

## Editorial Foreword

### The Development of Christian Theology on the Relationship between Nature and Humanity

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With the rise of environmental protection movements in the twentieth century, many scholars have argued that Christianity has had a significant negative impact on modern industrial civilization through its “anthropocentric” tendencies. A landmark event in this context was the “ecological protest” of the 1960s, which directly targeted the Christian doctrine of creation as a historical root cause of environmental crisis.<sup>①</sup> The doctrines of creation and providence, central to Christian theology, are the result of the historical integration of Hebrew faith and Greco-Roman philosophy, reflecting the dominant worldview and life philosophy of the ancient and medieval West.<sup>②</sup> However, in modern times, these doctrines have encountered new issues in the relationship between theology and science. It is important to note that Christianity has not always been “anthropocentric”. For instance, modern Christian thinkers have offered reflections and alternative interpretations. The Christian understanding of human nature is inseparable from the narrative of God’s creation of humanity and must be understood within the context of the relationship between nature and human beings.

One of the modern Christian theories on the relationship between

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<sup>①</sup> LIANG Weixia, “Ecological Theology: Reflections and Reconstruction of the Relationship between Humans and Nature,” *Academic Monthly*, no. 6 (2010): 51–55.

<sup>②</sup> ZHANG Qingxiong, *Christian Theological Categories: A Historical and Comparative Cultural Study* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2003), 136–177, 208.

“nature and humanity” is “ecological theology”. Among the pioneers of this concept was the American process theologian John Cobb Jr., who opposed “anthropocentrism” and argued that the relationship between human and nature is intrinsic to human existence. This necessitates a reinterpretation of the creation narrative. Nature has both instrumental and intrinsic value for human beings.<sup>①</sup> Another representative scholar is the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who acknowledged that “the ecological crisis is indeed caused by Western ‘technological civilization’.”<sup>②</sup> He emphasized that this crisis is not merely ecological or technological but also a moral, religious, and crisis of faith in the West.<sup>③</sup> Thus, he proposed that modern Christian theology could embrace the idea of a community of life between human beings and nature.<sup>④</sup> Scholars have summarized that “Moltmann’s ecological thought breaks through the traditional church’s main mode of dealing with the ecological environment, which is neither a simple partnership model, nor a stewardship model, nor a domination model, but a fully harmonious living community between human and nature.”<sup>⑤</sup> However, these “ecological theologians” all acknowledge, in some a way or another, that to address the contemporary issues, the traditional Christian theology of the relationship between “nature and humanity” - especially the doctrine of creation - needs to be retraced and rethought of.

This special issue, focusing on the relationship between “nature and humanity”, introduces the historical background of the development of the Christian doctrine of creation. Scholars have been invited to write about representative thinkers such as Augustine, Eriugena, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Aquinas, and finally, the history of research on modern intelligent design arguments and ecological theology in the Chinese academic community is

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<sup>①</sup> The introduction to Cobb’s thought is from LI Wei, “A Preliminary Exploration of Cobb’s Process Ecological Theology,” *Journal of Inner Mongolia Agricultural University* (Social Science Edition), no. 1 (2012): 286–288.

<sup>②</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt*, trans. ZENG Nianyue (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2003), 97.

<sup>③</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>④</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung Ökologische Schöpfungslehre.*, trans. WEI Renlian et al. (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2002), 5, 22, 101.

<sup>⑤</sup> LI Lei, “The Religious Roots of the Ecological Crisis: A Discussion of Moltmann’s Ecological Thought,” *Studies in Dialectics of Nature*, no. 9 (2004): 16–18, 35.

discussed.

Chen Yuehua's paper provides a concise introduction to the trajectory of Christian creation theology from classical to modern times using a genetic perspective and methodology. The paper first traces the key texts of the Christian doctrine of creation in the Bible's Book of Genesis. God created humans in His image and granted them dominion over nature, making humans "stewards" rather than "owners" of nature. Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden as a keeper, and after eating the fruit of knowledge, he was punished with a bond to the land, highlighting the close interdependence of human existence on nature. This original narrative constructs the foundational framework of the relationship between human and nature in Christian creation theology, characterized by mutual constraints. In the Patristic Age, Augustine viewed nature as a created entity and symbol of God's will, diminishing the intrinsic value of nature but laying the basic interpretive paradigm for medieval theology's understanding of nature as "the Book of God". In the medieval period, Aquinas integrated Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology, reinforcing the notion of "God as the legislator of nature", emphasizing the subjectivity of nature's inherent laws and advocating the rational use of nature, which influenced the subsequent development of natural science. After the Enlightenment, with the progress of science and the rise of mechanism, the attitude that humans could understand and conquer nature through reason became popular. In modern times, the complex relationship between Christian creationism and evolutionism has emerged, with ecological theology arising in this context to respond to the criticism that Christian "anthropocentrism", which emphasizes human dominion over nature, has led to ecological crises. As modern people involved in this crisis, we need to reflect on the historical origins, modern challenges, and transformational trends of creationism to find theoretical resources for solving problems. Marxist views of nature can correct the idea of human domination over nature. Traditional Chinese cultural thoughts such as "the unity of heaven and human" (天人合一) provide a new perspective for the development of Chinese ecological ethics, Chinese eco-theology and cross-cultural interaction with the Christian doctrine of creation.

