

Beyond Rationality: Replacing the Anthropocentric Pyramid with a Theocentric Circle

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Introduction:

In his *Compendium Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas provides one of the most comprehensive arguments for a hierarchy of creation in the Christian tradition. He places human beings at the top of the earthly portion of this hierarchy, drawing on his own prioritization of intellectual and rational substances¹ over material substances, as well as on Genesis 1.26-28, in which God makes human beings in God's image and commands them to have "dominion" over the earth. This leads Aquinas to conclude that "all creation exists for man" (148). In this paper, I argue against the idea that the world exists exclusively for the benefit of human beings. Instead, I posit that all of creation has inherent value as it is created by God, and that Aquinas's hierarchy is not supported by the creation stories in Genesis, the Book of Job, and the Book of Psalms. This requires the de-prioritization of the intellectual and the rational over the material, and a radical humility in recognizing the dignity of the non-human "other" in the rest of creation.

1. Although in other works, Aquinas may distinguish "intellect" from "rationality," for the purposes of this paper, the distinction is unnecessary. The intellect is made manifest in human beings through the ability to reason, but this distinction is primarily useful for distinguishing human beings from angels, and this paper's primary concern is the relationship between human beings and other earthly creatures. For this reason, I will use the two terms interchangeably in what follows.

I argue that the domination of human beings over the rest of creation is not inherent within Christianity, and that it is possible to maintain the dignity of the human person without denying or belittling the dignity of the rest of God's creation.

Part I: Constructing the Hierarchy

Thomas Aquinas and the Hierarchy of Creation

I begin this paper with an outline of the hierarchical pyramid of creation that Thomas Aquinas builds in his *Compendium Theologiae*. Aquinas builds his hierarchy from the top down, beginning with a depiction of God. He asserts that a body's motion is caused by the motion of another body, and that all that is must be set in motion by a "first mover that is above all the rest" (3). He calls this unmoved mover God. Next, he claims that all movement is action, and "everything that is moved is, to that extent, in potency" (4). Because God is the primary cause of all movement, Aquinas asserts that God is "pure act" and contains no potency (10).

Then, Aquinas claims that the intellect contains more action than matter. Matter is born and passes away; it is "subject to generation and corruption" (74), and this ability to decay proves that matter contains potency. Material substances come and cease to be, and thus "contain a potency for non-existence" (74). Intellectual substances, on the other hand, contain no such potency. They are "free from matter," and do not cease to exist, but rather "subsist in their being which they have received from God" (74). Characterizing the intellect as act allows Aquinas to claim that intellectual substances are more like God because they, too, are eternal and incorruptible. Furthermore, God must also be intellectual because God is not a material substance, and "freedom from matter is the cause of intellectuality" (28). Aquinas prioritizes intellectual substances over material substances because cre-

ation is “noble and perfect in the measure that it approach[es] likeness to God” (74), and created intellectual substances are more similar to their Creator than their material counterparts.

This is the foundation upon which Aquinas constructs a hierarchy of creation. Prioritizing one aspect of creation over another (intellectual over material) allows him to characterize different created beings as more or less like God.

Thus we observe that some things, those pertaining to the lowest degree, such as lifeless beings, share in the divine likeness with respect to existence only; others, for example, plants, share in the divine likeness with respect to existence and life; yet others, such as animals, with respect to sense perception. But the highest degree, and that which makes us most like to God, is conferred by the intellect. Consequently the most excellent creatures are intellectual. Indeed, they are said to be fashioned in God’s image for the very reason that among all creatures they approach most closely to likeness with God. (Aquinas 75)

In Aquinas’s hierarchy, each category of being (rocks, plants, etc.) contains something a little bit more like God, and thus he concludes that they must be in closer proximity to their Creator. For Aquinas, human beings are distinguished from the rest of the animal kingdom because of our rationality. Because God is intellectual, or something free from matter, and “man alone comprehends universals, and the relations between things, and immaterial objects” (79), Aquinas claims that we are the most God-like creatures on earth. In the passage quoted above, a pyramidal structure emerges in which inanimate objects such as rocks and water are placed at the bottom and human beings at the top, a ranking that is famously known as “the great chain

of being.” It is important to note, however, that human beings are not the only intellectual substances that Aquinas describes. Angels are also created beings, but because they are free from matter and, thus, are pure intellect, Aquinas places them above human beings and closer to God (125). While they are still creatures, angels’ lack of embodiment places them outside of the realm of earthly creation. Thus, although human beings are the “lowest among intellectual substances” (80), we are the pinnacle of earthly creation because we are the only intellectual substances on earth. Embodied and rational, human beings form the hinge between intellectual and material substances, and occupy the highest level of an earthly creation pyramid.

