

# DANCING BEFORE GOD

A Franciscan Composer's Theology of Creation

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a book about “Creation”. It’s about what this world is like. It’s rather a big subject, of course. In this study “Creation” means the whole of what there is, which is very much more than the material, natural, world.

It’s not about the present-day problems of our relationship with nature, though it is bound to ask questions about that relationship. It is, though, about the way in which we are part of that whole “Creation”, or should be -

It’s also about the tragic story of how we have become separated from that whole, that cosmos, over a few thousand years, and how we have tried, and usually failed, to re-enter that lost world, which may or may not be the “Kingdom of God.” It’s a very different world, a different reality, to the world in which we usually find ourselves living.

This is a very personal story. It can only aim to be the story of my attempt to find a language that made sense of the world for me. It’s a feature of Creation, I think, that it’s perfectly possible for the world contain have contradictory philosophies and theologies. It’s perfectly possible for one person to believe two contradictory things at the same time. I probably do. It’s certainly possible, in a Creation that has Unity for there to be many different religious attitudes and ways of life within it.

Creation as I see it is something far more than “nature” or “the material world”. That’s why so much of this study is about Music and Imagination. The analytical and empirical mind which has dominated us for hundreds of years is a good thing in its place. Scientific knowledge is useful and can inspire wonder – but it works on a different wavelength. It fails to tune in to the music and images which are all around us, and within us.

This short exploration will focus on the Franciscan tradition. This doesn't mean that it's "the" Franciscan Theology of Creation. It's "a" theology and it can only be this particular Franciscan composer's point of view.

As I'll explain, it was the discovery of certain Franciscan ideas which had a revelatory effect on me twenty years ago, after wandering about in a loosely Christian but rather esoteric way.

Is there such a thing as a Franciscan theology of Creation?

The answer is very definitely "yes" – but, as I will explain, this Franciscan tradition is a part of something very much older. St Francis and his followers came at a time of flourishing for an ancient way of seeing the world. This vision had been in the mainstream of Christian tradition since the time of Christ, but it can be traced far further into the past.

This is often referred to as the "Christian-Platonist" tradition.

This is a convenient, but misleading term. The ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato and his followers had an enormous influence on Christian theologians until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the philosophy of Aristotle was rediscovered and began to dominate – disastrously, some might say. The key ideas about Creation which the first thousand years of Christian theology associated with Plato have mysterious and ancient origins. They are not part of an alien philosophy imported into Christianity. Plato and Christianity are part of a larger flow of ideas – though, as will be explained, a large part of the Christian world lost track of this tradition after the time of Francis.

Contrary to some misguided or prejudiced beliefs this ancient tradition held an optimistic view of Creation, and saw humanity, both body and soul, as inseparably part of the whole – and inseparable from God. This was the vision of many thinkers from Augustine to the romantic poets. Francis's great interpreter, Bonaventure, developed a Christian variation of platonic philosophy which, I think, is inspired and wonderful, and which seems now to stand as the climax of a lost tradition.

It was, indeed, a final flowering. The tradition was lost, in the West at least, apart from the dreams of a few visionaries and poets.

It would be true to say that it wasn't just an idea that was lost, but a whole World.

Unless we can recover the way into that Lost World we cannot possibly understand even something as vivid and clear as Francis's "Canticle of the Creatures."

What on earth does he mean by "Brother Son" and "Sister Moon"? How can all of Creation – and he does mean all of it – be our Brothers and Sisters?

At the time of writing this Lost World is being rediscovered. This might seem to be a story of ancient and forgotten ideas, but, as I hope will become clear, this view of Creation is completely compatible with the 21<sup>st</sup> century scientific view expressed by the contemporary Franciscan writer, Ilia Delio. This might be a startling idea to some – but it could be that these ancient people saw the world, and God, in a quite different way from nearly everyone after Francis and Bonaventure, and even more so after the time of Copernicus, Newton and Descartes. The sense of Unity with Creation was broken down by theology, science, and, perhaps, something that changed in human nature itself.

Now, in 2018, we can go as far as to say that all those scientists and theologians were wrong – but it's one thing to argue intellectually that there is no separation of mind and matter (as Ilia Delio does in her most recent work) and quite another to recover the experience of this lost world.

It might involve forgetting everything we think we know.

If we are to re-enter this Lost World we might need to question all our ideas of how we should live and act. Attitudes which might seem to make sense in the divided world might not be helpful in this new world of "wholeness."

The only way I can approach this is by beginning with my own experiences, long ago. Everything was a discovery then, and a Mystery. There's nothing special or unusual in any this. I'm sure everyone can all find parallels in their lives.

**WALKING INTO MYSTERY**

*While I was still young, before I went on my travels,  
I sought wisdom openly in my prayer.  
Before the temple I asked for her,  
and I will search for her until the end.  
From the first blossom to the ripening grape  
my heart delighted in her;  
my foot walked on the straight path;  
from my youth I followed her steps.*

*(Sirach 51:13-15 NRSV)*

John Bunyan has an important part to play in this story. This might be surprising. The tinker was a Calvinist Baptist, whose theology would seem to have been a very long way from Francis. But, as in other cases, the genius and inspiration of the man rises above the tradition of his church.

I come from Bedford, Bunyan's town, where he was imprisoned for unlicensed preaching, and where a statue stands, impressive, but hollow and liable to collapse, or so I always believed. From the age of 14 we lived in Turvey, a village on the River Ouse, which makes expansive meanders through the North Bedfordshire countryside, past limestone villages. At one point you can see five spires and church towers on the curves of the river, pinning the landscape to heaven like lightning conductors. Clear, Christian country – of a puritan slant.

Look – the vicar of that village with the fine church tower went to America and founded Concord, Massachusetts, future home of Thoreau, Emerson, the Alcotts, transcendentalism...

Could this be the landscape of "The Pilgrim's Progress"?

Bunyan walked these paths, through the fields, along the river. He would baptise in the osier beds at Pavenham. The locals say that the village of Stevington is in the book. The village cross stands at the head of a lane, which slopes down to the church and river. Was this the cross at which Christian lost his burden? It rolled down the lane to a place where there was a sepulchre...

The church of St Mary stands above the river. A high retaining wall supports the church and churchyard above a strange damp place where a spring bubbles out from a holy well at the wall's foot. A place to come on pilgrimage to bathe sore eyes, they say. I have done it myself. Was my vision cleared?

There's an old chair in the church, where, the story goes, the wandering preacher sat and dreamed his dream. The arm of the chair has a carving of a fellow drinking from a bowl. Not far away was Drinking Hole Field where, at the beating of the bounds, the villagers would jump into a hole and drink ale.

Could Bunyan have imagined his hero's journey through this real landscape? That was an exciting idea. I had always known that the ruined Houghton House, visible from his birthplace at Elstow, was the House Beautiful. "In the footsteps of John Bunyan" by Vera Brittain told that Bunyan saw the Chilterns, a distant view on the horizon, as the Delectable Mountains.

Bunyan and his traveller were trying to escape this world, and to find the Celestial City. The lures of the earth were the sleep-inducing vapours of the Incharned Ground – and yet there are places of beauty and meaning in the places the pilgrim rests, the houses of learning, and with the shepherds on their hills. Perhaps the City could be glimpsed in certain lights beyond Harrold or Carlton.

In his "Solomon's Temple" he says that the ancient Israelites saw Canaan as a "type of heaven." This meandering valley could be an image of heaven, or the way to the sabbath of rest.

When walking, like Bunyan, the landscape seems to have meaning. It has a mystery. We are part of it, the things we discover are messages to us.

I knew from my teens that the things that mattered, had meaning, were not only the "natural" things, the river, or fields of wheat and yellow rape. What about the heavy shoe of a plough horse - rusting agricultural machinery - the remains of the closed railway - stories of sinister military depots – the entrance to an underground Royal Observer Corps post? Modern things like this could be as meaningful and mysterious as an ancient stone or "Druidic Enclosure."

And there were people, real and imaginary...

Stories, too, were part of the same world, and the same mystery – stories that suggested themselves through the landscape.

And, even more importantly, music. There was music with a symbolic link to Bunyan – Vaughan William’s Fifth symphony, based on ideas from his opera of The Pilgrim’s Progress. Part of the same world.

Music spoke the same language. There was no difference in the language of music and the language communicated through the places and their stories...

This was what the world was like.

God, whatever that was, spoke through all this.

The village church had beauty and mystery but we were not churchgoers. I think I wished we were. The rector, still appointed by the Lady of the Manor, was admirable, and walked the bounds of the village with his black Labrador – properly caring for all souls.

And yet there was true mystery in music – the great choral works of Elgar resonated with the real fire of the spirit – and Elgar had sat on a fence in a marsh near Tewkesbury where he had heard the desolate music of the lonely Christ in “the Apostles”. The end of the score is inscribed “In Longdon Marsh 1903.” And there were no more vivid sparks of God than in Haydn symphonies, or Laurie Johnson’s incidental music for “The Avengers”, or in that series itself, or Doctor Who.

The same world.

There was no need to drag in anything supernatural. The mystery was communicated through worldly things. It was also a mystery that drew in people. Making a film, in 1971-2, which used a lot of these ideas, was a way of experiencing the mystery as it drew in the people involved. For a moment you could enter a dance...

And the mystery continued to form in these places. In my own writings, and in my film, the House Beautiful was represented by Turvey Abbey, then the home of a widow of a businessman. The house was a Jacobean farmhouse, to which a Victorian owner, who kept

his hair uncut after bathing in the Jordan, had romantically added gothic touches. In 1980 it became a real abbey, the Benedictine house of Our Lady of Peace.

Of course, everything can go horribly wrong when you lose the careless rapture. There are the usual temptations. In the late 1970s there was a vogue for ley lines and earth mysteries. The real mystery could be completely lost in the deadly obsession of looking for patterns, or ancient secrets

In spite of this, the real calling was there – a Mystery that's an unpredictable search for knowledge, not an answer. We're drawn in by the sense that there is Mystery and, if we go deep enough, we experience the strange delight becoming a part of it. The Great Poetic Mystery.

I gathered all my knowledge of theology from music, Elgar oratorios, and the works of Messiaen, which were exciting and mystical. I would say that the two literary influences which began to make sense of this world were Charles Williams and Thomas Traherne.

Williams (1886-1945) wrote rather difficult "spiritual thrillers". They have visionary moments. His novel "The Greater Trumps" introduced me to the image of the Dance. In the novel small figures representing the figures of Tarot Cards, move in a dance on a circular table. They are weaving the world. The Fool is Christ. Some see him spinning round and round through the other figures, others see him motionless. This image inspired T S Eliot's line "the still point of the turning world" in "Four Quartets."

Williams was my first introduction to the idea of "the Way of Affirmation." I had no idea there was a Christian tradition in which the things of Creation had meaning and were signs of God. As part of this, Williams wrote of the "theology of romantic love" and introduced me to Dante. Hurrah. Things were beginning to make sense.

In 1977 I discovered Thomas Traherne – another rare hero of "the Way of Affirmation." I opened a book in the library, not knowing the name, and the poems looked so extraordinary. Exclamation marks, bad spelling - visionary. Here was a 17<sup>th</sup> divine with an unexpected view of the world. It rang bells immediately.

His most famous passage, set to music by Gerald Finzi in his “Dies Natalis”, is the innocent vision of the world where “the corn was orient and immortal wheat.” Traherne sees the world as illuminated by God but our sins obscure the vision. To Traherne, love is an immense “alluring” force that draws us towards God, and gives life to everything in creation.

All love comes from God and is all one love, just as the three Persons of the Trinity are One:

“Lov in the Fountain and Lov in the stream are both the same...Though it Streameth to its Object it abideth in the Lover, and is the Lov of the Lover.” (Thomas Traherne, Centuries 2:41)

Traherne had a remarkable interest in imagination, which he seems to identify with the soul. What we imagine can be real experience – part of the same reality. This might seem fanciful or even dangerous, but it is also a part of Bonaventure’s philosophy. Traherne got the idea from the esoteric teaching of the ancient writings associated with Hermes Trismegistus, the “Hermetica”. These had been thought to date from the time of Moses, but in Traherne’s time were shown to date from the early centuries AD. They may contain far older teaching. Traherne wrote:

“Thoughts are the Wings on which the Soul doth flie,  
Elijahs firey Charet, that conveys  
The Soul, even here, to those Eternal Joys.  
Thoughts are the privileged Posts that Soar  
Unto his Throne, and there appear before  
Our selvs approach. These may at any time  
Abov the Clouds, abov the Stars may clime.  
The Soul is present by a Thought; and sees  
The New Jerusalem.”

(Thomas Traherne, Thoughts V)

This might seem visionary and strange to us, but this is an important part of the world I was entering.

Here was a rare soul that saw the world as a whole - as a valley of vision, even within the Anglican Church. At that time I lived in a bedsit in Teddington. I discovered the mystical poet was buried there. I went to the church. The vicar was cleaning, I seem to remember. He couldn't see why I should be interested. I never saw the memorial.

I gathered some knowledge of Traherne's influences, Plato and the lovely Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino, but I felt there were many questions to answer.

In 1981, in a different bedsit, this time in Putney, I wrote a novel which put all these things together. It was just a private amusement. One of the characters was able to talk like this:

*"If we live in ourselves we're lifeless, meaningless, destructive, but once we find the flow of love, the swing of the music, we come to life. To join the dance is a strange delight. We find true joy, and, if it suits us, inspiration, only in the dance. It's not just people. It's everything. Every part of Nature follows the dance. Rocks and hills can arrange themselves, the stars themselves dance. We may not see the movement, but we can feel the tremor of joy when we join. When we give ourselves to the dance we find it is all ours, and, more than that, it is all each and every dancer's. The patterns the dance weaves wind sideways through time and space. We may not see them but we can sense the moments of grace when we pass through those mysterious interstices. Love is never static, but active, and often difficult – sometimes a light pleasure, sometimes intense, the old white spiritual flame, agonising but always rewarding with joy. The dance moves towards the establishment of peace – but it will never end. When the work of this dance of Creation is complete we will see the pattern of the dance, as visionaries may see it now, but we will dance on to preserve the peace and imitate eternity. The dance matters. Love matters. Nothing else."*

The Dance, obviously, began with Charles Williams. After a while I felt this image had become a bit corny, even twee – but I've come back to it, as the title of this little book shows. After thirty-seven years that speech still makes sense, even if the rest of the novel doesn't.

But in 1981 it seemed a long way from anything I could recognise in more sober religious circles.

Years later, in the 1990s, I got to know Gordon Mursell, who was then rector of Stafford where I had lived since 1982. He was working on his epic two volume study of English Spirituality. He told me that, if I liked Traherne, I should read Peter Sterry – whom I can't help involving in this story - and he introduced me to Bonaventure.

Everything fell into place. This was a theology that made complete sense of the world I had enjoyed for many years. I had no idea that there were such ideas in the Catholic Church. It was a different kind of God.

This very soon led me into the Franciscan order. My interest in the influences which, through "Creation," help us to form ourselves, developed into an interest in spiritual direction. I now have the fun of exploring "place" and "Nature" in music and film. In a few fascinating sessions with prayer groups I have simply asked people what they think of as "works of God" – and as they talk about what might seem at first to be "objects", like a bird seen through the window as they do the washing up, they begin to talk of the complex world of relationships which forms that encounter with the bird. Perhaps we all live in this infinitely complex Cosmos but something in the over-rational part of our brain, or a fixed idea of what God is, prevent us from seeing that this, yes, even this washing up, not just the bird, is God.

What follows is a very simple look at a few features of what I believe is a distinctive Franciscan theology, and how it tries to show that the whole world, the cosmos, can communicate God's song, and that we are part of the music.

It's not academic. It's just one point of view.

### 3

#### **WHY IS THERE ANYTHING?**

Why is the cosmos so creative?

Why, indeed, is there anything?

There is a simple answer. All things come from God. But the word "God" means very different things to different people. It can be a very unhelpful word to use. What, in this study, does "God" mean? What can be said of God?

It's useful to begin with the absolute minimum.

God is the absolute Source of All Being - the absolute simplicity, the absolute point of unity. To the followers of Plato it seemed best to refer to "the One." This is something (though God cannot be said to be a thing) unknowably simple. We might imagine God, as seen from our human understanding, in human terms, but those images are just a convenience, and can be very misleading. Christians know God in Christ. But we have to keep reminding ourselves that God is beyond words and images - the ultimate source of all things, of all Being.

The central philosopher and theologian of the Franciscan tradition was St. Bonaventure.

Bonaventure was born as Giovanni di Firanza in Bagnoregio, Umbria, in 1221, five years before the death of St Francis. He became the seventh Minister General of the Franciscans, the Order of Friars Minor as it was called, following a number of great thinkers who had already been drawn to the order by the inspiration of Francis. From the very beginning the Order had attracted preachers, theologians, philosophers and scientists. This is curious, as Francis seemed to disparage learning and books. Bonaventure was a contemporary of Thomas Aquinas, whose theology had very important differences to the Franciscan tradition. Bonaventure wrote a lot, but amongst the academic and complex texts, are a few masterpieces which had wider circulation in his time and which are still read today.

“The Soul’s Journey into God”, tells how we can find God in Creation, in ourselves, and, ultimately, we can hope to find God, pure and simple, in contemplation, passing beyond everything earthly.

“The Tree of Life” is a set of meditations on the life of Christ which use the Imagination to help us become Christ-like. This, and the implications of the Imagination, will be looked at in detail in a later chapter.

His “Life of St Francis” was intended to be the official version at a time when many alternative versions of the stories, and many apocryphal anecdotes, were circulating. The fact that other versions were suppressed might seem alarming today, but this was a time when it was very difficult to check the facts of any rumour or story, and fantasies could spread like wildfire. An example of Bonaventure’s “official” version compared to an earlier text is the famous story of Francis kissing the leper. In Thomas of Celano’s version the leper vanishes, leaving only his tattered clothes. The leper was really Christ. The story is an allegory, the leper unreal. In Bonaventure’s the leper is a leper. Of course, the leper is also Christ, as all outsiders are, but the story has far more force in Bonaventure’s more realistic version.

Bonaventure was later given the title “the Seraphic Doctor” by the Church. His writings, which gather together all the best thought of “Christian-Platonism” (actually part of a much older tradition) are now being rediscovered and seem to have new meaning in the present age.

Bonaventure’s ideas of God, or what can be said of God, were not original. Medieval thinkers tried hard to avoid originality. The best thoughts were supported by ancient authority, especially scripture. One of the greatest influences on Bonaventure’s ideas was the writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius who lived around 500AD.

Pseudo-Dionysius was regarded as very high authority because he was wrongly believed to have been Dionysius the Areopagite, a follower of St Paul, and inheritor of mystical secrets from the apostle. Pseudo-Dionysius’s writings, partly inspired by the Platonists, had a powerful influence on theology.

To this mysterious mystic, God was ultimately unknowable. He wrote of the knowledge of God that was hidden by the “cloud of unknowing” and only experienced in contemplation when every trace of worldly or personal knowledge has been put aside. This became the basis for a tradition of spiritual writing throughout the middle ages, and the ideas are used in the final part of Bonaventure’s “Journey of the Soul into God.” The English spiritual masterpiece “The Cloud of Unknowing” was written a century after Bonaventure.

This negative tradition, called “apophatic”, could be thought of as an attitude that denied any value in the material world. This would seem to make it far removed from the Franciscan joy in creation. Bonaventure’s “Journey of the Mind into God” reaches for this ultimate knowledge, but it also develops ideas from Pseudo-Dionysius to explain where Creation comes from, and how it can reveal God. In Bonaventure’s system we can be inspired by knowledge we glean from Creation, and from ourselves, to make the ascent, and, if we touch the highest truth, we can return to the world seeing it, and God’s presence within it, more clearly, with a sense of the Unity within all things.

To us God is paradoxical, a union of opposites. Pseudo-Dionysius writes of God:

“He is not one of those things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things and he is no thing in among things. He is known to all from all things and he is known to no-one from anything.”

(Pseudo-Dionysius, the complete works. New York: Paulist Press, 1987)

God, to Pseudo-Dionysius, is infinitely simple and very different from what we might imagine to be a medieval image of God the Father.

God is unknowable, but some things can be said of God.

God, Pseudo-Dionysius says, is “Being” – but, really, God is beyond even our ideas of being or non-being. What he means is that God, this unknown absolute unity, is the source of all Being. Every kind of Being comes from God. Just by Being, a Franciscan would say, a thing reveals God, by sharing in God’s Being.

Other things can be said of God.

God is Life, Truth, Power, Wisdom. Anything that has these qualities has them from God. It's not that they have a "Truth" which in some way is made by God, or resembles God's truth. It is the same Truth. Something that has Truth "participates" in, or shares in, God's "Truth."

But if God is this abstract, infinitely simple and infinitely remote concept, why is there anything other than God? Why is there a Creation at all? Why isn't this God sufficient in itself, content to be alone?

The understanding of Creation which came to its flowering in the Franciscan tradition stems from the concept of God's Goodness. God, absolutely simple and absolutely One, is absolutely Good.

The Goodness in Creation shares in God's Goodness.

(This seems clear enough, but, as will be explained, it was a dispute over this idea which led to devastating changes in theology, and the loss of this entire view of Creation,)

It is in thinking about Good that we begin to understand the origin of Creation – and why there is anything.

Nothing can be said to be Good if it jealously keeps that Good within itself. Goodness is inseparable from Love.

Surprisingly Pseudo-Dionysius did not explain the relationship of Goodness to Love, even though the first letter of St John simply says "God is Love." It is very odd that, in all his exploration of what can be said of God, Pseudo-Dionysius did not include this startlingly simple statement.

Incredibly, the central role of Love in the existence of everything was not clearly stated until the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the writings of Richard of St Victor, an important source for Bonaventure.

Everything Bonaventure wrote was inspired by Francis. Francis himself wrote very little. He simply lived his theology. God's goodness was very important to Francis and so was bound to be central to Bonaventure's work. In one of his few authentic writings, his Prayer for Brother Leo, Francis wrote:

“You are holy, Lord, the only God,  
and Your deeds are wonderful.  
You are strong.  
You are great.  
You are the Most High.  
You are Almighty.  
You, Holy Father are King of heaven and earth.  
You are Three and One, Lord God, all Good.  
You are Good, all Good, supreme Good, Lord God, living and true.  
You are love. You are wisdom.”

(Francis and Clare: Complete Works. Paulist Press, 1986

Richard of St Victor explained that the supreme quality of Goodness is Charity, freely given love. If God is absolute Good, God must also be absolute love. Love cannot be self-contained, it must have an object. If God is Love, there must be a Creation.

(For a detailed explanation of this view of Creation see – Ilia Delio, Simply Bonaventure. New City Press, 2001.)

