

The Attractor and the Energy of Love

Trinity in Evolutionary and Ecological Context

Denis Edwards

Denis Edwards is Associate Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology in the Department of Theology of Flinders University, South Australia.

In the Greek-speaking world in which the gospel was first preached and the doctrine of the Trinity emerged, permanence and stability were highly prized. Amidst the turmoil of personal and political life, the world itself seemed relatively stable. Our 21st-century worldview is radically different. After Einstein and Hubble, we know that we are part of an observable universe made up of more than a hundred billion galaxies, all of them in motion, a dynamic universe that has been expanding and evolving from a tiny, dense, and hot state over the last 13.7 billion years. And after Darwin, we know that all life on earth has evolved by means of natural selection from the first forms of microbial life that appeared on our planet about 3.7 billion years ago. At the same time we face a looming crisis of life on our planet because of human actions.

Stability no longer characterizes our worldview. We belong to a universe of constant motion and emergent processes. We are confronted by the reality that we are contributing to global climate change and to an increasing loss of earth's biodiversity. How is the Christian community to speak of its God in this new context? What difference does it make to our classical understanding of the Trinity to think about such a God in relation to an evolutionary worldview? How might this theology of God inform our ecological action? I will begin to explore these questions by briefly outlining a theology of the Trinity that I find meaningful in this context: that of Athanasius. Then I will explore three theological developments of the classical tradition for an evolutionary and ecological context: a) The Word as attractor and the Spirit as the energy of love in evolutionary emergence; b) the costs of evolution and the divine passion of love; and c) the defencelessness of the humble God in creation.

DOI: 10.1111/erev.12031

Copyright © (2013) World Council of Churches. Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.

Athanasius: Creation and Deification through the Word, in the Spirit

For Athanasius, the universe of creatures is continually held in being over an abyss of nothing by God's creative Word. Creatures exist only because they participate in God, by partaking of the creative Word:

But being good, he governs and establishes the whole world through his Word who is himself God, in order that creation, illuminated by the leadership, providence and ordering of the Word, may be able to remain firm, since it shares in the Word who is truly from the Father and is aided by him to exist, and lest it suffer what would happen, I mean a relapse into non-existence, if it were not protected by the Word.¹

Creatures exist because they “share in” or “partake of” the Word. After not paying much attention to the Holy Spirit in his early works, Athanasius makes it clear in his later writings that he sees the Spirit as the fully divine immanent presence of God, as the divine energy and the bond that unites creatures to the Word. It is, then, in the Holy Spirit that creatures partake of the Word. For Athanasius, both creation and deification occur through participation in the triune God: “The Father creates and renews all things through the Word in the Spirit.”² Before turning to Athanasius's theology of deification, I will discuss three aspects of his theology of creation that I find meaningful in an evolutionary and ecological context.

The first is the immediacy of the triune God to creatures. For Athanasius' opponents, the divine dignity of the Creator rules out a direct relationship with creatures. For them the created Word serves as a “buffer” between God and creation.³ But for Athanasius, by contrast, there is no such buffer. He agrees with his opponents on the radical otherness of the Creator and on the biblical conviction that God engages with creation through the Word. But he will not accept their view of the Word as a created intermediary. He insists that the Word shares fully the Father's very essence. And it is precisely as fully divine that the Word can bridge the gap between Creator and creatures in loving condescension.⁴ The ontological distinction between God and all creatures is bridged solely from God's side, in loving divine generosity, and not by any intermediary. Because

¹ Athanasius, *Against the Pagans*, in *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, ed. and trans. Robert W. Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 41.

² Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*, in *Letters to Serapion, Orations against the Arians, and Letter 40: To Adelphius*, trans. Khaled Anatolios (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.24.

³ Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 91.

⁴ Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians*, in *Letters to Serapion, Orations against the Arians, and Letter 40: To Adelphius*, trans. Khaled Anatolios (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.64.

Word and Spirit are one with the Father's essence, the Word's mediation in the Spirit involves the immediacy of the Father.⁵ The triune God is immediately present to each creature through the Word and in the Spirit, present in self-humbling love, immanent in a way that no creature could ever be. This view of the immediacy of God to creatures has consequences for the way we value and treat other creatures.

