

# The Christian Concept of Nature

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Does there exist a genuine Christian concept of nature? The embarrassing [perplexing] ambiguity of the term "nature" causes a lot of difficulties when we try to answer this question.

In modern Western thought the term "nature" is preponderantly understood in a natural-scientific sense. From the days of Galileo and Newton until the rise of micro-physics, "nature" was identified with the whole of objective phenomena capable of a systematic causal explanation to be formulated in mathematical equations. In this sense "nature" was tantamount to a closed deterministic picture of the world which left no room for any supra-natural encroachment upon the natural order. [It] found its dialectical counter-pole in the practical idea of the autonomous freedom of the human personality. This dialectical tension between "nature" and "freedom," as it was most pregnantly conceived by Immanuel Kant, had been a characteristic of the humanist world and life view since the Renaissance. It was the hidden dialectical basic motive of Western thought insofar as this latter was ruled by the humanistic starting-point. It also found expression in the [illegible: potent?] polar tension between "nature" and "culture" insofar as "culture" was viewed as the realm of creative human freedom.

In Scholastic Christian philosophy and theology, the term "nature" has a quite different sense. Here its meaning is determined by the dialectical basic motive of nature and supra-natural grace. According to Thomas Aquinas, whose view was accepted by the Roman Catholic Church, nature is the intrinsic ontological structure of all created beings, inclusive of man, who are composed of "form" and "matter" and as such are liable to becoming and decay. Human nature is characterized by its rational form, the immortal rational soul. This nature is the ontological substructure of the supra-natural gift of grace by means of which man was destined to participate in the divine being. This gift was lost by the fall into sin but regained by the redemption brought about by Jesus Christ, Who has entrusted the sacramental means of grace to the church. The natural sphere of life has a relative autonomy over against the supra-natural sphere of grace.

Natural reason can arrive at insight into all natural truths without the supra-natural light of divine revelation. But, rightly used, it cannot contradict the supra-natural truths of the church doctrine. Sin has not corrupted human nature but only wounded and weakened it. Therefore, natural reason is liable to error and should be submitted to the infallible doctrine of the church.

How is the relation between the order of nature and miracles?

The Scholastic concept of nature, though it has deeply penetrated traditional Christian theology and philosophy, was certainly not of biblical origin. It was taken from Greek philosophy, more particularly from Aristotle, and only externally adapted to the church doctrine of creation.

The Greek concepts of nature were from the very outset ruled by a dialectical religious basic motive, originating from the conflict between two pagan religions, namely the older religion of life and death, and the younger cultural religion of the Olympian gods. The former deified the ever-flowing stream of organic life, which cannot be fixed in any limiting form. From this formless divine source all generations of being take their origin [and] seek to maintain themselves in an individual form. Therefore they do wrong to each other since the individual corporeal form can only be kept up at the cost of others. Thus there is a natural law of retributive justice or *anankè*, according to which each corporeal form of life is doomed to death.

In other words, the central theme of this religion was the temporal process of becoming [genesis] and decay, while the moving principle and origin of this process was considered to be the formless ever-flowing stream of life.

This is what since Aristotle was called the matter-principle of nature, namely the formless principle of becoming and decay.

The cultural Olympian religion, on the other hand, was the religion of form, measure, and harmony. In this religion the fundamental form-principle of Greek thought found its origin. In the Aristotelian concept of nature we are confronted with an attempt to synthesize the antagonistic principles of matter and form. The essential form of a natural substance was conceived as the immanent end (entelechy) of the developmental process of its matter. Apart from this form, matter does not have actual being. The teleological order of nature shows a hierarchy of these substantial forms, culminating in the rational soul-form of human nature.

But the irreconcilable dualism in the religious basic motive of Greek thought reappears in the Aristotelian view of human nature. On the one hand man is conceived as a substantial unity of his rational soul and his material body, on the other the active intellect, which was supposed to have the central position in this rational soul, is conceived as a separate form and immortal immaterial substance which does not originate from nature but is implanted from outside.

God himself is conceived as the pure actual form, the absolute intellect, whose counter-pole is absolute matter.

It is the same dualistic basic motive which excludes in principle any idea of a divine creation of nature in Greek thought. That is why the Scholastic attempt at an accommodation of the Aristotelian concept of nature to the biblical doctrine of creation could only result in an inner deformation of both of them. It introduced a basic dualism into Christian thought which was incompatible with the integral and radical character of the Christian religion. The Scholastic basic motive of nature and grace gives a clear expression of this dualism.

The central theme of biblical revelation, that of creation, fall into sin, and redemption by Jesus Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit, unmasks the dualist religious basic motives lying at the basis of the Greek, the Scholastic, and modern Humanist concepts of nature. It lays bare their complete or partial apostate character. Creation in its biblical sense is not an ontological concept; it has a central religious meaning, and should therefore not be identified with the Greek concept of temporal genesis.

God created all things after their own nature. All cultural formation brought about by man presupposes the inner nature of all things which is determined by the order of creation. Within the order of time (which is implied in the latter) our world, such as it presents itself to human experience, shows a great diversity of model [*sic*] aspects and typical structures, which are

arranged in an unbreakable mutual coherence. But God created man in His image. This means that human nature in its temporal diversity of aspects has a religious centre, the human selfhood or I, wherein after the order of creation the whole sense of the temporal world should be concentrated into a radical unity, namely the service of the love of God and the neighbour. This is why man's fall into sin implied [entailed] the apostasy of the whole temporal world, since it affected this world in its religious centre, in its very root or *radix*. There does not exist a realm of nature independent of this religious centre of the temporal world.

For the same reason, redemption in the biblical sense has a radical character. It means that in Jesus Christ mankind, and in mankind the whole temporal world, has received a new religious root in which the image of God is revealed in its perfect sense. This implies the eschatological message of a new world which in the fulfillment of times will be opened up to a clear expression of the endless [infinite] love of God.

This is the only possible Christian view of nature in its biblical sense.