



## O Magnum Mysterium? Eco-theology at the foot of the Cross

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### Abstract

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis urges not just a renewal of respect for creation but also a *metanoia* in our attitude to the created world. This article is a response to the Pontiff's challenge, exploring how a distinctively 'modern' approach to creation arose in the late nineteenth century which still influences our attitudes today. As those attitudes arose, however, the article argues that Christian thinkers were able to articulate other approaches, which are referred to as 'doing eco-theology at the foot of the Cross'. The article explores these views and their implications in shaping a Christian response to the present ecological crisis within which we find ourselves. In particular, it concentrates on the interpretations of 'nature' in the writings of the German atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and his exact English Jesuit contemporary Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) who were both working at the dawn of the 'modern' view of 'nature' and creation.

### Keywords

Nature, Creation, Friedrich Nietzsche, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Neo-Platonism, St Augustine of Hippo

### Introduction

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis urges not just a renewal of respect for creation but also a *metanoia* in our attitude to the created world. As he puts it:

Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal. (*Laudato Si'*: 202)

This article comes as a response to the Pontiff's challenge, exploring how a distinctively 'modern' approach to creation arose in the late nineteenth century, which still influences our attitudes today. As those attitudes arose, however, I shall argue that other Christian thinkers were able to perceive other approaches which I have called 'doing eco-theology at the foot of the Cross'. We shall explore all of these views and their implications in shaping a Christian response to the present ecological crisis within which we find ourselves.

### 'Civilisation as Recently Invented'

The decade 1865–1875 was a busy one. In many ways we could argue that the world as we perceive it today, especially our attitude to 'nature' and creation, arose at this time. From a theological point of view it is significant as being the decade in which the Catholic Church met in ecumenical council for the first time since Trent. The First Vatican Council ran from 1868–70 and never, in fact, officially closed – this only happened at the onset of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. It was the first council in modern times that was attended by Catholic bishops from outside Europe (although invited, the Orthodox bishops did not attend). From the perspective of this article, the Council is significant as it gave the first magisterial statement on the nature of creation, especially *creatio ex nihilo*. As it stated in Chapter One of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*, promulgated on 24 April 1870:

Since [God] is one, singular, completely simple and unchangeable spiritual substance, he must be declared to be in reality and in essence, distinct from the world, supremely happy in himself and from himself, and inexpressibly loftier than anything besides himself which either exists or can be imagined. This one true God, by his goodness and almighty power, not with the intention of increasing his happiness, nor indeed of obtaining happiness, but in order to manifest his perfection by the good things which he bestows on what he creates, by an absolutely free plan, together from the beginning of time brought into being from nothing the twofold created order, that is the spiritual and the bodily, the angelic and the earthly, and thereafter the human which is, in a way, common to both since it is composed of spirit and body. (*Dei Filius*: 10)

This formulation of the relationship of the Creator with his creation, produced *ex nihilo*, is contrasted in the Prologue to the document with other 'modern' views that the Council treated with suspicion and condemnation:

There has come into being and spread far and wide throughout the world that doctrine of rationalism or naturalism, – utterly opposed to the Christian religion, since this is of supernatural origin, – which spares no effort

to bring it about that Christ, who alone is our lord and saviour, is shut out from the minds of people and the moral life of nations. Thus they would establish what they call the rule of simple reason or nature. The abandonment and rejection of the Christian religion, and the denial of God and his Christ, has plunged the minds of many into the abyss of pantheism, materialism and atheism, and the consequence is that they strive to destroy rational nature itself, to deny any criterion of what is right and just, and to overthrow the very foundations of human society. (*Dei Filius*: Prologue)

We do not have to look far to find the kinds of philosophies that the Council fathers were condemning in that fervent decade. After the publication of his controversial *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, the English biologist, Charles Darwin, was at work on an even more contentious sequel, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, which would appear in 1871. Here he famously set out to show how the human species, contrary to the decrees of the First Vatican Council, were on a continuum with the animal world and showed marked similarities in their natures, especially with regards to sexual selection. Our modern biological, genetic view of human evolution and the place of humans in creation arises here.

As Darwin charted the rise of humanity as a biological species at his home in Downe House, Kent, in central London, his German contemporary, Karl Marx, sat day after day in the British Library Reading Room charting the growth of humanity's motivations and history from an economic, and later social, perspective. Volume One of his ground-breaking *Das Kapital* had appeared in 1867 to be followed by Volume Two in 1885. His native Germany was equally in turmoil as Chancellor Otto von Bismarck sought to weld a German *Reich* from the various minor principalities and fiefdoms scattered around Central Europe. To this end the so-called 'Falk Laws' or *Maigesetze* had been enacted from 1873 to 1875 leading to restrictions on Catholic privileges and powers in public life – Jesuits were banned from German territory as were Catholic schools. This followed hard on Bismarck's great military success during the Franco-Prussian war (1870–71), the outbreak of which had led to the premature cessation of deliberations at the Vatican Council.