Second, Athanasius sees the fruitfulness and diversity of creation as springing from the dynamic fruitfulness of the Trinity. He asks: If God is simply a monad, if there were no dynamism in God, no generation of the other, how could we possibly account for the creation of a world of creatures? He asks: "But if, according to them, the divine essence itself is not fruitful but barren, like a light that does not shine and a fountain that is dry, how are they not ashamed to say that God has creative energy?"⁶ It is only because of the generativity of the divine life, where the light shines brilliantly and the fountain flows freely, that God then freely creates a world of creatures in the Word and in the Spirit. The fruitfulness of the evolutionary processes at work on earth are all grounded in the dynamic fruitfulness of the Trinity, the divine fountain, endlessly pouring forth the river of living water, from which all creation drinks in the Spirit.

Athanasius's third insight is his situating of creation within the joyful relations of the divine persons. Athanasius recalls the words of wisdom, God's companion in the creation of all things, from Proverbs 8: "then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight" (Prov. 8:30). He sees the biblical teaching of God's delight in wisdom as pointing to the eternal delight within the life of the divine persons, and he locates God's joy in creation within this divine delight. His argument is that wisdom cannot be thought of as being created and having a beginning, but must always have been God's delight: "When was it then that the Father did not rejoice? But if he has always rejoiced, then there was always the one in whom he rejoiced . . . For he did not delight in this way by acquiring delight as an addition to himself, but it was upon seeing the works that were made according to his own image, so that the basis of this delight also is God's own Image."⁷ Creation takes place within the mutual love and delight of the divine persons. God's delight in creatures is enfolded within the mutual delight of the Father and the Son.⁸

⁵ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 113.

⁶ Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians*, 2.2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:82.

⁸ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), p. 118, 153–4, 288.

This rich, trinitarian theology of creation is profoundly interconnected with Athanasius's theology of the incarnation. The Word in whom all things are created is the Word of the cross. In the sacrificial Word of the cross we find our forgiveness, the overcoming of death and the true revelation of God. In his theology of the cross, Athanasius takes up various images and concepts of salvation from Paul and from Hebrews. But he also builds on Irenaeus to offer an overarching theory of salvation as deification: "For he became human that we might become divine."⁹

This theology of deification is closely linked to the Pauline idea that by the grace of the indwelling Spirit we are adopted into the life of God (Gal. 4:7; Rom. 8:16) and transformed in Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we participate in the crucified and risen Christ. We are enfolded in the inner life of the Trinity, and as adopted daughters and sons are taken up in the position of the Word in relation to the Father.¹⁰

For Athanasius, deification entails a radical ontological transformation in creaturely reality. Because of the incarnation there is a divine transformation already at work in humanity, and not just in humanity but in the whole creation. Athanasius's concern, of course, is not that of a 21st-century ecological theology. His concern is with the full divinity of the Word made flesh, the divinity of the one in whom we participate and are deified. While Athanasius's direct focus is on humanity, he sees the whole creation as in some way sharing with humanity in deification and final fulfilment. He speaks frequently of the deification of creation, without distinguishing between humans and other creatures.

At times he explicitly includes the rest of creation in liberation in Christ. He speaks, for example, of Christ as "the Liberator of all flesh and of all creation."¹¹ He refers to Colossians 1:15–20 and Romans 8:19–23 and writes of the Father's philanthropy, "on account of which he not only gave consistence to all things in his Word but brought it about that the creation itself, of which the apostle says that it 'awaits the revelation of the children of God,' will at a certain point be delivered 'from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of the children of God' (Rom. 8:19, 21)."¹²

⁹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation, in Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, ed. and trans. Robert W. Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 54.

¹⁰ Athanasius, *Orations against the Arian*, 1:46; 2:59. See Anatolios 2011, 125.

¹¹ Athanasius, *Letter 40: To Adelphius*, in *Letters to Serapion, Orations against the Arians, and Letter 40: To Adelphius*, trans. Khaled Anatolios (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

¹² Athanasius, *Orations against the Arian*, 2:63.