It seems absurdly simple, but everything that exists comes from Love.

This central place of Love is also essential to our understanding of The Trinity.

God is Love.

The concept of the Trinity shows that love, and the whole idea of relationship, comes from God.

God is absolute Unity, the One, as Platonists would say. The concept of the Trinity, as Bonaventure would have understood it, is a way of declaring that God is absolutely One, though we may think of God, and experience God in the world or in our lives, in different ways.

We may think of God as the Source of all Being – whether or not we wish to use the biblical imagery of God as Father. We may be aware of God’s creative power, and of God present in

Creation. We may think of God as an energy that gives life, affects things, or inspires. But God is indivisibly One, however three-dimensional this Unity is seen from within Creation.

This is a mystery, a way of understanding. Bonaventure used the word “circumincessio” to refer to the way that these three apparent faces (technically referred to as “Persons”, which means something like “masks” and certainly does not mean they are in any way individual or separate things) exist within one another, or as one thing. They dwell within each other.

Because of this, God, this Source of all Being, is both unified, and also contains the essence of love and relationship.

This love is the reason why anything exists. Love, and the original goodness, cannot be self-contained. It pours out, creating everything, as an object of its own love.

So, however complex and imperfect the creation we experience, the source of creation, and its driving power, is love. Creation, simply by being, share God’s goodness.

At this point it’s easy to say “but Creation isn’t good! What about evil?”

People have been asking that for two thousand years. It might not be convincing or satisfactory to everyone, but I hope that looking at this process of Creation in terms of music and dance will help us understand a possible answer.

Everything flows from God because God is Love.

Bonaventure took his term “circumincessio” (dwelling within each other) from the Greek term “perichoresis”, which has the same meaning. He was influenced by the theology of the Eastern church when East and West were divided, as they still are. He worked for reconciliation between the two churches, which had been divided over one word in their definitions of the Trinity. Perhaps the style of his theology was always intended to unite both sides.

“Perichoresis” is sometimes misunderstood as being derived from the Greek for “dance”, as if the three Persons of the Trinity were dancing together. This would have seemed a nonsense to Bonaventure and Pseudo-Dionysius. God is beyond any concept of rest or movement, or even beyond being and non-being.

However, if we think of Creation, pouring from this invisible source, which might be imagined as the “still point of the turning world” we can hardly avoid thinking in terms of movement and dance, flowing from “the still point of the turning world.”

“Creation is a Performance”, as American writer David Fideler has said.

It is impossible, from the point of view of this Franciscan theology, to think in terms of Creation as something that happened, or has happened. Creation is a continual outpouring of creativity in which things are, very clearly, dancing. Things are continually forming, becoming themselves, combining into other things, dividing and changing.

Everything is being Composed.

Bonaventure wrote of things being in a process of creation, in effect, evolving:

“God created matter lacking in final perfection of form so that by reason of its lack of form and perfection, matter might cry out for perfection.”

(Bonaventure’s Sentences, translated by Ilia Delio, Simply Bonaventure. New City Press, 2002)

To the early theologian, beginning with Augustine, Nature was understood to contain potential creatures, “seminal reasons”, which would come to life in later times. To think in terms of a creation at a point in time, or the beginning of time, obscures this important idea that things are continually being created. Even the Jewish philosopher Philo, a contemporary of Jesus, saw the Genesis story as the story of God’s creation of the pattern of Creation, outside time. Things are continually being created.

As we are ourselves.

In Bonaventure’s time reading scripture “literally” meant looking at what the words actually say, not taking a “literal” understanding of their meaning. The literal view of the creation story in Genesis is a modern phenomenon, a symptom of the loss of imagination which is an aspect of our loss of unity with Creation.

## 4

### GOD SHINES FORTH

We have a tendency to think of Creation as something made, just as we might make a seed cake. We mix the ingredients according to a recipe, our own memory, or pure luck, bake it, take it out of the oven and put it down on the kitchen table. It now sits there as itself, an object, a thing achieved, but separate from its baker - and possibly too hot to touch.

This is, technically, a “creationist” view – which is not the same thing as the very modern (20<sup>th</sup> century) oddity of taking the Genesis story literally. No-one thought “literally” in Bonaventure’s day – and such an approach has no chance of discovering the mysteries of the ancient theology.

We must forget any ideas of making or baking.

Think of that unknowable source of creativity and relationships, that thing we call God - the Source of All Being - as the mysterious source from which everything flows, from which every kind of thing is flowing.

It might be helpful to think in terms of radiance, or a light projected from the source, rather than any kind of idea of God making things, as we bake a cake, and putting them down, finished and out of his hands.

There have always been too opposing ways of looking at this process of Creation – Creationism and Emanationism. Creationism, in this context, means a belief that God creates things which have an existence separate from “himself,”

In contrast, Emanationism sees all things as radiating from God, not separate, and perhaps not even to be seen as anything other than God, in the way that a white light may be broken into colours through a spectrum, or shine through an oil-wheel (in a 60s rock concert) and produce moving, dancing colours.

Because nothing is separated from its source, knowledge of creation leads us back to its source.

“This the whole of our metaphysics: it is about emanation, exemplarity, and consummation; that is, to be illumined by spiritual ways and to be led back to the supreme being.”

“Any person who is unable to consider how things originate, and how they are led back to their end, and how God shines forth in them, is incapable of achieving true understanding.”

(Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*. Translation with introduction and commentary by Zachary Hayes O.F.M, D. Th. New York: Franciscan Institute, St Bonaventure University, 1996)

The idea of Emanation comes from Plato, but Bonaventure disagrees with Plato in an important detail.

To Plato everything emanates from “the One” out of necessity. His emanation is a way of understanding how material things, changeable things, are reflections of ideal forms which are more real and unchanging, and closer to the source.

As Bonaventure is thinking in terms of a Christian God, however unknowable, he cannot think of a creation that is automatic or inevitable. To Bonaventure Creation must come about because God freely desires it. God might not have desired to be creative, in which case nothing would have existed.

This Creation is a product of that outpouring of love that Richard of St Victor described – something which, surely, should be the very centre of our theology but which took over a thousand years to be explained in Christian terms.

By the thirteenth century all this was just beginning to make sense - perhaps returning to its roots. Sadly, forces were at work which would undermine this moment of enlightenment.

In this kind of theology, it is impossible to think of God in human terms, as humanised, anthropomorphic Supreme Being, sitting on his Sapphire throne, making decisions, plans and judgments. God is something abstract, if you like, but, at the same time, is close to us as our own hearts. We can know the unknowable through Christ, but Christ unites us with the ultimate mystery. God is ineffable, but never remote – because we are part of the endlessly emanating Love, being Created in every moment.

Nothing can confuse God's unity and simplicity.

Everything emanates from God because Love is God and that everything is created freely and has freedom.

This is how it was for Bonaventure – but this is by no means a universal way of understanding Creation. At this point some Christian traditions part company, at the division between Creationism and Emanationism.

If God is Love, it follows that all Creation is free. Everything must have free will. There would be no pure Love if everything were planned, fixed, or ordained by God.

Creation must be a dance of continual change. The source is not in the past but eternal. This outpouring is continuous. The source is always present.

Though it might be easier to think of this emanation as an outpouring from a source “out there”, the source, this thing we refer to as God, is within everything, within everything's very essence.

Bonaventure is often associated with the statement “God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” The quote is actually from an esoteric mystical text “The Book of the Fourteen Philosophers” which might date from the fourth century AD.

This is, though, a very good way of reminding ourselves that this creative light is not radiating from somewhere “out there”, as if from a heaven that can be imagined in space, but is coming from within everything, as much in our own souls (which we can think of as being essence of what we are) as in the remotest flash of energy in the infinite depths of space.

Bonaventure (translated by Ilia Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*. New City Press, 2002) wrote:

“Creation...is like a beautiful song that flows in the most excellent of harmonies but it is a song that God freely desires to sing into the vast spaces of the universe.”

There would be no freedom to form new things if there were not also a freedom to go wrong.

Concord is meaningless without Discord.

So, if Creation, this infinite outpouring, is free, why is there not chaos?

This is a fair question, and to the modern mind there seems to be an obvious flaw in this theology. What gives all this outpouring of creativity form and meaning? Why is it that this radiance of love produces the seed cake and assortment of buns and dainties, rather than the after-effect of a custard pie fight (I am thinking of the 1965 film *The Great Race*) or, indeed, of an explosion in a custard factory?

The answer to this question, in terms of this theology, comes in two parts, one of which is almost universally forgotten by theologians today.

Everything that comes into being, in this process of emanation, is an image, infinitely varied as light through a kaleidoscope or many prisms, of its source. It has Unity, and a desire to return to its source, by discovering Unity in itself.

Creation is not a chaos of formless cake mix and custard because the Cosmos has inherent laws within it. Things are not pouring into a vacuum, but into a world which is governed by Harmony, the first of God’s creations.

**COMPOSING THE COSMOS**

*“And the union of many into one, bringing a divine harmony out of many scattered sounds, becomes one symphony, following one leader, the Word, and never ceasing till it reaches the truth itself with the cry, ‘Abba Father.’” (Clement of Alexandria (c200AD), Exhortation to the Greeks, Chapter IX. Translated by G. W. Butterworth. Loeb, 1919)*

A composer, or any other artist, may have the feeling that his work already exists, and that composing is a struggle to remember something which is already there, as much as to make something from nothing.

This effect, of something having a prior existence, can be experienced even more powerfully from something which is unfinished. Sometimes something incomplete or imperfect gives us a sense that the complete and perfect work is out there, waiting to be discovered. We can be filled with a desire to complete it, or, if we can't, with an aching sense of mystery and loss.

There is a power in unfinished works. Incompleteness can be used as a deliberate artistic device, as in Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan." The potential poem projects itself into the imagination

The same quality, of a work pre-existing and desiring to be born, can be felt in any aspect of Nature or life.

As someone once said to me in a dream: "God draws all things to their image in the Mind of God."

People may have a sense that their life has a plan, and that some things are “meant to be.” This is sometimes explained as the workings of “providence”, as if God has planned in advance everything that will happen to them. There is good scriptural authority for thinking like this.

The psalmist, in Psalm 139, says to God:

“My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place.  
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,  
your eyes saw my unformed body.  
All the days ordained for me  
were written in your book  
before one of them came to be. “

But if the pattern of our life was already ordained where is the freedom which, to Bonaventure, is an essential quality of God and Creation?

This is, however hard we think about it, a tough philosophical knot. If we do want to think in terms of a God who thinks and plans in this way, how does this fit in with the idea of a God who is eternal – outside time and equally present in every time? We might say that God knows everything – our beginning and end. But if God is outside time and knows our future it doesn't mean we haven't arrived there by our own devices. It need not mean that we are not free to become what we might be in God's great experiment.

Plato suggested that all learning was a matter of remembering – that we had Truth within us. The idea that we had some fundamental knowledge within our souls from the beginning was a commonplace through the middle ages, but this idea was interpreted in different ways.

Plato and his followers were very concerned with this idea that things had a pre-existence, a pattern in the Mind of God, which they tried to rediscover or grow towards through a process of remembering. It was as if God had first made a World of Ideas, or of perfect forms. Somehow, between our Creation and God was this perfect blueprint.

Sometimes this World of Ideas, or Mind of God, is thought of as containing patterns of every individual thing. Sometimes the patterns in God's Mind are thought to be only ideal patterns which individual worldly things hope to copy, perfectly or imperfectly. In some versions of this philosophy the only patterns are fundamental principles, such as the Good, Beauty, or Truth. Plato is always exploring alternative views and changing his mind. Bonaventure, too, uses different versions of this idea at different times.

In whichever way we try to define this World of Ideas the effect, it seems to us, is still that it is "as if" God has a pattern of everything in his mind – which is eternal and outside time.

And yet, as Bonaventure believed, there must be Freedom.

His solution to this paradox is, I think, inspired – and for me, at least, it rings true. It follows the Franciscan rule of simplicity. What is the simplest law that could ensure infinite creativity and also freedom?

To Bonaventure there is only pattern for everything that is – the Word.

The Word contains everything. As with most of his theology Bonaventure was not being original. He was drawing together old ideas into a coherent whole. The idea that Unity or "the One" was the only "Idea" in God's Mind is Platonic, but Bonaventure sees that this makes perfect sense when seen as "the Word", as part of the theology of the creative Trinity.

The Word, or Logos, means something more than "word" in everyday language. The Word is the reason, or meaning of God. The Word is God as present in created things. Rather than there being a world of ideal patterns to which everything aspires there is simply this one thing, which is God, which the infinite variety of created things exist to reveal through Creation.

As the Gospel of St John declares “In the beginning was the Word” it was a reasonable to think that this one Word was the pattern of everything, that it contained all things. St Augustine wrote that the Father “begot one word in whom He said all things before the several works were made.” (Quoted in Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation & Cognition in the Middle Ages*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.)

There is a simple dynamic concept of the cosmos in this.

God’s Love is the cause of Creation. God has a fundamental desire to reveal “himself”.

Created things do not need to have a predetermined pattern. Things form in complete freedom, drawn by the desire to be, to reveal God by having Being, and to be themselves, something which has, by being what is, Truth and Unity.

Everything comes from an absolute Unity. Everything is drawn towards Unity, from which it came. Things cannot move towards Unity by joining together becoming one thing, as that would destroy God’s infinite creativity. Similarly, things cannot reveal Unity by all becoming the same. There would be no freedom and creativity in that.

From absolute Unity everything is drawn to reveal Unity, God, by being itself, by having Unity in itself.

Creation, Bonaventure said, is “the fountain-fullness of God’s Being.” Bonaventure’s most well-known treatise, “The Mind’s Journey into God” explains that all things are “vestiges” of God, revealing God in different ways according to their nature, but elsewhere he seems to be thinking more that things reveal God by being what they are, as expressions of the Word.

This concept of individual things revealing God was developed more precisely by Duns Scotus who made more of the value of individual things. Scotus’s ideas of the value of individuality (the more individual a thing is the more it reveals God) were taken up in poetry by Gerard Manley-Hopkins in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

“Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.”

And —

“... For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.”

(Gerard Manley Hopkins, *As kingfishers catch fire.*)

It follows from this that everything, in being itself, is an expression of God, the Word. The Word is also Christ, and so it is true to say that by knowing anything as it is we know Christ — and, conversely, the more we are Christ-like (like St Francis) the more we see things as a “theophany”, a revealing of God, a sacramental world.

Indeed, Creation, as a whole, must have Unity, it must also be an image of the Word. Creation as a whole must, in fact, be a Cosmos, a Unity with form and beauty.

“Cosmos” is the word used in the opening of St John’s gospel, usually translated, very misleadingly, as “World”.

The complexity of Creation is a product of God’s absolute simplicity.

This idea, of all things freely expressing The Word, is of enormous importance and I am not sure that Bonaventure realised the implications.

Creation, things, and our own lives, need not be pre-determined by Providence. Creation is God’s experiment. This Dance of Creation has life, death, change, beauty and horror within it. Some things appear to us good, some bad — and which are which is often impossible to define

– but there is a potential goodness in Creation because all things flow from God’s love. We have to see things as a whole, and not look for God only in the easy, nice, concordant things. It’s a fundamental rule that Truth can only lead to God. Even dreadful things can reveal God to us when we see them as True. Knowing reality is a first step to God.

If God is revealed in all things, because the Word is expressed through the infinite variety of Creation, everyone can know God – through everything “out there”, and, also, within ourselves, as we too, and everything within us, is also the expression of the Word.

This is certainly implied in Bonaventure’s theology, particularly in his theology of Imagination, which influenced his meditations on “The Tree of Life.” If we can know God through Creation, in ourselves, and in contemplation, does this begin to undermine the Church’s role in salvation? Do we need to be saved? The Franciscans, including “the Seraphic Doctor” and Duns Scotus “the Subtle Doctor” also tended to chip away at the weight given by the Church to sin. Nothing they wrote was heretical, but some of it was put aside, left on the shelves of the inaccessible parts of a library with the shocking book that is the key to “The Name of the Rose” (a very good picture of the disputes in the Franciscan order in the 13<sup>th</sup> century).

And so –

My own phrase, remembered from a dream was “All things are drawn by love to reveal God.”

Not long ago I was delighted to find the same thought in Bonaventure, quoted by Joseph Milne:

Bonaventure sees

“Divine Love as the power that draws all things to Unity in the Mind of God.” (Joseph Milne, *Metaphysics and the Cosmic Order*, Temenos Academy, 2008.)

Everything that is shares Being with God and is an expression of the Word. Everything comes from that absolute oneness and, as Bonaventure's theory of emanation tells us, it seeks to return to its source.

This does not mean, as it does in other religious traditions, that everything moves in great cycles, returning to the beginning, as if the universe was collapsing in on itself, and starting again.

What Bonaventure means is that everything is seeking to return to Unity by becoming what it should be – like Hopkin's kingfisher, or the seed cake which is just, oh, that delicious seedcake, communicating joy with a cup of Earl Grey.

But what are these things which reveal the Word? What are these "Works of God?"

**WORKS**

What are these “Works of God?”

This seems to be the most difficult part of this theology to grasp. What do we think of when we hear the phrase “works of God?”

Is there something in the human mind that makes us think of things, of all kinds, as separate, as objects? Nothing is ever separate. Nothing is ever an “object.” Everything is part of the Cosmos, which is, as a whole, the expression of the Unity from which it springs.

We also, perhaps, have a tendency, when asked to think of “the Works of God” to think only of physical objects, especially natural things, the flowers and living creatures. This might be a surprising question – even slightly mad – but why are works of the Imagination, even Dreams, less real than trees and mountains?

Why is this? Is it something to do with the story of the seven days of creation in Genesis, which talks only of natural things being made, at the beginning, as if God has put them together, placed them down and left them? This implies that God has no further contact with nature, which was not the view of theologians before the Age of Reason.

But why limit our view to physical objects?

Everyone in church, whatever their denomination, will say in the creed that God “made all things, visible and invisible.” This is, surely, completely inclusive. It not only includes things that are not physical, but it also says, without any shadow of doubt, that God made everything. There is no possibility, according to this, that any other lesser deity, good or malevolent, made any part of the world – or even, if you want to see it that way, that we can claim responsibility ourselves for anything that is made, anything we make.

Nothing is separate. Nothing is “an object”.

Remember the example that came up at a prayer evening, the bird that the lady saw through her kitchen window when she was washing up.

The “work”, which we thought about in that group, wasn’t the bird, the breakfast things, or the window, though all those things are “works” in themselves. The “work”, which was a revelation of God, was the experience of standing there, washing up, looking through the window, seeing the bird, and being seen by the bird.

This is a Work of God. This Work has Unity. It is an expression of the Word – and dwelling within the Word (circumincession or perichoresis) is the Nature of the Trinity – relationship.

“Creation is a Performance.”

This is a very good example of what this world, this cosmos, is like. It can also demonstrate, if we think about that moment in the kitchen, that Works are about FORMING. The bird, breakfast things, the lady, the fairy liquid, the window, all Works of God and potential epiphanies and sources of grace, come together, FORMING the Work.

Clear theological explanations of this are hard to find. We can read Bonaventure and Scotus and still think of Works as individual things, but perhaps that is because they would not have had our dreadful narrow-mindedness. They were used to living in Scripture as Performance, living in the forest of words as they opened up new vistas and meanings. We read a text and see just words, ask “what does it mean?” They would have lived in a cosmos in which everything was from God, everything had Unity, and everything lived in our souls. Nothing was “out there”. Nothing was “an object.”

A rare treasure, from a time when this cosmos was in the process of being cut away from us by changing perceptions and new misunderstandings of Nature, comes in the writing of Peter Sterry, one of those great writers whose spirit overrules his assumed theology. Sterry was a

Calvinist, a Puritan, and at one time Oliver Cromwell's chaplain. He wrote sermons declaring that the success of the New Model Army in Ireland was a sign that they were doing God's work. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 he retired to a house at Sheen Abbey, near Kew, and lived in a family community, a puritan parallel to Little Gidding. There is no one more peaceful, more tolerant, or with a better understanding of the way Creation is a performance. He was a musician at heart.

He is very clear that every Work is an expression of the Word, but he knows that, because all Works are from God, the source of creativity, they not only ceaselessly combine to make new works, but they do it for pleasure, in the dance of divine love. The Idea (in the platonic sense) of each Work is the Word -

“...Every Idea of each Creature is this Idea, bringing forth itself according to the inestimable Treasures of the Godhead in it, into innumerable distinct figures of it self in the unconfined Varieties of its own Excellencies and Beauties, so that it may enjoy itself, sport with it self, in these, with endless and ever new Pleasures of all Divine Loves.”

(Vivian de Sola Pinto: Peter Sterry. Platonist and Puritan, 1613-1672. New York. Greenwood Press, 1968.p. 149)

This vision of the creative, endlessly forming, Cosmos, is a very important part of the more recent and more radical books by the contemporary Franciscan, Ilia Delio. In “Making All Things New” (Orbis Press, 2015) this is part of her vision of a Creation evolving towards what she calls “catholicity”, becoming part of the whole, the Unity. The most recent vision of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is the same as this vision of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – but in the centuries between this vision was lost almost completely, apart from for a few mad visionaries.

This awareness of the dynamic creativity of the cosmos, affecting us even at the kitchen sink, is thrilling, joyful, possibly startling or even terrifying. If it isn't you are missing the point.

It's surprising that this truth, that no Work is separate, or even static, is not clearly stated in Delio's very useful short book "A Franciscan View of Creation" (2004) – though there is one comment which implies it, and should leap off the page as something wonderful and astounding:

"Christ is the meaning and model of creation and every creature is made in the image of Christ. Because creation is centred on Incarnation, every leaf, cloud, fruit, animal and person is an outward expression of the Word of God in love...This means that sun, moon, trees, animals, stories, all have life only in Christ and with Christ, for Christ is the Word through whom all things are made."

(Ilia Delio: A Franciscan View of Creation. Franciscan Institute, 2004)

Stories!

When I first read that (I was in the car, parked under the trees at Seven Springs, near Stafford) I shouted aloud "Hurrah!"

Stories!

My anecdote of the washing up and my autobiographical rambling are also themselves Works of God, formed of how many influences, working together? It's worth spending time meditating on how many things, and how many people, came together to make even that simple encounter with the bird possible, sharing in its creation.

A performance implies a continuous Creation in which everyone is involved. If we think of a musical performance we could say that the musical work only really exists when it is a performance, in which the composer, performers and audience are all part, all co-creators.

The Work may be beautiful and reveal the Word - or it may be a piece which is searingly tragic, damaged, pained, and still has Truth – but there is another dimension to any performance.

This was explained by the lutenist Anthony Rooley in his book “Performance: Revealing the Orpheus Within” (Element Books, 1990).

