



A Reading of Westcott's Gospel of Creation: An Early Venture into Ecological Theology?

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ABSTRACT

In response to the contemporary ecological movement, ecological perspectives have become a significant theme in the theology of creation. This paper asks whether antecedents to this growing significance might predate the concerns of our times and be discernible within the diverse interests of nineteenth-century Anglican thinking. The means used here to examine this possibility is a close reading of B. F. Westcott's 'Gospel of Creation'. This will be contextualized in two directions: first with reference to the understanding of the natural world in nineteenth-century English popular thought, and secondly with reference to the approach taken to the doctrine of creation by three late twentieth-century Anglican writers, two concerned with the relationship between science and theology in general, and a third concerned more specifically with ecology.

KEYWORDS: Anglicanism, creation, ecology, nature, science, Westcott

A browse through one of the major Anglican hymnals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*,² first published in 1861, reveals a popular interest in creation as the expression of God's mercy and sovereignty. Apart from the obvious examples, hymns that celebrate the harvest or plead for divine assistance at sea, the whole structure of the hymnal focuses the worshipper on the hallowing of time (the church year) and place (the church building as the place of worship and the wider world as

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2. *Hymns Ancient and Modern, for Use in the Services of the Church* (London: William Clowes, 2nd edn, 1875).

the locus for mission). In addition, a great many of the 'general hymns' begin with a reference to creation, or some element in creation, before moving into an articulation of Christian doctrine. The hymnal is in many ways a handbook in natural theology, and one that was to be found in the hands of Anglican worshippers across the world. The hymnbook's popularity coincided with the century of the greatest expansion of the Anglican Church, and arguably its greatest sense of optimism. But was this simply an expression of popular piety, or did a concern for creation, and for what has come to be called ecological theology, also find more systematic expression on the part of Anglican theologians and biblical scholars? Clearly the ecological crisis has become a matter of urgency, in theology as well as in its own right, only since the 1960s. But could an Anglican theology of sacred time and place have helped pave the way, unconsciously and inarticulately, for a means of addressing this most pressing of late twentieth and early twenty-first century concerns? I shall attempt to explore this question in three steps: first, an attempt to contextualize theological concerns within the dialogue between faith and the natural sciences in general in nineteenth-century understandings of creation as 'nature'; second, an outline of more recent engagements with the relationship between faith and science, including ecological theology, especially by Anglican writers;³ and third, a close reading of an essay ostensibly on the incarnation that goes, however, under the unlikely title 'The Gospel of Creation', by one of the most prominent and influential Anglican thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century, Brooke Foss Westcott (1825–1901). The focus in this third section will be on the nexus between Westcott's understanding of incarnation and the possible foundations for a later ecological theology of creation

Creation and Nature: The Nineteenth-century Background

Kate Rigby in her *Topographies of the Sacred*, identifies three ecological themes in nineteenth-century Western European thought: first, the idea of nature as not simply the passive recipient of human action, but essentially active; second, the recognition, even in the early nineteenth century, that the natural (in the sense of non-human) world already

3. Although ecological theology is by nature ecumenical, I confine myself to Anglican thinkers in this paper because it originated as a discussion paper for the bilateral Anglican–Orthodox dialogue, as a way of outlining specifically Anglican approaches to ecological theology.

stands under threat; and third, an awareness of the extent to which this threat lies in the social and economic transformation of place into space. Rigby's book is a defence of the idea that Romanticism held a strong view of nature's agency: in the Romantic writers, 'the initiative lies with the phenomenon not with the gaze, repositioning the poet as recipient rather than as producer'.⁴ This perception of nature went hand in hand with a 'more immanent notion of the divine'.⁵ The divine expresses itself in and through the natural world. For this reason a writer like Goethe questioned the 'reduction of natural entities to the passive objects of an inquisitorial scientific gaze',⁶ and Byron describes a dream, or rather a nightmare, of a world that is 'void ... a lump of death - a chaos of hard clay'.⁷ Already here we see the uncanny premonition of ecological disaster, a premonition that comes to expression later in the century in the frenzy of Nietzsche's madman, words that are often cited as a premonition of the crisis of culture, but express just as much a premonition of ecological crisis: 'How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained the earth from its sun?'⁸ The third theme identified by Rigby, especially in the poetry of John Clare (1793-1864) is that of the transformation of particular, identifiable and identity-giving places into indeterminate, anonymous space; the reduction of a particular instance of nature, a familiar and cherished place, to nature in general, utilitarian space. This was Clare's response to the widespread dislocation of people from their ancestral homes (places) during the industrial revolution, in which land ceased to be place and became space (for industry or industrialized agriculture). The process of enclosure or privatization of land involved 'a series of changes that would profoundly alter the appearance and ecology of the place as well as fundamentally transforming the way land was used'.⁹

4. C. Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 13.

5. Rigby, *Topographies*, p. 17.

6. Rigby, *Topographies*, p. 19.

7. Rigby, *Topographies*, p. 18.

8. F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, available at http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/philosophy/friedrich_nietzsche_quotes.html (accessed 12 April 2013).

