1. Participation and Modernity

Nobody believes in flat-earth theories any longer (or, at least, for the most part we don't). We all know the earth isn't flat but round. Nonetheless, in some strange way it is true that flat-earth theories hold great appeal. What I mean is that today's culture deals only with the flat surface of things. The modern world, you could say, has become superficial. All we get in modernity is the flat face, or the flat surface of things—increasingly, we have come to treat the world as though it was made up only of the things that we access with the senses (our sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch). The world, so we have come to think, is just what you get when you map its DNA. There's no longer any depth dimension beyond the appearances to which we have ready access with the senses.

On a Christian understanding, however, reality consists of more than just surfaces. The world of created things is not just a flat surface but has a depth dimension that gives it meaning. The Christian universe is a sacramental universe, one that contains infinite depths. This insight changes everything. In this talk, then, I want to look at the difference between the flat earth of modernity (where everything stays on the surface) and the deeper understanding of the Christian tradition (where created realities have a deeper, spiritual dimension).

Sacramentality as Real Presence

I want to begin with discussing some basics of Christian Platonism. The basic premise is that until the Late Middle Ages (say, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), people looked at the world as a mystery. The word "mystery" didn't have quite the same connotations that it has for us today. Certainly, it did not refer to a puzzle of sorts, whose secret one can uncover by means of clever investigation. Our understanding of "mystery novels," for example, carries that kind of connotation. For the patristic and medieval mindset, the word meant something slightly—but significantly—different. The word "mystery" referred to realities behind the appearances that one could observe by means of the senses. That is to say, although our hands, eyes, ears, nose, and tongue were able to access reality, they could not *fully* grasp this reality. They could not *comprehend* it. The reason for this basic incomprehensibility of the universe was that the world was—as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins famously put it—"charged with the grandeur of God." Even the most basic created realities that we observed as human beings carried an extra dimension, as it were. The created world could not be reduced to measurable, manageable dimensions.[1]

Up to this point, things are relatively straightforward. Most of us, when we think about the ability of the senses to comprehend reality, realize that they are inadequate to the task. And I suspect we generally recognize that the reason for this does not lie mainly in faulty hearing,

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[1] Flannery O'Connor puts it well when she writes, "The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula" (*Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald [1957, repr.; New York, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970], 153).

poor vision, or worn-out taste buds, but in the fact that reality truly *is* mysterious. It carries a dimension that we are unable to fully express. But let's take the next step. Throughout the Great Tradition, when people spoke of the mysterious quality of the created order, what they meant was that this created order—along with all other temporal and provisional gifts of God—was a sacrament. This sacrament was the sign of a mystery that, although present in the created order, nonetheless far transcended human comprehension. The sacramental character of reality was the reason it so often appeared mysterious and beyond human comprehension. So, when I speak of my desire to recover a sacramental understanding of reality, I am talking about an understanding of reality that is sacramental in character. The point that I want to make is that the mysterious character of all created reality lies in its sacramental nature. In fact, we would not go wrong by simply equating mystery and sacrament.

What, then, is so distinct about the sacramentality that characterized much of the history of the Church? Perhaps the best way of explaining this is by distinguishing between symbols and sacraments. You've all seen the road sign with a picture of a deer. It symbolizes the presence of deer in the area, hopefully inducing drivers to slow down. Drivers will not be so foolish as to veer away from the road sign for fear of hitting the deer that is symbolized on the road sign. The reason is obvious: the symbol of the deer and the deer in the forest are two completely separate realities. The former is a sign referring to the latter, but in no way do the two co-inhere. It is not as though the road sign carries a mysterious quality, participating somehow in the stags

that roam the forests. Symbol "X" and reality "Y" merely have an external or nominal relationship. The distance between the two makes clear that there is no real connection between them. Things are different with sacraments. Unlike mere symbols, sacraments actually *participate* in the mysterious reality to which they point. Sacrament "X" and reality "Y" co-inhere; the sacrament participates in the reality to which it points.