Rooley took this theory of the effect of performance from the book “The Courtier” by the Renaissance writer Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529). This is a book about courtly behaviour. The ideal of good manners was all about treating life as a performance, in which one had to achieve the right relationship with others in conversation and action, so that everyone lived together in harmony and balance - and avoided stepping on each other’s toes.

This is, in fact, the idea of Peace, as defined by Pseudo-Dionysius – not a silent inactivity but a state where everything is free to be itself – which depends very much on courtesy and right relationships.

“Now, the first thing to say is this: that God is the Fount of Very Peace and of all Peace, both in general and in particular, and that He joins all things together in an unity without confusion whereby they are inseparably united without any interval between them, and at the same time stand unmixed each in its own form, not losing their purity through being mingled with their opposites nor in any way blunting the edge of their clear and distinct individuality.”

(Pseudo-Dionysius: On The Divine Names, 11, translated by C E Rolt.  
<http://documentacatholicaomnia.eu>)

This is the essential quality of a Dance. A Dance could be said to be this Divine Peace in action. All human relationships, to be Good, must have the characteristics of the Dance. Love depends exactly on this definition of Peace, as Plato explained in his Symposium.

In fact, surely it is increasingly obvious that Love really is the key to Creation?

Is Love the principal topic of study in the training of Priests?

Castiglione's theory of Performance can be applied to the formation of any Work of God, from the speck of dust to the Nation.

The performers, music, audience, all share the performance. We need to learn skills, how to play, listen, or love in harmony with others and with nature. We participate in everything – as co-creators.

A very important aspect of Castiglione's which might remind us of Francis's approach to life is sprezzatura – the spirited, careless quality. There has to be a lightness of touch for everyone and everything to bring life and spirit to their performance.

The key point, though, is "Grazie".

Rooley says that this is not to be seen as the same thing as divine grace, but surely it is?

The performance, the music, the response of the audience, can be inspired, and the effect wonderful – but Grazie is a rare and special gift – that moment, a flash of gold, when everything comes together and reveals, just in that flash, Truth. This is, surely, how the world is.

Everything in Nature is performing all the time. We can be aware of the Word in the process of being revealed in anything, any part of the world we experience – but these flashes of grace, and it is grace - the unpredictable gift - give us, suddenly, a glimpse of God. They might happen at any time. The Performance might be something astounding, or something completely trivial or absurd. It might be the shock of love at first sight, a Performance of the most profound and delightful kind. It is only a sudden spark - but that gleam is something that stays with us, a revelation or epiphany of God – and it confirms the faith that this sometimes chaotic dance has heaven within it.

Performance implies a continuous creation. New works are forming, or struggling to be born, struggling to discover what they are, to reveal unity.

The same is true of us. Human beings are trying to uncover our own Souls, and become what we might be. Anything, story or human person, can only find that Unity, which might never be more than a dream, or a light far away in the night, by interacting, performing with other things. We might think we know what we are and what matters to us – but then we taste that seed cake, we hear that song from a place we had never heard of, or wander into that East End alley – and we realise how little we knew of what was within us...

We are not to think of any Performance as something complete, or perfect.

Perfection is only known in those moments of grace – and it comes from God. The world is constantly creative, a vast experiment. Every performance contains life and death, love and pain. It must, to be alive, contain concord and discord.

This is more than a convenient musical metaphor. Music is not a sign or metaphor for the Cosmic Performance - it is a part of it - and Music is the most direct means that we have of understanding the language within Creation.

This is something that would not have been thought of before the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

“Harmony” was the common way of understanding the inherent law in Nature (of which more will be said later), and most music was thought of as an attempt to express this Harmony. From the Renaissance Western music began to experiment with the expression of human feeling, inspired by a belief that ancient Greek music had been able to move people in an almost (or actually?) magical way.

Music began to be based on contrast, change - with an increasing use of discord for expression, and to give a sense of movement.

By the early 17<sup>th</sup> century music could be complex, dark, and philosophical if it wished, Music showed that even the most painful sound could have meaning in its place.

This is such an important way of understanding what Creation’s Performance is like, and yet so rarely written about, that it’s worth quoting again the miraculous Peter Sterry – puritan, mystic, musician:

“Every single Note in this sacred Musicke is a particular and singular Forme in the Divine Works...These single Notes are contrary to another, are distinguished into flatts, and sharpes, Concords and Discords... like to the Dancings of Witches, or howlings of Devills...

...the Divine Harmony... reconciles, and marries them into answering, and suitable Notes...Thus they become the sweetest Rellishes of the Musicke, most necessary, and delightull Parts of it, which bear the Universall Harmony Itselfe, as a Pearle-seed in their Bosomes, and a Crowne of Dyamonds upon their Heads.”

(Peter Sterry. Select Writings. Edited by N. I. Matar. Peter Lang, 1994)

To Sterry, even Hell can be thought beautiful in its place.

The risen Christ shows his wounds.

We can be aware of these Works and willingly join the Performance. We can become part of the Performance and know ourselves to be co-creators of the Dance, - but we must also be aware that there are Works we cannot see, or understand. Why should these Dances limit themselves to our small place and time? Perhaps for a few steps we join a Dance which weaves through Creation in a way we could never follow. There might be spark of delight - or the sense that someone has trodden on our grave.

Music is more than a metaphor – but there is also Comedy. Comedy is a characteristic of Creation. It can come from the surprising connection of incongruous things. The Dance to this Hidden Music is always throwing up surprises. Developing a sense of humour is an essential part of becoming a performer or composer.

In ancient musical theory the muses were associated with the planets and stars but for very good reasons the muse of Earth - the material world – was Thalia, muse of comedy, because

the music of Earth, this World, is all about change, surprise. To trip on someone's toes, or a banana skin, is part of the work of Creation.

The greatest composer, in my humble opinion, Joseph Haydn, had a reputation for humour, as a person and in his music, but there was nothing more serious than this. Comedy had a deep philosophical purpose. In his symphonies the tragic and the absurd could be thrown together in one work, not only for comic effect but because this is the nature of Creation - and because his symphonies are about tolerance, what we might call inclusiveness. These were virtues learned from Lord Shaftesbury and his German followers. All Haydn's scores are headed "Laus Deo!" Praise be to God!

And, of course, such comedy can be the result of chance, not providence. The juxtaposition produces new kinds of works, as chance might trigger a new direction in evolution. The language within Creation can accommodate the most ludicrous slapstick and the subtlest wit – Jane Austen, Will Hay, Father Ted.

There is also Mystery. Mystery can be the intoxicating sense of touching something which is forming or has a form, which we cannot understand. If we try find an answer to this Mystery we can lose our way through the wood.

Both Comedy and Mystery are destroyed if we have a literal or empirical approach. This is the human failing for which all these different ways of understanding the intimate unity of God, Creation and ourselves, are here presented as antidotes.

Works come in an infinite variety. I have a personal interest in "Spirit of Place". Our relationship with Place, which can be any small part of the world which we see as having a unity or meaning, is no different than our relationship with any other kind of work, but it is another useful way of reminding ourselves that all Works are made of many elements in relationship, whether a forest, a symphony, cake, or visiting bird.

There is Mystery in this – which draws our love.

Remember the church and well at Stevington. The church itself, its builders, the centuries of parishioners – the water that might clear my jaded eyes – here comes old Bunyan walking up

the wet path through the gloomy gunnera, like sinister rhubarb, in his big black boots – and if I follow the path I come to the osier beds where he has been baptising in the Ouse, and the Ouse, for a while, is the Jordan...

This is what a place is like - and what any Work is like if we are really living in this New Creation – this Creation which was restored, or simply revealed, when in another place, both a stable and cave, shepherds and mystic visitors heard angels singing.

There is a tradition that places, or any work of nature, can echo with deeper meaning when they reflect a scene in scripture – as the river in the last example. I remember at the tiny church, with a wobbly tower, at Capel y Ffinn the windows are inscribed “I will lift up my eyes to the hills” – and the black mountains, seen from that unexpected shrine to Our Lady, are the hills the psalmist sang about.

“For every creature is by its nature  
a kind of effigy and likeness of the eternal Wisdom,  
but especially one  
which in the book of Scripture  
has been elevated by the spirit of prophecy  
to prefigure spiritual things...”

(Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God etc. Paulist Press, 1978)

Some places may resonate with things deep in our memory, some may call them archetypes. A wood can become “The Magic Wood”. We might find that the narrow paths take us to deeper places than the narrow confines of the wood should, by a narrow view of nature, contain. There are some places which seem to draw down all the darkness and discord. There are valleys which are, really are, aspects of the Earthly Paradise. This is easy to understand if we make that leap away from “nature” into “Nature.” These valleys, or the beautiful artificial

gardens which are designed by art to have the same effect, resonate with Eden, or the Temple, because they have that right balance of Harmony.

I can take you there.

Such a place is no less real if it's in a book.

Dante may have been a member of the Franciscan Third Order, but it has never been proved. A very Franciscan feature of his "Divine Comedy" is that the characters are all individuals, not mythological characters. Individual things reveal God by being themselves.

At the centre of the poem is the Earthly Paradise, and there Dante meets the most mysterious character in the entire epic. She is Matelda, walking by the river. Surely she must be a person who is so perfectly balanced in her spiritual and physical influences that she is living in the Earthly Paradise while living on earth? If she were dead she would have been encountered in heaven, or as a visitor from heaven, as with Beatrice. But Matelda seems to belong to the Earthly Paradise, wandering by the river amongst the flowers...

"A lady all alone, who went along  
Singing and culling floweret after floweret,  
With which her pathway was all painted over.  
"Ah, beauteous lady, who in rays of love  
Dost warm thyself, if I may trust to looks,  
Which the heart's witnesses are wont to be,  
May the desire come unto thee to draw  
Near to this river's bank," I said to her,  
"So much that I might hear what thou art singing.  
Thou makest me remember where and what

Proserpina that moment was when lost  
Her mother her, and she herself the Spring."  
As turns herself, with feet together pressed  
And to the ground, a lady who is dancing,  
And hardly puts one foot before the other,  
On the vermilion and the yellow flowerets  
She turned towards me..."

(Dante: Divine Comedy, Purgatory Canto 28, translated by H W Longfellow)

This place, with its twin rivers, brings together classical and Christian imagery of the Earthly Paradise and Eden. There is nowhere more real and tangible, and no-one more real than Matelda.

The bird seen through the widow, the Bedfordshire well, the Welsh hills, all manner of dances, the Earthly Paradise, the stable (or cave), are all memories of one world, one Cosmos, one Creation.

This Creation is the same world in which we all live, but we narrow our vision, close our ears, deny that some dimensions of this world are real – which is no different from that way some people deny that some people, races, are as real as they are. We only live fully in the world we see no barriers between the senses, memories and imagination.

We are part of this one Work, the Cosmos. We are never merely observers. It's not easy. "The life so short, the craft so long to learn." Even an audience at a concert has a lot to learn to be able to participate in the Music.

We are an Audience, which, in enjoying Creation (everything that has Being), offers it back to God. We are co-creators. Simply by experiencing the world we have shared in the creation of memories, feelings, our own stories. If we have a true relationship with the world we might find we are drawn by the unfinished work, that source of mystery and desire, to place a tower on a hill which demands a tower – or to clear a river of accumulated beer bottles.

Even more importantly - we participate in these places through prayer. There is nowhere so damaged and desolate that can be divided from us. Our prayers, and simply our presence, are part of it, and draw it to God.

Nothing of this is “supernatural”. We know there is no need for spirits and demons in nature to explain its natural processes, whether an earthquake or the formation of a tree or a sonata. The Holy Spirit is quite a different thing. Here, I’m equating it with “the love that moves the sun and stars.” All this working of Love is God working through Nature itself, and through our own human senses, imagination and soul.

Any person is a Work, searching for what he or she should be. A person is always changing, is always in performance. The sense of Vocation is this sense of a possibility, a mystery of what we might become. This is Christ, the Word, in us, drawing us in love to reveal Himself. It is never a fixed pattern. We cannot predict what chance encounter might turn us on a different path. If we cling to one image of ourselves and go against this unexpected change we can create destructive tensions in ourselves. There is a goal of vocation, and it never change, but, as for everything else, it is simply the Word.

We can make mistakes. The world depends on freedom, and that includes freedom to go wrong.

This is the dynamic, dancing, Creation. This world is the song that Clement of Alexandria and Bonaventure wrote about. This is the world the dancing, singing and slightly crazy Francis lived in, in which the sun, moon and stars, wolves, birds and lepers, were his brothers and sisters.

In the early church the image of the Dance was common. The Apocryphal Acts of John has the scene where Christ dances with his disciples on the eve of his death.

“The whole universe shares with the dance on high.

He who does not dance

Does not know what is coming to pass.”

(Peter Dronke: *Imagination in the Late Pagan and Early Christian World*. Sismel. Edizione del Galluzzo, 2003)

Is this new Creation, which we enter when we join the Dance, also “the Kingdom”?

Some theologians suggest “the Kingdom of God” is not something that can be thought of in geographical terms, not a world, but the rule of God, the world to come or this world when it abides by laws from above. Doesn’t that suggest that this world is fallen, detached from God? Is the idea of a fallen world compatible with this theology, or does that come from the time when we lost this optimistic vision?

The laws, as we will see, are within Creation, renewed in the Incarnation, to be rediscovered, not laws to be imposed from anywhere.

Surely it is impossible to read St John’s gospel without thinking of the “true kingdom” within Creation?

“Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit...’” (Gospel of John 3:3-5 NRSV)

See?

Enter?

This is about entering a world that is already here. Can the holy well at Stevington, in Bunyan country, clear the eyes that our stupidity has clouded since our baptism?

The apocryphal “Gospel of Thomas”, written some time later than John’s gospel, but, perhaps, with older material says:

‘Jesus said, “If those who lead you say to you, ‘See, the Kingdom is in the sky’, then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you.’

“It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying ‘Here it is’ or ‘There it is.’ Rather the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it.”

(Gospel of Thomas, 3 and 114. The Nag Hammadi Library, ed. James M Robinson. E J Brill, 1977)

This is less “gnostic” (which often implies a denial of the material world) than the biblical “the Kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21) It seems to accord with the Creation I am describing – a unity of “within” and “without.” (The Gospel of Thomas version of the saying supports the King James Bible’s use of the word “within.”)

It could be said that the Garden Dante described, and the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, are images of the world that has been lost, and which might one day be recovered – but they are also places, or states of being, which are here now. Certain Gardens may become, if only at certain seasons, the Earthly Paradise. The Celestial City can be glimpsed in certain lights in the meanders of the River Ouse.

These places can also be present in our imagination, they are, as Henry Corbin would say, “imaginal worlds” which are as real as anything “material.” If we can bring imagination, feeling, love and the world of sense together we can re-enter the Garden, or the City – and discover that our whole world lies within it.

Perhaps.

This is no escape from reality. It's a return *to* reality. It's a case of seeing reality as a whole – and, as should be clear from all this, the spark of grace can be found in anything, however simple, if we see it as is, with feeling and imagination, and in a true relationship, without imposing ourselves, or imposing a “meaning” of our own.

On the journey I made along the Welsh border, photographing the mysterious and liminal places (including the aforementioned Capel y Ffin) the real epiphany was a shop window in a small village.

Autumn leaves scattered.

A few tins of beans and soup.

An autumn window.

Tom Cheetham, in “Imaginal Love. The meaning of Imagination in Henry Corbin and James Hillman.” (Thompson, Conn: Spring Publications, 2015) writes that all we should be trying to say is:

“Look! Just look! Look at what there is!”

There are very big questions here.

If Creation is like this, if it communicates God, it must, potentially communicate to everyone. It is totally inclusive. We all live in the same world. Everyone's stories are our stories. There are no “Christian” trees or “Buddhist” trees. All trees are the Word of God, and our understanding of God must be adjusted to this fact.

At the same time, it's useful to remember Charles Williams' saying:

“This also is Thou. Neither is this Thou.”

What we are experiencing in seeing things as they are is something beyond – the touch of grace.

We can have our own religious discipline as a way of rediscovering this Unity, but the end is the same end for everyone.

We need to think carefully of the implications of this.

Do we live like this? How do we make ourselves better performers, dancing with sprezzatura, and avoiding bumping into people? (If we do, we can apologise gracefully. Perhaps, if appropriate, laugh.)

It's possible to live as Francis did – but, apart from those few moments of vision, it's a very hard struggle.

“You never Enjoy the World aright, till the Sea it self floweth in your Veins, till you are Clothed with the Heavens, and Crowned with the Stars: and Perceiv your self to be the Sole Heir of the whole World: and more then so, because Men are in it who are every one Sole Heirs as well as you. Till you can Sing and Rejoyce and Delight in God, as Misers do in Gold, and Kings in Scepters, you never Enjoy the World.”

(Thomas Traherne. Centuries 1:29)

## HARMONY

*It is impossible to understand Franciscan attitudes without considering Harmony. Alessandro Vettori writes:*

*“The recovery of the harmony governing the universe at Creation, which the Book of Genesis identifies with the specific locus of Earthly Paradise, represents one of the most significant spiritual goals for Franciscanism in its beginning stages.”*

*(Alessandro Vettori: Poets of Divine Love, Franciscan mystical poetry of the thirteenth century. Fordham University Press, 2004.)*

Everything that exists, every Work, from the simplest atom to the most complex life, or city, or symphony, flows from God, as the Source of All Being, and is an expression of that one Idea, the Word.

How is it possible for such an effusion of creativity to find a state of peace, as Pseudo-Dionysius described, in this world of Creation, this Cosmos, without causing chaos and confusion? How is the Cosmos a Dance rather than a riot? A seed cake rather than an explosion in a custard factory?

We could answer “everything follows the laws of nature, or physical cause and effect.” Indeed, in which case there is no need for God – but that seems an inadequate explanation for the kinds of Works described in the previous section.

We might say “God guides all things.” Such an outpouring of invention surely needs God’s hand to guide everything towards its form, to fulfil its design?

This might seem a natural, and suitably Christian, answer, but it comes from a way of thinking of Creation and God which is not the same understanding as Francis, Bonaventure, or anyone

before the 16<sup>th</sup> century would have had. God is responsible for everything, and in all things, and so his means of governing Creation comes from within.

The essential difference is that, from a mysteriously distant time until the confusion and misunderstanding caused by the discoveries of astronomy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was assumed that Creation was, indeed, a Cosmos, a Unity which had order and beauty within it. The Cosmos had its own law – God’s first Work of Creation - which governed the whole and which was embedded in everything that came to be.

In its simplest form this law was Number - but that is a rather dry and cold way of thinking of it. What it was, at heart, was Harmony.

In “The Soul’s Journey into God” Bonaventure writes of the Numbers, which is far better read as Harmonies, which extend through all Creation. He refers to St Augustine’s “On Music”, which followed earlier sources going back to Plato, who

“indicates the differences of numbers (harmonies) which ascend step by step from sensible things to the Maker of all so that God may be seen in all things.”

(Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God etc. Paulist Press, 1978)

Number and Harmony are signs of the ultimate Unity of everything. We can, mathematically and philosophically, say that all numbers derive from One. We can demonstrate musically and mathematically that all Harmonies can be derived from one note. Harmony and Number pervade Creation, and guide the Cosmos.

All things in Creation, and we ourselves, are not controlled by Providence, in the sense of a complete pre-ordained plan. There need not be a hand of God to guide every stage in our, or anything else’s, growth. There need not be any divine plan other than that one Idea in the Mind of God. Creation is a vast experiment in which an infinite number of possibilities are explored. Every Work needs no other goal than the desire to express God, the Word, which is also Christ, drawn by the energy of the Spirit, which all things experience as Love. God’s providence or plan need be no more than Love.

God, as Love, must allow the Dance to live and grow in freedom. There is no chaos in Creation because it is Harmony which has guided chaos to find form.

Harmony was God's first work, the first Created Thing – not so much a plan or pattern, more a Law embedded in Creation.

This is a very ancient idea. Its origins are mysterious.

Throughout the first 1400 years of Christianity the key source for this understanding of the Cosmos was Plato's *Timaeus*. Plato (427-347BC) explored the origins of Creation in several dialogues but *Timaeus* was the only significant part of his writings that was known throughout the middle ages, and then only in part. Plato's explanation of the nature of the cosmos was revered through the early Christian centuries and often treated as divinely inspired. Here was a Greek philosopher speaking in terms of a creator God, a single first cause and maker of everything.

This story of Creation seemed to be compatible with the story of the seven days of creation in Genesis. It had been accepted as a useful interpretation by the Jewish philosopher Philo, a contemporary of Jesus. Philo explained that God also created Time, and that the story of the Seven Days was an allegory of this pattern of Creation, outside time. This was something deeply holy and secret. According to Margaret Barker (*Temple Mysticism, an introduction*. SPCK, 2011) the creation story was one which was not allowed to be read aloud. Medieval thinkers might not have been aware that this compatibility was due to the fact that Plato's story had much more ancient roots. It probably had the same sources as the story in Genesis.

The Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino, who was the first to translate all the works of Plato, which had been recovered by way of the Islamic world, into Latin, saw that Plato's account came from Pythagoras.

“Just as Plato devotes his energies, in the *Parmenides*, to encompassing all matters divine, in the same way he embraces, in the *Timaeus*, all things natural; and in both dialogues he is principally a Pythagorean, his discourse being uttered through the mouths of Pythagoreans.”

(Marsilio Ficino: All Things Natural, Ficino on Plato's Timaeus, translation by Arthur Farndell. Shephard-Walwyn,2010)

Pythagoras lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. He is a mysterious figure who is believed to have been the first to discover that Creation had an Inherent Law of Harmony within it, but even he is said to have received this secret from more ancient sources.

Creation, according to Plato, is a Cosmos. Cosmos means "ornament". It implies a beautiful whole. The Cosmos is Good because God created something which reflected his own Goodness. It has order, a fundamental order in every part, and in every facet, however complex and imperfect it may seem to us.

Plato explained how the creator made the Cosmos, by first making a pattern, not a plan of everything that would be made, but a pattern of fundamental principles, or laws, which would be the guidelines of everything that was made. Plato describes this in a very abstract way, and, as always with Plato, it is only ever meant to be a way of looking at things, a way of understanding, and not to be taken literally.

This pattern, the first created thing, he calls The World Soul. This is not an active force but a guiding principle.

The use of the term "World Soul", with its implication that Nature was a single living being, led to confusion when Christian thinkers tried to adapt Plato into Christian terms. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century Peter Abelard argued with Bernard of Clairvaux over his suggestion that the World Soul was the Holy Spirit. This seems incredible for a medieval theologian, when the Platonic World Soul is very clearly defined as something made by God. This should, according to the most important tenets of orthodox theology, mean that it cannot be equated with the Holy Spirit, which is, by definition, not made, but *is* God.

