancestors that we are utterly dependent on this world because we now understand that we can destroy it and, in doing so, destroy ourselves. Despite the power of our technology, Latour thinks that the humans of the Anthropocene will be forced to abandon the delusions of modernity and recognize that we cannot escape from Gaia to other worlds. There are no warp drives and no starships and no space-bending wormholes. Even if we managed to build space stations on Mars or the moon Europa, we would need to bring a portable Gaia with us, and our Martian and European worlds would not last very long if Gaia fails. For Latour this adds up to a radical shift in human identity that is at least as large as the shift that ushered in

modernity 500 years ago. In the Anthropocene, we are no longer beings dealing with an inert object called nature; we are one of Gaia's creatures embedded in a web of acting subjects and we are so inescapably.

Second Century Materialism

I may have stumbled across Latour while surfing on the Internet, but his ideas about a secular Gaia struck me in part because they resonated with work I was already doing on the emergence of the Christian doctrine of creation in the second century. In my recent research, I have been putting contemporary ecological thought in dialogue with ancient Christian theology in an attempt to demonstrate how the latter might inform the former. When I first began this project, I thought that the best place to start would be to try to find out what ancient Christian theologians had to say about nature and the natural world. I quickly realized, however, that this path was a dead end because no one in antiquity held a view of nature similar to mine. If I was going to press the early church fathers into the service of contemporary ecotheology, I would not be able to do so by accessing handy references to texts depicting their romantic love for the natural world and its systems. Even in texts that seem like excellent candidates for such a recovery project – like, for example, St. Basil's *Hexaemeron* – we find nothing really analogous to contemporary Deep Ecology.

While researching these issues, I came across several helpful discussions of the concept of nature and how it did not always mean what it means to us, namely the non-human world out there. In his stimulating book *The Corinthian Body*, New Testament scholar Dale Martin argues that if we want to grasp emerging Christianity we must first recover the ancient understanding of nature in which it operated. Martin thinks that most contemporary scholars are in the habit of reading ancient discussions of nature through the lens of Descartes and that we do so without even knowing we are doing it. Thus, when we read Plato distinguishing between mind and body, we tend to think he espouses a dualism similar to that of Descartes, as if mind transcends body in an absolute way. Martin says this is wrong; no ancient Greek philosopher or early Christian theologian thought about reality in this way. Martin says that the ancients are more properly described as monists than dualists. So, when early Christian writers invoked the standard Platonic distinction between the higher intelligible (or mental world) and the lower material world they were not distinguishing between a transcendent mind and a separate natural world. They were, instead, thinking about different aspects of – or even regions within – one reality or cosmos. One could conceivably go to the higher and lower spaces of the cosmos, but one could not transcend the cosmos because that would be like leaving reality itself. The normal Greek word used to capture this sense of total reality was *physis*.

Now, the Greek word "*physis*" is nearly always translated into English as "nature." However, Martin says that *physis* never meant to them what the word "nature" means to us. Our concept of nature is burdened with Cartesian distinctions between natural things and human things that the ancients did not make. For the ancients, the "sum of all things" was the normal ancient meaning of the term *physis* (nature)" (4). That is, *physis* meant "the totality of all reality, including humans and the gods." It did not mean *the non-human world out there*. Martin thinks that the path to the modern view of nature begins quite late, probably in the fifth-century Neo-platonic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius. If he is right, and I think he is,

this means that no theologian in the patristic period was in possession of a concept even remotely similar to that evoked by our ordinary use of the word nature. In short, to return briefly to Latour, they all held a pre-modern view of nature, one in which there was no radical distinction between the natural and supernatural orders.

Reading Martin's discussion impacted me in two ways, both of which are relevant to the argument of this essay. First, I recognized myself as one of those scholars who habitually read ancient discussions of nature through Cartesian filters, which is ironic because I am no fan of Descartes. Second, and more significantly, Martin helped me understand that when the ancients distinguished between the intelligible and material worlds, they were not necessarily making abstract metaphysical distinctions. They were actually making spatial observations about their universe. For them, the intelligible mental world was literally *up there*, far above the material world that was literally *down here*. They saw the cosmos as a continuum stretching from mind (and spirit) down to matter. The distance from one to the other was vast, both ontologically and spatially, but it was still a single cosmos. As an analogy, we might imagine pure white, gradually turning to gray and eventually to black. In short, reading Martin helped me to recover the spatial imagination of the ancients and to reenter their *physis*, precisely as a place and not simply a concept. To be sure, I already knew this at some level, but I failed to really pay attention to what they were saying and, because of this, I failed to really understand how different their thinking was from my own.