A world, then, not unlike our own, in turmoil: religiously, scientifically, economically, socially, and militarily and, as I am suggesting here, was the blazing crucible out of which so many of our present-day attitudes to nature, creation, and the world around us arise.

Accordingly, for the rest of this article we shall examine two conflicting attitudes to 'nature' that arose at that time. Two approaches, I will argue, of relevance as we take up Pope Francis's challenge to initiate a present-day *metanoia* in our relationship to creation. For our two authors, one German, one English, sensed the change of the late nineteenth century world, the Vatican Council's world of 'pantheism,

materialism and atheism’, and reacted to it in quite distinctive and instructive ways for our own contemporary response to the challenges facing us today.

### The (Re-) Birth of Dionysos

The first of our interlocutors is the German philosopher and man of letters, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). If ever the Vatican Council wanted a prime example of the ‘pantheism, materialism and atheism’ they condemned then they could do no worse than cite the works of the Leipziger. Effectively by-passing the findings of the Enlightenment and German nineteenth century Idealism, the young philosopher had forged a path back to what he saw as the heart and *Ursprung* of European culture: ‘the Greeks’ and ancient Attic culture. These revolutionary thoughts exploded onto the European scene in his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, which was published in 1872 in direct response to the upheavals of Bismarck’s militarism. This book, with all the enthusiasms and incoherencies of a young man in his late twenties, sets the tone for what Nietzsche would later present in similar keys but never again with quite the same melody.<sup>1</sup>

Nietzsche begins the *Birth*, and indeed his public writing career, with his famous distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian. Famous, and influential, but often misrepresented, to the Anglo-American mind at least. For many in this culture their interpretation is drawn from artworks such as Thomas Mann’s novella, *Death in Venice*, later remade and represented by Luigi Visconti in the 1971 film where the fictionalized Aschenbach is changed from a writer to a musician (loosely based on Gustav Mahler) followed by the 1973 Benjamin Britten opera, again of the same name, but this time following more closely Mann’s narrative.<sup>2</sup> In all three *Kunstwerke*, Aschenbach’s struggle between sensuality and intellectual control is represented by the ‘battle’ between Dionysos and Apollo that he experiences towards the end of the novella in a dream.

Yet, I say ‘misrepresented’ as the legendary ‘battle’ between the two forces is not what Nietzsche describes in the *Birth*. Rather, Nietzsche gives a more subtle typology, which begins with the passage at the outset of the *Birth* where he associates the two deities with the

<sup>1</sup> I shall cite here from the German text contained in *Friedrich Nietzsche Werke in Zwei Bänden* (Munich, 1990), hereafter GW, and the English translation of S. Whiteside, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (London, 1993), hereafter BT.

<sup>2</sup> The Dionysian/Apollonian trope is a common feature of early twentieth century culture. As well as the examples cited, we can reference E.M. Forster’s 1902 short-story, *The Story of a Panic* and Karol Szymanowski’s 1918 opera *King Roger*.

difference between the realms of dream (*Traum* – Apollo) and intoxication (*Rausche* – Dionysos):

To reach a better understanding of these two drives (*Triebe*), let us first conceive them as the separate art worlds (*Kunstwelten*) of dream (*Traum*) and intoxication (*Rausche*), two physiological manifestations (*physiologischen Erscheinungen*) which contrast similarly to the Apollonian and the Dionysian. (BT: 14; GW: 19)

Nietzsche's opening – much criticized and much misunderstood – is significant from the perspective he buries in the first line:

We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics when we not only through logical comprehension (*logischen Einsicht*) but through the immediate certainty of view (*unmittelbaren Sicherheit der Anschauung*) have come to see that continuous development of art as it arises from the duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. (BT: 14; GW: 19)

Taking his cues from Kant's intuition and Schopenhauer's *Wille*, Nietzsche will no longer rely upon logical comprehension but rather enlarges his perspective to embrace the 'immediate certainty' of the *Anschauung* that will inform his discourse. Having chosen his path he is clear that the best way is thus not simply to rely on the means of logical discourse but, like the Greeks before him, to embody the *Anschauung* through the mythic figures of Dionysos and Apollo.