The World Soul is a blueprint of principles. Plato describes this making of the World Soul in complicated terms, as if a pattern made from paper, a celestial origami.

The key to the World Soul is Number. The same mathematical principles are true of everything and are a sign of the Unity from which they come. This seems a very cold and abstract way of thinking, but the student of Plato would understand that the origin of this reverence for the divine value of number derives from Harmony.

This is the secret of the Cosmos. All things contain the same Harmony.

This Harmony was reflected in the structure of the Cosmos itself. From very ancient times until the 16<sup>th</sup> century it was assumed that the sphere of the Earth was the whole of material Creation. The Earth was at the centre of a Cosmos of larger, transparent, spheres, on which the planets turned, and beyond them, the sphere of the stars. The stars and planets (including sun and moon) were not part of the material creation.

The clearest description of this singing Cosmos from the classical period was in Cicero's "Dream of Scipio". Cicero describes the order of the planets and their spheres, and the music they make:

"What is this great and pleasing sound that fills my ears?" asks Scipio.

This is no physical phenomenon to be observed scientifically. Scipio's guide, his grandfather, explains that the music is caused by the numerical relationships of the spheres and their speed of revolution, and says that:

"Gifted men imitating this harmony on stringed instruments and in singing, have gained themselves a return to this region, as have those of exceptional abilities who have studied divine matters even in earthly life."

(Translated by Joscelyn Godwin in *Music, Mysticism and Magic*, a sourcebook. Arkana, 1987.)

When Francis sang his praises with Sun, Moon and stars, he was not thinking of physical objects in space, but these signs in heaven which seemed to guide the life of Earth, the “sublunar world”.

These stars and planets were the visible representations of the structure of the Cosmos which pervades everything – Harmony.

This has to be remembered if we are to understand anything of the philosophy and theology from ancient times until the beginning of what is sometimes called the Modern Era.

We know that this was not what the material universe is like. There is far more to the material creation than this Earth, which we now know is a planet like millions of others.

But what Francis understood through this myth of the Music of the Spheres is still true. What he saw was the pattern of the Harmony in everything. The planets, rather strangely, did seem to move with the same proportions as governed musical Harmony. That view of the heavens might not be “true” to our modern, literal, minds, but Harmony still is. The Cosmos described by Plato and Cicero is a symbolic model of this Inherent Law.

An essential aspect of this worldview is that the human soul is made of the same stuff as the World Soul, the harmonies of the cosmos. In Plato’s symbolic description human souls are made from the material left in God’s mixing bowl after the making of the World Soul. The same laws are within us. By knowing the harmonies in ourselves we can reach for the knowledge of God’s Unity.

This Harmony is an inherent law, a ladder by which we can ascend to God.

If so, how does this Platonic concept relate to Christian systems of Salvation? To the Greeks it allowed us to ascend by philosophy and good living, through the spheres to the knowledge of the One, or God. In Christian terms this journey was hindered by the weight of sin. To what extent it was only possible within the Church was open to question.

There is, in this, a very deep question of the value of Inherent Law, in Nature itself, against the need for a Law imposed from without, or covenanted by God. This is not a question that only needs to be asked of the Christian idea of God. This understanding of an inherent law, Harmony, is much more ancient, and has to be considered when we think about the attitudes to God in the Old Testament period.

Plato's ideas of Harmony were not new. They are traditionally associated with Pythagoras, who had lived a century earlier. It was Pythagoras who was said to have discovered that musical harmonies derived from simple mathematical ratios. He is traditionally said to have realised this when hearing the different tones of the striking of the different sizes of the blacksmith's hammers. This was one of the most dramatic discoveries in history as it revealed that harmony was derived from number, that there was a harmony in everything and that harmony derived from a divine Unity.

This, in turn, led to the idea that this Unity must be the source of everything. There must be one God, about whom nothing can be said other than that he is One, and that Unity is, as Plato and his followers would say, is the same as the Good and Truth.

This knowledge changed completely the human understanding of Creation. Everything came from Unity. There was a Unity in everything.

Was it, though, an older knowledge that had been a sacred secret? Though he lived only a century before Plato, a well recorded historical figure, Pythagoras is the subject of myth. The various legends, such as are recorded by Plutarch (Plutarch: *Moralia* V, Loeb Classical Library 1936) in his "On Isis and Osiris", that Pythagoras had studied astronomy and music in Egypt or with the Magi and other Eastern sources of wisdom suggest that his teachings were believed to have more ancient sources. Iamblichus mentions that he studied with descendants of "Moschus" (Moses) in Phoenicia.

Whatever the truth of this there was an ancient belief that the ideas of Pythagoras and the ancient Hebrew religion shared a common source.

The Holy of Holies, a chamber in the form of a perfect golden cube, was the representation of the divine pattern of Creation. To the priests it was more than a representation. It was a place where that divine pattern was present on Earth.

This is where the original Tree was, in the form of the great Candlestick, the Menorah. Clement of Alexandria, in the second century AD, but drawing on the Jewish philosopher Philo from over 100 years earlier, writes:

“The lamp, too, was placed to the south of the altar of incense: and by it were shown the motions of the seven planets, that perform their revolutions towards the south. For three branches rose on either side of the lamp, and lights on them; since also the sun, like the lamp, set in the midst of all the planets, dispenses with a kind of divine music to those above and to those below,”

(Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata or Miscellanies*, Book V Chapter VI, in *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 2 T & T Clark, Edinburgh, reprinted by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.)

Margaret Barker’s research into the meaning of the Temple suggests that the Holy of Holies was the sign of the same Inherent Law in Creation, centred on the same belief in Unity and Harmony. This seems to be reflected in the Old Testament Wisdom Tradition. Wisdom appears as a personification of that divine pattern, the first created thing, which guides all Nature. According to Margaret Barker this belief in an Inherent Law was part of the original religion of the Temple. Only later, after Jerusalem had been hit by a series of disasters, which suggested that sinful humans needed stricter control, was this replaced by the idea of a Mosaic written law. The priests and prophets felt that the people needed an imposed law, which would order religious life and society, rather than be trusted to find the law in their hearts.

Pythagoras is an extremely important figure in the history of ideas. He brought together teachings from other cultures, with the idea of Harmony at the centre, and became a teacher rather reminiscent of Buddha, his contemporary. He and his followers lived a life of peace, wore white robes and were vegetarian. They also abstained from beans.

There are curious parallels with Francis.

Iamblichus tells of Pythagoras's relationship with animals. These stories go back further, to the hazy figure of Orpheus, whose singing, with its power over Nature, might also be echoed in Francis. Iamblichus writes:

“The Daunian bear, who had severely injured the inhabitants, was by Pythagoras detained, long stroking it gently, feeding it on maize and acorns, and after compelling it by an oath to leave alone living beings, he sent it away. It hid itself in the mountains and forest, and was never since known to injure any irrational animal.

“...Once happening to be talking to his intimates about birds, symbols and prodigies, and observed that all these are messengers of the Gods, sent by them to men truly dear to them, when he brought down an eagle flying over Olympia, which he gently stroked and dismissed.”

(The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library, translated by Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, edited and introduced by David Fideler. Phanes. 1987)

Whatever its origins this discovery, of the mathematical roots of harmony, is one of the turning points human consciousness.

The key points of this understanding of the cosmos are:

God is Unity and the unchanging source of all things.

God's first work is the World Soul and all changing things, the world of Nature, are made through this pattern.

The Cosmos, as a whole, is Good and reveals God.

We have the same harmonies in ourselves. We part of an integrated whole, as Ilia Delio says “catholicity.”

This is why Creation has meaning. We speak the same language as Creation.

## 8

### THE MUSIC OF CREATION

As an ancient mystical text in the Hermetica says:

“But to know Musick is nothing else then to know the Order of all things, which pertakes of divine wisdom; for an order of all things artificially pitched upon one generall, will make in divine Melodie a certain sweet sounding and most true Harmony.”

(The Asclepius translated by John Everard)

The most influential Platonist throughout the middle ages was Boethius. Boethius (475?-526?AD) marks the end of a continuous philosophical tradition from the ancient Greeks, through pagan and Christian theologians, to the sixth century. Boethius hoped to translate the works of Plato and Aristotle into Latin but before his grand design could be begun he was executed for treason by the new ruler of the Western Empire the Ostrogothic king Theodoric the Great.

Boethius was, in effect, the head of the civil service. Why he was imprisoned is unknown, but one factor might have been that Theodoric was an Arian, supporting the view that Christ was created by God rather than being God, while Boethius, as his “De Trinitate” makes very clear, was a supporter of the Trinitarian theology of the eastern church, and so possibly inclined towards the Eastern Emperor Justin.

“De Trinitate” directly attacks the Arians and other heretics and includes the argument that Christ was “of two natures” and “from two natures”. Accordingly he must have taken his human nature from Mary, the position defined by the Council of Ephesus in 431 which had established the title “Theotokos”, Mother of God. The importance of this title, used by Francis, will be considered in the next chapter.

“The Consolation of Philosophy” (Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy. Penguin, 2000) is a conversation between the imprisoned Boethius and a personification of Lady Philosophy. In his cell the author attempts to understand how a world that came from a good God could involve such misery and evil. Philosophy’s answer is that creation can only be good if it is free, and that the effect of evil (not a thing in its own right) is the price we pay for freedom.

At the turning point of the dialogue Philosophy suggests that they sing a song to the Father of All. In this beautifully constructed poem of only 28 lines Boethius encapsulates the whole of Plato’s creation myth in the light of his own point of view.

“O qui perpetua mundum ratione gubernas...”

“O thou who governs the world with perpetual reason...”

“...You draw all things from

On high, yourself most beautiful, carrying a beautiful universe

In your mind...”

(Peter Dronke: The Spell of Calcidius. Platonic concepts and images in the medieval west. Florence: Sismel, 2008)

As with Plato’s Timaeus it is understood that the human soul copies the pattern of this “beautiful universe in your mind.”

Developing ideas from St Augustine, Boethius made the study of Music the key to the understanding of Creation. Boethius defined three kinds of music:

Musica Mundana

Musica Humana

## Musica Instrumentalis

“Musica Mundana” is the Music of the Spheres, the study of the fundamental harmonies of all things. Actual music, as we think about it, is the lowest level, Musica Instrumentalis. Musica Humana, Human Music, is not to do with singing, or any actual music made by people, but the music within them. The music of their souls. This is another statement of the understanding that the human soul is a microcosm, a cosmos in miniature.

It was Boethius’s version of the cosmic worldview which became a golden thread through the following centuries when the collapse of the Empire and the rise of Islam meant direct knowledge of Greek philosophy was lost. His Consolation of Philosophy was one of the most copied books of the middle ages.

Having arrived at this point it would be a good idea to read again Francis’s Canticle.

“Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,  
Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honour, and all blessing,  
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,  
And no human is worthy to mention Your name.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through all Your creatures,  
Especially Sir Brother Sun...”

The study of Harmony has always been the study of the inherent law in Nature. The study of Music, that is, of the language of Music and the way in which ideas, tones and harmonies, come together to make Works and have meaning, can be a way of understanding the way all those Works of Nature, discussed in the previous chapter, are formed.

Medieval and Renaissance musicians studied this language in depth. Just as medieval medicine believed that parts of the body were affected by stars and planets, so, with far more reason, musicians believed that the Harmony which the soul shared with Nature brought with

it different qualities, archetypal effects, which the various musical modes could communicate. They imagined that the various characters that the planets seemed to show, solar, jovial, lunar, for example, were qualities which pervaded everything. Thus, Harmony was far more than a structure of abstract number. It was the key to a shared language of meaning, symbol, emotion, colour – the rainbow was another sign of this common law shared with all Nature. God’s covenant, indeed!

This was the common imagery of the middle ages. We may have dismissed the ancient image of the spheres, but, it is worth repeating, this way of understanding is based on Harmony, not on a mistaken observation of the stars. It is still true.

Some contemporary writers suggest that the qualities, which Francis’s Sun, Moon and stars represented, are comparable or compatible with Jung’s psychological archetypes – but pervading all Creation. It’s a nice idea, but, perhaps, these things are not possible to define. It’s too easy to be literal and narrow minded, and to force neat patterns onto something which can only be experienced in the subtler and ephemeral language of Music.

Music was an essential part of the Franciscan tradition from the earliest days of the Order, inspired by the tradition of Francis himself dancing, singing, and playing an imaginary violin. Because we shared the same language as Creation, and Music was at its heart, the Franciscans saw Music as having meaning and value in itself, not only through the setting of words.

Singing the mass was an essential part of evangelism. Different modes would be used to create different moods at the various points of the liturgy. This belief in the different qualities of the modes predates by two centuries Marsilio Ficino’s use of music to cause different emotional effects as part of his magical theory of medicine.

The Franciscan Juan Gil de Zamora (c1230 – 1318) was a contemporary of Bonaventure and his “Ars Musica” was probably written around 1250. This shows how music was important to the Franciscan mission very early on. His introduction gives the traditional history of music and its emotional and healing powers, and he explains how the different musical modes, or

scales, whose varying qualities were associated with the music of the different planets, could be used to express the moods of the various parts of the mass.

Gil conveniently gives a list of the church modes and describes their qualities. These church modes are not simply scales based on each of the notes of the diatonic (the scale which uses only the white notes of the piano). Only the “Perfect Modes” are, in effect, scales from a keynote. (The scales on D, E, F and G). The other Church modes are adjusted to avoid discord.

For example, Mode 1, the Dorian mode or scale on D:

“One should note that the first tone is flexible, easily suited, and accommodating to all affects, as in the Song of Songs.”

This is not very specific, but his description of Mode 3 (Phrygian) is clear:

“One should note that the third tone is angry and stimulating, having vigorous leaps in its contour.”

This mode is the mode on E, which is, in most cases, the tone associated with Mars. There does seem to be a relationship between the musical mode and the quality which was thought to belong to the planet.

Mode 5, which can be identified with Jupiter, the Lydian mode on F is “modest and delightful, cheering the sad and softening the anxious, calling back the fallen and hopeless.”

(Peter V Loewen, *Music in Early Franciscan Thought*. Brill, 2013.)

These two modes, Mars and Jupiter, can be seen to have a musical reason for their qualities. In the Martial Phrygian mode the second is flattened in comparison with the minor scale that it resembles. This gives, to modern ears used to only minor and major scales, a sour effect in a phrase descending to the tonic, or key note which accounts for the “angry and stimulating” effect.

The Jovial Lydian mode is like a major scale but with a sharpened fourth – an F sharp instead of an F natural in the key of C. This gives a very bright and piquant quality. In classical harmony it makes the music sound as if it wants to modulate upwards a fifth.

Not all Juan Gil's definitions are so obviously related to the planetary qualities. The modes could be used in many ways. The mood is not fixed and simple. Obviously, rhythm, melodic shape and tempo have an effect.

Gil's work, though, is evidence that music is inseparable from Franciscan tradition. Music has value and meaning in itself. The study of Music is the key to the Inherent Law which guides Creation. Music is the pattern of Creation.

Of course, this was a medieval commonplace – but it was a something which continued to have a special interest for the Franciscans.

The greatest and most sophisticated depiction of this harmonious cosmic worldview is Dante's Divine Comedy, written at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Dante's work seems to be pervaded by Franciscan ideas, though there is no proof that he was himself a Franciscan. The Divine Comedy is a story of a journey from Hell to Paradise, but it can also be seen as an allegory of the soul. Those in Hell have made their own punishments from their human failings, mostly from misdirected love. Love is the key to the whole vision. The heavens reveal the harmonious qualities, the planets, which combine in us to create our individual music, and the divine influences from above, concluding with the Love which moves all things.

After two centuries in which the Platonic philosophy had been supplanted by the philosophy of Aristotle the works of Plato were re-introduced into Europe through the Latin translations of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). Most of Plato's work had been unknown for centuries and Ficino's work was an enormous influence on the Italian Renaissance. Though Ficino was a Dominican and his massive work "Platonic Theology" aimed to show that Plato was compatible with Christianity this outpouring of pagan ideas failed to mix with the Aristotelian theology of the church – and very soon afterwards the discoveries of Copernicus put the entire ancient view of the cosmos into question.

Ficino was a musician and wrote about the healing power of music, drawing down the influences of the planets. He was the most obvious influence on the last flowering of the Platonic-Christian tradition in Italy, the epic “De Harmonia Mundi” by the Venetian Franciscan monk, Francesco Giorgi.

This “Harmony of the World” is a song of praise in which the whole of Creation is seen, for the last time, as work of Music.

Francesco Giorgi (born 1466) was an important figure in religious politics in Venice. In 1500 he was guardian of the monastery of San Francesco della Vigna. He famously advised the monastery on the appropriate mathematical proportions for their church, based on threes in celebration of the Trinity. This is a physical expression of the theme of harmony. He was closely involved with Venetian Jews and is said to have converted Rabbi Marco Raffaele to Christianity. Giorgi became familiar with the Jewish mystical tradition of cabala, and his book includes a passage which uses cabbala to show the relationship of the name Jesus to the name of God. This is a passing detail in a massive book that aims to show how all things come from unity and, amongst everything else, how all religions have traces of truth within them, in the spirit of the attempts to reconcile religions by Ramon Lull.

Giorgi had a connection with England which may have brought him favour in high places.

He was involved with the very detailed research to support Henry VIII’s case for an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. (Henry was never divorced from any of his wives.) Giorgio worked with the English agent Richard Croke and made contact with the rabbinical scholars who might give a ruling on the legitimacy of a marriage to the king’s brother’s widow. Though a case could be made Giorgi was warned to drop this hot potato by the Venetian senate. There is a possibility that Giorgi came to England in 1530 or 1531. His friend the ex-rabbi Marco Raffaele certainly did come to England as an exile at that time. De Harmonia Mundi was published in Latin in 1525 and in a French translation in 1579.

It may be a rather decadent feast of esoteric imagery but, as Joscelyn Godwin writes:

“...every page shines with Giorgi’s own Franciscan piety. For there is only one purpose behind his enterprise: to be reunited with God.”

(Joscelyn Godwin: *The Harmony of the Spheres*. Inner Traditions International, 1993.p. 185)

The book is divided into three Cantos, or Songs. Each canto is divided in eight “tones”, corresponding to a musical scale. The first book is about Creation and shows how all things come from Unity and how harmony runs through everything that exists, from the planets, that are the source of each tone of the scale, or mode with an individual quality, down to the smallest object. Giorgi lists all the traditional correspondences of plants, stones, scents with the planets with which medieval doctors were familiar.

The second canto is devoted to Christ, with a strongly Johannine theology, showing how all things come from the Word, in God, and how Christ contains all things and all harmonies within Himself. The third Canto is devoted to Man, and how man is a microcosm of all harmonies and can be lead back to God and unity through Christ. Giorgi’s positive attitude towards Creation is very Franciscan – though the celebration of nature and beauty had become central to the Italian Renaissance. His optimism extends to the next world as he tends towards the idea, derived from Origen, that ultimately all people will be saved. The end of Creation is that

“We will sing perfect and harmonious songs – so God grants – because we will sing in the highest together with the angels.” (Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann: *Philosophia Perennis*. Springer, 2004)

Giorgi was a controversial figure in the Roman church, but his book was translated into French, and the historian of esoteric tradition, Dame Frances Yates, believed it was a major influence in England.

In Elizabethan England the catholic church was vilified. Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, of which there were copies in every church, had terrible stories about evil friars. Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* includes the lines:

“I charge thee to return and change thy shape,  
Thou art too ugly to attend on me.

Go, and return an old Franciscan friar;  
That holy shape becomes a devil best. " (1.3.25-28)

In spite of this, Shakespeare's plays feature several good Franciscans.

In one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a Friar Laurence and a Friar Patrick are mentioned.

"'Tis true, for Friar Laurence met them both  
As he in penance wander'd through the forest.  
Him he knew well; and guess'd that it was she,  
But, being mask'd, he was not sure of it.  
Besides, she did intend confession  
At Patrick's cell this even, and there she was not." (5.2.38)

Confession to a priest was strongly disapproved of as a catholic enormity in Elizabethan England, but Shakespeare refers to it elsewhere, and in every case Shakespeare's friars are good men, though also very human.

*Romeo and Juliet* has Friar Laurence and *Much Ado About Nothing* has Friar Francis, both good men with a role in the denouement of the story, not stock villains.

*Measure for Measure* has an extraordinary Franciscan presence. The central female character is Isabella, specifically a "votaress of St Clare", with a Sister Francisca as a colleague.

Could the work of Francesco Giorgi, which might have found more favour outside the catholic world, have kept the image of a good Franciscan, and student of the Harmony of Creation, alive in the imaginations of a few playwrights and poets? Is Giorgi behind Lorenzo's speech in "*The Merchant of Venice*?"

"There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st  
But in his motion like an angel sings,  
Still quiring to the young-eye'd cherubins:

Such harmony is in immortal souls,  
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay  
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.”

We have the same Harmonies in our Souls as pervade the Cosmos. This is a poetic, Platonic, convention, but it was one that was losing its place in both theology and science.

Music continued to be important in Franciscan tradition. The 16<sup>th</sup> century composer Palestrina was a Franciscan tertiary, but in the eighteenth century there was another late Franciscan showing of the value of music as a key to Creation.

Perhaps St Anthony of Padua could be seen as the patron saint of Music as a Universal Language.

St Anthony, (1195-1231) was a contemporary of St Francis and one of his most important early followers. He was famous as an eloquent preacher. As St Francis preached to the birds, St Anthony preached to the fish. (Both stories have resonances of stories about Pythagoras, whose philosophy came from his cosmic understanding of harmony.)

It might seem rather odd to people who are not used to the tradition of relics that there is a special chapel devoted to St Anthony's tongue at Padua Cathedral. This represents the saint's power of communications. His tongue spoke to everyone, even the fish, as if he conveyed true meaning even if the words were not understood.

As Pierpaolo Polzonetti (see the reference below) explains, this relic became a focus of spectacular musical celebrations. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century Padua had some of the finest church music in Europe. Polzonetti suggests that music had become more and more expressive and dramatic in the catholic church since the Counter Reformation as Latin ceased to be a lingua franca, a common tongue. All the most modern devices of music, particularly from opera, could be used in church music, to engage the feelings and imaginations of worshippers. Oratorio, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, could tell biblical stories in a style which is identical to opera.

This was a catholic tradition long before Handel (from the 1730s) adapted it to suit English audiences.

What is interesting and unusual about Padua is that it began to make a feature of purely instrumental music. An understanding developed that music without words was in itself valid as a form of worship.

The leading musician at Padua Cathedral was Giuseppe Tartini (1692-1770), who was violin soloist there from 1721 to 1765. His concertos were an important feature of the worship in devotion to St Anthony's tongue. This connection of Tartini with the cathedral puts the composer's career in an unexpected light.