I see Athanasius as offering the basis for a renewed theology of creation and salvation that involves the whole creation, but one that needs to be developed in the light of evolution, emergence and our 21st-century ecological context. I will take up three of these developments, concerning, first, the roles of the Word and the Spirit in evolutionary emergence, second, the divine passion of love for creatures and, third, the humility of the Creator in accepting the limits of creaturely processes.

The Word as Attractor and the Spirit as Energy of Love

The evolutionary nature of the universe invites us to think again about God. It suggests that we need a theology in which the triune God is seen not only as the source of the existence of the natural world but also of its wonderful fruitfulness, creativity, and novelty. We need a theology of a God who, like Mother Carey in Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, "can make things make themselves."¹³ I will outline such a theology, in trinitarian terms, with the Holy Spirit understood as the immanent energy of love, and the Word of God as the divine attractor in evolutionary emergence. In taking this approach, I hold to the traditional view that the Trinity's actions with regard to creation are one and undivided, but also propose that something specific can be said of the persons in the unity of their one act.¹⁴

The Spirit as the energy of love in evolutionary emergence

Karl Rahner has made an important contribution to theology in an evolutionary context with his idea of the Creator enabling the active "self-transcendence" of creatures.¹⁵ The effect of God's creative presence to creatures is that it gives them the capacity to become something new, to transcend themselves. It is God who enables this process. But the God-given capacity for emergence truly belongs to the creaturely world. It occurs through all the processes of evolutionary emergence studied in the sciences. Rahner's insight transforms the classical theology of creation, enabling it to function in a new, evolutionary era. I am proposing two modifications of Rahner's theology. First, instead of "self-transcendence" I will speak of the natural world's own "evolutionary emergence." By the relationship with creation, the Creator, then, confers on the creaturely world the capacity for its own evolutionary emergence. Second, I will explore

¹³ Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1977), 255–56.

¹⁴ I have argued this in some detail in my *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004).

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 183–87.

this as a trinitarian theology of the Spirit, envisioning the Spirit as the energy of love enabling the evolutionary emergence of our universe and all its creatures.

The proposal, then, is to see this Spirit as immanently present to all the entities of our universe, enabling creatures to exist, to interact and emerge into the new by means of the laws of nature and the processes discussed in the natural sciences. The capacity for emergence, for increase in complexity through self-organizational processes at work throughout the universe, and for the evolution of life on earth by means of natural selection is interior to creaturely reality. It belongs to the natural world. The capacity for emergence comes from within. At the empirical level of science, the emergence of the new is completely open to explanation at the scientific level.

The Spirit's presence and action operates at a level that entirely transcends the empirical. In *A Brief History of Time*, physicist Stephen Hawking asks a famous question:

Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations. *What is it that breathes fire into the equations* and makes a universe for them to describe? The usual approach of science of constructing a mathematical model cannot answer the questions of why there should be a universe for the model to describe. Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing?¹⁶

Theology does have its response to this question. It sees God as breathing the fire of the Spirit into the equations. It sees the Holy Spirit as breathing life into the laws of nature and the natural processes by which the universe and life emerge. The Spirit can be imaged as the blazing flame that confronts Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3:2), the whirlwind that is the place of God for Job (38:1), and in “the sound of sheer silence” that is the sign of the divine presence for Elijah (1 Kings 19:12). The Spirit is the breath of life of the scriptures (Gen. 2:7; Job 34:14–15; Ps. 33:6; Ps. 104:27–30; Ez. 37:3–10) and the life-giver of the creed.

The Holy Spirit can be understood as the dynamic life-giving presence of God to the whole process of the emergence of a universe, uniting it, and every part of it, to the Word in the relationship of continuous creation. It is this relationship that enables the existence of entities and their becoming. Without this relationship there is no existence and no emergence. The relationship with the Spirit enables both.

Emergence is a creaturely reality, but it occurs because of God's ongoing creative presence in the Spirit. It is God's immediate Trinitarian presence in the life-giving Spirit

¹⁶ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 174.

that enables creatures to exist, to interact and to emerge into the wonderfully new. The Spirit is at work in the emergence of the first atoms of the early universe, the birth of galaxies and stars, the development of our solar system around the young sun, the origin of the first microbial life on earth, the flourishing of life in all its diversity and the emergence of humans with their highly developed brains.