With these passages we could argue that Nietzsche closes the period of the Enlightenment and ushers in our own world – the 'modern' (or perhaps better 'psychological') world that seeks to comprehend the world not by reason but the mythic figures, dreams, drives, shapes, and forms of the 'underworld': more familiar to us moderns as Freud's 'unconscious'.<sup>3</sup> The *Gestalten* he will play with in the *Birth* are those of Apollo and Dionysos (amongst others) but what is notable, and what had such a profound effect on the clinicians who would follow him, is the use to which he puts these *Gestalten* and *Geheimlehren*. They will from now on sketch out the drives of the soul (Freud's *Trieben*) as we go beyond reason to find the source of being itself. This reason, this enlightenment, will later be characterized by Nietzsche in his text as the Socratic, the 'man' of reason who will seek out the answers to the *mysterion* through the use of reason, logic, and dialectic alone. Yet, *pace* Mann, Britten, and Visconti, the true conflict does not therefore exist between Apollo and Dionysos, but rather between the mythic world view, the world seen through the eyes of the deities (this he will term

<sup>3</sup> Although reluctant to acknowledge his debt to Nietzsche it is clear that the psychological schema that Nietzsche developed in works such as *The Birth* were heavily influential on both Sigmund Freud's and Carl Jung's emerging notion of 'unconscious drives'. For more on this topic see Peter M. Tyler, *The Pursuit of the Soul: Psychoanalysis, Soul-making and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2016).

the tragic view) and the later Socratic dialectic that seeks to end the triumph of the tragic in the Greek world view.

Immature the *Birth* may be, but Nietzsche certainly achieved what he set out to accomplish in this work. He had *shifted the ground*, upon which the West assessed itself and its claims to truth. From the Socratic enthronement of reason, Nietzsche had introduced the possibility of a new world view (*Anschauung*) that would recalibrate our view of ourselves. In Freud's words, we would no longer be masters in our own houses, but rather we would have to pay new attention to the drives that arose from the cellars of our personalities.

### The Symbolic Dream-Picture

So Nietzsche's view of creation, and nature, is at once darker, and more brutal, than the suppressed benign force of the Enlightenment thinkers. The Apollonian and Dionysian thus become for Nietzsche representatives of '*Kunst Triebe*' (Artistic Drives) that 'spring from nature itself' (BT: 18/GW: 22) without the mediation of the artist. According to the *Birth*, they become manifest through two means – the immediacy of dream and the ecstasy of intoxication. Neither is concerned with intellectual accomplishments or artistic culture (in the case of the dream) or indeed individuality (in the case of ecstasy) which would rather perhaps destroy the individual in the collective destiny of the whole.

The Dionysian, second cousin to Freud's later *Id* and Unconscious, arises from the 'innermost Ground of nature', like the spring, full of *Wollust* and green (BT: 17). It will 'tear down the veil of Maya' as it leads to the Primal One-ness – *der Ur-eine*. Being touched by it:

Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art... the artistic power of the whole of nature reveals itself to the supreme gratification of the primal One-ness amidst the paroxysms of intoxication. (BT: 18)

Yet, rather than threatening the individual, Nietzsche sees what Freud would later term 'the return of the repressed' in the birth of Greek tragedy (and in his own time, later repudiated, in the birth of Wagnerian music drama). For Tragedy (and by implication the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*) reveals the 'symbolic dream-image' to ourselves.

This is the 'symbolic dream picture', the archetypes or 'Ur-bildern' of the self. It is important to stress the significance of these symbolic dream pictures of the archetypes conveyed, according to Nietzsche, through the tragic medium. Dionysos as portrayed in the *Kunstwerke* of Mann, Britten, Visconti, *et al* mentioned above is a rampant destroyer of the cool, Apollonian intellect. Yet Nietzsche is at pains throughout the *Birth* to distinguish the raw destructive energy of Dionysos, what he calls the *Hexentrank* – the Witch's Brew (BT: 20)

full of ‘*Wollust und Grausamkeit*’, (the same witch’s brew that leads King Pentheus to be torn apart limb from limb by his mother and his attendants in Euripides’ *Bacchae*), and its *symbolic* mediation of the drive through the medium of tragedy. In this distinction lies the birth of the twentieth century psychological therapies. As Freud and Jung both recognized (how far they may have been influenced by Nietzsche is a moot point), the destructive drives are best dealt with by means of the mediation of the formulations of the therapeutic counselling room – thus obviating the expression of these gruesome drives in the witch’s brew of unmediated expression. In Nietzsche’s word, such a mediation ‘recalls (the deadly acts) as medicines recall deadly poisons’ (BT: 20). Thus, the psychological therapies, following Nietzsche’s formulation, act as homeopathic drugs in recalling the source of poison itself.