Tartini is remembered as a virtuoso and teacher. He taught many violinists from all over Europe. His school was known as "The School of Nations." He was a very influential musician, but his music is little known. Misleadingly his most famous work is "The Devil's Trill Sonata" which is associated with a story of diabolically difficult music which Tartini had heard the devil play in a dream. This is a complete distortion of the story that Tartini told. What Tartini heard in his dream was not devilish fiddling but something exquisitely beautiful which the composer feared he would never be able to reproduce. Tartini had a more sophisticated understanding temptation than pantomime devils. Perhaps it had more to do with vanity and pride.

He was a virtuoso but he was also a mystic, with largely impenetrable ideas of the mathematical basis of harmony. At the time of his connection with the cathedral and St Anthony his aim in music was not to be showy but to find simplicity and expression. He wrote many solo pieces for himself to play, and these use folk songs (the songs of Venetian gondoliers) and some scores have poetry noted in them which he aimed to communicate in music alone. In his writings he stated his belief that the simplest folk melodies could be more expressive than intellectual compositions, and more like the ideal of Ancient Greek music, which was said to have a direct effect on the listener's emotions.

Tartini's musical ideals are clearly related to the ideas of universal communication associated with St Anthony's tongue. They are also very Franciscan.

He was never a member of a Franciscan order himself – unless he was a Tertiary – but was connected with the Franciscans most of his life. His parents, in Venice, wanted him to be a Franciscan friar, but Tartini married. His wife was a favourite of a local Cardinal, who objected to the marriage so Tartini went to Assisi and learned the violin there. He was either taught by, or taught himself, a Bohemian Franciscan composer, Cernohorsky. Eventually he came to Padua, started his school and his involvement with the cathedral.

It is unlikely that Tartini and the friars at Padua were aware that there was a very old Franciscan tradition of valuing music in itself as conveying meaning – back through Giorgi, Gil de Zamora and back to St Francis's time. He probably really did play an air-violin.

The implication of all this is that music in itself is sacred. Harmony is an aspect of the Inherent Law in Nature, and Music demonstrates the principles of formation and creativity.

Music can be used for sacred purposes, in any kind of worship or liturgy but there is always a possibility that words can obscure the value of the music itself. Music is always sacred.

As St Francis probably didn't say of preaching "use words if necessary."

Words are not necessary because music is the laboratory of Nature. Music is the sacred language in everything. This is universal and beyond our personal prejudices, the various differences of style and culture, and any particular religious traditions. If we really believe in the divine in the world we should be confident enough to explore it according to our abilities and natures, free of the limitations of words.

*(The information about St Anthony, Padua and Tartini is largely derived from:*

*Tartini and the Tongue of Saint Anthony Author(s): Pierpaolo Polzonetti Source: Journal of the American Musicological Society, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Summer 2014), pp. 429-486 Published by: University of California Press on behalf of the American Musicological Society Stable URL:<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jams.2014.67.2.429> .)*

**MARY**

St Francis wrote very little. One thing he actually did compose was his "Salutation to the Virgin."

*"Hail, O Lady,  
Holy Queen,  
Mary, holy Mother of God,*

*You are the Virgin made Church,  
and the one chosen by the most Holy Father in heaven  
whom he consecrated with His most holy beloved Son  
and with the Holy Spirit the Paraclete,  
in whom there was and is  
all fullness of grace and every good.*

*Hail His Palace!  
Hail His Tabernacle!  
Hail His Home!  
Hail His Robe!  
Hail His Servant!  
Hail His Mother!*

*And (hail) all you holy virtues  
which through the grace and light of the Holy Spirit  
are poured into the hearts of the faithful  
so that from their faithless state  
that from being unbelievers,  
you may make them faithful to God."*

(Francis and Clare, the complete works. Translation and Introduction by Regis Armstrong OFM CAP and Ignatius Brady OFM New York: Paulist Press, 1982)

There is no doubt that Mary was extremely important to Francis and his Order. Thomas of Celano wrote that

*“Francis embraced the mother of the Lord Jesus with an inexpressible love since she made the Lord of Majesty a brother to us and, through her, we have obtained mercy. He composed special songs of praise in her honour, he poured out prayers and offered her his affection. He made her the advocate of the Order and placed under her wings the sons he was about to leave so that she might cherish and protect them to the end.”*

(From p.374 of St Francis, Early Documents, vol. 2. Edited by Regis Armstrong, New City Press, 1999.)

We cannot understand Creation without understanding Mary – and our understanding of the role of Mary, and the meaning of the Incarnation, depends on our understanding the nature of Creation.

Was the incarnation a miraculous birth into a wholly sinful, or fallen, Nature, or a birth into a Creation which was fundamentally good?

Was Creation something made by God but separated from God, only influenced by God from without, by supernatural intervention, or an occasional miracle – or was Creation a theophany, a window into God? Was Creation sacramental?

Was Creation Good, as God saw it was in Genesis, or was Creation damaged? Were we part of Creation or somehow standing above it, as stewards, users, or sometimes abusers of Nature? Was human life a struggle against a Nature that tended to be chaotic and threatening?

According to the theology with this study is attempting to explain Creation is, in fact, a Cosmos, which is continually created, continually flows from God, is the image of the Word in every part and is drawn by Love towards a new Unity and ideal completion.

As Plato's *Timaeus* explained, and as was accepted by theologians and philosophers for centuries, we contain in ourselves the pattern of Creation. Our souls are the image God, bearing the Word within them, and they are formed by the same Harmony which allows, by the guidance of its Inherent Law, all Works of God to form.

Francis, in his words and actions, declared his joy in Nature in vivid and lasting terms, at a time when heresy in France, which devalued Nature and the humanity of Christ, was causing appalling conflict.

The Albigensian Crusade only came to an end in 1229, three years after Francis's death, with the fall of its last stronghold, Montsegur, following in 1244. The heresy took the extreme view that the material world was evil. To the heretics Christ could not have been a material being, born of a woman. Any image or idea of Mary as his mother, as a human woman, was in direct opposition to this heresy.

In contrast to this heresy the positive view of Nature can be seen in spectacular form in the building of Chartres Cathedral, which was exactly contemporary with Francis's life.

Chartres is also a sign of the growth of "The Cult of the Virgin". Mary had long been patroness of Chartres, which had long been a pilgrimage site focussed on a relic of the Virgin's shirt, or chemise. There was also an image in wood, a "Black Virgin." The new cathedral raised her

image in new and dramatic ways, with the spectacular representation of Mary in glass, and the first representation of Mary in stone, above a doorway, surrounded by the Seven Liberal Arts.

The concept of the Seven Liberal Arts originated with Boethius, who was so influential in the philosophy of Music. This idea of seven areas of learning had previously been described in a pagan context by Martianus Capella but Boethius ensured the idea would become the framework for education for centuries. All the Arts stem from the view that number, or harmony, was at the heart of all things and the understanding of this would lead to the knowledge of Unity in God. The number seven reflects the number of planets, which in turn derives from the seven notes of the diatonic musical scale. All worldly wisdom stems from this Inherent Law of Harmony.

Mary, at Chartres, is not only Mother of God, but also patroness of wisdom and the divine truth that we can discover in Nature through Knowledge and Art – and Music is the key to all the Arts and Sciences – and has an intimate association with the ancient Hebrew idea of Wisdom, as the Inherent Law.

To the right of Mary, in this doorway at Chartres, Pythagoras is shown with his monochord, a single stringed instrument with which he could measure the Harmony of Creation.

This was how Mary was seen in the middle ages – the image of Wisdom and the teacher of worldly wisdom to her son – sometimes represented as “sedes sapientiae”, Seat of Wisdom, seated with her son on her knee.

*“Hail, O Lady,  
Holy Queen,  
Mary, holy Mother of God...”*

“Mother of God” is the common translation of the Greek term “Theotokos”.

The term was defined by the Council of Ephesus in 431AD. The precise way in which Jesus could be born as both the son of God and son of Mary is probably beyond our understanding, and all the arguments from the first Christian centuries until alarmingly recently were affected by what seem to us to be bizarre misunderstandings of biology.

The point which was defined at Ephesus holds true in whatever way we interpret these questions. The key issue was the nature of Jesus. Jesus Christ, in orthodox Christian theology, but not in the heresies which were still influential in Francis's time, was wholly Man and wholly God. The Council of Ephesus defined Jesus as having two natures. He was both Human and God.

However we may imagine the working of his conception and birth the Council declared that his Human Nature came from Mary and his Divine Nature came from God.

"Theotokos" or "Mother of God" defines Mary as being the source of Jesus's humanity. She herself, of course, and her own Human Nature, was created by God, however she might be considered to have been chosen or prepared to be Christ's mother. Dante correctly addressed her nearly a thousand years later as "figlia del tuo figlio", "Daughter of your Son."

What, though, is "Human Nature", as understood by the Council of Ephesus and by St Francis?

"Human Nature" does not mean physical nature. Mary, it was said, must have given Jesus material substance according to the processes in which reproduction was believed to work. Mary was Jesus's mother "according to the flesh" but this is not what "Human Nature" means.

"Human Nature" is the product of the Soul which makes us human, rather than the physical matter from which we are made. It is the innate pattern or form rather than the substance. This "Human Nature" is this innate harmony, or template, which we share with the whole of Creation.

Human Nature is not masculine or feminine. It contains both. The harmonies within the Soul have all the potential qualities that the ancient imagination ascribed to the Planets. It is the divine pattern, God's first creation, which is in everything in varying degrees, from the Cosmos

as a whole to the smallest creature, but which is wholly present in humanity, though obscured by our sins.

This belief that Mary was “Theotokos”, giving Christ his human nature, depends on the belief that Human Nature contains within it this divine harmony, however imperfectly we manage to find it within ourselves due to the deafening effects of sin.

We struggle to read The Book of Nature and to hear the Music of Creation because we tend to see only ourselves, impose our own meanings or see only the surface.

As Bonaventure explained the Incarnation was not merely to remove Sin but to perfect or complete Creation.

The New Creation, God’s completion of his plan, is a mirror of the First Creation.

Mary is an individual human being. It is not at all important who she actually was or what she looked like. However she might be pictured it is her humanity that is important. She is perfectly human and while being perfectly human is also, in bearing Christ in this new creation, a perfect reflection of that pattern of Harmony which was the pattern for the first Creation. The cosmic Harmony was God’s first creation through which Nature is born. Mary was prepared for her role in the new Creation, as everyone in the middle ages knew from the popular stories of her childhood in what is now known as the Proto-Evangelium of James. It’s very nice to think of Mary, as the story tells, dancing in the Temple. In the legend she has music in her and the Temple, the heart of Creation, is her natural home. She is the woman

*“in whom there was and is  
all fullness of grace and every good.”*

She passes this Human Nature to her Son.

*“Hail His Palace!  
Hail His Tabernacle!*

*Hail His Home!*

*Hail His Robe!*

*Hail His Servant!*

*Hail His Mother!”*

Mary, as seen in these images, reminds us of the relationship of Christ with Creation. Without Mary it could be possible to forget that Creation is an emanation of God and to imagine Christ as a purely supernatural visitor to an alien world of evil matter, as some dualist heretics might have done, or even “orthodox” people with a negative attitude to Nature.

Mary is not a goddess, or a symbol of an abstract or unearthly idea. She is a human being. She is not only an embodiment of this idea of Harmony, or the pattern of Creation (which some called the Soul of the World) she is, very importantly, material. She is, like all Nature, made of the matter which the platonic tradition imagined to be the indefinable stuff which only had meaning when it was combined with Form. This is the “Silva” (which literally means “wood”) which the philosophers of the School of Chartres wrote of, matter searching for form.

The contemporary expert on Mary, Sarah Jane Boss, prefers to think of this stuff as the Chaos from which Creation was formed. This biblical term has the advantage of suggesting Energy, rather than a physical Matter, which is more in line with current scientific thought.

But what is also important is that Mary, in bearing Christ, is actually being, not merely representing, the whole Creation. As the Chaos bore Creation, Mary bears Christ.

The image of Mary is the image of Creation as Cosmos, containing within it Harmony.

It isn't necessary to concern ourselves with a real historic Mary see that this is a very powerful image of the inherent goodness of Creation and its intimate, inseparable, union with God. This theology of Incarnation is saying in a many-layered way that God is present, living, in all Nature.

There could be nothing more powerfully opposed to the dualist belief in the negative power of matter.

All Nature is in Mary. Christ is in all Nature.

The Franciscans, particularly Duns Scotus, argued the case for Mary to have been free from sin herself, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This is often seen as a way of making Mary even more remote from humanity – but the intention was the reverse. The Franciscans seem to have done what they could to undermine the idea of Original Sin. The Incarnation, according to Bonaventure, was the completion of Creation, not a way of redeeming us from Sin. Duns Scotus case for Mary’s sinlessness was a case for the inherent goodness of Nature.

Mary is integral to the Franciscan Theology of Creation. A devotion, or high regard, for Mary is a defining quality of what it means to be Franciscan – and in very complex ways Mary is the embodiment of the Cosmos - created by God, formed through Harmony, and bearing God.

In whatever we prefer to think of Sin there is no doubt that we have human failings, from ignorance or too much knowledge. By becoming one with Christ in his resurrection we are able to find God in the Music of Creation or in the Silence of Unity. We are all, therefore, in our recreated Human Nature, part of the Body of Christ, God’s children, and Mary’s children. She is “Virgin made Church”.

Francis also addresses her as:

*“Hail O Lady  
Holy Queen”*

In her Assumption into heaven she is still Mary, an individual human being, but, as a human, who is also the whole Cosmos, she draws the whole of Creation into Heaven. The True Kingdom is renewed in the Incarnation and united with God in the Assumption.

How can we fail to find this Kingdom?

Mary, in giving birth to Christ, becomes the representative of, or simply is, the Inherent Law, Harmony. Mary, as the human embodiment of the original Creation, takes Nature into God's presence when she is crowned Queen of Heaven.

This is all very far from the sentimental version of Mary, with the emphasis on purity, which was popularised after the Counter-reformation.

Margaret Barker believes that Mary's role adopts aspects of the ancient figure of Wisdom, who represented the Inherent Law, lost after the return from the Babylonian Captivity and the invention of Mosaic Law.

"The Lord created me the first of all his works long ago, before all else was made."  
(Proverbs 8:22)

"Then I was at his side each day, his darling and delight, playing in his presence continually, playing over his whole world, while my delight was in mankind." Proverbs 8:30-31

"It is he who created her, beheld her and measured her, and infused her into all his works." (Ecclesiasticus 1:9)

"She spans the world in power from end to end, and gently orders all things." (Or, in the Septuagint, according to Margaret Barker, "harmonises all things.") (Wisdom 8:1)

Regardless of this mysterious background, Mary does share these same meanings with the mysterious biblical Wisdom, but, because she is a human being, she represents a very intimate relationship between the Source of All Being and Nature. In Christian theology the language is complicated by the way Christ is also referred to as the Wisdom of God, as the incarnate Word, but Mary, the woman, can be understood to have Wisdom within her, as Nature has Harmony within it, and Christ is that Law Incarnate.

The relationship between Wisdom and the Word is complex. Harmony is also a sign of Unity. All musical tones derive from one sound, mathematically. The study of Harmony always leads back to God. There is a parallel here with the complex traditions of Wisdom as the pattern of Creation. Can Wisdom really be distinguished from the Word? The Word has Wisdom within

it. Harmony contains Unity. The language of Wisdom is used of Christ by many medieval theologians, including Bonaventure, who has an extravagant devotion to Mary. The way in which Wisdom and Word, Harmony and Unity, are sometimes indistinguishable is part of the mystery of the incarnation, the root of Creation.

The sermons in honour of Mary by Bonaventure and other Franciscan preachers are very little known today. They are extravagant tapestries in which any text from scripture can be threaded into the weave and transformed into a reference to the Mother of God. This is a startling antidote to the literalness of modern scriptural commentary or exegesis – but this is an essential aspect of Franciscanism. Mary is Nature and bears God. She is a sister of Scripture. Logically she is, with her Son, interwoven into scripture, and the whole of Creation, like a thread of Gold. This is what Creation is like – joyful, sparkling with hidden gold, bearing infinite fruit.

“The sun in a wonderful way makes the universe beautiful by its presence and rising; similarly the blessed Virgin adorns the whole world. She is an admirable instrument, bearing light, that, were it taken from the middle, the whole world would be deformed. For if you take the Mother of God from the world, as a result you take the incarnate Word...”

(Saint Bonaventure: Sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary, translated by Campion Murray OFM. Tau Publishing, 2012)

Unfortunately this delirious love for Mary could become excessive. Sometime after Bonaventure’s death an uninspired and reckless Franciscan produced a Marian psalter in which references to God in the psalms were changed to references to Mary. This did Bonaventure very great harm as this book, circulated under the Seraphic Doctor’s name, was held up as sign of the blasphemous decadence of the Roman church.

Nevertheless – Mary is, not simply is the image of, Creation as a whole, in its intimate relationship with God.

**PERFORMING**

*“Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures...”*

Creation is a Performance. We are performers in Creation. The Word is in all things. We all share the same inherent Harmony.

Unfortunately, our failings prevent us from performing as well as we might – and it is only through performing, and participating, that we become what we should be.

How can we become better performers?

A very fine musician asked Debussy’s daughter if he played like her father. She answered:

“He listened more.”

In prayer and meditation we can hope to become more Christ-like – to find Christ within us - which also means that we become children of God and kindred of Creation – but this process of learning how to be a better performer depends on listening, seeing, opening ourselves.

Bonaventure left three books, each a guide to a different aspect of this learning process.

The Seraphic Doctor’s Life of St Francis was written as the official biography at a time when legends were proliferating. Francis was the perfect performer. This very artistically composed life is designed to encourage us to imitate Francis as a way towards imitating Christ.

“The Souls Journey into God” is an ascent from knowing God in Creation, through knowledge of the working of God within ourselves, to ascent beyond “the cloud of unknowing” to absolute Unity. If this union is achieved, only for a moment, we can return to see Creation in the light of God’s unity.

This book is considered the classic text of the Seraphic Doctor's theology of God in Creation. The first stage of the ascent is to recognise God as present in all things. In this work Bonaventure refers to God's "vestiges" or footprints in Nature. We can also find that Nature reflects qualities of God.

The ways in which the Word is present in Creation were developed in other works of Bonaventure and Duns Scotus – as explained earlier.

This awareness of God in Creation is not a matter of theology. It is emotional, not intellectual. We are reminded that we should not believe...

“...that reading is sufficient without unction,  
speculation without devotion...  
knowledge without love,  
understanding without humility...”

...though an analytical and scientific view of Nature can also lead to wonder and love. Whatever means of considering God in Creation we prefer we have a duty to pursue this knowledge:

“From all this, one can gather that  
*from the creation of the world*  
*the invisible attributes of God are clearly seen,*  
*being understood*  
*through the things that are made (Romans 1:20)*  
And those who do not wish to heed these things,  
and to know, bless and love  
God  
in all of them  
*are without excuse;*  
for they are unwilling to be transported

*out of darkness  
into the marvellous light of God.”*

(Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God etc. Paulist Press, 1978)

The second stage is to find God within us, in our own souls. The third stage is to contemplate this knowledge of God until we pass beyond Pseudo-Dionysius's "Cloud of Unknowing" until we leave everything worldly behind and touch, if only for an instant, Unity with God.

This is an endless spiritual process. From this knowledge of the Unity of things we return to the world with a knowledge of God's Unity in all things, and a renewed love for all Creation. If we can achieve this, and it is not an easy challenge, we might have a chance of entering that visionary world, the Dancing cosmos, which this study has been describing.

This great mystical tract begins, though, with a vision at Mount LaVerna, where Francis received the stigmata which completed his own "imitation of Christ." Bonaventure describes the vision of a six-winged seraph bearing Christ's wounds.

At the absolute core of his theology is the crucified Christ.

The most important step in any journey into this New Creation is the recognition that the Christ's love flows into every facet of Creation, not just the beautiful and comfortable, but into the pain, the damaged, the desolate, the dead.

This is the great key to Francis's world.

It is only in sharing this love with every part of this world that we come to know Creation as it is.

The third of Bonaventure's spiritual classics concentrates on this difficult task of identification with Christ, and it brings Christ into our own experience in a way which is usually associated with the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.

"The Tree of Life" is a series of meditations on the gospel story which invite us to participate in the events. In Bonaventure's mysticism this imaginative meditation is real experience. We, Creation and God are so intimately united that imagination can lead us to truth. This is not always recognised and comes from the distinctive Franciscan tradition, inspired by Francis himself.)

Bonaventure's "The Tree of Life" was one of his most influential writings. It is a book of meditations which are designed to guide us to knowing Christ and becoming Christ-like. The book may have been intended as a training manual for Franciscans, rather like the Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, which followed nearly three hundred years later. (Bonaventure died in 1274. The date of the book is uncertain.) Like Ignatius's exercises the Tree of Life invites the reader, or meditant, to imagine themselves in the various scenes and to share in the experience – but, unlike the popular manuals of devotional exercises which imitated Bonaventure in the following century, this is not simply an "affective" exercise, of developing an emotional response to the story. Bonaventure's work can be understood as a means of entering into real knowledge through imagination.

This powerful and, if you like, mystical, interpretation of Bonaventure's work can be justified in several ways – as a reflection of the older relationship with God and Creation which was being lost in Bonaventure's time, in terms of Bonaventure's own references to newly re-discovered Aristotelian philosophy of the Soul, and in terms of Bonaventure's Franciscan theology of God in all things.

The symbolism of the Tree is deep and complex. This is the Tree of Life, in the Revelation, which is also the Cross.

"Picture in your mind a tree whose roots are watered by an ever-flowing fountain that becomes a great and living river with four channels to water the garden of the entire church"

(Quotations from *The Tree of Life* are from Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, the Life of St Francis*. Translation and introduction by Ewart Cousins. Paulist Press, 1978.)

The book is in three sections: the Origin, Passion and Glorification of Christ. There are twelve chapters, which Bonaventure calls "fruit" after the Tree in the Revelation. Each of these has four meditations. Bonaventure is totally Christocentric. To Bonaventure knowledge of Christ is knowledge of everything.

The person who devotes themselves to these exercises

"...contemplates the labor, suffering and love of Jesus crucified, with such vividness of memory, such sharpness of intellect, such charity of will that he can truly say with the bride: A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me, he will linger between my breasts."