9. Rigby, *Topographies*, pp. 64-65. Australian readers should be aware of the extraordinary significance of place in Aboriginal ontology. See T. Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Clare's 'view from below',¹⁰ that is from the perspective of the dispossessed labouring masses and also – by extension – from the perspective of the land itself, was already in the air in the mid-nineteenth century. In a genre that Rigby calls 'eminently eco-centred counter-pastoral', Clare had already by the early 1860s apprehended the threats to wild places, and thus to untamed countryside everywhere.¹¹ She concludes: 'within the horizon of the immanent ecology of the sacred informing Clare's poetics of place, it is what happens in the flesh that matters most'.¹² Before Westcott's essay, then, a popular English writer was drawing the connection between the significance of the flesh and nature.¹³ This was the literary and social context in which Westcott was to undertake his exploration of incarnation. Westcott was explicit about the social implications of the doctrine of the incarnation, as this, along with the engagement with science, was the issue of the day. However, given his context, it is hardly surprising if at least implicitly there should be an awareness in his writing of the deeper ecological malaise.

The social conditions of an industrializing society, in tandem with an older social-ethical impetus embedded in faith, drove a few theologians like Westcott to look to the doctrine of the incarnation as a source of thinking about their contemporary human society. Westcott moves, for example, from a discussion of the 'word became flesh' to a consideration of 'righteousness, peace and truth' as the newer Christian answer to the older revolutionary slogan of 'equality, liberty, and fraternity', an answer in which 'nothing of the old truth is lost, and all is transfigured'.¹⁴ Westcott's juxtaposition of 'new' and 'old' is interesting here: the revolutionary slogan, though historically relatively recent, is seen as the mindset of the old Adam; the gospel invitations to 'righteousness, peace and truth' are of a newer, eschatological, order. Westcott is not alone among nineteenth-century Anglican thinkers in these insights: we

10. Rigby, *Topographies*, p. 236.

11. Rigby, *Topographies*, p. 237.

12. Rigby, *Topographies*, p. 240.

13. This tradition in English poetry is to be seen as early as Thomas Traherne (1636/7–1674), whose relevance to the ecological crisis has been noted in A.M. Allchin, *The World Is a Wedding: Explorations in Christian Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), p. 83. See also P. Armstrong, *The English Parson Naturalist: A Companionship between Science and Religion* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000) on Anglican forerunners of the ecological movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

14. B.F. Westcott, *Social Aspects of Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1887), p. 90.

have already alluded to hints in the popular hymnal. But he represents an important alternative to the dominant nineteenth-century theological schools, the tractarians and the evangelicals, each of which was driven by its own theological agenda and engaged with its own rather more narrowly circumscribed set of problems.¹⁵ Where Westcott anticipates more recent thinking in ecological theology lies in his methodology, in which he seeks to address some of the scientific problems of his own day. It is here, in the engagement with contemporary natural sciences, that we might best consider Westcott's anticipation of later ecological theology.

Scientific advances in the second half of the century, most notably Darwin's *Origin of Species*, also led to a concern with the broader physical world. As Ulrike Link-Wieczorek puts it:

a broad understanding of incarnation ... justified by an appeal to the doctrine of the Logos in the Early Church, which accorded with the Prologue of the Gospel of John, made it possible to speak of the Logos as the mediator of creation and thus extend the 'becoming human' to 'becoming creation' ... the incarnation was closely and explicitly associated with the action of God immanent to creation, which made possible the integration of new scientific theories about the development of life (such as the theory of evolution).¹⁶

That Westcott shared in the attempts to offer a theological response to the rapid changes in scientific thinking, and their popular reception, can be seen – albeit expressed with typical late nineteenth-century optimism – throughout his works.¹⁷ While he still sees humanity as the peak of creation, the elements that comprise it are also to be seen, though less articulately, 'dispersed' through creation. In a section headed 'The Incarnation and Nature', he puts it this way:

In revelation, no less than in science, man is the representative of Creation who gathers into himself and combines in the most perfect form the various manifestations of life and being which are seen dispersed tentatively, as it were, through other orders.¹⁸

15. Graham Patrick sees Westcott's fascination with bridges as symbolic of his life-long commitment to the reconciling of contradictory positions, politically as well as theologically. G.A. Patrick, *The Miners' Bishop: Brooke Foss Westcott* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2002), p. x.