Martin's observations also had the immediate impact of causing me to reconsider what I thought I knew about the emergence of the doctrine of creation in the second century. The second century, of course, was dominated precisely by extensive theological conflict around the meaning and purpose of the created world. Gnostic thinkers like Valentinus and Proto-orthodox thinkers like Irenaeus differed sharply in their assessments of the material world. In general, Gnostics believed the material world to be the work of a lesser god, one who had fabricated matter as a prison for luckless spiritual beings like us who had been caught up in a cosmic disaster. In contrast, Irenaeus believed that the one true God had created all of the *physis*, including this world, from nothing and that the matter of this world was both entirely part of the divine plan and of enduring value. Irenaeus understood the challenge of material suffering and answered it not by rejecting matter but by holding to a radical hope for a new creation.

With Martin's correction in mind, we can see more clearly that Irenaeus and his opponents were not fighting about something vague like "the creation," they were arguing very concretely and specifically about the value of *this material earth*, whether humans belonged here or not, and whether *this world* should even exist. We might say, then, that the great theological question of the second century was, did God make the earth for earthlings or is the earth a material prison holding spiritual beings in horrific bondage, as most Gnostics believed. Thus, theology in the second century was not so much focused on abstract opposition of matter and mind (or spirit), but rather on this earth, the people dwelling there, and the reasons for its existence.

Consider the following passage from *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus' most influential work. Here he is describing the doctrines of Ophites and Sethians, two Gnostic groups he opposed. According to Irenaeus, these groups taught:

Adam and Eve formerly had light and luminous and kind of spiritual bodies, just as they had been fashioned. But when they came to *this world*, their bodies were changed to darker, fatter, and more sluggish ones (1.99).

Clearly, Irenaeus is not thinking about vague concepts like matter and spirit, but about what happens to spiritual beings when they move into a denser and material region of the cosmos. It is precisely the specific materiality of this world – the place where bodies are dark, fat, and slow – that Gnostics thought was demonic. In contrast, Irenaeus insisted this world was the native place of humans created by God specifically for them. For Irenaeus, the angels and other unseen beings in the cosmos lived in less material places because that is where they were created to live, but our lower material place was no less dignified for its lowness.

As a second example, I turn to an often-misquoted passage from *Against the Heresies* that appears at the top of any Google search. According to the search engines, Irenaeus is the one who said, “the glory of God is the human person fully alive.” However, a close look at this passage in the surviving Latin renders a different translation. What Irenaeus actually wrote was this: “for the glory of God is the living man, and the life of man is the vision of God” (Grant: 153). While this translation removes the possibility of thinking Irenaeus was a progenitor of modern spiritualities of self-fulfillment, it does get us closer to the concerns of the second century.

Here is what I mean. This quotation appears at the end of an extended meditation on the significance of Genesis 2:7, which is interpreted in the light of 1 Corinthians 15. According to text of Genesis, “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” In the related passage in 1 Corinthians, Paul explains how Christ, who is the new Adam, fulfills the promise of this first creation by recreating the living man (Adam) into an imperishable being through the resurrection of Christ (the new Adam). Irenaeus builds upon these themes to make his key point; these dust creatures, Adam and Eve, give glory to God by the very fact that they are alive at all. This claim stands in contrast to the position of his opponents who think that the creation of the dust people was an error and an affront to the dignity of God. For them, the true spiritual God would never tolerate the presence of material creatures like this in his realm, and their presence can only be explained as the result of a dark plot.

As the passage unfolds, Irenaeus insists that the one true God made the dust people on purpose and that, contra the Gnostics, the material bodies of these people were not prisons for the spirit, but part of God’s design. In the thought of Irenaeus, human dust beings have material bodies by nature, not by accident. We are, in essence, sentient and spiritual matter. In addition and by extension, Irenaeus also argues that God made a material world for the dust people to live in, and this God also did on purpose. This God, Irenaeus explains, “created and adorned and contains everything. This ‘everything’ includes us and *our world*. We too, with everything the world contains, were made by him. Of him scripture says, ‘And God formed man, taking dust of the earth, and he breathed in his face a breath of life.’” (Grant: 150). Irenaeus goes on to say that this same creator God “assigned *this world* to the human race” (Grant: 152), and the incarnation will deliver it and us to its imperishable potential. For Irenaeus, this world is an intentional project of God, just as are the higher, spiritual parts of cosmos. This world too gives glory to God. In this “living man,” this man

of dust, this earthling, is “the Glory of God.” Thus, the phrase, “the glory of God is the living man,” reveals a second-century preoccupation with the value of this world that I had failed to noticed in my many previous readings of Irenaeus. We might say that Irenaeus was profoundly devoted to the earth, not as a goddess, but as the world God made to be the dwelling place of humans and other earth creatures.