The meditations cover the origins of Christ as the Word of God, his life, death, resurrection and his eternal place with God and in our lives. Throughout the book Bonaventure makes it clear that the reader is to share in the experiences:

"O my God, good Jesus, although I am in every way without merit and unworthy, grant to me, who did not merit to be present at these events in the body, that I may ponder them faithfully in my mind and experience toward you, my God crucified and put to death for me, that feeling of compassion which your innocent mother and penitent Magdalene experienced at the very hour of your passion." (Introduction)

We are invited to put ourselves directly into the event, as in this example from the nativity, which may remind us of St Francis's physical recreation of the scene:

"Now, then, my soul, embrace that divine manger; press your lips upon and kiss the boy's feet. Then in your mind keep the shepherds' watch, marvel at the assembling hosts of angels, join in the heavenly melody, singing with your voice and heart: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will. (Luke 2:14)" (Jesus born of Mary)

We are to join in with the heavenly melody, we are to participate. This intense use of Imagination may have a relationship with the changes in the style of visual art at the time, particularly, perhaps, in the work of Giotto, who worked on the basilica of St Francis at Assisi.

Giotto, painting at least thirty years after Bonaventure, introduced far more realistic figures and expressions than had been known in western art before. The characters may have been painted from life. Could this new style be directly related to Bonaventure's invitation to put ourselves in the picture? Older religious art, most obviously icons, was "unreal" or stylised, to lead the mind beyond the image to the eternal. At the same time as the western soul was becoming detached from Creation and God the Franciscan spirit was affirming that God was to be known not only in Creation but in things in particular. To Francis, Bonaventure, and, it appears, Giotto, the individual face could be the Face of God.

This is a very important point in considering the workings of imaginative meditation. The modern analytical mind can easily find itself wondering what the scene was really like. Was it a stable? Or a cave? Do we know at all? We might feel we should try to picture the characters as they really were. If we do, we are almost certainly going to be wrong. Our traditional image of Jesus, as an example, is traditional, from the Byzantine world, but it has no historical authority. The earliest images of Christ are of a clean-faced young man, in Roman style. Some recent researchers say men had short hair and shaved in Hellenistic Palestine. Yet Christ is within us. When we imagine Christ we can imagine himself as a mirror of ourselves, as, conversely, Clare said we should see ourselves in Christ. We can't imagine "realistically", but we can imagine truthfully.

In imaginative meditation, as in the paintings of Giotto, we are not trying to picture the scene as it was. We are picturing a scene and seeing faces which have meaning and truth to us. As with the reading of scripture we have to escape the disease of literalism.

Bonaventure's meditations lead us to the highest levels of vision:

"So the soul devoted to Christ, strengthened in truth and borne to the summit of virtue, can faithfully say with Peter: Lord, it is good for us to be here, (Matt 17:4) in

the serene enjoyment of contemplating you. When heavenly repose and ecstasy are given to the soul, it will hear the secret words which man is not permitted to speak. (2 Cor 12:4)” (Jesus Transfigured)

“Happy the eyes that have seen! But you will be truly happy if there will be remnants of your seed to see (Tob. 13:20) both interiorly and exteriorly that most desired splendor.” (Jesus, Extraordinary Beauty)

Bonaventure is not merely hoping that we will imagine, in the modern sense, the vision, but that we will see “both interiorly and exteriorly that most desired splendor.”

It seems that the spirituality of Bonaventure and Francis was about becoming Christ-like, finding Christ in ourselves. Francis became completely identified with Christ to the point of being given the stigmata, the physical signs of Christ’s wounds. This spirituality is not about imagining Christ as a person, an “imaginary friend”, as some say disparagingly, presumably those who do not have a high regard for Imagination. The over-personal image of Jesus seems to be a focus which grew up after the Reformation. Does a vivid imagining of Christ as a person draw us away from seeing Christ in other faces (“faces not his own” as Gerard Manley Hopkins says) and in all things? Does this over emphasis on an imagined Jesus belong to a spiritual tradition which turns away from seeing God in Creation? This is not to say that Francis was not overwhelmed by a love of Jesus.

Was there a baby, real, or pretend, in the stall when Francis recreated the nativity scene?

Perhaps the iconoclasts, who would not allow images, had a point. Any imagined face of Christ may distract us from seeing Christ in “the other.”

This may seem to be giving an exaggerated value to Imagination in Bonaventure, but such a high and mystical understanding can be justified in three ways.

Firstly –

The earlier sections of this paper attempt to show that Imagination is an essential part of Creation and a means by which we participated in it.

Secondly –

Bonaventure, living during this critical period of change, was aware of the Aristotelian philosophy of Imagination, and developed it in Christian terms.

Bonaventure's theology is completely Christ-centred. Perhaps more important than anything else in this high view of Imagination is the way in which, according to Bonaventure, we know the nature of things because Christ is present in us, in our understanding.

“Christ teaches interiorly, so that no truth is known except through Him, not through speech as it is with us, but through inner enlightenment....He Himself, then, is intimate to every soul...”

(Bonaventure Collationes in Hexaemeron XII:5 Karnes, p.76)

Christ is at the heart of Imagination.

Bonaventure made use of Aristotle's writing on the Soul to explain his theology of Imagination. This has been discussed in detail by Michelle Karnes in “Imagination, Meditation and Cognition in the Middle Ages” (University of Chicago, 2011). This explains in detail the nature of Imagination in Bonaventure and how it differs from later medieval mediations which are not supported by a belief in “real” knowledge through Imagination.

According to the medieval theory of imagination we understand what things are because we receive from things their “species”, or idea. In Bonaventure's version of this Christ is the clearest and brightest of “species” within us and shines on these darker things to make them clear.

This may seem obscure when expressed in the technical language of medieval philosophy, but, when the various comments in Bonaventure's works are put together, it can be seen that he had a much more powerful idea of understanding than Augustine or other philosophers nearer his time.

“You are able to see within yourself the Truth that teaches you.” (Bonaventure “Souls Journey into God”, quoted by Karnes p76)

“By the same cognition by which anyone knows the Word, he knows things in the Word.” (Bonaventure3 Sent.XIV.ii.i.arg. 4 Karnes p.78)

“Our intellect is joined to that eternal Truth itself.” (Bonaventure “Soul’s Journey into God” III.3 Karnes p. 78)

This complex philosophy may be seem to be an attempt to justify what had earlier been a natural way of seeing, as expressed by St Francis in his Canticle. By the late 13th century such justifications were necessary. At the same time other complex justifications were needed for St Francis’s apparently simple demonstrations of poverty. The Franciscan way of seeing God and the World are still a challenge to much of the Christian world.

Thirdly –

Bonaventure’s belief that all things are expressions of The Word is important to our understanding of Imagination, and of the value of works of imagination, the arts and human creativity

In “The Tree of Life” Bonaventure writes:

“O, if only I could find this book whose origin is eternal, whose essence is incorruptible, whose knowledge is life, whose script is indelible, whose study is desirable, whose teaching is easy, whose knowledge is sweet, whose depth is inscrutable, whose words are ineffable, yet all are a single Word!” (Jesus, Inscribed Book)

To Bonaventure everything that exists is an expression of the Word. God has only one blueprint, or Idea, and that is The Word. In an infinite and free outpouring of Love God creates an infinite variety of things which are all declarations of the Word.

Because Christ is in us we have real knowledge of God through created things and in things within our Imagination. We have Christ in our understanding, and God is

“closest to the soul, closer than even the soul is to itself.” (Bonaventure: Breviloquium I:iv quoted in Karnes p.80)

To Bonaventure this does not mean that everyone has automatic access to Christ. We are all imperfect. We are all clouded by sin. The Tree of Life is a device to help us clean the mirrors of the soul.

Even so, though we are not perfect mirrors of Christ, this philosophy of Imagination does seem to imply that we can be, with the grace of God.

In Bonaventure’s time this would have raised some very obvious questions. Where does the church fit into this? And have human beings always had this divine reflector within them? (Let’s assume that other living beings have no need for all this. Their lenses are unstained.) What part does the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ have in this?

Did we suddenly change with the incarnation? Do we only have this faculty and divine link if we are baptised Christians? Presumably not, as the Word was in all things from the beginning, but, to Bonaventure, was completed, perhaps “refreshed” in the Incarnation. The philosophical theory Bonaventure drew on, from Aristotle, was pre-Christian and also used by Muslim philosophers.

In effect this theory supports a “gnostic” view of direct access to God. (The early church’s opposition to Gnosticism was more due to gnostic attitudes of inclusiveness, or secret knowledge known only to them, than to the idea of direct personal knowledge of God.)

Soon after Bonaventure’s time it seems the church recognised that meditations such as his did imply that everyone had access to a direct personal knowledge of God. Sets of meditations written after Bonaventure, though superficially similar, are meant to be purely affective, or providing emotional understanding, rather than actual knowledge. (Ignatius’s Exercises, from

the 16thc, seem to revive Bonaventure's deeper view.) Bonaventure's theory of Imagination might also be seen to justify and explain visions or prophecy. This might be suspect as far as the church was concerned, but, in terms of Bonaventure's understanding, is there any difference between visions and works of Art? Both can express Christ within us. Is there a direct link between Bonaventure and Dante's Divine Comedy (in which Bonaventure appears, praising St Dominic, as Aquinas appears praising St Francis), a century and a half later, which is a literary vision, but no less a vision?

And yet Bonaventure is completely orthodox.

The European knowledge of Aristotle came from the Arab commentators. Imagination was a very important part of Islamic thought and has been studied in the last century by Henry Corbin and his followers. There is no question that Imagination has a reality in Islamic tradition – especially in the concept of Imaginal Worlds – places which are close to God and accessible through the Imagination, perhaps seen in this world, as Eden might be glimpsed as the Earthly Paradise, or the Celestial City be found just beyond the bend in the river.

But all this intellectual argument is doing nothing more than trying to explain, or justify, something which no-one before the Reformation would have doubted.

Bonaventure's works open up new perspectives on each other. They cannot be read in isolation. The works are an "unfolding text", searching for new depths, rather than a vast unified "summa", as Aquinas's epic was.

The "Journey of the Soul into God" describes God's presence in Creation in the form of "vestiges" in a rather detached way, as if we are to note these qualities of God in things rather than to experience God through them. Elsewhere he explains that all things are witnesses of the Word – and this gives all things meaning and value. The "Tree of Life" is a far deeper exploration of the mysteries of Creation.

Christ is present in all Creation, to its darkest roots, as Christ Crucified. Bonaventure's philosophy of Imagination demonstrates that we have Christ within us. By drawing these

shared experiences into our Imagination, and by using our feelings as well as our intellect, we can bring the dimensions of Creation together. We can only do this because Christ, the Word, is both within us and within all Creation. As the Gospel of Thomas says, the Kingdom is both within us and outside us.

If we find Christ within us we are also sharing in the whole of Creation.

The Tree of Life is both the King and the Kingdom.

It must follow, surely, that by sharing in Creation we are also finding Christ within us? It is possible to imagine that a parallel set of meditations to the “Tree of Life” could be made by reflecting on Creation, drawing ourselves through imagination and sympathy to union with Christ.

Though God speaks through the world it is in our imagination that we hear the voice. Our Imagination is the faculty through which we experience Creation. It is the mirror of Creation within us. We can experience the world through our senses but it is in our imagination, and, inseparable from that, our memory, that we understand and know. This understanding in imagination is the same for an experience that is happening immediately, communicated through sight, touch and the other senses, or an experience that is remembered, or imagined. In fact, many experiences are only fully experienced when memory and imagination have had time to absorb them.

We don't need to think about the philosophy of Imagination to understand that Bonaventure's meditations produce real experience in us – but the philosophy affirms that this is real experience because we are made of the same stuff as the world. In religious terms we have Christ in us.

If Christ is in all things it follows that we can discover Christ in us by any work of the imagination that helps us to discover what lies within ourselves. It is as if our own imagination is a world in shadow, or muddied by our self-centredness, which we can illumine through experience, seeing clearly, listening, to all things – as Christ is in all.

I hope this makes it clear that Imagination is not only our means of relating to Creation but is part of Creation itself, a mirror of Creation – is Creation.

Looking back at the idea of “Works” –

A chair, a symphony, an action, is formed in Imagination. That chair exists before it has physical form. Ideas form in the Imagination following the same love that draws material things to express Unity, and guided by the same inherent Law of Harmony.

It could be said that there can be no such thing as fantasy. Any creative thought, including Dreams, can only be made of memory or experience of Creation, and can only follow the same desire for Unity and Harmony. I would include the visionary in this. The kind of works of imagination which we think of as visions need not be the product of external supernatural influences.

A vision, dream, or fantasy, or musical work, whatever its surface of images or words, can only have life and meaning when it touches that truth and Unity. Any work of Imagination can help us find these inherent Harmonies, or archetypal qualities in us.

But what of the “imaginary” beings with which we populate our world, our stories and our visions?

In such a rational discussion it might seem curious to suddenly leap into the world of the supernatural – but it could be that our ideas of the supernatural world are based on a materialist attitude, treating things which have a reality in the world of imagination (which the foregoing explanation has argued is, indeed, real) as if they were simply beings of different material order, and, possibly, fictitious, or the product of superstition.

Some supposed supernatural beings might be imagined by the superstitious mind. Some could be understood as attempts to explain natural phenomena, or, perhaps, illness and mental illness, as in some gospel stories. But what of those beings which are associated with nature, or places, and seem to "embody" (if they have an airy body) the meaning of the place, or that natural feature?

Our empirical, literal, mind might argue that these are unnecessary distractions. A spring or a tree has meaning by being itself - but in arguing this we might be denying the way that meaning is

communicated to us, and lives in us. C S Lewis argued that it was unreasonable to deny the existence of fairies. It is not necessary to believe in such beings as having a "literal" independent existence in order to accept them as having a reality - as "works". We relate to the world through imagination. The meaning of a place may communicate itself to us in these terms. The perceived fairies, or spirits, are living things, because our imaginations and the world are alive. They are living stories, seen in human or semi-human terms.

Because of our detached, or perhaps fallen, state, even if we believe in these beings we tend to treat them literally, or to think of an "imaginal" being in material terms. Similarly, we might have a tendency to think of the visionary, or prophetic, as "literally true". Enthusiasm for the supernatural can be associated with lack of imagination.

It is extraordinarily difficult to recover the right use of imagination.

The novelist Thomas Love Peacock, who was a mix of Georgian rationalist and romantic, in his last book, "Gryll Grange", included a chapter justifying his devotion to St Catherine which includes a heartfelt account the danger of losing sight of these other forms of life.

*"There can be no intellectual power resident in a wood, where the only inscription is not "Genius loci," but "Trespassers will be prosecuted;" no Naiiad in a stream that turns a cotton-mill; no Oread in a mountain dell, where a railway train deposits a cargo of Vandals; no Nereids or Oceanitides along the seashore, where a coast-guard is watching for smugglers. No; the intellectual life of the material world is dead. Imagination cannot replace it But the intercession of saints still forms a link between the visible and invisible. In their symbols I can imagine their presence. Each in the recess of our own thought we may preserve their symbols from the intrusion of the world. And the saint, whom I have chosen, presents to my mind the most perfect ideality of physical, moral, and intellectual beauty."*

This might seem a rather surprising digression – but Bonaventure's philosophy of Imagination must apply to all Imagination just as the theology of Creation explains that God, the Word, is present in all of Nature. His meditations are specifically Christian, and they must, in theory, allow us to work down to the deepest roots of Christ within us, because that is the nature of the story – but the same deep search for the Word in even the most shadowy parts of our Imagination (or we could, like Thomas Traherne, call it our Soul), this search for what we really

are, could be guided by images or ideas from any part of Creation, relationships with people, a journey, a pilgrimage in music, stories, and even fairies or oroads.

Some literal minds might find this thought alarming – but remember the deeply Christian fiction of George Macdonald, C S Lewis, and J R R Tolkien. These writers, surely, would have agreed with Peacock. That brief extract from “Gryll Grange” might be an encapsulation of the meaning of the £Lord of the Rings.”

*(I am grateful to Keri Ford for suggesting that I include the preceding comments.)*

The Church does seem to have mistrusted imagination, particularly in its use in prayer. If we all have access to this divine truth, does this weaken the role of the church?

Egil Asprem, following the work of Michelle Karnes, has argued that Bonaventure’s philosophy of Imagination had a surprising effect which might explain, though not necessarily justify, the church’s mistrustful attitude. Asprem suggests Bonaventure’s work had a revolutionary effect in the world of Magic. Before the Renaissance Magic was an almost mechanical process, based on the belief that things were linked by a system of sympathies and correspondences. If one wanted to produce a magical effect, which might be, benignly, a cure for an illness, one assembled stones, or herbs, or symbols (in the form of talismans) which would draw down spirits in nature which would work the desired effect. This was not an imaginative system. In the middle ages this kind of magic was common, not necessarily demonic or heretical, and shared its methods with the Islamic world.

Magic which used correspondences in Nature (“Natural Magic”) was inseparable from medicine. It affirms the Unity of Creation. The use of music used for healing, common in the middle ages, was a form of magic that had biblical justification in the story of Saul and David. The magic which the church objected to was any method that called upon supernatural agencies, whether demons or angels, to assist.

By the Renaissance a quite different concept developed – in which effects were thought to be caused by a focussed use of Imagination – on the basis that the Imagination was linked to all of Creation. (The difference between this new magic and the old is explained in the introduction to John Michael Greer and Christopher Warnock’s edition of the “The Picatrix”,

(Adocetyn Press, 2010-11) an Arabic text which entered Europe through the Court of Alfonso the Wise of Castile in the mid-thirteenth century.) This idea of magic dominated esoteric practice until today. Until recently this new idea, in which Imagination was believed to have power, was assumed to have begun with the Renaissance philosophers who rediscovered Plato and more esoteric platonic writings, in particular Ficino, but Egil Asprem suggests that it originates with Bonaventure. He explains Bonaventure's philosophy, following Michelle Karnes and writes:

"Ficino (1433–99) is typically considered the chief exponent of Renaissance Neoplatonism and is often given a central place in historical overviews of the "vis imaginativa" in what is presumed to be a heavily Platonic esotericism. Such narratives, which we find reproduced by key esotericism scholars like Faivre, Goodrick-Clarke, Versluis and others, tend to emphasize the power of imagination as a Platonic innovation over the impotent and passive imaginative faculty of Aristotle and his scholastic henchmen. There is only one problem with this story: Ficino's account of the inner senses is lifted wholeheartedly from the scholastic tradition!" (Egil Asprem: Esotericism and the Scholastic Imagination: The Origins of Esoteric Practice in Christian Kataphatic Spirituality. *Correspondences* 4 (2016) 1–34 ISSN: 2053-7158 (Online))

(Ficino is particularly known for his use of music in magical healing, a form of music therapy, and recent writers have suggested that this also derives from the philosophy of medieval Franciscans.)

Another influence on this concept of Magic was a passage by the fourth century philosopher Plotinus, who believed that we could change the world through desire. In his *Enneads* (4.iv.40) he writes of Love as the force that draws all things together – and that the Magus can work with the force of Love if he works "within the All." This neo-platonic magic is not that far removed from the Christian idea of Formation - love drawing things to Unity. If we are "within the All" can we use our will to control things, as we imagine a magician trying to do, or is our will subservient to "the All", as a co-creator?

Plotinus's comments talk of Love in a way that would not be echoed by Christian theologians until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but he does not directly mention imagination.

We might not accept that we can affect things outside ourselves through Imagination and desire, but what this does reveal is a belief in the power and reality of Imagination, derived from the idea that we have Truth, the Word, in us. We might reject magic as such but if Asprey is right we can see Bonaventure and the Franciscans as the starting point of a tradition in which Imagination was a way to the divine – not through magic but through Art.

Whether or not we can affect Love in the Cosmos through will, like Plotinus's magus, or whether we can only be servant of the Work of Love we can be a co-creator. Images and symbols have power because Love draws all things to Unity. The heirs of this idea were almost indistinguishable from magicians – the poets, artists and magicians of the Renaissance who explored the truths within us, not necessarily in Christian language.

Shakespeare is an heir of Bonaventure.

All these works are facets of Creation, this multi-dimensional Kingdom.

Personally, I would dismiss all thought of the kind of supernatural agencies on which the magus might have called to effect his desires in the world. Most of these things were invented to explain causes and effects which we can now explain through completely natural forces. It's always worth remembering the Franciscan William of Ockham's razor - don't drag in unnecessary factors, especially imaginary supernatural beings. Others may disagree, but I do not believe in the supernatural.

Love is something quite different. Of course, even this is simply a way of looking at things, it need not be taken literally, but the love that controlled the cosmos for Plotinus, and the love that turned the stars for Dante, is not "supernatural" but something which flows directly from "the All" or "God."

I feel that the idea of magic (in which we hope to affect external things) is an illusion – others say otherwise. Surely, we can only be part of this whole, this cosmic dance, if we do not impose our own will, in a self-centred sense, but we serve the work of Formation. Any act of creation only lives when we feel it isn't ours, when the work has a life and truth of its own. The more we try to "express ourselves" the less chance our work has of touching the spark from heaven – unless we have become our true selves by becoming selfless, if you see what I

mean. Of course, there are exceptions. Hurrah for the self-obsessed romantics. Sometimes the dance needs to be boosted by these expressions of human failings.

This is a long and rather esoteric digression about Imagination, but I believe this is a key issue.

Let's imagine the Performer or Composer, as the Co-Creator of Music, Art, Comedy, Love, dancing extravagantly, at one with the music, but not lost in it, weaving new works from the threads of love, with deft and sparkling fingers.

We have no idea how far these threads stretch and what other ideas, objects and people are dancing with us, sharing in this work.

Is it true that everything is linked, by love, in this way? Is it an illusion caused by our desire for Unity? That's probably unanswerable. Does it matter?

Composing (and the same is true of all creative activity), whether in the Imagination or working with physical materials, is a working with the patterns and ideas of Creation. The study of music (and all other arts) is a study of Harmony and the work of Formation in everything. Yes, this is, almost, indistinguishable from magic. It is also indistinguishable from Prayer – that is, kataphatic prayer, which affirms images and sees God in all. All the work of the Imagination is a form of prayer. Even in what seems like conventional prayer we can be tempted to be self-indulgent.

There is no distinction between sacred and secular art or music. Music can have a sacred function, liturgical or as a form of worship, but that purpose has no relationship with the sacredness of the music itself. "The potency of cheap music" that Noel Coward referred to can include the spark of the divine and the revelation of God.

This might be fanciful, but this is what this book is about. However fanciful this might be I like to see composing as work in the laboratory of Nature, the study of Formation and an act of prayer. It might be of no value to anyone else, but there might occasionally be a spark in the alembic which inspires the abandonment of the laboratory and the desire for pure contemplation.

Or something like that.

Francis himself writes of the most indispensable way of entering the Dance – in which the whole of material creation is united with the Imagination, and Memory:

“Let the whole of mankind tremble  
the whole world shake  
and the heavens exult  
when Christ, the Son of the living God,  
is (present) on the altar  
in the hands of a priest.  
O admirable heights and sublime lowliness!  
O sublime humility!  
That the Lord of the universe,  
God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself  
that for our salvation  
he hides himself under the little form of bread!”