The Risen Christ as divine attractor in evolutionary emergence

What can be said about the relationship between the Word that is made flesh in Jesus and the evolving universe? I find a beginning in a proposal of the Polish philosopher and Archbishop of Lublin, Józef Życiński (1948–2011). He argues that an evolutionary view requires us to go beyond the traditional idea of God as the divine planner. He suggests replacing this image with an analogy taken from the role of an attractor in dynamic systems, so that God is thought of as the “Cosmic Attractor” of evolution.¹⁷

Życiński takes the analogy of the attractor from its use in mathematics and physics. In mathematics it names a set or a point that “attracts” points from its surroundings. In physics it is used to describe the thermodynamic evolution of physical systems, where the system is directed towards a state that appears to be attracting the whole system to itself.¹⁸ Although Życiński does not refer to it, the idea of the attractor is also found in astronomy, where the “Great Attractor” names a part of the universe that exercises a powerful gravitational pull on the Milky Way and thousands of other galaxies – although more recently it has been discovered that much of this gravitational attraction comes from a massive cluster of galaxies beyond the Great Attractor.

I will take up Życiński’s analogy in a trinitarian and Christological way, proposing that the eternal Word of God can be imaged as the divine attractor in the emergence of the universe and of its individual entities, and that the Word made flesh, Jesus crucified and now risen from the dead, can be thought of as the attractor not only of evolutionary emergence but also of the final transformation and fulfilment of the whole creation. It is, of course, important to insist that this attraction is not any kind of physical action, but the divine act that we call God’s creation of a world of creatures. The power of attraction is the bond of divine creative love, the presence and action of the indwelling Spirit. The Holy Spirit, the power of the new, *is* this indwelling attraction, drawing all things to the Word of God.

¹⁷ Józef Życiński, *God and Evolution: Fundamental Questions of Christian Evolutionism* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 161.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

Earlier I discussed Athanasius's view of each creature as existing by partaking of the Word through the indwelling Spirit. In evolutionary terms, Athanasius's idea can be developed so that the Word is understood as the divine attractor, drawing into existence galaxies, stars, and planets, and then, on earth, calling into existence through evolutionary processes all the diverse species of microbes, insects, birds, fish, and animals, including human beings. The divine Word draws each species to its own identity and place in evolutionary emergence. Not only each species, but each member of each species, each sparrow, is held in the divine memory and embraced in the divine love, as a word of the Word, an expression of divine wisdom in our world.

The incarnation of the Word is, then, the incarnation of the attractor of evolutionary emergence. As John's gospel tells us, all things were made through the Word (John 1:3) and this Word of creation is made flesh in our midst (John 1:14). In this line of thought there is a profound connection between the evolutionary emergence of a universe of creatures and what happens in the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Saviour. In the theology of John's gospel, and in the subsequent Christian theology of the incarnation, the whole creation is directed towards this event in some way, and is transformed by it.

In the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, the Word of God is forever flesh, but earthly, bodily reality now transfigured in glory. The risen Christ is the promise and the beginning of new creation for the whole of reality. The incarnate Word, the crucified and risen Christ, can thus be seen as the attractor of the whole creation, not just to its evolutionary existence, but to its transfiguration and fulfilment. And the Holy Spirit is the enabling power at work in this whole process – the very attraction, the drawing power of love, the life-giving presence at work in it all.

To say that the risen Christ is the attractor of the whole process of evolutionary emergence is to speak in evolutionary terms about the promises of a future for all things in Christ that are already contained in the scriptures (Rom. 8:21; Col. 1:19–20; Eph. 1:8–10). One of the advantages of the analogy of the attractor is its non-anthropomorphic character. It points to the fulfilment and transfiguration of a creaturely world far beyond the human. But I see it as having the further advantage that it can also be understood in a personal way as offering meaning for human beings on their journeys. The gospels tell us of a Jesus who attracts great crowds in Galilee, who draws followers to himself, who involves them in a life-long relationship, and calls them to become active participants in his mission on behalf of the kingdom of God. Jesus attracts not only adults but also the children and tells those who would move them away, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14).