Nietzsche’s ‘new world of symbols’ (*neue Welt der Symbole*) (BT: 21) can thus helpfully be identified with the formulas and arts of the emerging discipline of psychoanalysis. This includes, following Nietzsche’s prescription ‘*die ganze leibliche Symbolik*’ – the whole symbol of the body made manifest in rhythm, movement, and dance:

Not only the symbolic of the mouth, the face and the word but the fullness of all limbs in the rhythmic movement of the language of dance.  
(BT: 21; GW: 24/25)

In the *Birth* Nietzsche is ostensibly talking about the Attic discovery of tragedy as a means of channelling the destructive Dionysian ‘natural urges’ in society. Yet it is not too far-fetched to see his account as mirroring parallel developments in nineteenth century European society as I have done here. The full title of Nietzsche’s book, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* reveals his specific intent of relating the birth of the Attic arts to the contemporary artistic labours of Richard Wagner as he sought to establish a home for his *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Second Empire German society as Nietzsche makes clear towards the end of the *Birth* with his explicit references to *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*. Similarly, as suggested at the beginning of this article, we can see the *Birth* as mirroring the concomitant movement in late nineteenth century European anthropology from the Kantian rule of reason to something more ‘rich and strange’. My argument being here that this ‘strangeness’ would ultimately find its home in the psychological therapies that today hold such a central place in our contemporary anthropology. The unquestioning acceptance of the ‘Nietzschean paradigm’ comes, as I suggest, at a price. First we need to question if this is the only way of understanding human anthropology, secondly we need to question whether there is not space for alternative views of human nature that lead away from the over-dominant Nietzschean model, especially as practised in the psychological therapies.

Nietzsche, as we have seen, sees the life force of creation as an unstoppable force of nature that is dammed at our peril. The Greek

genius, in his eyes, had been to amalgamate the Dionysian and Apollonian life forces in the great sacred act of the tragic drama. This had been sadly perverted by the growth of the Socratic dialectic and the cult of reason.

### The Platonic ‘World Soul’

Thus, at the dawn of our modern world, we have humanity’s relationship to nature depicted as a struggle with an irrepressible cauldron – Nietzsche’s *Hexentrank*. Gone is the Enlightenment order of Newton and Kant; we are in a life and death struggle with forces that threaten to destroy us all.

Each week I have to cross the Thames by footbridge for work. On Maundy Thursday 2019 my path was stopped by the Extinction Rebellion Carnival that had been set up on the bridge. As I waited to be allowed passage so that I could attend the Maundy Thursday liturgies in London, I watched the new liturgy unfolding before me. Nietzsche would have enjoyed it: all the carnivalesque of the Dionysian was manifest in pink balloons, ecstatic dancing, gender fluidity, and luxurious costumery. ‘Here’, I thought to myself ‘is Nietzsche’s Dionysian – returning once again.’ A return to the *Wollust*, the *Hexentrank*, who can say? But what is certain is that our society, faced with the uncertainties of a rapidly changing climate, is really unsure how to react and much of that insecurity surely arises from our alienation from nature, and with the concept of nature itself.

Yet, it has not always been so. Returning to Nietzsche’s Greeks, and specifically Plato, we see a harmonious view of creation and nature distinctly lacking in our own responses. In works such as the *Phaedo*, what is striking to modern eyes is how he does not set limits on soul/*psyche* to individual persons but rather that *nous*/mind can permeate all the cosmos and in many respects our individual soul is but an aspect of the larger ‘World-Soul’.

In this respect, of all the Platonic dialogues, the *Timaeus* could arguably be said to be the one that would have had the most influence upon the early Christian era, not least because of the sophisticated elaboration of the metaphysics of the relationship that he maps there between the individual *psyche* and the World Soul. These characteristics make it also one of the strangest to contemporary readers as the metaphysical world described is so alien to that of our post-scientific outlook. In contrast to the other dialogues, *Timaeus* starts from a clear theological perspective: that *nous* and *logos* are the determining principles of creation (29a) for ‘intelligence could not be present in anything which was devoid of soul’:



For which reason, when he was framing the universe, he put intelligence/*logos* in soul, and soul in body, that he might be the creator of a work which was by nature fairest and best. Wherefore, using the language of probability, we may say that the world became a living creature truly endowed with soul and intelligence by the providence of God.<sup>4</sup>

The whole world thus becomes a living soul and we reflect the intelligence of the universe in our own *psyche*. The cosmos, therefore, is made from a ‘compound’ of soul and body and it is from this that the seven spheres of the planets are created: Sun, Mercury, Venus, Moon, Saturn, Mars, and Jupiter (36d) and within this cosmos ‘the soul, inter-fused everywhere from the centre to the circumference of heaven, of which also she is the external envelopment, herself turning in herself, began a divine beginning of never-ceasing and rational life enduring throughout all time’ (36e) making the cosmos like a ‘perfect and intelligent animal’ (39e).