16. U. Link-Wieczorek, 'Mediating Anglicanism: Maurice, Gore and Temple', in D. Fergusson (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 282–84.

17. D. Thompson, *Cambridge Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Enquiry, Controversy and Truth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 103.

18. B.F. Westcott, *Thoughts on Revelation and Life* (ed. S. Phillips; London: Macmillan, 1887), p. 247.

Westcott then goes on to quote with approval the words of Herbert Spencer that seem to lend nature a quasi-numinous aura: 'Scientific progress is a gradual transfiguration of Nature. The conception to which the explorer of Nature tends is much less of a Universe of dead matter than that of a Universe everywhere alive.'¹⁹ Westcott is not, however, prepared to surrender final knowledge to science, and in the opening pages of *The Gospel of Resurrection* he develops the argument that the 'laws of nature' themselves can mean nothing else than a law of (necessarily limited) human apprehension,²⁰ always to be seen within the bigger picture of the new creation and its 'promise of a more complete transfiguration of Nature'.²¹

In this discussion we see the concepts of creation and nature being used, to some degree interchangeably, but also with slightly different nuances. Creation still carries the theological loading of created reality as distinct from, and yet also in relation to, the uncreated, to God. Nature, however, is emerging as a term of reference for an autonomous reality, which may be 'transfigured', but not necessarily by the eschaton: for Herbert Spencer it is transfigured by the entirely mundane growth of scientific knowledge.

Ecological Theology: The Contemporary Discussion

The Anglican ecological theology in our own time can be approached through three contemporary thinkers who bridge the conceptual gap between the natural sciences and theology: John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke, both of whom exemplify a long-standing Anglican interest in the interface between faith and the natural sciences generally, and more significantly for our specific focus on ecological concerns, Michael Northcott.

Methodologically, John Polkinghorne considers himself a 'bottom-up' thinker. By this he means one who starts from particularities,²² who prefers to 'point to occurrence' rather than simply tell a story.²³ This leads him to be 'open to the possibility of critical events on which an understanding pivots'.²⁴ In this his position is not unlike that of

19. Westcott, *Thoughts on Revelation and Life*, p. 247.

20. B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel of the Resurrection: Thoughts on its Relation to Reason and History* (London: Macmillan, 1889), pp. 21–22.

21. Westcott, *Gospel of the Resurrection*, p. 157.

22. J. Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 11.

23. Polkinghorne, *Faith of a Physicist*, p. 33.

24. Polkinghorne, *Faith of a Physicist*, p. 120.

Pannenberg, for whom any thinking that rules out *a priori* an unprecedented event is not properly scientific. All knowledge rests on presuppositions, and any *a priori* dismissal of the possibility of an event is an invalid argument: that the resurrection, for example, did not happen because it could not happen. Polkinghorne considers the resurrection, which in turn points to the validity of speaking of incarnation, as a phenomenon that calls for explanation:

Why are we driven to such incarnational language at all? It is the instinct of a bottom-up thinker to start with a description of the phenomena to be explained. They determine the nature of the problem whose solution is being sought, and therefore they control the nature of the solution which can be regarded as acceptable.²⁵

The incarnation for Polkinghorne is the critical event 'on which an understanding pivots'. While recognizing that the ecological crisis contextualizes all our theological work in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Polkinghorne, however, remains cautious. He eschews the language of pantheism,²⁶ preferring, as he puts it, 'more modest, stewardly language',²⁷ and admitting to a 'certain ambiguity about current concerns with green problems'.²⁸

Arthur Peacocke is another scientist-theologian but one who on the face of it seems to take the opposite methodological approach: he proposes a notion of 'top-down causation', in which the whole of a system influences the part, and more complex systems influence the less complex. Peacocke proposes a 'new integrated view of reality' involving a typology of scientific disciplines ranging from simpler to more complex levels of subject matter.²⁹ These he calls 'hierarchies of complexity', in turn involving 'hierarchies of disciplines', and culminating in theological insights at the highest level of complexity.³⁰ This view of reality, for which Peacocke is happy to accept the term

25. Polkinghorne, *Faith of a Physicist*, p. 135.

26. Polkinghorne, *Faith of a Physicist*, pp. 64–65.

27. Polkinghorne, *Faith of a Physicist*, p. 86. The language of stewardship is, as Norman Habel points out, rather more problematic than Polkinghorne allows; see N. Habel, 'Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1', in N. Habel and S. Wurst (eds.), *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 46–47; and N. Habel, *The Birth, the Curse and the Greening of Earth: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1–11* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011).