In the wisdom books of the Bible, the wisdom of God is presented as an attractive woman, who invites all to the feast she has prepared: “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed” (Prov. 9:5); “Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits” (Sir. 24:19). In the New Testament, Jesus-Wisdom invites to his inclusive table all those in need, including the poor, the sinners, the socially unacceptable. In a particular way, he reaches out to draw to himself all those who struggle in life with weariness, pain, and grief: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28–30).

At the most human level, Jesus-Wisdom draws us human beings to himself in the ups and downs of existence, attracting us, even in our resistances, into our own new, not only in our lives but also, and above all, in our deaths. In John’s gospel, we are told explicitly that it is the Father’s doing when we are drawn to Jesus (6:43–46) and we find Jesus crying out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink” (John 7:37–38). Perhaps the deepest theology of Jesus as attractor is found in the Johannine image of Jesus being lifted up and attracting all to himself as the crucified and risen one: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

In the light of the many other texts that speak of “all things” being transfigured in the risen Christ, it is appropriate to see Jesus lifted up in the cross and resurrection as the divine attractor for the whole universe of creatures in its evolutionary emergence. This theological claim is not warranted by the sciences but by Christian faith in the crucified and risen Christ. It tells a story of hope. In dialogue with evolutionary science, but based on its own sources, it can tell a story of evolutionary emergence as participation in the life of God.

The Costs of Evolution and the Divine Passion of Love

Evolutionary biology has shown us that the emergence of life has costs built into the process. Not only cooperation but also competition, predation, pain, and death are intrinsic to evolution. The costs of evolution are not the result of something gone wrong. They are part of the process of the evolutionary development of life. An evolutionary view of the world intensifies the age-old theological problem of evil. In my view there is no adequate intellectual answer to the problem of evil, but an evolutionary theology must address this issue as best it can. I think three fundamental things can be said. The first and most important has already been discussed, that God

hears the groaning of creation, embraces it in the incarnation and the cross and, in the resurrection, promises creation's deliverance and fulfilment. The second, taken up here, is that God cares passionately about creation and suffers with it in its groaning. The third, discussed in the next section, is that God humbly respects and waits upon the unfolding of creation according to its own dynamisms.

Does God suffer with creatures?

This always difficult question has been unavoidable in theology since the horrors of the second world war, above all since the Holocaust. It is also unavoidable in an evolutionary and ecological theology of creation. There is an important Christian tradition that holds to the utter otherness of God and to God's freedom from suffering. In the context of the costs of evolution, it becomes necessary to ask: Is God free from suffering and, if so, in what sense? Does God suffer with suffering creation and, if so, in what sense?

I see the patristic theology of divine impassibility as defending the biblical concept of the radical otherness of the Creator. Paul Gavriluk points out that the patristic writers were not advocating an absolute impassibility that would deny "God-befitting" emotions such as love to God. Rather they saw impassibility as an apophatic qualifier: "For the orthodox divine impassibility functioned as a kind an apophatic qualifier of all divine emotions and as the marker of the unmistakably divine identity."¹⁹ What are ruled out by the "apophatic qualifier" are characteristics like fickleness, arbitrariness, and inconstancy, and all the emotions and passions unworthy of God: the lust, jealousy, vengeance, and violence attributed to mythological gods and found in human tyrants.

I am not inclined to follow Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar, who in quite different ways push the suffering and the self-emptying of the Word incarnate back into the eternal trinitarian relations, apparently making suffering and self-emptying essential to trinitarian life.²⁰ Is there another way to think about God's suffering with suffering creation? Is there an alternative to the positions of Moltmann and Balthasar, on the one hand, and of those like Thomas Weinandy²¹ and Brian Davies,²² on the other, who

¹⁹ Paul Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 173.

²⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 81; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume V: The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 268.

²¹ Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).

²² Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2006).

oppose the idea of God suffering with creation? I find a helpful resource for different kind of response in the brilliant and influential patristic thinker, Origen of Alexandria (185–254).