Plato’s view of the cosmic soul would find its way into the later neo-Platonic views that would have such an influence on the emerging views of Christianity. From such influences writers such as Plotinus envisage a ‘great chain of being’ (which would become so important in the later medieval period) manifest in three hypostases/principles of the cosmos: at the beginning is the first principle which is absolutely transcendent. It is beyond all description:

It is ‘beyond being’. The phrase ‘beyond being’ does not mean that it is a particular thing – for it makes no positive statement about it – and it does not say its name, but all it implies is that it is ‘not this’... But this ‘what it is like’ must indicate that it is ‘not like’: for there is no ‘being like’ in what is not a ‘something’... even the term ‘One’ is inadequate, but is the best term available. (*Enneads* 5.5.6)<sup>5</sup>

From this Transcendent Other comes the great outpouring – the emanation ‘like the outpouring of the sun’ (*Enneads* 1. 7.1; 5.1.6; 6.8.18). For the nature of the One is ‘generative of all, Unity is none of all; neither thing nor quality nor intellect nor soul; not in motion, not at rest, not in place, not in time; it is the self-defined, unique in form, or better, formless’ (*Enneads* 6.9.3).

The first manifestation of the outpouring of the One is Universal Intelligence/*nous*. It is the higher and most perfect form of being, ‘It is *nous* that contains, or rather is, the totality of all being, the Forms and Ideas of all things in the universe, of all individuals and all classes of living things’. *Nous* proceeds from the One, then contemplates the One

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Timaeus* 30b. I am using here the version of the *Timaeus* in the Loeb Classical Library: *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*. Trans. R. Bury (London: 1929/1989).

<sup>5</sup> I draw here upon the version of the *Enneads* in the Loeb Classical Library, trans. A. H. Armstrong (London: 1966–1988) 440–445, 468.

through *theoria* (*Enneads* 5.3.11). In Louth's words: 'here knower and known are one, here knowledge is intuitive, it is not the result of seeking and finding, with the possibility of error, but a possession, marked by infallibility'.<sup>6</sup>

From *nous* comes the World Soul (*psyche ton pantos*) as described in *Timaeus*, which ultimately being able to turn back and contemplate the *nous* as *nous* in itself contemplates the One.<sup>7</sup> Thus Plotinus expounds a three-fold hierarchy in the universe where *nous* proceeds from the One, and *psyche* (including our individual *psyche*) from *nous*:

There is the One beyond being, of such a kind as our argument wanted to show, so far as demonstration was possible in these matters, and next in order there is Being, that is *nous*, and the nature of *psyche* is the third place. (*Enneads* 5.1.10)

And this divine light of creation and *nous* is exactly what is intimated in the individual soul when it engages in contemplation/*theoria* – an activity that is not confined to humanity but found in all manifestations of the cosmos: rocks, planets, birds, trees, and so:

All goes on noiselessly, for there is no need of any obvious external contemplation or action; it is *psyche* which contemplates.... Contemplation and vision have no limits... the same vision is in every soul for it is not spatially limited. (*Enneads* 3.8.5)

Thus, in summary, for neo-Platonists such as Plotinus, the One emanates *nous* which in turn emanates *psyche* and thus from our *psyche* we can return to the One via contemplation in *nous*. Contemplation will play a key role in Plotinus' scheme for it is by this means we return to our source.<sup>8</sup>

### The Christian Rejection of the World-Soul

The cosmic harmony of the neo-Platonists, however, was not acceptable to the early Christians. As the contemporary Dominican writer, Dominic White, puts it:

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007/1981), p.38.

<sup>7</sup> As is common in so many neo-Platonic and other contemporary Gnostic texts, for example, Numenius' second god and Albinus' 'celestial mind'. Space does not allow a detailed exposition of all the variants of neo-Platonic and Gnostic cosmology here and I am concentrating on Plotinus as an important representative of that thought-world while emphasising that Plotinus is just one of many variants of the 'world soul emanation' theme that were crisscrossing Southern Europe, Africa, and Asia Minor during the evolution of early Christianity. For more on the various schools and their interpretation see Louth (2007).

<sup>8</sup> As Armstrong puts it: 'He shows contemplation as the source and goal of all action and production at every level: all life for him is essentially contemplation' (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans by A. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann), Vol 3:358).