This pyramidal hierarchy is more than just a ranking of proximity to God, however. Aquinas also claims that lower creatures, which contain less act and more potency and, thus, have a “smaller share in [God’s] perfection,” are “governed by higher creatures” (124). Because the lower levels of creation participate less in God’s divine goodness, which is the end of all things (148), Aquinas argues that each level of creation is subordinate to and therefore exists for the sake of the higher levels of creation. He explains that “plants draw their nutrition from the earth, animals feed on plants, and these in turn serve man’s use” (148). While this ordering reads like a modern biology textbook, Aquinas goes on to ascribe a human telos to the earthly pyramid. He claims, “[T]he whole of corporeal nature exists for man, inasmuch as he is a rational animal. And so the consummation of the whole of corporeal nature depends, to some extent, on man’s consummation” (148). For Aquinas, all earthly ends depend on human ends, and all earthly creation exists solely for the purposes of human beings.

Aquinas does allow for and celebrate diversity in creation. He does not wish for all of creation to be assimilated into human form, but rather claims that diversity is necessary, “[s]ince the divine goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone” (102). God’s goodness in creation “had to be represented by many

creatures, so that what is lacking to one might be supplied by another” (102). In this way, Aquinas preserves the beauty and necessity of diversity in creation, and recognizes that God is present in each created element.

And yet, rather than undermine the pyramid that he has constructed, Aquinas uses the diversity of creation to support his hierarchy. He claims that divine intelligence devised and carried out “the multiplicity and distinction existing among things” so that “different things might participate in the divine goodness in varying degree” (102). Hierarchy requires diversity because there must be a “lower” below a “higher.” After all, a monochromatic pyramid is just a simple triangle. The layers of the pyramid require diversity in order to have any distinction between the lower and the higher beings. Even in their distinction from human beings, non-human creatures merely throw the whole pyramid into relief, accentuating the fact that human beings stand at its top.

Thus, a reader of Aquinas is left to believe that the whole world was created for human beings. Although he claims that through human beings all things will be redeemed, Aquinas allows no room for the inherent dignity of non-human earthly creation, or the dignity that is entirely separate from and indifferent to the dignity of human beings. As Aquinas himself puts it, “[T]he whole of corporeal nature exists for man” (148). Ignoring the inherent dignity of non-human earthly creation leaves the door open for human exploitation of the earth and her² creatures. In the next section, I will examine the biblical roots of this claim and the charge that has been laid against Christianity as “the root of our ecological crisis” (White 1205).

2. I chose to gender the earth and her creatures because, in the English language, the pronoun “it” can refer to both objects and subjects, although it commonly refers to objects. At the risk of anthropomorphizing other parts of creation, I chose the more personal pronouns such as “her” and “his” that we conventionally use to talk about other human beings in order to indicate the need to recognize the “other” as a fellow subject. I explore “subject-subject” relationships in Part II of this paper.

An Anthropocentric Reading of Genesis 1

Aquinas builds his creation pyramid through a progression of logic beginning with the Being of God, but near the end of the *Compendium*, he supports his claims with an interpretation of the creation narrative found in the first chapter of Genesis. He says, “By [original justice] man himself was subject to God on high, and all lower creatures were subordinate to man, as is indicated in Genesis 1:26” (187). This verse and the two following it detail the creation of man and woman, and are the source of much Judeo-Christian theological anthropology. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus primarily on three phrases found in these verses. First, Genesis 1.26 and 1.27 both proclaim that human beings were made in the image of God. Thomas Aquinas interprets this as human rationality mirroring God’s intellect. Second, God says that man will “have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth” (*Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition Bible*, Gn. 1.26),³ and finally, God commands human beings to “Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it” (Gn. 1.28). The phrases “have dominion over” and “fill the earth and subdue it” have been used to justify human exploitation of the earth and her creatures, centering the human experience on earth and denying other creatures’ inherent dignity in God’s eyes. If all of nature is created for man, then man is justified in doing whatever he likes with all of nature.

This anthropocentric reading of Genesis 1 has led to the accusation that Christianity is “the root of our ecological crisis” and “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (White 1203, 1205). In an essay titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Cri-

3. In this paper, I reference the Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition Bible. This English translation of the Bible is closest to the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible that Aquinas referenced.

sis,” critic Lynn White, Jr. blames Christianity for giving human beings permission and even ordering us to dominate the earth and use it only for our own gains. He interprets Genesis 1.26-28 to say that, “God planned all of this [the creation narrative in Gn. 1.1-25] explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes. And, although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image” (1205). White argues that Genesis 1 explicitly places human beings above instead of within the natural world. Additionally, he claims that Christian rejection of idolatry destroyed the respect for and fear of the natural world that had formerly been inspired by the spirits of trees, rocks, sun, etc. “The spirits in natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man’s effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled” (1205). According to White, this Christian attitude was the seed from which human exploitation of the earth grew, and when advances in science and technology expanded our ability to manipulate nature, we were ready to believe that our (over)use of the land was sanctioned by God. Christianity’s insistence that “it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” had primed us to believe that it was our duty and our destiny to use the earth however we saw fit (White 1205).