The passion of love

Origen defends the divine impassibility and makes it clear that we cannot simply take the Bible literally when it attributes all-too-human emotions to God. But he clearly thinks that we can speak about God suffering for and with creation, in the specific sense that God suffers out of the eternal divine passion of love for creatures. In a beautiful passage from his *Commentary on Ezekiel* he writes,

Let me offer a human example; then, if the Holy Spirit grants it, I will move on to Jesus Christ and God the Father. When I speak to a man and plead with him for some matter, that he should have pity on me, if he is a man without pity, he does not suffer anything from the things I say. But if he is a man of gentle spirit, and not hardened and rigid in his heart, he hears me and has pity upon me. And his feelings are softened by my requests. Understand something of this kind with regard to the Savior. He came down to earth out of compassion for the human race. Having experienced our sufferings even before he suffered on the cross, he condescended to assume our flesh. For if he had not suffered, he would not have come to live on the level of human life. First, he suffered; then he came down and was seen (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16). What is this suffering that he suffered for us? It is *the passion of love (caritatis est passio)*. The Father, too, himself, the God of the universe, “patient and abounding in mercy” (Ps. 103:8) and compassionate does he not in some way suffer? Or do you not know that when he directs human affairs he suffers human suffering? For “the Lord your God bore your ways, as a man bears his son” (Deut 1:31). Therefore God bears our ways, just as the Son of God bears our suffering. The Father himself is not without suffering. When he is prayed to, he has pity and compassion; he suffers *the passion of love (patitur aliquid caritatis)* and comes into those in whom he cannot be, in view of the greatness of his nature, and on account of us he endures human sufferings.²³

Henri De Lubac highlights this text in his discussion of Origen’s view of God, exclaiming that it is “one of the finest pages, without doubt, one of the most humane and the most Christian pages we have from him . . . An astonishing, wonderful text!”²⁴ Beginning with a very human example, Origen imagines himself in dire need and asking for help and mercy from another. He describes two responses, the first of a man with no pity. Such a person, Origen tells us, does not *suffer* anything when hearing the sad

²³ Origen, *Homilies on Ezekiel 6:3*, in *Homilies 1-14 On Ezekiel*, Ancient Christian Writers 62, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (New York: Newman Press, 2010), 92–93. I have modified the translation of the two italicized phrases, highlighting Origen’s declaration that the Word suffers “the passion of love,” and his use of an equivalent expression of the Father.

²⁴ Henri De Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 275.

story. The second is that of a man of gentle spirit, who hears the need of the other and has pity. Origen comments that the first man does not “suffer” anything when hearing the sad story. This person, Origen seems to be thinking, does not feel the pain of another and therefore is not moved by it. He does not “walk in the shoes” of the other. In the second case we find a person who is capable of empathy, who can imagine being in another’s shoes, who has not hardened himself against feeling for the other.

Origen then applies this line of thought to the Saviour. The person who is capable of suffering with another gives us some insight into the Word of God, as one who feels with, who suffers with, suffering creatures. Origen insists that the Word comes to us in the incarnation out of com-*passion*. He makes the point that the Word experiences our sufferings *before* the incarnation. If the Word did not suffer with us, and did not in some way feel our pain, then the Word would not come to us. In his view, then, the motivation for the incarnation is the divine feeling, the divine passion for creatures in their need. The Word comes to us, he tells us, because of the “*the passion of love.*”

What of the Father, the Creator of the universe? Origen is emphatic that the Father, too, is not impassible but, like the Word, suffers with creatures. I have already pointed out that there is an important sense in which Origen thinks of God as being impassible. But in this text, he shows that there is a real (analogous) sense in which the Father suffers with creatures, out of divine compassion, in the divine passion of love. He tells us that when we approach God in prayer, the Father is moved with com-*passion*, and suffers with us. God the Father, like the Word, suffers *the passion of love*. There is, of course, Jesus’s own image of this compassion in his vivid picture of the father in the parable of the prodigal son: “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:16).