The early Christian theologians did not generally take up the World Soul, largely because of its lack of Biblical basis: so the fourth-century theologian St. Gregory of Nyssa dismisses the idea of a distinct world soul, instead insisting that it is Jesus Christ in whom nature, including heavenly and ‘otherworldly’ realities holds together.<sup>9</sup> Gregory’s reading is strongly Biblical, recalling Colossians 1:17, ‘in Him all things hold together’, which also fits nicely too with the Platonic Logos doctrine. (White 2021)<sup>10</sup>

This early Christian unease with the World Soul is no better shown than in the writings of St Augustine, that famous recovering ex-Platonist. As Ernan McMullin makes clear, like Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine is adamant that rather than ‘emanating’ from the One, creation is the work of a Creator (as reaffirmed in the First Vatican Council):

Where Plotinus had the emanations gradually descend to the level of a matter that as non-being is over against the One and ultimately the source of evil, Augustine argued that the realities created by the Good could only themselves be good. The creative act on God’s part can only be *ex nihilo*; there is nothing that could serve as material for it. To suppose otherwise would be to make God no longer the One. The warrant for the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was now the testimony of philosophical reason as well as of the biblical tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Hence Augustine’s later obsession to finish his extended ‘Commentary on Genesis’ (*De Genesi ad litteram*) and set out the Christian view of creation *ex nihilo* in contrast to any Platonising emanations from the One. As he would finally put it in the Literal Commentary:

In the seed, then was invisibly present all that would develop in time into a tree. And in the same way we must picture the world, when God made all things together, as having all things that were made in it and with it when day was made. This includes not only heaven, with sun, moon, and stars...but also the beings that earth produced in potency and in their causes before they came forth in the course of time.<sup>12</sup> (*Literal Meaning of Genesis: 45*)

In his last works Augustine had thus ‘squared the circle’ between Plotinian Neo-Platonic metaphysics of creation and biblical revelation and so set the tone for Christian metaphysics of creation, which would be reiterated, as we have seen, as late as 1870.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* III.40; see Johannes Zachhuber, ‘The World Soul in Early Christian Thought’, [https://www.academia.edu/5977922/The\\_world\\_soul\\_in\\_early\\_Christian\\_thought](https://www.academia.edu/5977922/The_world_soul_in_early_Christian_thought) (downloaded 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Unpublished paper reproduced with kind permission of the author.

<sup>11</sup> E. McMullin, ‘Creation *ex nihilo*: Early History’, in D. Burrell, C. Cogliati, J. Soskice, W. Stoeger, *Creation and the God of Abraham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 21).

<sup>12</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John H. Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 45.

However, despite the lasting impact of Augustine's work, I think the problem perceived by Nietzsche and enacted by our Extinction Rebellion friends on London Bridge remains: how do we make sense of the 'dark matter' of creation, the chaos of the world, of a climate out of control? Here I would like to end by suggesting a way forward that may be of help in our response to Pope Francis's call for a personally integrated response to the climate emergency with which we began this article. Theologically, what is being proposed is based on the reality of the Cross ('doing eco-theology at the foot of the Cross') which of course is inextricably bound up with the doctrine of the Incarnation (as Augustine rightly noted). This alternative position would be propounded by Nietzsche's English contemporary, the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889).<sup>13</sup> Like the German, Hopkins would express his thought through his poetic gifts and it is with his greatest work, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, that we shall conclude.

### The Wreck of the Deutschland

Hopkins' theologically and poetically subtle ode of 35 verses, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, was written in 1875, virtually contemporary with Nietzsche's *Birth* (1872) and intended, like the German's work, to be a response to the 'shipwreck' of modern civilisation as embodied in the real shipwreck of the German ship *The Deutschland* off the Kent coast on a stormy night in December 1875.

Hopkins was lucky enough to have studied in Oxford in the 1860s with and under some of the greatest philosophical and aesthetic minds that venerable institution has ever produced: John Henry Newman, Coventry Patmore, Robert Bridges, and Benjamin Jowett could all be listed as, amongst others, his confidantes, advisors, and mentors. At this time he himself showed great promise as a poet and literary scholar. But, after his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1866 and subsequent entrance into the Society of Jesus in 1868 he abruptly decided to burn all his early poetry in an oblation that he called 'the slaughter of the innocents' in his diary. For the following seven years he placed himself under the spiritual discipline of the sons of Ignatius Loyola inwardly determining only to write again should his gifts be required for the 'greater glory of God'.

In 1875 whilst at the Jesuit theologate of St Beuno's on 'a pastoral forehead of Wales' he finally received the permission he had been waiting for to write again. The Jesuit community read with shock the lurid accounts in the newspapers of the drowning of sixty passengers on the

<sup>13</sup> Strangely enough both thinkers were born in the same year and ended their writing careers in the same year: Hopkins dying in Dublin in 1889, while at the same time Nietzsche collapsed into insanity in Turin. He spent the rest of his life in an asylum, dying in 1900.