(Francis and Clare: The Complete Works. Paulist Press, 1982)

## A WORLD LOST – AND FOUND?

Are we living in the same world as St Francis?

The answer, to what might seem to some a surprising question, is almost certainly - no.

We almost certainly see the world in a different way than anyone in his time would have done. We are, in effect, living in a different world. If this is the case, we not only cannot understand how St Francis experienced the world, but we cannot understand how St Francis thought of God.

How can we rediscover that Lost World?

Before the 12th century there was no separation between us, Creation, and God. We might separate ourselves through our own self-centredness, sin, or what Plato thought of as the weight of our material bodies dragging us down – but that was a failing we could recover from. We had, after all, been redeemed. The New Creation was available, here and now. It was more than within reach, it was within us and we were within it.

After St Francis's time we started to see the world, and God, as separate. Creation, rather than something we could live in through our whole being, was something which could be objectified, analysed, and exploited.

The key to this change was the loss of Imagination. Imagination allows Creation to live in us, affect us emotionally, and to resonate with the Word within us.

In the Imagination we experience and know God.

Francis's great interpreter Bonaventure was one of the last of this lost world. To Bonaventure Imagination is real, the way to true knowledge. To Bonaventure Imagination "puts us in the

picture” of the divine story and encourages us to see all the works of Creation, and of Imagination, as Sacred.

It’s only when we forget Imagination that we begin to think that anything, especially scripture, can be taken “literally.” To Bonaventure reading scripture “literally” meant reading what the words actually say, not reducing them to “literal” meaning. The words, though, were not words on the page, but the Word of God which lived neither on the page, or in our mind, or even in the “literal” words, but in the process of communication, of reading. The same is true of the Book of Nature. It is known in Communication, in our relationship with it, in our participation.

Bonaventure wrote of the Reduction of all Arts to God. “Reductionism” in modern thought tends to imply a reduction to a literal meaning. The idea of “reductionism” might be used in relation to the reading of the Bible or the Koran, but this not what Bonaventure means. “Reductionism” in Bonaventure and Islam before the end of the 12th century has nothing to do with the literal or empirical. Bonaventure is saying that in all the sciences, sacred writings and Creation, there is nothing but God. In Bonaventure’s world we cannot examine “works of God” as objects “out there” because God is in us. If there is nothing but God. Creation and God are within us. We are within God, who is also transcendent. Everything has meaning because of God. We know this meaning in Imagination.

This, without the need of philosophical words, is how St Francis experienced the world, and sang about it in his “Canticle of the Creatures.” His praises were sung with or through (he used the Italian word “per”) all Creatures.

God is in All Things and gives them meaning. We experience this meaning in Imagination. Forget Imagination and we no longer live in a meaningful world. We also become detached from the world, and almost effortlessly find ourselves destroying it.

Imagination is a serious business.

This is the reverse of escapism. Imagination is how we experience reality. It lets things live in us, makes us part of them, and lets them be what they really are – which is not an object separate from us, but part of us, and we part of them – and all only God.

In both the Western Christian world and the Islamic world something happened at about the same time, around the time of Francis, which changed how people think and, in effect, changed the nature of the world. This is something common to both Christianity and Islam.

The Imagination in Islamic thought was a major theme in the work of Henry Corbin (1903-1978). Corbin explained that, in Islam, a complete change in the way of experiencing the world had happened in the 12th century. A theology which had been centred on imagination and a complete unity of person, world and God was lost as an extreme rationalism and literalism took over. A state of mind in which we participate, or share, in the Being of all things and God, through imagination, was replaced by a state of mind in which we and creation are separate. Created things became objects to examine and analyse rather than things which exist within us.

Tom Cheetham, who has written several books inspired by Corbin's work, calls this change the "Great Disturbance" (a term taken from F. Edward Cranz). Both Henry Corbin, thinking of Islam, and Owen Barfield, thinking about Christianity, suggested the root may have been the rediscovery of the works of Aristotle, and specifically Aristotle interpreted by the Islamic philosopher Averroes, or Ibn Rushd (1126-1198). This is unfair to Aristotle. The negative influence was an exaggerated version of logic, or an over literalness which separated observer from object, us from God, which was not Aristotle's fault, but the effect of his Islamic commentators, the principal way in which Aristotle was known in Europe at the time, particularly the work of Averroes (1126-1198).

The earlier philosopher Avicenna (908-1037) was immensely influential in the west and the first to transmit Aristotle, whose works had been unknown in the west, but which had always had a high reputation and were treated as inspired from the moment they were rediscovered.

In the 11th and 12th century Islamic and Christian philosophy and theology were intimately linked, possibly helped by the inescapably close links caused by the crusades, and, before the expulsion of the moors in 1492, through Spain. Neither Aristotle, Avicenna nor Averroes in themselves can fairly be said to have been a negative influence. The negative effect on Islam and Christianity was the way that an exaggerated focus on reason led to this change in seeing the world, and to a world in which we were separated from creation, in which things became objects and in which God gradually became remote.

Bonaventure, and his greatest intellectual influences Hugh and Richard of St Victor, stood against this change.

Inspired by Francis, whose entire life demonstrated the unity of the person, creation and God, Bonaventure's theology may even be a final stand against this overwhelming tide. The thinking of his contemporary Thomas Aquinas became the dominant theology, and he was far more influenced by Aristotle than Bonaventure, who was very critical of Aristotle and extremely suspicious of Averroes. In medieval scholasticism from the 12th century onwards Aristotle was dominant. Some of Bonaventure's thinking, while never condemned as heretical, was quietly forgotten as it may have been seen as quite radical and contradictory to the growing Aristotelian orthodoxy of the church.

Hans Boersma, in "Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry" (Eerdmans, 2011) pinpoints the key idea which caused this change in theology to enter Christian tradition, both catholic and protestant. He explains that this was one of the issues which led to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Roman Catholic Church had adopted the theology of Aquinas as its standard, and 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist theologians realised that this brought problems.

Boersma is an Evangelical theologian who sees this change as a disaster for Christianity which has had damaging effects until the present day in encouraging a loss of a "sacramental" or "participatory" relationship with Creation.

The key moment, to him, was when Aquinas said that the Good we know in Nature is not the same Good as in God, but only an “analogy”.

This apparently simple statement destroys in a few words 1500 years (or more) of the vision of Creation which had come to its last great flowering in Francis and Bonaventure.

The devastating importance of this cannot be emphasised strongly enough.

To Plato, Pseudo-Dionysius, the early church fathers, Francis and Bonaventure, the Good (or Truth, or Beauty – they are, Platonists would argue, precisely the same thing) we experience through our senses, imagination, and love in any of the infinite variety of God’s Works, is a direct experience of God. We are living within God. God is not “out there” but closer than our touch.

Suddenly this entire Cosmos has been robbed of its inner light.

These things may be Good – but that’s not God.

Aquinas might have meant well, and he might have “good reason” for saying this, but this idea leads to all kinds of distortions of our understanding of our world and God.

Before long God has become, in the mad Aristotelian complexities of scholasticism, something remote from human understanding. Of course, God was always a mystery, but the Source of All Being was never remote. God is

“closest to the soul, closer than even the soul is to itself.” (Bonaventure: Breviloquium I:iv quoted in Karnes p.80)

It became possible to imagine a God that was remote from human reason – and yet Plato’s God was the source of all reason. God’s reason was the same as ours, and we could know God through reason – the essence of Philosophy.

If God was remote from human reason God could do things which seemed unreasonable. Far more dangerously, it became possible for us to justify unreasonable behaviour in the name of God.

This was, in fact, a completely different God. It would be possible to say that almost all theology which follows Aquinas, which includes the Lutheran and Evangelical theology which Boersma writes about, is a different religion in a different Creation.

From that moment the authentic Franciscan view of Creation, the climax of the platonic-Christian tradition, separated irrevocably from the dominant theology of the church. How many people think they are “Franciscan” without being aware of this difference? It seems little known in Anglican circles but it’s a serious matter of concern in America.

The problem became far worse with the loss of the idea of the Inherent Law, God’s first work of Creation. the Harmony or Wisdom which allowed Nature to flourish in freedom. This idea began to fade and was lost entirely with the new view of the universe which developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. (Though Harmony is still true.)

We then had a God who was detached from the World and a world that no longer had a guiding law within it. What kind of God was this?

If there was to be a God at all it would have to be a God that controlled everything. If there was no law in Nature to guide the free growth of a flower, a forest, or a human being, then God must be responsible for controlling every part of that growth.

God, logically, must be responsible for every disaster, disease, horror.

Oh, it’s OK. It’s all part of God’s plan.

Well, I have to say, this is monstrous and ridiculous. This is a horrific aberration. I don’t believe in any such God.

As Joseph Milne said, in a lecture to the Temenos Academy in 2018.

“This is the God atheists don’t believe in.”

Milne's main point was to show that this same change in perception eventually led Martin Luther to stress that there should be one, straightforward, reading of Scripture. The idea of Scripture as something which communicated through its many layers and our participation in it, could vanish. This, Milne believes, was another disaster. The problem was that, if anyone abandons the one universal catholic church and makes Scripture the source of authority how can you avoid moving towards a literal interpretation of the words?

This is completely alien to everything that had come before. A literal, empirical. view of Scripture goes with a literal, empirical, view of the world. Again, participation is lost.

It's very clear now, after centuries of research into the history of Christianity and the scriptures, that there is no case at all for treating scripture as authority. The books of the New Testament were never intended as a manual containing everything that was necessary for salvation. The church managed for some time without them. The tradition of the church was in what they did, the liturgy and community, not in any words.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century God was removed from Creation altogether. God had set the machine working and then stepped aside, leaving only scriptural laws to follow. (Was Christ still within us?) The world was no longer sacramental. A solution to this deadly theology was to allow the Holy Spirit to intervene and warm our souls. This might lead to good works and good lives, but it still suggests that the Spirit is intruding into a lifeless world rather than one which is sacramental and "pregnant with God."

A few artistic people in 18<sup>th</sup> century England (this is one of my own historical interests) looked back to Plato to reaffirm that Creation emanated from God, and that its Good and Beauty were, indeed, God's Good and Beauty. They didn't see any hope in the church, and no-one else was interested.

Perhaps, if we are to have any chance of re-entering this Lost World we have to forget everything we think we know.

It's important to remind ourselves, though, that however misguided we might think someone's theology is, this might have no effect at all on the work of the Spirit. I have referred several times to Bunyan and Peter Sterry. Their theology, which I don't think I would agree with (at least not today) has nothing to do with the inspiration which shines through their lives and work.

Could any of this theology really have affected "ordinary people." The various churches could preach and lay down their own laws, but did people listen? Did the "ordinary people's" way of seeing actually change?

There are theories that this loss of Unity with Creation came from changes in humanity itself.

Owen Barfield, one of the group of friends known as "The Inklings" wrote a classic book about this change in ways of seeing, "Saving the Appearances." (Wesleyan University Press, 1988). Barfield suggested that everyone once lived in the world in the way that I have been describing. He used the term "participation" to refer to this relationship of people and Creation. His theory is that this was lost as a part of human evolution. The changes in Islamic philosophy and the theology of Aquinas might have been a symptom rather than a cause.

His close friend, C S Lewis, encapsulated Barfield's ideas of the loss of this world and the conflict of the old vision with new world in his "Cosmic Trilogy", particularly "That Hideous Strength" and his Narnian novels. For example, in the "The Voyage of the Dawn Treader:"

"In our world," said Eustace, "a star is a huge ball of flaming gas."

Aslan answers:

"Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of."

It's possible to feel some sympathy for Madeline Bassett (for example, in P G Wodehouse's masterpiece "The Code the Woosters") who thought that the stars were "God's daisy chain." How can we say that this is not a facet of what stars are?

A star is made of flaming gas, but it is also the star we see, beautiful or alarming, with all the feelings and stories which dance with it in its performance in the Imagination.

This study tries to argue that Creation, which is Reality, is constantly pouring out from an infinitely creative Source of All Being. Love draws all things towards Unity, not as a return to their source but by expressing the Unity in their origin by becoming a Work. This Creation contains everything. There is no separation between “Mind” and “Matter”. Mountains, people, stories, dreams constantly dance together to form new works.

Everything has God within it. The evolving and changing Creation reveals the divine pattern. The City, or the Garden, are always being touched, revealed, glimpsed in moments of grace.

If we like we can imagine this divine pattern, the perfect form of Creation, as something ahead, a vision of a future, something close by or something infinitely distant – but we are always being told that it is already here, within this wild experiment of Creation, but we don’t seem to want to see it.

It looks to me as if this is a long and sorry story. Barfield suggests an evolutionary change within human nature had been happening long before the philosophers and theologians drove their intellectual nails into the coffin of the lost world. This seems to be true, if we just look at the moments in an old tradition which have been mentioned in this short account.

Margaret Barker argues in her many books that the ancient Hebrew religion was centred on a belief that the Kingdom was accessible, the divine pattern of Creation, present in the Holy of Holies. After the building of the second temple in the sixth century BC this belief in an Inherent Law, the Kingdom within us, was replaced by a code of written law, Mosaic Law. What had been something we could all find within ourselves became something controlled by religious authority.

In the fifth century BC Pythagoras, having learned from older traditions, taught a pure and simple life in which we could rediscover this Harmony. A little further to the east Buddha was saying similar things.

A century later Plato, writing in the character of his inspiration, Socrates, argued. in his Timaeus, that our material bodies prevented us from hearing the Music of the Spheres, but we could lift ourselves higher through reason and a good life. Elsewhere he seems to describe something very like the true Creation or Kingdom which this book explores.

In “Phaedo”, shortly before the philosopher drinks the fatal hemlock, Socrates asks Simmias if he would like to know what the things on the earth and under the heaven were really like.

“Yes,” said Simmias, “we’d be glad to hear that story.”

The true earth, the philosopher explained, is said to resemble one of those balls made of twelve pieces of leather, each of a different colour, stitched together. The world is a multi-coloured football, purple, golden white – many colours, but all these colours are far more wonderful than the colours we see. This ball floats in the heavens, perfectly balanced. This is what the World is like, but we live in the stitching. We can’t see the whole.

A few hundred years later Jesus speaks cryptically about the Kingdom. Is it here now? Is it to come? But his incarnation is a renewal of Creation. The new light spreads from that stable (or cave.) And the Christian view seems to say something quite new. Yes, God is within us and within Creation, but God is within the whole of Creation, even within suffering and death.

The Kingdom is here. We can step into it, by sharing this bread and wine – by following its Law rather than the laws of the world, or the Roman Empire.

Yes, it’s within reach. We can crawl out of the cracks in Plato’s football, shake off the heavyweight of “matter”, turn away from the lure of our selves.

This means that by living in a new way we can re-enter the Kingdom. It’s here. We can know the wonder that communicates itself through Creation and live within God’s love.

But hang on a minute. That seems too easy. (It really isn't!) What about the persecutions, the disasters that are falling on Rome even though Rome has officially adopted this new Way as Religion?

In his old age St Augustine becomes concerned with sin, Original Sin, something fixed in our natures. This is eight hundred years after Plato, and nearly a thousand after the Hebrew tradition began to turn away from Harmony.

Regardless of how we feel about Nature, whether or not we delight in God's presence in the world, we depend on the authority of the church to escape sin. Perhaps the world itself is fallen. Perhaps we should reject nature and seek only a heavenly city.

And another seven hundred years go by. On one side Nature is rediscovered - Cathedrals are built expressing the unity of the world, new found scientific knowledge, joy in Creation. On the other side the poor and oppressed, who see the Church as something impossibly corrupt, reject the material world.

So here comes Francis! Look! We are part of Creation. We sing God's praises with everything, the stars, elements, even death, because the Crucified Christ is within all Nature.

But hang on a minute. That seems too easy. (It really isn't!) If Love draws all things towards God, and if Christ is within our own Souls, and if the Incarnation is a completion of Creation (and a welcoming of us back into the Dance) – doesn't that raise certain questions about the Church? And, even, the social and political world?

Oh no. Nature might have beauty, but don't get too excited - that's not quite the same thing as God's Beauty.

And - jumping a few more centuries forward – this Kingdom isn't for everyone. It's only for a few lucky people who God selected at the beginning of time. There isn't any freedom in Creation. It's just a threshing floor, wheat from chaff, etc etc.

What does this mean? Was there ever a time, long before Pythagoras and Buddha, when people lived in Unity with Creation, or is that an illusion? Is this Kingdom a lost world or one which we have been trying to find, knowing it's there, for three thousand years?

What's most alarming is that the history of religion, told as flippantly as this, seems to be the history of our own attempts to avoid facing reality, or, some would say, of the attempts of those in authority, often for what seemed at the time to be good reasons, to prevent the discovery of God in Creation. It might be thought to be a dangerous idea - that, if God is within Nature, and if, as most of this tradition says, we have the same God in ourselves, isn't it possible that we have the means to enter the Kingdom within us?

Of course, we need help to escape from the distractions of "sin" -or "this muddy vesture of decay" - but that help, when offered from outside, seems so easily become control. If God is in Creation, there must be a universal language. This Kingdom must be absolutely inclusive. We might enjoy a multitude of different traditions, musical genres, dance steps, but they have to work together in that ideal of Peace which Pseudo-Dionysius described.

This study has dwelt on old ideas and ancient writers, in particular the key figures of early Franciscan tradition. This might be simply the delight of the ancient and mysterious - but I believe that the same message is at the centre of the work of the contemporary Franciscan Ilia Delio.

She has written several books about Bonaventure and Franciscan theology, and, as scientist herself, the theology of Creation has always been central to her work. A major theme has been the way in which Franciscan tradition, and Christian as a whole, adapts to Evolution. In fact, Christianity makes no sense, as a religion of transformation, without Evolution. This argument is very important at a time when new (20th century) ideas of a literal interpretation of Genesis are becoming associated with Christianity in general in the popular mind. I knew an old priest who despaired at this. When he was at theological college in the 1940s no-one questioned evolution.

Delio has recently drawn the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin into her work. Teilhard was a scientist and advocate of evolution in the catholic church, and some of his ideas were controversial. His most useful book, “Le Milieu Divin”, is a wonderful complex mystical account of spiritual evolution. It is all about how love draws people and things together, and in doing so, lifts them up towards union with Christ. This can be seen as theological poem and commentary on my chapter on “Works.”

Delio sees Teilhard as coming from the tradition of which Franciscanism is a major part. She links this spiritual evolution with current understanding of the universe – and it is very clear from the theories she describes that it is impossible to separate “the material” from the spiritual, thought, or consciousness.

In “Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness (Catholicity in an Evolving Universe)” (Orbis Books, 2015) she uses the term “catholicity” to mean the “belonging to the whole” (the whole being God and Creation) which she believes Christianity was originally about, as distinct from the idea of “catholic”, which implies a church which is for everyone.

The universe which she describes in scientific terms is exactly the same as the Cosmos I have been describing. This universe is inclusive. Everything and everyone should be part of it, but for whatever reasons, by faults in human nature or bad theology, we have fallen away from it.

How can there be a church, or a religion, which is “catholic”, when only Creation as a whole can be “catholic”?

We are in a time when we are able to see both the Participatory world and the empirical together. The western scientific worldview of the last four hundred years has been proved wrong and the Lost World is reappearing – it was hidden, but no-one could see it.

She writes that, if we can find this world again, “the contemplation of Creation becomes indistinguishable from the contemplation of God.”

This must be true.

It suggests that Creation in itself contains the essence of the gospel, and the crucified Christ. This is what Bonaventure is saying in all his works, and what Francis demonstrated through his stigmata.

When scripture is so overweighed with conflicting interpretations, and while we still find it impossible to read it in its proper spirit, perhaps we can turn to the world around us, the Book of Creation, for a universal, inclusive, message.

It is absolutely essential that we realise that Creation is not about “the material world” or our narrow view of “nature”. Delio’s 2018 book “A Hunger for Wholeness” (Paulist Press, 2018) emphasises this rediscovered unity of “mind” and “matter” and the problems caused by our separation from the cosmos – which, I feel, is the fault of Christianity over centuries, with science simply following divisions which had already been made.

Delio writes in detail about modern scientific theory, and this can excite a sense of wonder - but we if we think only in terms of quantum theory we might find we are still standing outside ourselves and Creation and looking down, still detached.

We are not detached. We have the language of Creation within us.

I like to think that this universal language is Harmony, but that’s just a way of looking at it. Composers, artists, poets, psychologists, can enjoy exploring the workings of this language, but we have the devices of our souls to help us be part of Creation – performing, listening, praying, worshipping. We just need to tune ourselves.

What role, then, should Christianity play? Has mainstream Christianity, of all denominations, allied itself to the wrong world for four hundred years, and burnt its boats? It does look like that. Does it matter? Is it better to abandon a religion which people out there are increasingly associating with ignorance, prejudice, and misguided ideas about Nature and human nature?

If we are to re-enter this Lost World, which includes all people, stones, flowers, stories, music - and in which everyone's imagination, or Soul, is an equally valid and true part - how does this effect our behaviour? What is life like when we have this true relationship with Creation, and, if you like, God?

**12**

### **ARE WE WRONG ABOUT EVERYTHING?**

Yes. I think we probably are.

We can find it extraordinarily hard to see God in Everything.

But – if we do misunderstand Francis's understanding of Creation, the world in which we live, we might quite easily be wrong about Everything we think and do within this cosmos. We might not have a proper relationship with Everything, and what we might call God.

Francis's view of Creation, according to his "Canticle of the Creatures" is startling. This song celebrates a view of Creation which has its roots in very ancient tradition and yet, mysteriously, is compatible with the most recent scientific and philosophical thinking – as conveniently explained in the most recent work of the Franciscan scientist Ilia Delio.

We have a problem with Francis. His popular image is too familiar. People might think they know about him and his tradition and spread a Franciscan icing onto, for example, an Anglican fruitcake. With a few drops of brandy this can result in a Christmas cake full of love and joy, but it might have nothing to do with the startling and radical spirit infused world of Francis himself.

The Canticle of Creatures is accepted as an authentic writing of St Francis, perhaps written late in life, with its last lines said to have been added when he was close to death. It is a song,

a Laud. One early manuscript has spaces between the lines for the tune, but the notes are not filled in. It is possible, though, that the original tune survives in settings of other lauds.

There are stories that Francis sang and danced. This idea is supported by recent research which reveals the importance of music in the early Franciscan order, both in theory, the theory of Harmony in all things, and in practise. Music was believed to communicate meaning. Words were sometimes unhelpful, confusing, best kept to a minimum. Music spoke directly to the soul.