28. Polkinghorne, *Faith of a Physicist*, p. 87.

29. A. Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age* (enlarged edn; London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 234.

30. Peacocke, *Scientific Age*, pp. 214–48.

'panentheism', is consciously developed within an awareness of our own 'age of environmental degradation and nuclear hazard'.³¹

The differences between Polkinghorne and Peacocke are not as great as they might at first appear.³² It is important to notice the terms 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' are used to refer to different things: for Polkinghorne, to the basic method of enquiry, and for Peacocke, to the question of causation within physical systems. Both reflect and develop ways of locating the natural sciences within a larger, theological perspective, one that will have implications for our understandings of and responses to the natural world. Both bring a theological perspective to their scientific work, in that the natural world is integrally and relationally connected with God, and therefore to be characterized as creation.

In Michael Northcott we come to a younger thinker who shows no hesitation in identifying himself as a practitioner of ecological theology. Northcott's book consists of a dialectic between extended, very carefully researched passages that critically analyse contemporary positivist science and what he calls the 'pseudo-science of modern utilitarian economics'³³ – critiques that could easily be voiced by writers working on a purely secular basis – and short bursts of theological and ethical reflection. It is the latter that give Northcott's critique a sort of Archimedean point upon which to position the lever he takes to contemporary neo-liberal political ideology and the positivist science that is drawn in to support it. This fulcrum allows him to exert a remarkably radical critique, precisely because theological insight stands completely outside the dominant ideological system. Ethical systems constructed on utilitarian, emotivist or deontological foundations all fail to address the problem of ecological crisis because 'they all collude in the invention of society as household, and of mass society as a collection of individuals', and as a consequence all 'refuse the perennial and traditional claim that there is a deep moral structure in the biophysical ordering of life on earth'.³⁴ All are in some way or another held hostage to the reduction of everything to the status of commodity, with no inherent value, but only exchange value. This is the result of the 'disenchanted description

31. Peacocke, *Scientific Age*, p. 254.

32. C. Southgate *et al.*, *God, Humanity and the Cosmos: A Textbook in Science and Religion* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), pp. 261–67.

33. M. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007), p. 69.

34. Northcott, *Moral Climate*, pp. 64–65.

of the universe as a cause-effect mechanism³⁵ and utilitarian economics, in which wealth is accumulated in monetary form at the expense of human and natural ecosystems, and in which collective human agency is simply not considered in the causal equation.

As an alternative to this dominant ideology of late modernity, Northcott proposes a return from the god of mammon to the God of Moses,³⁶ and the concomitant permission and requirement for 'a new kind of politics, which needs to be cooperative, local, face-to-face, and reorganized around the household and place'.³⁷ Neoliberal market economies simply do not have the ability to move beyond the illusory panacea of economic growth, so cannot deliver on what will be required to address the current ecological crisis. Their inherent drive is toward an 'alienation between humans and their own labour, and between human work and the fertility of the earth. ... this alienation ultimately manifests as spiritual loss – a sense of no longer being at home on earth.'³⁸ It is the sense of *place* that is lost, in other words, and with it, human identity.

Northcott's answer to this lies in the incarnation,³⁹ though he does not explore the inherent logic of the incarnation as bound to particularity of time and place, but rather moves directly to the idea of the Creator's love for the creature, and the consequent 'law of love'. He hints at the possibility of a deeper exploration some pages later in his critique of 'a particular form of disembodied rationality'.⁴⁰ Northcott's exploration of what an embodied, that is, incarnational, rationality might look like involves an implementation of the phenomenological notion of self-in-relation:

The roots of moral action do not lie in the certain ability to calculate consequences, but in a coherent relationship between the inner world of thought and emotion and the outer world of bodies, relationships and species.⁴¹

It is the biblical principle of justice, combined with the christological themes of embodiment and relationality that, in the end, enable Northcott to bring a conceptual blowtorch to an ideological system that seems all but impervious to internal criticism on the one hand and