The theoretical origins of ecological theology must be traced back to

the foundational stage of the formation of Christian theology, the “Patristic Age”. Moltmann has argued that “it is often the early traditions of Christian theology that provide the most creative ideas for a revolution in our attitude towards nature.”<sup>①</sup> He suggests that we need to re-examine the ancient questions in the Christian doctrine of creation and engage in dialogue with pioneers such as Augustine to unearth illustrative materials and summarize intellectual patterns.

This issue includes Hu Aixin’s paper “From ‘Rationes Seminales’ to ‘Ratio Causalis’”, which focuses on Augustine’s innovative theoretical contributions to the interpretation of Genesis. Augustine faced the problem of the apparent contradiction between the first narrative (1:26-28) and the second narrative (2:7) of God’s creation of humans in Genesis. This contradiction, for example, involves the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib in the second narrative, which seems to conflict with the simultaneous creation mentioned in the first narrative, creating a tension between “simultaneous creation” and “continuous creation”. He employed a temporal dialectic of “then” and “now”: “then” refers to the pre-set potential and causal aspects of created things in the Word of God, while “now” refers to their continuous actualization in the temporal sequence according to the divine will. Thus, she described the first narrative as God’s creation of the potential nature of all things—the “seed reasons” —while the second narrative represents the “actuality” of the unfolding of all things according to the seed reasons in history, including the specific process of human creation. This interpretation not only maintains the uniqueness and completeness of God’s creation but also provides a unified framework for the seemingly contradictory creation narratives in Genesis. Augustine further introduced the concept of “causal reasons”, which is prioritized over “seed reasons” in creation theory. This concept indicates that “creation out of nothing” is an act of God’s will, a free decision, and a transcendent principle. Thus, Augustine achieved a paradigm shift from the classical Greco-Roman philosophy to the “theoretical center of the world view” of Christian creationism. Unlike the monistic cosmos-teleology of Stoic natural philosophy, he established a Christian monotheistic creationist-teleology centered on God’s action. Natural history becomes the

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<sup>①</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung Ökologische Schöpfungslehre*, 3-4.

continuous manifestation of God's will in the history of redemption. In this theoretical picture, the essence of natural things is a "symbol" pointing to God's will, the transcendent divine cause—hence, they do not have intrinsic value in themselves. The rational order of natural things is the effect of the causal reasons bestowed by God at creation. Therefore, human understanding of nature is only through symbols to recognize the divine truth, and human beings should not be "slaves of symbol" captivated by material beings.

Since the Middle Ages, Latin Christian creationism has largely accepted Augustine's linear view of time and the idea that God reveals Himself in history. The divergence between Eastern and Western Christian interpretive traditions has also increased. Moltmann believes that in the Middle Ages, the doctrine of creation and cosmology began to separate, and modern science successfully discarded the medieval cosmology, so that creationism in later times became a matter of personal faith.<sup>①</sup>

Two papers in this issue deal with the medieval situation. Nie Jiansong's paper "Eriugena's 'On Nature' and the Latinization of Pseudo-Dionysius" discusses an example of the transition from Patristic to medieval scholastic philosophy, showing the complexity and solutions in the early medieval Christian theology's integration of Greek philosophy and the traditions of Eastern and Western Fathers. Eriugena's creationism is based on Augustine's *Literal Commentary on Genesis* and incorporates the angelology of Pseudo-Dionysius to fill the gaps in the former, attempting to construct a divine creation framework transcending the temporal dimension. However, he selectively used the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, which can be seen as a creative misreading of Eastern Patristic thought, also reflecting the differences between Eastern and Western Christian traditions in their views of nature and creation. Pseudo-Dionysius's stance on creation is not close to Augustine's but is closer to that of the Eastern Father Gregory of Nyssa, who views creation as the orderly unfolding of divine wisdom in time rather than instantaneous completion. This metaphysical framework, which distinguishes form (spirit) from matter (generation), is clearly influenced by Neoplatonism. From Nie Jiansong's article, we can see that Eriugena's non-

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<sup>①</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung Ökologische Schöpfungslehre*, 49.

temporal interpretation of the “six days of creation” trended to reinforce the Western Christian symbolic understanding of nature because, in his view, nature is not a self-unfolding system within time.