As a corollary to this robust defense of the earth, Irenaeus argued forcefully that material creation would be redeemed, not by being absorbed into mind or spirit, as the idealistic impulse would have it, but by stabilizing it. In Irenaeian thought, nothing is lost; God cares for particular things and God saves particular things. The suffering we experience in our bodies can be endured because God has promised to re-create them in resurrection. In a famous section of *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus meditates on the characteristics of the new creation. Resisting all forms of allegorical reading of the book of Revelation (Grant: 182-83), Irenaeus insists that the new creation will be a literal place very much like the old creation, only without sin, death, and decay. It will be a world populated with animals, who no longer survive by predation but on food suitable for beings residing in a restored world. Quoting Isaiah 65, where “wolves and lambs shall feed together,” Irenaeus says he is “aware that some try to refer these texts metaphorically to savage men who out of various nations and various occupations come to believe . . .” He insists, however, the new creation will also transform animal life; this change “will take place for these animals at the resurrection of the just . . . when the world is re-established in its primeval state.” In this world lions will eat straw and fruit, re-engineered for lion bodies (Grant: 179). “None of this can be taken allegorically,” Irenaeus writes, “but everything is solid and true and substantial, made by God for the enjoyment of just men” (Grant: 184).

Clearly, from the point of view of later Christian theology, which was integrated tightly with Platonic idealism, millenarian ideas like these seem quaint and foolish. Indeed, the loss of so much of the original Greek of Irenaeus’ work can be traced, at least in part, to the rejection this aspect of his theology. However, there are good reasons to believe that Irenaeus here represents a very powerful stream of pre-Platonic first and second century materialist Christianity that was never fully domesticated by the later Platonic synthesis. The strongest artifact of this ancient understanding of the gospel is the tenacity of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, which, because of its inclusion in the creed, has forced theologians to deal with it, even when it would be easier to image paradise as a world without a creation (Bynum).

Latour and Irenaeus

So what does all of this discussion of creation theology in the second century have to do with Bruno Latour and shifting Christian Identity? In this last section I would like to suggest that Latour’s concept of a secular Gaia exposes our status as creatures of this world in a way that could make the theological materialism – although not the millenarianism – of Irenaeus newly attractive. That is, this encounter might offer a theological path that avoids anthropocentrism, not by collapsing God in the world nor by introducing a new form of idealism, but rather by dusting off ancient materialist Christianity and re-appropriating it.

At first glance, such an appropriation of Irenaeus might seem implausible. After all, many of his ideas are bizarre to us and do not translate easily into a modern idiom. His

cosmology is not ours. We no longer think that the mental, spiritual world is “up there,” and we no longer think that the space between high and low is populated by all manner of unseen beings arranged neatly on a hierarchical scale. Also, Irenaeus’ ideas about the creation of the earth for earthlings are not at all secular. For him, God is actively creating the world, actively managing it, and actively shepherding it toward its eventual redemption. Moreover, Irenaeus lived in a mythic cosmos that is no longer plausible to us.

With these cautions duly noted, I argue that we can retrieve some aspects of this Irenaeian materialism for contemporary ecotheological conversation (see Webb). Indeed, this conversation would be greatly enriched by such retrieval. First, the theology of Irenaeus is not anthropocentric. Irenaeus certainly thought that God made the earth for earthlings and gave to humans a special role. However, I do not interpret this as an anthropocentrism similar to that which we frequently encounter in the modern world. Irenaeus’ claim that God made the earth for humans is more properly described as the naive position of a person who knew nothing of the deep earth history that is now available to us through geology and paleontology, and who interpreted the creation account in Genesis in a pre-modern way. He knew nothing of the vast scale of the universe that modern humans now take for granted. Yet, even not knowing this, Irenaeus did not think that creation as a totality existed only for humans. He believed that the cosmos God had made was populated by all kinds of other beings and that human specialness was local to the earth. It seems to me we should follow his lead and point our theological attention back to our creature-hood and our world rather than direct our gaze so quickly to the entire cosmos.