German ship, *The Deutschland*, as she foundered off the Kent coast during a horrific storm between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1875. Amongst the passengers were five Franciscan tertiaries, driven from Germany by the Falk laws, all of whom drowned. One of them, ‘the tall nun’, was heard to cry before she perished: ‘*Mein Gott! Mach es schnell mit uns!*’.<sup>14</sup> Poignantly, for Hopkins, they were finally laid to rest near his childhood home at St Patrick’s Cemetery, Leytonstone. While discussing the incident with his rector at St Beuno’s, Fr Jones, the priest, opined that he ‘wished someone would write a poem on the subject’.<sup>15</sup> This was all Hopkins needed to rekindle his writing career and within a few weeks he had written ‘The Wreck’ depicting nature and creation at its most destructive and cruel – Nietzschean if you like – but what is striking is Hopkins’s sophisticated theo-poetic response to this raw nature, Nietzsche’s *Hexentrank*.

Unusually, the first third of the poem is not given over to a narrative of the *Deutschland*’s destruction (this only begins in ‘Part the Second’ at verse 11). Rather, the first 10 verses, ‘Part the First’, beginning with the opening verse, are given over to a sort of ‘examination of conscience’ as Hopkins explores his own Christian perspective on the events he is about to narrate. He is, as it were, preparing himself and us his readers for the events we are about to witness. This begins with a ‘fiat’ rather like Mary’s at the Annunciation when Hopkins first says ‘Yes’ to the reordering of his life around Christ’s pattern in his life:

I did say yes

O at lightning and lashed rod;

Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess

Thy terror, O Christ, O God;

Thou knowest the walls, altar and hour and night:

The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod

Hard down with a horror of height:

And the midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of stress.

(Stanza 2)<sup>16</sup>

‘Laced with fire of stress’. In this second verse Hopkins introduces one of his personal *leitmotiven* – the ‘stress’, ‘pitch’ or, as he famously

<sup>14</sup> ‘*Oh God, make it quick with us!*’. R. B. Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 245.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>16</sup> Quotations from *The Wreck of the Deutschland* are taken from the Penguin edition of *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, ed. W.H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953/1985).

calls it, ‘instress’ of being. In an early undergraduate essay on Parmenides he had linked the ‘instress’ of creation with being itself:

It [Parmenides’ notion of being] means all things are upheld by *instress* and are meaningless objects without it... the feeling for instress, for the flush and foredrawn, and for inscape is most striking.<sup>17</sup>

As Abraham comments:

Instress then in its ultimate sense is being or the final principle in virtue of which all things are unified and upheld and by reason of which the mind can make univocal and particular judgements and can say ‘Yes’ and ‘is’ and can conform itself to reality.<sup>18</sup>

By being aware of the ‘pitch’ of existence the individual can conform themselves to the reality of Christ’s presence in all things as the one who ‘plays in ten thousand places’. This cosmic being, this divine ‘inscape’ and indwelling was one of the chief insights Hopkins derived from the British medieval theologian, Duns Scotus, whom he described as: ‘of realty the rarest-veined unraveller’.<sup>19</sup> What is exceptional, and shown exceptionally in the First Part of the *Wreck*, is how Hopkins takes this cosmic sense of Christ’s presence and personalises it into our own ‘pitched’ ‘taste’ of realty/reality. As he put it in his commentary on Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*:

For human nature, being more highly pitched, selved, and distinctive than anything in the world, can have been developed, evolved, condensed from the vastness of the world not anyhow or by the working of common powers but only by such finer or higher pitch and determination than itself.

For:

Nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness and selving, this selfbeing of my own. Nothing explains it or resembles it.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, later on in the commentary, this ‘pitch’ or ‘stress’ will explicitly be linked by Hopkins with Scotus’s *haeccitas* or thisness:

Is this pitch or whatever we call it then the same as Scotus’s *ecceitas*?<sup>21</sup>

From this pitch, this insight into Christ’s presence in reality, comes the *fiat*, the Yes to that same creative force: ‘I did say Yes’. Notice, a

<sup>17</sup> H. House (ed.), *The Letters and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 71f.

<sup>18</sup> J. Abraham, *Hopkins and Scotus: An Analogy between Inscap and Individuation*, PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin. 1959, p. 262.

<sup>19</sup> G. M. Hopkins, ‘Duns Scotus’s Oxford’ in the Penguin Edition 1959, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.147 and p.148.