Feng Zilian’s paper “The Design of Nature” discusses Aquinas, a representative medieval philosopher, as one of the earliest important proponents of the Christian Argument from Design (also known as teleological argument). From the previous tradition of creationism, we can see that Christian theologians generally regarded the world and its creatures as the creation of a wise God, designed with intelligence and purpose. This perspective essentially constitutes a form of “design argument”. In simple terms, natural things often move in a regular and purposeful manner, exhibiting a certain finality in their motion. However, Aquinas denied that natural things have intrinsic purposes of their own, arguing instead that these purposes are arranged by a transcendent Creator. Thus, in his view, both human beings and nature are pre-set in God’s harmonious design blueprint, all serving to fulfill God’s grand plan. Within this “God-human-nature” structure, both human beings and nature are subordinate to God, making it difficult to argue that it is purely anthropocentric.

Reflecting on the criticism from ecological ethics last century that Christian creationism has fostered a domineering attitude towards nature due to human arrogance, we might suggest that the modernity since the Enlightenment has, in a sense, concealed the “God” who loomed over humanity in the Middle Ages (as Nietzsche famously declared, “God is dead”), thereby fueling human claims to the right of dominion over nature. Nature has simultaneously been “disenchanted”; it is no longer a creation imbued with sacred significance and closely related to human salvation but rather an object existing by its own laws, awaiting human to explore and conquer. Therefore, it is not accurate to simply attribute the “anthropocentrism” that led to the ecological crisis to the ecological thought of ancient and medieval Christianity as its direct descendant. Instead, this tendency is more appropriately seen as a product of the complex interplay of the Enlightenment, science, and capitalist modes of production in Western civilization.

One of most direct challenges that Christian creationism has faced in modern times is Darwin’s theory of evolution. However, the relationship



between the two is not as straightforward as being mutually exclusive or replacing each other. Feng Zilian's paper discusses the evolution of modern versions of creationism, such as the design argument. The core issue of the design argument, which has evolved from the "watchmaker analogy" to "intelligent design", is how to explain the complexity of biological entities. The modern challenge faced by the design argument is the deconstruction of its core logic by Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* provided a competing explanation—that biological complexity can emerge through the cumulative process of variation, inheritance, and environmental selection without the need for an external intelligent designer. Natural selection is purposeless, and even if there were a designer, he would be blind. Despite these controversies, the real intention of modern proponents of intelligent design is to package Christian creationism as a scientific theory that can replace evolutionism and be introduced into the public school curriculum. They argue that the presupposition of evolutionism—that natural phenomena can only be explained by natural causes—is just as much a matter of belief as the design argument's appeal to God. Clearly, the debate between the two sides in the Western public education domain is far from over, and the controversy will continue.

As exemplified by Cobb and Moltmann, ecological theology is a product of Christian theology's response to the criticism of creationism. Zhang Haoran's paper, "Theoretical Mechanisms and Paradigm Shifts in the Localization of Ecological Theology in China", introduces the rise and evolution of ecological theology research in the Chinese academic community and presents a new perspective for Chinese scholars to understand the reconstruction of the relationship between human and nature in Christian thought. This academic history has gone through a process from the translation and introduction of Western theories to the exploration of localization in the Chinese context, but its core issues have always revolved around the interaction between Christian creationism, Chinese cultural traditions, and modern social transformation. Early discussions focused on the relationship between "humans and nature" in the Christian tradition, criticizing dualism and anthropocentrism, and emphasizing the sacredness of nature as a creation and the responsibility of humans as stewards.

Zhang Haoran concludes by calling for the Chinese church and academic community to deeply integrate Chinese cultural resources and social realities, especially the ideas of the “unity of heaven, nature, and humanity” to propose a subjectively conscious, contextually situated Chinese ecological theology.

We hope that this special issue can present to readers a more detailed and original intellectual landscape from Chinese young scholars, focusing on the exploration of the relationship between nature and humanity in the Christian intellectual tradition since the Patristic Age, including its reception and influence history. This includes discussions on the ancient and modern interpretations of the doctrine of creation, the value of natural world presented in the classics, the essence of human nature, Christian ecological views, and so on. We are grateful for the support of the “Journal for the Study of Christian Culture” for this special issue and thank our colleagues in the academic community for their contributions. We hope that this concentrated presentation of academic achievements will serve as a catalyst to draw readers’ attention once again to the modern significance of the age-old question of the relationship between nature and humanity.