Irenaeus believed that the fate of human dust creatures was tied to the fate of the earth and all its creatures. As noted above, for Irenaeus, God’s promised new creation was radically continuous with this one; the new earth would be populated by all kinds of creatures, just like the old one: the old creation passes into the new creation without being lost or destroyed. Indeed, his eschatological imagination runs in a direction quite different from later Platonizing idealist theologies, which tended to construe salvation as mental and spiritual and struggled with how to appropriate the resurrection of the dead. Clearly in the Platonizing world, non-mental life forms like lions and plants would not be needed in the new creation. Not so for Irenaeus. He did not imagine salvation as the deliverance of spiritual beings from matter, but as a perfection of matter that included humans and other creatures with their bodies. While we may find Irenaeus’ literalism naive and implausible, preferring instead the more idealistic narratives, there is something refreshingly non-anthropocentric in his desire to include all the creatures of the old creation in the new one.

Second, unlike ecocentrism, Irenaeian materialist theology is not prone to pantheism. Irenaeus did not in any way turn the earth into a goddess or collapse the distinction between God and creation. Indeed, he was one of the first early Christian writers to embrace a doctrine of creation from nothing. God is not just a shaper of the cosmos, but the ultimate source of it as well. Irenaeus certainly loved the earth, and he thought the earth was a beloved part of God’s larger project of creation, but he was also a Christian. For him the earth and the cosmos are not divine in themselves; we can love them but we do not worship them. Moreover, unlike deep ecologists, Irenaeus did think that there is something wrong in the world – especially in this lower, thicker world – that needs to be repaired. He believed our world needed a divine intervention to set things right, which is a deeply Christian idea.

Finally, Irenaeus' materialist theology was not an abstract theocentrism focused on God's wondrous works in the cosmos. Irenaeus definitely thought that God created all things that make up nature – that is the *physis*, the sum total of existing things – but he did not spend much intellectual energy speculating about what is going on “up there.” For his part, he considered the Gnostics to have lost their way precisely because they turned their collective gaze from the earth to the sky and in doing so forgot their true nature as earthlings. For Irenaeus, the real drama of the Christian story was not happening in the far high heavens, but here below, on the earth, where God was continuing to work out the redemption of the materialist project in the lower cosmos.

Conclusion

It seems to me that it might be possible to use Latour's idea of a secular Gaia to find our way to a new Christian materialist ecotheology inspired by Irenaeus. For Latour, the environmental crisis confronts us with the reality of our earthiness. We have never and will never be anything but earthlings. In his Gifford lectures, Latour notes that with the rise of a secular Gaia we are, in a way, thrust back to the position of the ancients who gazed at the stars, speculated about the beings who might be living there, but who knew beyond any doubt that they were creatures of this world. As Latour says in the lectures, we are once again, creatures of the sublunar world, in a way excluded from the heights occupied by less earthy beings. For a time humans imagined they did not really need the earth. Many thought we would soon escape and assume our deeper destiny as conquerors of space. Instead, Latour argues, the rise of the secular Gaia and the realization of our status as earthlings both exposes the implausibility of this dream and forces us to attend more intentionally to this world and our place in it.

Reading Irenaeus through Latour challenges Christian theology to turn back to the world and reconsider the doctrine of creation not just as an abstract narrative about the origins of everything, but as a theological reflection on our status as creatures of this earth and God's plans for it in the wider cosmos. That Gaia is secular – that is, not God – allows us to retain important theological insights about the relative autonomy of the world in relationship to God. At the same time, that the world is Gaia, and in a way an agent or an actor, invites us to ponder more deeply her participation in the wider drama of creation. Knowing that we are symbiotically connected to this world and our fate is tied to her fate, should make us cautious about rushing to relocate our identity in star dust and cosmic consciousness, as is common in some ecotheological projects. Re-engaging Gaia will require Christian ecotheology to wrestle more thoughtfully than it has in the past with the problem of suffering. This world is, after all, “red in tooth and claw,” and this requires a serious response. In my view, part of this response must include the development of an eschatology that envisions Gaia and the creatures that live here in ways that are formally similar to that developed by Irenaeus and others in the second century. This eschatology should resist subsuming the material in the spiritual and collapsing particular things into universals. At this point, few theologians are willing to go down this path, preferring instead the deep ecological or idealistic mainstream. There are, however a few. The work of Stephen Webb and Christopher Southgate stand out as notable examples of thinkers pushing for another way. Webb is especially known for being a maverick, arguing in favor of the resurrection of dogs, and taking seriously Mormon ideas about heavenly flesh. Similarly, Southgate, in his

book, *The Groaning of Creation*, writes about the redemption of individual creatures. In my own ongoing ecotheological reflection, I hope to follow this example.

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