<sup>21</sup> H. House, *op. cit.*, p.328.

typical Hopkinsian move, the shift of the pronoun from the third person plural of the nuns, and even the third person singular of Mary at Nazareth to the 'I', the pitched selving of individual existence with its own taste 'more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor'.<sup>22</sup> From this *fiat*, my personal Yes, flows everything else as we are pitched with the nuns into the dark and distressing destruction of the winter storm off the Kent coast:

I kiss my hand

To the stars, lovely-asunder

Starlight, wafting him out of it; and

Glow, glory in thunder;

Kiss my hand to the dappled-with-damson west:

Since, tho' he is under the world's splendour and wonder,

His mystery must be instressed, stressed;

For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.  
(Stanza 3)

The symbolic presence of Christ is the key, not only to my own existence as a believer but to all that happens in the world, including its grossest and coarsest destruction as depicted in the poem. For the symbolic interpretation of these events comes through knowing Christ:

It dates from day

Of his going in Galilee;

Warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey;

Manger, maiden's knee;

The dense and the driven Passion, and frightful sweat;

Thence the discharge of it, there its swelling to be,

Though felt before, though in high flood yet—

What none would have known of it, only the heart, being hard  
at bay, (Stanza 7)

<sup>22</sup> G. M. Hopkins, Penguin Edition 1959, p. 148.

From this symbolic perspective, even the ghastly events off the Kent coast begin to make sense.<sup>23</sup> The poetic representation of the symbolic thus presents for the Christian something of the structure of the universe, and God's saving (and loving) plan for suffering creation. In this respect the winter storms that destroyed the *Deutschland* become the *symbolic* signifiers for Hopkins' vision of the Creator's plan for his creation - the nuns' suffering off the Kent coast becomes the means for their instantiation of the grace of God - an insight into the profound truth that lies hidden within our selves and our world. Or as Hopkins calls it, the 'ground of being, and granite of it'. Is this then Hopkins's - and perhaps modern Christianity's - response to Nietzsche's *Hexentränk*? Faced with the dark pitch of existence, do we head into it, like determined seabirds - facing the full force head on as we enter the mystery of the cross?

One modern Christian who certainly did this was St Teresia Benedicta a Cruce - Edith Stein (1891-1942). Like Hopkins's nuns, she too was to take the full force of the modern *Hexentränk* as she was driven to execution in Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in August 1942. As the dark forces of Nazism (themselves supported by a perverted reading of Nietzsche's writings) surrounded her convent in Cologne in 1942 she wrote a *festschrift* for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of her fellow Carmelite, St John of the Cross: *The Science of the Cross*. Here she wrote of following the way of the Cross as described by St John:

'The Crucified One' demands from the artist more than a mere portrayal of the picture. He demands that the artist, just as every other person, follows him: that they themselves become the picture of the Cross-Bearer and Crucified One and allow themselves to be so transformed.<sup>24</sup>

As in Nietzsche's writing, we are to become a work of art, but this time 'God's work of art' as we follow the crucified one to Golgotha. The deepest disasters, including death, are thus transformed from her perspective, from the symbolic perspective, into the entrance to the 'double-natured name', 'the heaven-flung, heart-fleshed, maiden-furled, Miracle-in-Mary-of-flame, Mid-numbered he in three of the thunder-throne!', as Hopkins would put it.

Following this argument, entering into the symbolic - Stein's 'science of the cross' is thus an invitation to let Christ 'easter in us' so that ultimately He becomes for us, as Hopkins concludes his epic poem:

'...a dayspring to the dimness of us, be

<sup>23</sup> As I write this news reports came in of the terrible drownings in the Channel of modern-day refugees escaping conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hopkins's poem has taken on a terrifying contemporary relevance again.

<sup>24</sup> 'Aber der Gekreuzigte verlangt auch vom Künstler mehr als ein solches Bild. Er fordert von ihm wie von jedem Menschen die Nachfolge: dass er sich selbst zum Bild des Kreuztragenden und Gekreuzigten gestalte und gestalten lasse' (E. Stein: *Kreuzwissenschaft: Studie über Joannes a Cruce*, ed. L. Gelber [Freiburg: Herder, 1050], p. 6, my translation).



a crimson-cressed east...  
Pride, rose, prince, hero of us, high-priest,  
Our hearts' charity's hearth's fire, our thoughts' chivalry's throng's  
Lord. (Stanza 35)

Thus, at the end of Hopkins's epic poem, we have once again entered the symbolic mode, not as Nietzsche (or even modern psychological therapies) envisaged, as a 'homeopathic' dilution of the darkness of the *Hexentrunk* of creation but rather, by complete identification with the Crucified One, we have been given access to the mystery of Creation itself as we return to the arms of the Creator.

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