35. Northcott, *Moral Climate*, p. 65.

36. Northcott, *Moral Climate*, p. 116.

37. Northcott, *Moral Climate*, p. 117.

38. Northcott, *Moral Climate*, p. 143.

39. Northcott, *Moral Climate*, p. 173.

40. Northcott, *Moral Climate*, p. 177.

41. Northcott, *Moral Climate*, p. 274.

lurching towards global catastrophe on the other. In the following section I shall argue that in the work of Brooke Foss Westcott we can discern an anticipation of this critique. It is all the more remarkable for having taken place at a time when the sureties of Newtonian physics had not yet been called in question by the paradoxes and uncertainties of the quantum worldview, and before the overly confident claims of neo-liberalism filled the vacuum left by the implosion of the various large-scale twentieth-century social and economic experiments.

Westcott's 'Gospel of Creation'

Westcott's essay 'The Gospel of Creation'⁴² makes a detailed study of the tradition, especially in Western thought, that understands the incarnation as, in his words, 'independent of the Fall', the tradition that understands humanity as having been from the beginning 'predestined ... for union with the Word'.⁴³ That is to say, he is interested in the tradition that argues, as a theologoumenon, that the incarnation of the Word would have taken place even if there had been no fall; that it was not contingent on some putative 'happy fault' (*felix culpa*) in the Garden of Eden. The 'circumstances of the incarnation were due to sin' but 'the idea of the incarnation was due to the primal and absolute purpose of love foreshadowed in Creation, apart from sin which was contingent'.⁴⁴ In other words, existentially the incarnation takes place in a 'fallen' world, a world in which sin – alienation from God – is a reality. But the Word would have become incarnate even under other circumstances: this was God's decision in eternity. The early church, Westcott argues, needed as a practical matter to separate the church from fallen humanity, focusing in other words on our actual, fallen human condition, rather than 'enter upon the theoretical investigation of the original relation of man and humanity to God'.⁴⁵ Indeed Westcott is slightly apologetic about the nature of his investigation. The scholastic argument, on both sides, seems so far removed from the real life of his own time as to appear 'to us frivolous and pointless'.⁴⁶ But Westcott feels it is worth exploring, and reads both sides of the argument with sympathy,

42. B.F. Westcott, 'The Gospel of Creation', in *The Epistles of St John: the Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 2nd edn, 1886), pp. 285–328.

43. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 287.

44. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 288.

45. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 288.

46. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 289.

drawing out what he sees as the best insights even of those with whom he disagrees. The biblical authors, he argues, do not give us a clear basis for either position, their thoughts having been 'evidently written down without careful guarding against misconception'.⁴⁷

The tradition of favouring the incarnation as 'independent of the Fall' he discerns in a wide range of authors including Alexander of Hales, Albertus Magnus, the early Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, John Wessel and Andreas Osiander (the latter of interest to Anglicans as uncle of Thomas Cranmer's wife). It is the latter two thinkers that Westcott finds most interesting. John Wessel (1419–89) is significant because he is so insistent on revisiting Anselm's question *cur Deus homo?*⁴⁸ and thinking through a biblically substantiated and logically consistent response: that Christ was from all eternity destined to become flesh, and all creatures, even the angels, are immeasurably blessed by this becoming flesh. Osiander (1498–1552), as a Reformation thinker, has even more reason to base his argument on Scripture and the Lutheran concern with justification.⁴⁹ Humanity was made in the likeness of God, and this points to a union with God of the sort that will in time be presented and made manifest in the incarnation: creation thus prefigures the incarnation. We are justified by the indwelling of the eternal Word, and this also points to an eternal decision for a divine-human hypostatic union. Finally, Osiander refers to the distinction in the Nicene creed: 'for us human beings' referring to the primary, eternal decision for the Word to become flesh; 'and for our salvation' referring to an additional reason for the incarnation, contingent upon human bondage to sin.⁵⁰

Westcott argues that this discussion is essential to understanding the Johannine epistles. With regard to several essays he includes as appendices to his commentary, he writes in his preface to the second edition, 'they are an essential part of [the commentary], and ... as far as they appear to be merely accidental additions I have failed to make my purpose clear'.⁵¹ In particular, 'the characteristic revelation of the Epistle is "God is love"'. Clearly in response to the theodicy question raised by Darwinian evolution in the English-speaking world at the end of the nineteenth century, Westcott continues 'How, untold thousands have sadly inquired, can such a revelation be maintained in

47. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 293.

48. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', pp. 308–12.

49. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', pp. 313–15.

50. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 315.

51. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. x.

face of the facts of life? “The Gospel of Creation” points, I think, to the solution of this last enigma of our being.⁵² The question of theodicy has not of course disappeared. But Westcott believed his reflections, and the tradition in which he had demonstrated that they stand, at least point to a solution. The pointer is the gospel of creation, by which Westcott means not simply the gospel as communicated in and through creation, but the gospel announced and delivered *to* creation. Let us follow Westcott’s own line of argument.⁵³

Westcott sets out systematically to answer two questions: First, what do the scriptures have to say about the relationships between humanity and God, and between humanity and the world? Second, from as it were the other direction, what can be discerned from the scriptures as to the divine intention or motive for the incarnation? We will take Westcott’s treatment of these questions in order.

First, what do the scriptures have to say about the relationships between humanity and God, and humanity and the world?

- On the first of these relationships, Westcott posits two ‘brief propositions’: (i) in relation to God, humanity is made in God’s image; (ii) in relation to the world, humanity is the ‘representative of the visible creation’.⁵⁴ The development of the first proposition (i) can itself be subdivided. (a) The individual human being was intended, as an individual, to ‘gain a divine ideal’. Westcott states that ‘there is no authority for limiting the image to any particular part of (human) nature’.⁵⁵ In other words, it is by no means clear what is meant by the statement that human beings are ‘in the image of God’. What we can say is that ‘For us the individual man in his complex being is one; and as man he was made in God’s image to gain His likeness’. But human beings were not of themselves made capable of union with God: here Westcott cites both Irenaeus and Athanasius to the effect that human beings are first made human, then afterwards gods.⁵⁶ So even without a fall, individual human beings would still have needed a mediator ‘through whom the relation of fellowship with God might have been sustained, and deepened, and perfected’.⁵⁷ This mediator

52. Westcott, ‘Gospel of Creation’, p. xi.

53. Westcott, ‘Gospel of Creation’, pp. 317–28.

54. Westcott, ‘Gospel of Creation’, p. 319.

55. Westcott, ‘Gospel of Creation’, p. 319.

56. Westcott, ‘Gospel of Creation’, p. 319, n. 1.

57. Westcott, ‘Gospel of Creation’, pp. 319–20.

would have needed to have been 'a union in due time of man with God'.⁵⁸ (b) Next, 'These considerations which apply to the individual man obtain greater weight if they are extended' to what Westcott calls 'the race', that is, to humanity as a whole.⁵⁹ Without a mediator, there would be, even 'wholly apart from the Fall', no unifying theme or guidance for the progress of humanity to greater fulfilment. Without it, 'the whole conception of humanity would have been broken up and distributed, so to speak, through countless separate personalities'.⁶⁰ Westcott's own combination of nineteenth-century liberal optimism and Anglo-Saxon individualism is clearly on display in this statement, but let us follow his argument. There has to be some unifying 'personal unity' that would model this fulfilment of humanity in its humaneness, in which 'the completed body (of humanity in general) might be brought into a final unity in fellowship with God'.⁶¹ After some reflection on the gendered nature of humanity as a whole (a reflection that also reveals something of the presuppositions of his times and culture), Westcott concludes this section of his argument: 'both these relations, the individual relation and the corporate relation (i.e. to God, through the incarnation), are independent of the Fall. The Fall has disturbed and disordered each, but it was not the occasion for the first existence of either'.⁶²

- On the second of these relationships, Westcott turns to consider humanity as representative of creation.⁶³ The dominion of humanity was and is such that creation shares the consequences of sin, or as we might put it, suffers from our human estrangement from God. If creation's representative is estranged, creation itself suffers a similar estrangement. And correspondingly, the fulfilment of humanity, our restoration to communion with God, holds the promise for the reconciliation of creation, 'the hope', in Westcott's words, 'of the material world'.⁶⁴ Westcott goes on to unpack the consequences of this idea. Not only in humanity, but in 'all parts of the natural order ... there is constant divisions, dispersion, differentiation, of elements; and

58. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 320.

59. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 321.

60. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 321.

61. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 322.

62. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 322.

63. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 323.

64. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 323.

at the same time clearer glimpses are opened of a unity to which all the parts appear to tend'.⁶⁵ Is this simply neo-Platonism, we could ask. But Westcott almost immediately moves to the eternal decree for incarnation. 'This separation, this unity, as far as we can see, belong alike to the essence of things.' This is not neo-Platonic: we are closer, in Westcott, to a classic modern description of nature, including Newton's second law of thermodynamics, the law of entropy. There is an order, a unity, but also a dissolution of order. Westcott continues: 'This separation has been, it is true, influenced by the Fall, but, as a condition of growth, it is not due to it'.⁶⁶ In other words, the phenomena of the world point to human separation from God and a consequent suffering of nature, or in theological terms, to the suffering of the whole of God's creation. This is why the whole creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God (Rom. 8.19).⁶⁷ The phenomena we observe are influenced, when viewed theologically, by the Fall, but, in Westcott's words, 'are not due to it'. In other words, the phenomena would still show these centrifugal and centripetal tendencies, to dissipation and to unification, even without any estrangement from God. Within this setting, Westcott continues, the idea of incarnation fits this tendency to material unity, and expresses 'the aspiration towards the vaster unity to which the full development of Creation points. The restoration of unity to man carries with it the promise of the restoration of unity to all finite things.'⁶⁸

Second, from as it were the other direction, what can be discerned from the scriptures as to the divine intention or motive for the incarnation? Here Westcott is hesitant to enquire too deeply into the

65. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 323. Alan Cadwallader (personal communication, 24 April 2013) writes 'Indeed this is part of the method drilled into BFW (and so many others in the mid 19th century) to build an account of every item of creation (it explains his hunt for samples of every fern, or rock, for his collection – all carefully labelled). Only by knowing the intricacies of the parts can we gain a sense of what the whole might look like (keeping open to the limitations on knowledge of course). This needless to say drove his grammatical analysis of the biblical text. He would find nuances in the aorist for example that escaped most mortals.'

66. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 323.

67. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', pp. 323–24.

68. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 324.

mind of God, except to say that the mind of God can be to some degree discerned from the foregoing considerations. It has been established that the incarnation is from our human perspective not dependent on the Fall or the factuality of our estrangement from God, but that the incarnation was always going to be needed for our human fulfilment both as individuals and as a human species, and also for the completion, the perfection, of the whole of creation. For this reason, it seems to Westcott that the incarnation 'so far as we can see, cannot be regarded as contingent in the Divine Counsel'.⁶⁹ It is not, in other words, simply a divine response to something that has gone astray in the created order, specifically in human beings.

Westcott moves on to sum up his argument. The incarnation serves three purposes: the revelation of God, the benefit of humanity, and the overcoming of Satan.⁷⁰ The first purpose can be fully understood and the second partly understood without any reference to a fall or a human estrangement from God. Consequently, the incarnation cannot be reduced simply to a matter of 'satisfaction and atonement'.⁷¹ The incarnation addresses not simply the redemption of humanity, but the perfection of humanity. Does this make the action of God in becoming flesh dependent eternally on creation? No more than the act of creation itself, according to Westcott, which in itself constitutes a self-limitation on God's part. In fact it does greater justice to God – 'as far as we dare speculate on such subjects' – to think that 'the crowning act of love, the consummation of all finite being, was included in the one creative act, than it was contingent upon man's conduct'.⁷² In other words, it does God a greater disservice to think of some mistake in the original design that then had to be fixed, rather than the incarnation as being foreseen in the eternal wisdom and loving kindness of God.

It is not surprising, says Westcott, that such speculation finds no definitive resolution in Scripture. Scripture is practical, it addresses

69. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 324.

70. Alan Cadwallader (personal communication, 24 April 2013) notes 'the overcoming of Satan' ... has important implications for Westcott's thought, firstly in his essentially Origenist understanding of the personification of evil as a temporary aberration; secondly as a necessary call to redress (mainly social) evil as a participation in the restoration and perfecting that characterises God's activity; thirdly as a demonstration that the fundamental goodness of humanity, not the aberrations need to be affirmed through such social(ist) action. It explains why he was such a proponent of nineteenth century "cooperativism" (more on the Owen model than the Marxist, but dialoging with both).'

71. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 324.

72. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 325.

human need as it presents itself, and humanity as we experience it is estranged from God.