In his essay, "Transposition," C. S. Lewis makes this same point when he distinguishes between symbolism and sacramentalism. The relation between speech and writing, argues Lewis, "is one of symbolism. The written characters exist solely for the eye, the spoken words solely for the ear. There is complete discontinuity between them. They are not like one another, nor does the one cause the other to be."[2] By contrast, when we look at how a picture represents the visible world, we find a rather different kind of relationship. Explains Lewis:

> Pictures are part of the visible world themselves and represent it only by being part of it. Their visibility has the same source. The suns and lamps in pictures seem to shine only because real suns or lamps shine on them; that is, they seem to shine a great deal because they really shine a little in reflecting their archetypes. The sunlight in a picture is therefore not related to real sunlight simply as written words are to spoken. It is a sign, but also something more than a sign, because in it the thing signified is

[2] C. S. Lewis, "Transposition," in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (1949, repr; New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 102.

> really in a certain mode present. If I had to name the relation I should call it not symbolical but sacramental.[3]

For Lewis, a sacramental relationship implies real presence. This understanding of sacramentality is part of a long lineage. According to the sacramental approach of much of the Christian Tradition, the created order was more than an external or nominal symbol. Instead, it was a sign (*signum*) that pointed to *and participated in* a greater reality (*res*). It seems to me that the shape of the cosmic tapestry is one in which earthly signs and heavenly realities are intimately woven together; so much so, that we cannot have the former without the latter. Later on, I will need to say more about what this reality is in which our sacramental world participates. For now, it is enough to observe that the reason for the mysterious character of the world—on the understanding of the Great Tradition, at least—is that it participates in some greater reality, from which it derives its being and its value. Hence, instead of speaking of sacramentality, we may also speak of a participation.

The notion of sacramentality or participation insists that not only does the created world point to God as its source and "point of reference," but that it also subsists or participates in God. A participatory or sacramental worldview will look to passages such as Acts 17:28 ("For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'"), and will conclude that our being participates in the being of God. Such an outlook on

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[3] Ibid.

reality will turn to Colossians 1:17 ("He [Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together"), and will argue that the truth, goodness, and beauty of all created things is grounded in Christ—the eternal Logos of God.[4] In other words, because creation is a sharing in the being of God, our connection with God is a *participatory* or *real* connection, not just an *external* or *nominal* connection.

Few people have expressed this distinction better than C. S. Lewis: "We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it."[5] We do not want merely a nominal relationship; we desire a participatory relationship.

When we talk about "real presence," we tend to think in terms of Eucharistic theology, and we ask the question: is Christ really present in the Eucharist (the sacramentalist position) or is the celebration at the Lord's Table an ordinance in which we remember what Christ did by offering himself for us on the Cross (the memorialist position)? It's helpful to keep in mind that these debates surrounding real presence (or, we might say, participation) in the Eucharist were but the particular instantiation of a much broader discussion about real presence. While the Church Fathers and medieval theologians did look to the bread and wine of the Eucharist as the sacrament in which Christ was really present, in making this point, they at the same time conveyed as their

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[4] Cf. also the angelic hymn of Isa 6:3, which proclaims that "the whole earth is full of his glory"; and Eph 1:23, which speaks of the Church as Christ's body, "the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

[5] C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *Weight of Glory*, 42.

conviction that Christ was mysteriously present in the entire created order. Christ's sacramental presence in the Eucharist was, we could say, an intensification of his sacramental presence in the world.

The Celebration of Creation: Use or Enjoyment?