Whether Francis's song is a late work or not, it stands out as unique statement, a revelation. It is the climax of a thread of ancient tradition. It is something it is all too easy to misunderstand.

The words are too familiar. What does the Canticle tell us about Creation?

I think there are two intensely expressed ideas. They are both shocking – and if we do not find them very difficult and startling we are not reading the words aright.

FIRSTLY –

This view of Creation is completely inclusive.

The song has a very precise structure which unshakably declares its total inclusivity. To appreciate this we have to see the universe through 13<sup>th</sup> century eyes.

The Sun, Moon and stars –

These are not the physical objects we think we know - but the mysterious signs of God's work in the heavens.

Fire, Wind, Earth, Water – These are the Four Elements - from which everything in the material world is made.

It is absolutely essential to remember that this "earth" is not this planet Earth – and the world Francis sings about is also *NOT* EARTH, the planet. It is CREATION. The pre-16<sup>th</sup> century mind assumed this Earth was the whole of the material Creation, surrounded by the Heavens, which

were not the same kind of world at all. We know otherwise. We have to understand that Francis means the WHOLE physical and material world – EVERYTHING - just as in the Lord's Prayer we have to understand "on earth" as referring to the whole of creation.

Do we?

Creation is EVERYTHING. The Nicene creed tells us that God made all things "seen and unseen." There is nothing that exists that is not of God. But do we really think inclusively? Do we think only of the nice things?

Do we confuse "Creation" with our modern ideas of "nature" or "environment"?

SECONDLY –

Everything – and that means Everything is our Brother or Sister.

What?!

How can this be? The heavenly bodies – those immaterial lights which reveal the Harmony within the Cosmos – are our Sisters and Brothers? The elements and the creatures of the elements are our siblings?

Death is our Sister?

Yes. He means what he says. It's more than a metaphor.

We might be familiar with the thought that we are all Children of God, or members of One Body with Christ – but why do we think only of people? Isn't Christ, the Word, in all? Of course – but that seems to be going too far. The implications are too radical.

Medieval society attempted to be an image of the hierarchical structure of the universe – with a monarch representing God.

Francis is not doing this. Francis's world is a rediscovery of Eden. The idea of Eden is of a world which conforms to the pattern of Creation, the Harmony which lies within everything in this world of change. In Eden, Adam and Eve lived in unity with Creation.

This Eden is also Paradise, or sometimes the Holy City, that people imagined waited outside or beyond this world – a place to aspire to as we travel through this Vale of Tears.

It seems to be a Christian tendency to push this ideal world further and further away from the world in which we live. The earliest Christians had conflicting ideas about this. Was the "Kingdom of God" here and now? Was it going to appear suddenly, soon? Was it awaiting us after death and judgment?

To Plato, four hundred years before the time of Jesus, there was no doubt that this Paradise was here but the weight of our material bodies (we would think in terms of Sin) prevented us from seeing it. Plato was part of a very much older tradition.

Is the Christian view, of a paradise that is only known once we depart this world, a terrible mistake?

Francis's song throws it out of the window. It's here and now! Here we are, Brothers and Sisters, dancing in Eden!

Alessandro Vettori tries to explain the tone of the Canticle in rather heavy language:

The song

"...epitomizes Francis of Assisi's desire to return to the uncontaminated first stage of Creation...More than a utopian recovery of uncorrupted nature, the poem urges perception of a natural world re-created through the fundamental salvation achieved by redemption...."

"...All elements in the Canticle point to the recovered, renovated, and restored status of creation, as the cosmos was new at the moment of creation, it is now perceived by Francis, because of his accomplished purification as renewed."

(Alessandro Vettori. *Poets of Divine Love, Franciscan mystical poetry of the thirteenth century*. Fordham University Press, 2004.)

Francis can sing in his rediscovered Eden because he is redeemed through the Incarnation – yes – but there is no suggestion that the song is for him alone. We can be part of the new Eden. We are all redeemed. In Christian terms, the Incarnation and Christ’s death and resurrection give us the means to escape from the blindness to heavenly reality that Plato talked about. Francis’s life demonstrated, too, that we can all be in Eden if we embrace poverty and humility and find Christ in ourselves.

But there’s something more...

This isn’t an Eden in which humanity has dominion over Creation. The biblical story of Eden has Adam naming the creatures, which, of course, implies superiority, but there is no mention of dominion. That’s an idea from the quite separate story of the seven days. Francis’s song implies a purer Eden, more like the classical idea of the Golden age, in which he is singing in equality with Creation.

Do we have to forget the biblical Eden and imagine something simpler?

The same message can be found in the 17<sup>th</sup> century English writer Thomas Traherne.

We can all be in Eden. Now.

Why do we keep delaying this discovery? Why do we keep saying – “no, it’s not yet....”?

The message is radical and alarming, but it isn’t madness.

The theology which I have tried to explain in this short study can be encapsulated in three ideas – which might be seen as touchstones with which we can test all the complexities of theology which scripture and theologians weave.

- 1 GOD IS ONE
- 2 EVERYTHING IS AN EXPRESSION OF GOD (THE WORD)
- 3 EVERYTHING FLOWS FROM GOD

## GOD IS ONE

Francis's greatest interpreter, Bonaventure, was enormously influenced by the mysterious 4<sup>th</sup> century writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius, both in his theology of spirituality and in his statements of what we can say about God.

There is very little we can say or know about the Source of All Being, which we might call "God", as that source is so absolutely simple.

Dionysius says that all we can say is that the Source of All Being is One, by definition, and that One must also be Good, or "The Good" (think of Francis's own address to God as good) – which, centuries later, the Victorines and Bonaventure, realised must also be Love.

This abstract approach to God, which provides such a touchstone to help us discern our way through the maze of words, in scripture and theology, which people have confusingly used to try to define God, is sometimes referred to as "Platonic", because Plato used reason to define the Source of Being, or Good. It is actually a much older tradition.

This simple idea that all things come from a Source of All Being, which is One, seems to be very ancient and lies at the root of what we might think of as monotheism. The outstanding historical, and semi-mythical, figure in this tradition is Pythagoras.

The further we go back the closer we come to the worldview of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

And we seem to come closer to Francis....

Pythagoras learned a secret on his travels. It was a secret which had changed the way we saw Creation. The fifth century BC wise man travelled in Egypt. He is said to have studied with followers of Moses. This secret is the same secret that lay behind the Hebrew religion and the mystical side of Egyptian religion. Through Pythagoras we can come close to the key idea that inspired a religious revolution. It's worth forgetting everything and going back to that beginning.

This was the secret.

There was only one God – a simple, single, Source of All Being from which EVERYTHING flowed.

We might think this is a familiar idea – but have we lost sight of what it really means?

The revelation of this simple source of unity came, as Pythagoras told it, from the discovery of Harmony. This is usually told as if the discovery was made by Pythagoras himself, but it must be very much older.

The key point in this understanding of the Source of All Being is that Nature is free to express unity in infinite variety. Multiplicity is an expression of Unity. As a composer I have stressed this idea of Harmony as the inherent law in all Creation.

This God which is an absolutely simple Unity becomes obscured by our attempts to make God a person, an omnipotent ruler rather than an abstract source. The Old Testament God is far removed from this abstract One and hard to reconcile with this ancient knowledge that there was a Unity in all things. Fortunately theologians have always had this touchstone of a more abstract concept to test the more human inventions.

The Christian point of view is something different – a God which can be known in human terms because we are all “Children of God” – we all have God within us – we are made of the same stuff as the cosmos. Our humanity is our means of relating to God. And that God, that Unity, is in Everything.

And, of course, this infinitely deep unity of God and Creation is experienced not through words but in bread and wine.

#### EVERYTHING EXPRESSES THE WORD

As everything comes from Unity everything, by being what it is, is an expression of that Unity. In Creation that Unity becomes an energy which drives Creation, call it the Spirit, or Love. Everything has the desire to become One in itself. In Christian terms this can be referred to as the Word, that Unity as it is reflected in Creation, being expressed in Everything. We know that this expression of the Word, or God, living in Love, can be as much in a conversation, a thought, a relationship, as in a flower or a can of soup.

Plato suggested that there were patterns, or ideas, of everything in “the Mind of God”. Bonaventure sees that there only needs to be one “Idea” – the Word, Christ – God’s Unity reflected in Everything.

As Ilia Delio explains this “everything” includes:

“...sun. moon, trees, animals, stories, all have life only in Christ and with Christ, for Christ is the Word through whom all things are made.”

(Ilia Delio: A Franciscan View of Creation. Franciscan Institute, 2004)

Stories!

Yes, the Word is expressed in Everything. We must not limit ourselves to “nature”

There is a terrible temptation to see “nature” as God’s special work. “You are closer to God in a garden” as the old poem says.

No. We are as close to God in a scene of natural or human devastation and suffering. We are as close to God on a dead planet or in the vacuum of space. We can love the wonder of nature, but such love must not be indulgent or possessive.

Trees, flowers are works of God. So are ideas, stories, events, conversations. Everything, every kind of work, is about relationship. A tree or flower is never an object. It is made of relationships. The tree we experience is part of us.

Works are constantly coming to be. Works combine, separate, dance together.

Do we objectify Creation?

Medieval Franciscan scientists examined nature to understand its workings but that does not help us know what things are. Nothing is an Object. We are part of the whole because we, too, have the Word in us. Our walk through a wood is as much a Work of God, as a tree. Our perception of the tree is part of what the tree is.

Creation is Performance!

Do we see God in everything, including the difficult, damaged, or damaging, things? The Christian story should assure us that God is present in the darkest facets of Creation.

Or are we dualists of some kind – allowing some things to be not works of God? Whose works, then?

If we are to see EVERYTHING, material and immaterial as a work of God, we must have a view of God that makes this possible.

What kind of image of God do we hold in our minds?

Do we imagine a God who is responsible for everything that is and everything that happens – in whose providence everything is decided? This God decides that you are going to happy. This God decides that a thousand people are going to die of a terrible disaster or disease. This is the God atheists don't believe in.

Or do we think of a God which is the Source of All Being, and who is present in everything that is – but is present in a universe which evolves freely, constantly forming new works as things, people, come into relationships, divide again, form new works – as in a cosmic dance?

We can justify either view of God from scripture. We might try to see Francis in the light of the first of these different Gods - but we have his followers attempts to explain and justify Francis to show that he danced with the God of freedom and delight.

#### EVERYTHING FLOWS FROM GOD

Creation is not something made, as baker makes a cake, and the places it down on the table.

Creation is not made and separated from God, it emanates. This is a technical term from Plato. We might imagine Creation as a light shining from God, or the Source of All Being. (Don't think of things which that light illuminates – but of that light itself). It's infinitely colourful and changing but it is inseparable from God – but, we can easily understand from this image, it is not God. Every gleam of the light reveals God.

Of course, it's not a perfect metaphor as that light is also free to dance, weave patterns.

Bonaventure wrote:

“This the whole of our metaphysics: it is about emanation, exemplarity, and consummation; that is, to be illumined by spiritual ways and to be led back to the supreme being.”

“Any person who is unable to consider how things originate, and how they are led back to their end, and how God shines forth in them, is incapable of achieving true understanding.”

(Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*. Translation with introduction and commentary by Zachary Hayes O.F.M, D. Th. New York: Franciscan Institute, St Bonaventure University, 1996)

This is the working of the Trinity. Everything comes from Unity and has Unity within it – and pervading everything is Love, the Spirit, the energy which draws everything to find its Unity in itself, and which draws all things together in relationship.

If we see the world as an emanation we can understand that the Kingdom, Eden, Paradise, is here, within the world, the pattern of the performance shining through. We do not see it if we are blinded by what we call sin, but we CAN see it. We can follow its dance and reveal Eden in Creation. We can be part of that outpouring of Love, which reveals the divine Unity in the pattern of its dance.

To me these three touchstones are the key to a distinctly Franciscan view of Creation. Other Franciscans thought differently.

Soon after the time of Francis and Bonaventure this vision was lost, or, at least, hidden in the shadows.

Why was this vision lost?

Some say (Owen Barfield) that humans lost their sense of unity with creation through some form of natural evolution. We became detached, seeing things as separate from us, to be analysed empirically. We lost sacramental participation.

Some argue that the rediscovery of Aristotle in the 12<sup>th</sup> century affected both the western Christian and Islamic world and led to intellectual, analytical thinking. Or was this a symptom of the evolutionary malaise?

There was certainly a change and a loss which happened at the time of Francis and Bonaventure – and it is this change that divides their worldview from so much that came after.

Bonaventure's idea of Creation emanating from God, like light, never detached from its source, was replaced by an Aristotelian idea of Creation as an object, separated, made in a more literal sense. This led to a loss of a sacramental view of Creation in Aquinas and much protestant theology.

How do we see the world? Do we have a deeply embedded Aristotelian worldview, taken for granted for the last eight hundred years, which is actually opposed to our Franciscan feelings?

These differences affect what it means to be a religious order. Are we living in Francis's new Eden or are firmly rooted in an Aristotelian "worldly" world?

This was one of the questions which inspired Bonaventure's last, unfinished, work, the "Collations on the Hexaemeron" or "Conferences on the Six Days of Creation." This was a series of lectures for the Franciscan brothers in Paris. At its core it is about kinds of wisdom.

This was 1267, only forty years after Francis's death, and the Order was, Bonaventure believed, threatened by dangerously different ways of thinking – principally the influence of Aristotle, and what we would think of as scientific method. This is not a bad thing in itself. Already Franciscans like Roger Bacon were thinking scientifically – but this is "literal" thinking – about how things work. It has nothing to do with true wisdom, of God. If such an approach is applied to faith – and scripture – faith is destroyed.

Bonaventure believes the brothers he is addressing should be "vires spirituales" - spiritual men.

It may surprise us to read that at the start he warns them that “being in love with the beauty of nature” leads to death. (Collations I:17). What he means is love of nature for itself, and not as a window through which we see God. This is, I believe, how we do, naturally, see Nature. We don’t naturally see a wood “scientifically” as an object, detached from ourselves, we experience a relationship with that wood, as our walk through the wood, in which how we see and feel is part of that “work”.

(See Works of St Bonaventure: Collations on the Hexaemeron. Franciscan Institute Publications, 2018)

Wisdom comes from reading and contemplating Scripture – and Creation is part of scripture.

There are four kinds of Wisdom, four steps to God.

Uniform Wisdom – the literal reading of Scripture. The scientific method is part of this. This is not spiritual wisdom.

Multiform wisdom – reading Scripture on all its levels – and, for Franciscans, this would include “Lectio Spiritualis” – reading spiritually – in which we become co-authors of the text because the Word is also in us.

Omniform Wisdom – reading the world – Creation – because EVERYTHING is an expression of the Word – and we are part of Creation’s performance - like that walk through the wood. John Smith, the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Cambridge Platonist, seems to have known Bonaventure:

“God made the Universe and all the Creatures contained therein as so many Glasses wherein he might reflect his own Glory: He hath copied forth himself in the Creation; and in this Outward World we may read the lovely characters of the Divine Goodness, Power and Wisdom...”

(Quoted in Cambridge Platonist Spirituality. Paulist Press, 2004. I have restored Smith’s original word “glasses” in place of the unnecessary modernisation in this edition.)

If the world as a whole is Scripture it is a universal scripture. There are no Christian, Muslim, or Pagan trees. If we have the faith that God speaks through Everything we have to avoid imposing meaning on the world. We may enjoy our own religious traditions and systems of imagery but in the Book of Creation we walk together with people of every kind of worldview and we all read the same text, which speaks in our own language. Creation is Pentecostal. Reality, some might say, is angelic. It communicates.

If the deep understanding of Creation and Incarnation shows us that God is within every part of Creation – and that in knowing Christ we can find that Unity of God in Creation – it surely follows that by knowing Creation as it is we know Christ. This is the implication of Ilia Delio’s work. Christianity has to be universal if it is about finding a true relation with Creation. This does not mean that the language of Christianity should be universal. As a religion it should lead to union with God. If people have other traditions, or have natural insight and understandings, perhaps from more recent cosmic worldviews, which bring them to the same knowledge of Unity it is not for us to impose our own language on them.

Nulliform Wisdom – in which love of God draws us away from all words to pure contemplation.

These “Spiritual Men” are to be Christ-like, to become one with God.

This is the aim of the Order – and it as an Order that this process of reading operates – through learning as a community.

From Bonaventure’s time it seems that we have all done our best to avoid the implications of this Unity.

If we forget eight hundred years of confusing words and theological contradictions and go back to this simple faith that everything flows from God, everything seeks unity in its infinite

variety, and that we can rediscover Eden, we can see that in the 13thc Francis, in his own language, had arrived at an understanding of the cosmos that still has value today.

This is explained in detail in Ilia Delio's recent works "The Unbearable Wholeness of Being" (Orbis Books, 2013) and "A Hunger for Wholeness" (Paulist Press, 2018).

Delio urges us to embrace science and the 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of the universe. There is no distinction between consciousness and the material, world. Everything evolves. Everything comes from Unity.

We are made of the same stuff as the universe.

Yes – all this what Francis sang about!

Ilia Delio writes, in her most recent book:

"There is an absolute Divine Love at the heart of life, a wholeness of Love completely centered, irresistible and attractive. This Love is the life force of unity and deeply vested in what life becomes. To wake up to this Divine Other at the heart of life is to admit that reality is relational; nature is relational and we are relational because love is relational and God is Love."

(Ilia Delio. A Hunger for Wholeness. Paulist Press, 2018)

Everything is our Sister and Brother.

Everything!

When we see Creation as it is we are not loving Nature, but God expressed through Creation.

If we can forget everything and rediscover Eden – or discover this more harmonious Eden - we should find that we are drawn to live in a quite new way – with more singing and dancing, perhaps.

If we live in this rediscovered world, which might also be the Kingdom, we will, simply by living within it, be expressions of Peace – and the Justice which flows from Peace – the Peace that Pseudo-Dionysius described.

Peace, as Pseudo-Dionysius (a major influence on Bonaventure) precisely defined, is not stasis – silence – immobility. Peace is a state where everything is able to be what it is – when everyone dances without tripping up anyone else - including people we don't agree with – whose ideas which completely contradict what I have been saying.

We know we can enter this peace. We have that redemption within us – but we might have to work and pray to escape the distractions that prevent us stepping through the veil.

If we can become simple and humble what would it be like to enter this new (yet original) world?

When Clare entered the convent she separated herself from what we call “the world” – the world as humans make it. She is not entering an enclosed world of “The Order of Poor Clares”. That Order is simply a device, or a support, to enable her and her sisters to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. She is entering the heart and pattern of Creation.

Those who “go out” to live and work in the world are doing the same thing. They are entering Enclosure – not into an enclosed and separate world of “The Society of St Francis” – no, that's the device, the support and encouragement – they are entering into Everything. It's precisely the same as Clare, but turned inside out. The same Kingdom.

This is a matter of being in a new way, of seeing differently. Simply being in Unity is what it's about. Nothing else is necessary. There really is nothing more to desire.

Are we, then, wrong about EVERYTHING we do?

In this damaged world there may be a need for some to be active, to “fight” for justice or the environment, but I suspect that any attempt to be active in this way is a step away from being “Spiritual People.” Such activity is “worldly” and not religious. The Order, as Bonaventure saw it, was about being, not being activists in this sense. Being “spiritual people” changes the world by uniting Creation to God.

What should we do to be Spiritual People and to enter the Edenic World of Francis?

We can, in a small way, live in a community that contradicts the rigid patterns of the (actually imaginary) “material” world, by dancing, singing, celebrating this world in which stones, trees and stories are all Works of God – or just by being, by catching a sudden spark from heaven –

– or, perhaps, we might do something mad that makes people look again

– or we might just by say “Lo!” - just look at what there is!

All this is the work of love, of course, which draws all things to Unity in the Mind of God.

## **EPILOGUE**

This view of Creation, which does not pretend to be “the” Franciscan view, but which is very Franciscan, is my justification for a wide variety of musical works.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher quoted the ancient Hermetic tract “The Asclepius”:

MUSICA NIHIL ALIUD EST QUAM OMNIUM ORDINEM SCIRE

The study of music is nothing less than the to know the order of things.

This would have been the basis of art and philosophy in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The study of music is the study of the language of Creation – not just the inherent Harmony in things, but the way in which many elements are drawn together to form “Works” – the study of Formation.

Music is also a way of understanding how we “Read the World” and become co-creators or performers.

All music is sacred, regardless of the intention behind it, because it is this language of Creation which can only lead back to the Source of All Being. According to this theology, the Word is present in all Creation, light and dark. As anyone who follows the way of negative spirituality will know, things which are simply beautiful or “relaxing” are distractions. The only music as we approach the Cloud of Unknowing is Silence.

Just like the world as a whole, the music which conveys that spark of grace, or truth, might be difficult, troubled, anguished, as much as it might be joyful, delightful or simply fun. The quality of divine inspiration in music has nothing to do with the seriousness, triviality, complexity or simplicity of the music, or what cultural tradition it comes from.

It certainly has nothing to do words, however religious they may attempt to be.

I have to work with my very limited technical knowledge. I do what I can with what I have. There are various kinds of music I can write in my vocation to explore the language of Creation.

I might write pieces that explore the process of formation – fantasies which go where the music wants to go, seeing what happens when contrasting ideas are thrown together. This music is part of the mystical Incarnation – the coming to be of all expressions of the Word in the womb of Harmony, or Wisdom.

I might write music which explores ideas – perhaps attempts to draw me in to a meditation or a text.

I might use music as a way of Reading the World. I like this idea. The Book of Creation is an infinitely unfolding text. We can see the whole in the smallest part. Music can be a counterpoint to an exploration of a place – just a way of helping us to see that place differently, as something which is part of us, to which we relate. *Lectio Spiritualis*.

These are ways of learning, perhaps, perhaps not, parallel to Bonaventure's types of knowledge. The fourth would be the Silence of Contemplation.

And once all these are sufficiently studied I might be able to write, simply, Music!

Peter Sterry, Cromwell's chaplain, had music in his soul. I have explained that I think there is a justification for believing that the Kingdom is accessible here and now, if we can find the way into it. At the same time it is that ideal, or potential, pattern of Harmony which is also within our souls.

Even if some may question this idea of the Kingdom, surely there is no doubt that we can, if we live musically, reveal the Kingdom, if only for a moment, in our steps?

“Let us ever remember that we are here in our pilgrimage and Disguise. Let us have our own country and the way to it ever in our hearts... (We have) ...Musick made by the heavenly spheres of the divine beings themselves in us, by the Charms of which

even our house, our Pilgrimage, and all things in it are turned into heavenly dances and delights.”

(Peter Sterry. *Select Writings*. Edited by N. I. Matar. Peter Lang, 1994)

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