The Gospel is a message to man as he is. It is perfectly natural therefore that Scripture should for the most part contemplate the actual state of things and speak of the Incarnation as dealing with fallen man. It is perfectly natural that the Creeds ... dealing with the actual history of the Incarnation should state that Christ 'came down from heaven for us men and for our salvation....' But this language is in no way inconsistent with the belief that what was accomplished under certain conditions due to sin would have been accomplished otherwise if man had remained sinless.⁷³

Here Westcott goes on to recall with approval Osiander's distinction between 'for us' and 'for our salvation'. Salvation for Westcott is always 'far more than deliverance from the consequences of evil'. There is also 'a making perfect'.⁷⁴ To ignore this would be to focus purely on the one sheep that was lost, forgetting the shepherd's loving care for the ninety-nine who were not. Westcott concludes with a call for generosity in our view of God's love for creation: 'The thought that the Incarnation ... was part of the Divine purpose in Creation, opens unto us, as I believe, wider views of the wisdom of God than we commonly embrace, which must react upon life'.⁷⁵ Which must, in other words, entail practical consequences for our lives in our natural environment. Above all, Westcott's essentially Scotist understanding of the incarnation as independent of the fall identifies his soteriology with that of the Franciscan tradition,⁷⁶ a tradition seen by Lynn White, in his famous early foray into the nexus between theology and ecology, as ecologically life-giving.⁷⁷

Conclusion

There was already a strong tradition of looking back, through the lens of the church fathers, to the prologue of John's Gospel. So on one level there is nothing surprising about Westcott's estimation of the incarnation as taking place for the benefit of creation as a whole, not simply for the benefit of human beings. It is an idea to be found in the

73. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 326.

74. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 327.

75. Westcott, 'Gospel of Creation', p. 328.

76. Patrick, *English Parson Naturalist*, p. 85.

77. L. White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', at <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf> (accessed 22 April 2013).

Greek patristic writers who have been so formative for Anglican thinking. But why does Westcott call his discussion of incarnation here the 'Gospel of Creation'? Not, I think, because he is interested in discerning the good news of Christ within the natural order, in the manner of classic natural theology. Westcott is writing after Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and is fully aware of the problems facing any overly optimistic reliance on natural theology. Rather, Westcott's primary interest throughout this essay is in the incarnation, which will in turn determine his approach to creation. As for Polkinghorne, it is the critical event 'on which an understanding pivots', and like Peacocke, Westcott sees the less complex operating within the context of the more complex, and in fact – as we have seen – proposes his own 'new integrated view of reality' involving a typology of scientific disciplines ranging from simpler to more complex levels of subject matter. Both Polkinghorne and Peacocke reflect and develop the idea we see in Westcott of locating the natural sciences within a larger, theological perspective. In Westcott's reflections on the specificity of the incarnation – for it is always the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ, a particular human being at a particular time and place in history – we see the nineteenth-century concern for *place*, which has re-emerged in Northcott's work. For Westcott, every place is potentially a point of encounter with the divine.⁷⁸

The incarnation is the expression of God's care for humanity within creation. The incarnation, in this view, represents the perfection of both humanity and all creation. In the light of the incarnation, the good of humanity and the good of creation are one and the same. Rowan Williams has recently expressed this insight with his usual clarity:

Living in a way that honours rather than threatens the planet is living out what it means to be made in the image of God. We do justice to what we are as human beings when we seek to do justice to the diversity of life around us; we become what we are supposed to be when we assume our responsibility for life continuing on earth. And

78. Patrick, *English Parson Naturalist*, p. 126. Cf. Westcott, *The Gospel of Life* (London: Macmillan, 1892), pp. 96–97: 'Even the rudest demon-worship contains the germ of this feeling by which the worshipper seeks to be at one with some power which is adverse to him. It is a witness to something in man by which he is naturally constituted to feel after a harmonious fellowship with all that of which he is conscious, with the unseen, with the infinite, no less than with the seen and the material'. I am very grateful to Dr Alan Cadwallader for this and a number of other additions and corrections to this paper.

that call to do justice brings with it the call to re-examine what we mean by growth and wealth. Instead of a desperate search to find the one great idea that will save us from ecological disaster, we are being invited to a transformation of individual and social goals that will bring us closer to the reality of interdependent life in a variegated world.⁷⁹

Westcott's 'Gospel of Creation' is the affirmation of the gospel, the good news, to creation. As a systematic exploration of a concern for and engagement with God's creation, it can be read as an early venture into the ecological theology we are familiar with today. As Westcott himself put it, in an 1892 sermon in Peterborough Cathedral, instead of speaking, as he had previously done, of 'our debt to the past. Now I wish to speak of our debt to the future.'⁸⁰ That is the essence of his, and should be the essence of our, commitment to the future of God's creation.

79. Rowan Williams, 'The Climate Crisis: A Christian Response', Annual Lecture to Operation Noah, 13 October 2012, available at <http://www.operationnoah.org/node/90> (accessed 19 April 2013).

80. Cited in Patrick, *English Parson Naturalist*, pp. 43–44.