Why is this sacramental presence important? What does it have to do with life in our (post-) modern Western world? Let me explain by briefly mentioning some of the main factors that inform my theology. The basic motivation that drives much of my theologizing is twofold. First, I believe that face to face with mystery of the triune God, theology needs a great deal of modesty. Theology, as St. Anselm († 1109) recognized, is a seeking of the face of God. Quoting Psalm 27:8 at crucial junctures of his *Proslogium*, the great eleventh-century theologian pleaded with the God whom he knew as a humble believer:

> Do thou help me for thy goodness' sake! Lord, I sought thy face; thy face, Lord, will I seek; hide not thy face far from me (Psalms xxvii.8). Free me from myself toward thee. Cleanse, heal, sharpen, enlighten the eye of my mind, that it may behold thee. Let my soul recover its strength, and with all its understanding let it strive toward thee, O Lord. What art thou, Lord, what art thou? What shall my heart conceive thee to be?[6]

[6] St. Anselm, "Proslogium," in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane, 2nd ed. (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1968), XVIII. See also ibid., I.

St. Anselm, often unjustly reproached for being a rationalist, had a deep appreciation for the mystery of God and was keenly aware that theology was not there to explain God but to draw us into the very mystery of his life. The modesty that theology needs is the recognition that we cannot rationally comprehend God. Theology is based on mystery and enters into mystery. Not only can we not grasp *God*, but, adds the fourth-century mystical theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, "I also ask: Who has known his own mind? Those who think themselves capable of grasping the nature of God would do well to consider whether they have looked into themselves…."[7] For Gregory, not only is the nature of God himself a mystery to us, but as human beings created in his image we also remain a mystery to ourselves. My concern with much modern theology is precisely that it has lost a great deal of this sense of mystery; modern theology's problem is its rational confidence and thus, ultimately, its pride.

This is an important point, since many today are reacting against the propositionalism and intellectualism of our forebears.[8] When they read some of the earlier theological handbooks, many people today find them dry and without life. Theology, people today rightly sense, must be about more than just providing true propositional statements about God and our relationship with God. More importantly, these theological handbooks seem wrongly to give the impression that we can fully and adequately grasp the truth to which our theological statements refer. There is a growing sense, therefore, that we need a healthy dose of

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[7] St. Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, c. 11, as quoted in de Lubac, *Mystery*, 210.
[8] Cf. Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2002), 83-106.

mystery to counter sterile intellectualism. To the degree that we sense the hubris of a great deal of modern theologizing, I can only echo these sentiments. But, of course, a return to mystery may take on different forms. Some of the evangelicals that I have taught the past 25 years run the danger of confusing postmodern skepticism with mystery. As we attempt to recover mystery in theology, it is critical that we recognize that the pre-modern notion of mystery owed nothing to skepticism or relativism. It had everything to do with acknowledging that the mystery of God's being suffuses the created world. Theology's genuine humility has less to do with the skepticism than it does with mysticism.

My concern about the rational self-confidence of modernity leads to the second factor that drives my theologizing: a concern about our often uncritical acceptance of contemporary culture.[9] Too easily, it seems to me, do we give in to the temptation of accommodation to the latest trends and fads of the culture around us. We often naively and uncritically accept the dictates of a society that is largely post-Christian. Whether it is secular criticism of our Christian past, politically correct agendas that we are massaged into accepting, or the backbone of our moral commitments, we look askance far too readily at counter-cultural Christianity and instead opt for accommodation to our surrounding culture. We need to recognize that participation in being and goodness comes in degrees of intensity. The alien intrusion of evil in the world diminishes this participation. As St. Augustine recognized, because created things "are not, like their Creator, supremely and unchangeably

[9] Cf. Hans Boersma, "Accommodation to What? Univocity of Being, Pure Nature, and the Anthropology of St. Irenaeus," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006): 266-93.

good, their good may be diminished and increased."[10] Evil sucks the life out of us and so diminishes our existence and goodness. Wherever evil rears its head against the goodness of being, Christians have the calling to oppose it. Thus, we need to recognize that accommodation (often masked theologically with claims that the goodness of creation means we should avoid escapism, that the gospel "redeems" every sphere of life, that the gospel needs to be "incarnated" in people's everyday existence, etc.) comes at a price when practiced in a culture that prizes human autonomy as the basic building block of our common life together. Such radical autonomy diminishes the goodness of being and must be resisted.