There is, then, a divine passion of love for the needy and suffering creation. This passion is, analogically speaking, a suffering with creatures, a divine feeling for human beings in their need and for the whole creation in its groaning. The passion of love is the overflow of the mutual love of the divine persons in the life of the Trinity. It is the eternal love of the divine communion turned towards creatures, the dynamic love that is identical with the divine nature – “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

Paul tells us that the whole creation is groaning, waiting to be liberated from its bondage to decay and to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8: 22). He speaks of us human beings, who already have the Spirit, as groaning while we await our adoption and bodily transformation (Rom. 8:23). He then goes deeper, describing the

Holy Spirit as groaning with us, expressing the longing that is too deep for words (Rom. 8:26).

Origen's theology encourages us to see our universe, and our earth with all its diverse creatures, and the "groaning" of these creatures because of the costs of evolution, as held with the divine passionate love of the Trinity. They are held in a love of the Trinity that embraces them, that loves them with a divine passion of love, and that promises them a future where they will share in the transfiguration of all things in Christ. God is involved with the life and death of each creature, holding every single sparrow in the divine creative and life-giving memory.

The idea of a God who suffers with a divine passion for creatures has practical outcomes. It can lead not only to a response of love for the compassionate God but also a deepening of our own feeling for the community of life. If God is a God of passionate love for creation, then it can be said that our, perhaps occasional, human experiences of deep compassion for other creatures, of longing for their healing and liberation, give us a glimpse of the infinite depths of divine compassion for creatures. Elizabeth Johnson points out that speaking of a God who suffers signals that God is in solidarity with those who suffer in our world, and it can bring not only consolation but also energy for our own participation in the healing of suffering.²⁵ It can provide a basis for hope in God's future for the creation, and thus serve as a basis for ecological practice. It challenges us to the work of the kingdom, to our own compassionate engagement in the overcoming and the relief of suffering.

A Humble God Who Waits upon Creaturely Processes

The costs of evolution raise questions not only about God's suffering with us, but also about divine power. Christians confess in the creed that God is "almighty." They understand God as the one whose immense power and love not only create and sustain the universe but will bring it to its fulfilment. What needs further discussion is the nature of this divine power. The central source for a Christian theology of divine power can be found only in the life and teaching of Jesus and its culmination in his death and resurrection. The cross reveals divine power as self-emptying, limitless love. The resurrection proclaims that this love is the most powerful thing in the universe, promising life in its fullness to the whole creation. But the God revealed in the cross is a defenceless and humble God.

²⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 266–67.

The defencelessness of Jesus and the Spirit

The power of the cross is a power-in-love. For Christians, the absolutely vulnerable human being on the cross is the revelation of the nature of this love. It is hard to imagine a more extreme picture of defenceless love than that of a tortured, naked human being pinned to a cross and left to die. To believe in God as all-powerful is to believe in the omnipotence of divine love and in this love's eschatological victory over sin, violence, brokenness, and death. The incarnation and the cross reveal a God of divine vulnerability in love, while resurrection points to the power of this love to heal and save. In the extreme vulnerability of the cross we do not find the loss of divinity, or the absence of divinity, but the true revelation of God.²⁶ The vulnerable self-giving love of Christ gives expression in our finite, creaturely world to the divine nature. This love manifest in Jesus' life and death and culminating in the liberating and transforming power of the resurrection is the true icon of God.

In his later work, Edward Schillebeeckx wrote of the defencelessness and vulnerability of God in the cross of Jesus. In one of his essays he outlines divine vulnerability at three different levels: God's defencelessness in creation, God's defencelessness in Jesus Christ, and the defencelessness of the Holy Spirit in the church and in the world.²⁷ He chooses to speak of the defencelessness of God rather than of divine powerlessness, because powerlessness and power contradict one another, whereas defencelessness and power need not. He says, "We know from experience that those who make themselves vulnerable can sometimes disarm evil!"²⁸ God was not powerless when Jesus was hung on the cross, but God was "defenseless and vulnerable as Jesus was vulnerable."²⁹

The Holy Spirit empowers the church community to be the effective sign of Christ to the world. The Spirit breathes through the wider human community drawing it to life, to justice, to peace, to love, and to care for the rest of God's creation. But the Spirit of God is present in the world as defenceless love, a love that does not overpower, but depends on human participation. The Christian community at Ephesus is told, "[D]o not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30). It would seem that the Spirit is grieved when the church fails to listen to the signs of the times in the light of the Word, and refuses to be open

²⁶ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 194.

²⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *For the Sake of the Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 88–102.

²⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 90.

²⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 128.

to God. And the Spirit is grieved when humanity fails to respond to the needs of the poor and to issues like global climate change and the increasing loss of biodiversity that confront the community of life on Earth.

In God's act of creation, Schillebeeckx sees a kind of divine yielding on God's part, as God makes room for the other. When God creates humans and chooses them as covenant partners, this partnership involves freedom and initiative on both sides. In giving creative space to human beings, God makes God's self vulnerable. Schillebeeckx says of God's act of creation that it is "an adventure, full of risks." The creation of human beings is a "blank cheque which God alone guarantees." By creating human beings with their finite, free wills, God freely renounces power, and this makes God "to a high degree 'dependent' on human beings and thus vulnerable."³⁰

The humble God who waits upon creation

Athanasius sees God in creation and incarnation as self-humbling. He speaks of divine "condescension." This word does not have its contemporary meaning of patronizing behaviour, but refers rather to the "gratuitous descending love of God."³¹ God comes down to us in order to be with creatures. Reflecting on the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:4–8, Athanasius insists that the Word, far from being self-promoting or growing into glory or divinity, is actually self-emptying and self-humbling.³² Christ is the descending, self-humbling God. This self-humbling is for the sake of our advancement and our deification – "The Son of God humbled himself so that in his humbling we may be able to advance."³³

The English adjective "humble" translates the Latin word *humilis*. This word is derived from the word *humus*, which refers to earth, soil, or the ground. In its origin, then, the word "humble" can mean "from the earth," "down to earth," or "grounded." In following Philippians 2:8 and Athanasius in speaking of God as humble, I am referring to God's capacity to overcome the otherness between Creator and creature, to meet us where we are, and to be with the whole creation where it is – in process. God's transcendence is not something that makes God distant. It enables the unthinkable nearness of a grounded, down to earth, God – a God not only of distant quasars, but also a God of this handful of topsoil with its billions of microbes.

³⁰ Ibid., 90.

³¹ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 55.

³² Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians*, 1:40.

³³ Ibid., 3:52.

The cross reveals that the way divine omnipotence works is in humility. There is every reason to believe the same power-in-love that characterizes the incarnation, and the cross and resurrection, also characterizes the divine relationship of continuous creation. If this is so, then God can be understood as creating in a way that respects the finite limits and the proper integrity of natural processes and the freedom of human beings. God waits upon the proper unfolding of these processes and upon human freedom

By using the language of waiting upon, I do not mean to suggest that God is passive. There is a waiting upon another that is creative and powerful – but not overpowering – in the active, nurturing way a parent waits upon a child growing into independence, or the way a lover or friend waits upon the other. This kind of waiting upon the other can allow the other the time it takes to flourish and to possess his or her own integrity. The nature of divine love is such that God works with creaturely limits and waits upon them with infinite patience. By creating in love, God freely accepts the limitations of working with finite creatures.

God was with Jesus in his cross, holding him in love, and in the Spirit, transforming failure and death into the source of healing and transformation. Based on the true nature of God revealed in Christ, it becomes clear that in creating a universe of creatures, God's love is of a kind that respects and works with the limits of creaturely processes. The power of the triune God is a power-in-love, a divine capacity to respect the proper autonomy and independence of creatures, to work with them patiently, and to bring them to their fulfillment.

God achieves divine purposes, not by over-riding the laws of nature, but by a power-in-love that works in and through natural processes. God's power is of a kind that waits upon the otherness of creatures, which respects the integrity of human freedom and the *autopoiesis* of self-organizing natural processes. The triune God accompanies creation, delighting in its beauty and its diversity, suffering with it with the divine passion of love, responding to it creatively, and bringing all to its liberation and transfiguration. God's action, in both creation and salvation, is humble and defenceless, but powerful in the capacity to bring healing and life to the whole creation. This is a God who calls human beings to participation, to share the divine passion of love for the diverse creatures that make up the community of life, and to develop a lifestyle and practices that express this passion for earth and all its creatures.