To my mind, there is deep irony in such a stance of accommodation. Let me illustrate the irony with an example from personal experience. A number of years ago, our local Christian high school organized a school trip to a "Body Worlds" exhibit set up at the well-known Science World (a hands-on science centre and museum) in Vancouver. "Body Worlds" turned out to be an exhibit of plasticized human bodies, organized by Gunther von Hagens, a German anatomist whose exhibitions and public autopsies (performed while dressed in a black fedora) have led to protests and legal controversies throughout the world. Von Hagens's displays reduce the human body to simply an object, one that we can purchase, plasticize, display, and analyze for the sake of education and entertainment. Especially among Catholics, objections to Von Hagens's exhibits were quite pronounced. To my

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[10] St. Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, introd. Thomas S. Hibbs; ed. Henry Paolucci (1961, repr.; Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1995), XII.

surprise, within our Christian school community, there was little or no concern about the exhibit's objectification and exploitation of the human body; instead, the exhibit was regarded as an opportunity for the students to see how the body was "fearfully and wonderfully made." More troubling perhaps than Von Hagens's display seemed to me its broad acceptance among Christian parents and teachers with an appeal to the goodness of the created order. My argument is not with the goodness of the created order. Rather, I have become convinced that a certain type of appeal to the goodness of creation—such as the one I just described—lapses into its opposite: into a denigration and commodification of the created order, in this case of the human body.

We certainly should celebrate the goodness of the created order, along with St. Irenaeus, that untiring second-century opponent of Gnostic escapism. But we can only *truly* celebrate it (and prevent its denigration) when we keep in mind two caveats. First, the created order (and this counts also for our time-bound history and for the Old Testament economy)—does not exist in itself and for itself. Created truth, goodness, and beauty are merely borrowed by way of a loan given through the infinite mercy of the One who is truth, goodness, and beauty himself (cf. 1 Cor 4:7). Over the past several decades, many of us have made up for lost time in affirming the goodness of the created order. But the Christian twist on things is that we dare not assign it ultimate significance. As C. S. Lewis puts it:

> The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it

> only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.[11]

Created objects, Lewis explains, turn into idols when we mistake them for ultimate realities. Or, as he memorably states it elsewhere: "You can't get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first."[12]

The temporal, created order has its ultimate end not in itself but in the mysterious reality that transcends it. The end of created being lies beyond itself. "I was created to see thee," confesses St. Anselm, "and not yet have I done that for which I was made."[13] For Augustine, the difference between enjoying something (*frui*) and using it (*uti*) is that "[t]o enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love *for its own sake*."[14] Accordingly, while we may *use* this good created order, only the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is to be *enjoyed*. Only he can be loved strictly *for his own sake*.[15] The temporal, created order may only

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[11] Lewis, "Weight of Glory," 30-31.
[12] C. S. Lewis, "First and Second Things," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 280.
[13] St. Anselm, "Proslogium," I.
[14] St. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. and introd. R. P. H. Green, Oxford World's Classics (1997, repr.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), I.8 (emphasis added).
[15] Ibid., I.10.

be used (*uti*) with an eye to the eternal purpose of the enjoyment of God. (Needless to say, for St. Augustine, the word "use" did not have the negative connotation of "abuse," which our word "use" often does carry.) This point is important because it is precisely by celebrating created realities *for their own sake* (*frui*) that we unhinge them from their grounding in the eternal Word or Logos of God. Unhinged from their transcendent source, created objects lose their source of meaning; they become the unsuspecting victims of the objectifying human gaze and turn into the manageable playthings of the totalizing human grasp. The irony of a misunderstood focus on the goodness of creation is that it results in its mirror-opposite—a Gnostic-type of devaluation of created life.

Second, the recognition of the goodness of the created order is always grounded in its participatory status. That is to say, its goodness is not its own.[16] When we separate creation from the Creator, "from whom, through whom, and in whom everything is" (Rom 11:36), we are forced to locate the creature's significance—its truth, goodness, and beauty—in itself.[17] In the process, we tear apart the beautifully woven cosmic tapestry. We forget that the creation is no more than a sacramental sharing or participating in the life of God. So, when I talk about the sacramentality of creation or about creation's participation in

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[16] Cf. the delightful Platonist-Christian insight of John Calvin, who at the very beginning of his *Institutes* quoted Acts 17:28 and then commented: "For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, Library of Christian Classics, no. 20 [Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster, 1960], I.i.1).

[17] For St. Augustine's use of this biblical text, see *On Christian Teaching*, I.10 Cf. also Acts 17:28; Col 1:17.

God, this in no way erases the distinction between Creator and creature. Quite the opposite: to say that creation participates sacramentally in the life of God is to *limit* the status of the created order. By contrast, the modern notion of a separate creation *does* erase the Creator-creature distinction: by insisting that the created order carries its own truth, its own goodness, and its own beauty, modernity has idolized the created order.[18]

Only God is to be enjoyed for his own sake, and creation has no more than a sacramental participation in the life of God. It seems crucially important to me that we recapture these two caveats to the celebration of creation. Whenever as Christians we forget or ignore them, the result is that we tend to accommodate our contemporary desacralized culture in all sorts of unhelpful ways. If, however, we take our starting-point in a participatory appreciation of creation, we can avoid our culture's denigration of the human body and of the world around us. What is more, such an approach will give the highest possible (because Eucharistic!) value to creation. In this way, we recognize the sacramental aim or purpose of the material creation in the eternal Word of God.

Christianity and the Platonic Heritage

How did the Great Tradition of the Church argue for participation or sacramentality? The best way to make this point in a satisfactory

[18] Cf. Job 31:26-28: "Or has the sight of the sun in its glory, or the glow of the moon as it walked the sky, secretly stolen my heart, so that I blew them a kiss? That too would be a criminal offence, to have denied the supreme God" (New Jerusalem Bible).

manner is by acknowledging that nearly the entire Christian Tradition, at least until the High Middle Ages, took the shape of Christian Platonism. The impact of Platonism (and, especially, Neoplatonism) on the Christian Tradition is much lampooned today.[19] I don't mean to suggest that any and all Christian use of the Platonic tradition has been appropriate. At times, the relationship was so close that it became rather unhealthy. But the Church Fathers were, by and large, not naïve about what to accept and what to reject from the Platonic heritage. Generally Christians knew when to say "no" to the Platonic worldview. They knew what to accept from Middle Platonists such as Philo (c. 20 BC - AD 50) and from Neoplatonists such as Plotinus (c. 204-70) and Proclus (411-85) and what to reject in them.

There's a fairly common story doing the rounds today, which blames most of the history of Christianity for uncritically accepting Platonism. Sometimes one almost gets the impression that it's only recently that we have managed to recover the importance of the human body, and have finally overcome the evils of the Platonic tradition. That story says a great deal more about the contemporary church than it does about the history of Christian thought. While such accounts purport to be simply "biblical," they in fact often work with a

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[19] N. T. Wright associates Platonism with Gnosticism without wondering why it is that the Christian tradition carefully distinguished positive and negative elements in the former, while vehemently opposing the latter (*Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* [New York, N.Y.: HarperOne, 2008], 88-91). North-American evangelical criticism of the Platonist-Christian synthesis owes much to the impact of the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition stemming from Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd, particularly through influential popular accounts like Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1984), 107-16.

philosophical framework in which it is assumed that the relational language of the Scriptures exhausts the character of God.[20] The result is a radical historicizing of our understanding of God and thus a loss of transcendence.[21] This approach ignores the fact that, by and large, Christians did reject the excesses of Platonism. They were keen to assert divine freedom—as shown particularly in creation and in the Incarnation. They largely agreed on the goodness of the material order and so celebrated their belief in the resurrection of the body and in an eschatological future of a new heaven *and* a new earth. And, most importantly, they were eager to affirm the Trinitarian character of God.[22]

But Christians were also careful not to overreact and simply denounce everything Platonic as incompatible with the gospel. Despite the strong reservations that I have just listed, Christian theology did look to the Platonic tradition as in many ways an ally rather than an opponent. The resulting synthesis with Platonism lasted well into the High Middle Ages. The central characteristic of this Christian Platonist tradition is its doctrine of participation or, we might say, its sacramental worldview. One of the main objections that many today have against

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[20] Both advocates of a non-reductive physicalist anthropology and open theists often regard the Christian tradition as having fallen from its purely "biblical" origins by being amalgamated with Platonism.

[21] David Bradshaw, in his excellent book, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), traces the pre-Christian and Christian distinction between *ousia* (essence) and *energeia* (energy), with the Church Fathers regarding the former as always remaining out of human reach. Some kind of distinction along these lines seems to me necessary to avoid the danger of collapsing the divine into the natural order.

[22] Cf. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 136-61.

the Platonic notion of a world of eternal Forms or Ideas, of which our terrestrial life is a mere copy or shadow, is that it appears to undermine the goodness of the created order—whose value is much greater than that of a mere shadow or copy. Add to this the fact that we can easily (and, perhaps, better) conceive of a relationship between creation and Creator without the seemingly speculative notion of eternal Forms, and we get a sense of why many consider the early Church's appropriation of Platonic thought an unhelpful "hellenization" of Christianity. Let's just discard the unhelpful philosophical accretions of Platonism and simply accept the pure gold of the biblical Christian faith.

Before jumping to the defense of the early theologian Tertullian by insisting that Jerusalem has nothing to do with Athens, however, let's listen to a voice that disagrees. Robert Wilken, in his beautiful book, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, makes the following comment:

> The notion that the development of early Christian thought represented a hellenization of Christianity has outlived its usefulness. The time has come to bid a fond farewell to the ideas of Adolf von Harnack, the nineteenth-century historian of dogma whose thinking has influenced the interpretation of early Christian thought for more than a century…. Amore apt expression would be the Christianization of Hellenism….[23]

Wilken makes clear that the so-called "hellenization" of the gospel simply does not do justice to the judicious, careful use that the Fathers

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[23] Wilken, *Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, xvi.

made of the Platonic tradition. What is more, his mentioning of Adolf von Harnack—one of the stalwarts of the German Liberal school—should give us pause. If Harnack, as a Liberal theologian, thought it prudent to remove Platonic notions (such as creation's participation in eternal Forms) from Christian theology, we should perhaps consider the consequences of the "hellenization" thesis before simply adopting it.

While I understand that anti-Platonic moves are often intended to defend the Bible, ironically, the Scriptures themselves suffer the most serious consequences. Christian Platonism made it possible to regard creation, history, and Old Testament as sacramental carriers of a greater reality. Creation, history, and Old Testament had significance throughout most of the Christian tradition precisely because they pointed to and participated in a greater reality—that which the Platonists called Forms or Ideas and which Christians insisted was the Word of God himself. This meant that the Church Fathers worked on the assumption that Old Testament events were sacraments of the Christological reality of the New Testament—something I'll discuss in more detail in one of the later talks. Time and time again, the Church Fathers and medieval theologians explained the events reported in the Old Testament as "future mysteries" (*futura mysteria*) or "future sacraments" (*futura sacramenta*), referring to Jesus Christ and to the Church.[24] Thus, the Great Tradition did not just interpret created realities sacramentally. History, too—including the biblical history of redemption—was sacramental in character.

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[24] De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 2.94-96.

For the Great Tradition, the only way to make sense of the world was by means of a sacramental view of reality: God has graciously provided a sacramental link between his own divine life and the time-bound order of creation. Modernity has given us flat earth theories. But the Christian faith introduces us to creation's mysterious, sacramental depths. It is this sacramental participation that gives the world around us eternal significance.