White finds one Christian figure worthy of praise from an ecological point of view. He commends St. Francis of Assisi for his “belief in the virtue of humility – not merely for the individual but for man as a species” (1206). In Francis, White finds an attempt to “depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures” (1206). White believes, however, that exploitation of the earth was so deeply engrained in Christianity that it was a miracle that St. Francis “did not end at the stake” (1206). White claims that Francis tried to humble the human species by “substitut[ing] the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of

man's limitless rule of creation" (1207). In White's opinion, Francis failed. White believes that Christianity could not be separated from this hierarchy of man over beast, St. Francis notwithstanding. It is my project to show that the pyramidal hierarchy constructed by Aquinas and condemned by White is not inherent within the Christian tradition, and that Christianity can and must endorse a theocentric organization of creation, placing God at the center of God's creation, rather than humans at its pinnacle.

Part II: Dismantling the Hierarchy *Replacing the Prioritization of Rationality with Recognition of "Thou"*

Part I of this paper summarized the hierarchy of creation in Thomas Aquinas's *Compendium Theologiae*, and analyzed an anthropocentric reading of the Christian creation narrative through the critique of Lynn White Jr. In Part II, I respond to the prioritization of the intellect as the highest form of earthly being, and suggest replacing this pyramid of earthly creation with Elizabeth Johnson's theocentric circle of creation with God at its center. I then provide a theocentric reading of the creation narrative in Genesis 1, in conjunction with those in the Books of Job and Psalms. The first step is to return to Thomas Aquinas's hierarchy of creation and address the question of whether rationality (and human beings) should be considered the pinnacle of earthly creation.

Aquinas's hierarchy depends heavily on his prioritization of intellect over matter, of rationality over embodiment. He makes the case that a rational nature is closest to God because it resembles God's Divine Reason. In response, I challenge the reader to try to experience the world as, say, a plant would, or your favorite animal. Anyone who accepts this challenge soon realizes that this is impossible; we have no

way of knowing how other creatures experience the world.⁴ We know so little about how other creatures interact with the world that we cannot even say for sure whether or not they are rational. We must learn to be humbled by this encounter with “otherness,” with a being so entirely outside of our own experience that we cannot assume superiority over it.

In a certain sense, human beings do recognize the non-human as “other.” We consume plants and animals to fuel our bodies, while eating human flesh is considered revolting. We use plant compounds that we cannot synthesize ourselves to heal the sick. It is important, however, to recognize that “otherness as usefulness” is not true recognition of an “other” in and of itself. According to Sallie McFague, it is easy for us to recognize “a thing in its difference if it is important to us or useful to us, but realizing that something other than oneself is real, in itself, for itself, is difficult. To acknowledge another being is different – perhaps even indifferent to me...is, for most of us, a feat of imagination” (28). For McFague, the encounter of “other as useful” implies a one-way, subject-object relationship between the two entities. The natural world, for example “has not been seen as having its health and integrity in itself, for itself, but rather in and for us” (McFague 33).

McFague argues instead for replacing the subject-object relationship with one that is subject-subject, and borrows Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship for this purpose. A subject-subject or I-Thou

4. Thomas Nagel’s essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” addresses this question, and he concludes that, while we may be able to form an objective conception of what it is like to be a bat, the “specific subjective character” of a bat’s experience is “beyond our ability to conceive” (439). We might learn how echolocation works, or close our eyes to mimic a bat’s poor eyesight, or even hang by our knees on a jungle gym, but all of this only allows our human minds to imagine what it would be like for a human to behave as a bat. We are “restricted to the resources of [our] own mind[s]” (439), which are inadequate to grasp a bat’s experience of bat-ness. The bat’s experience of being a bat is necessarily outside of, and other than, the human mind’s framework.

relationship necessitates a radical decentering of the first subject, a move that McFague claims we can “scarcely imagine” (33). Instead of asking what the other creature can do for us (subject-object), we must recognize that the other creature is complete and whole in and of itself, without any reference to us or our ability to recognize it (subject-subject). For an example of this, we need look no further than our own brief history on this planet. By the time human beings showed up, a few million years ago, the earth was already over four billion years old. She and her creatures had been through many iterations of thriving ecosystems before the human smeared paint on a rock. Sticking a little closer to home, think of the tree that spouts leaves every spring to conjure its own food out of thin air, or the salamander who hides out under a rock. If all human beings were to disappear one day from the surface of the earth one day, these creatures would continue growing leaves in the spring and seeking shelter under rocks. The natural world exists “independent of and indifferent to human interests and desires” (McFague 33). Non-human earthly creatures also exist as complete and whole creatures in and of themselves.

The recognition of “other as subject” also includes coming to terms with the limits of our own understanding. In a subject-subject relationship, the experiences of the two subjects are necessarily different, and while the subjects can help and/or learn from the other, it is impossible for either subject to understand completely the experience of the other. McFague illustrates this with the analogy of a white woman learning about the experience of a Black woman (38). The white woman can study Black women as much as she would like, but she will never actually know what it is to be a Black woman in America. The white woman runs into a limit in her own understanding and must recognize that a Black woman’s experience is other than, but not less than, her own. In a similar way, a human person encountering a creature of a different species will never truly understand how that species experiences the world. As human beings, rationality is one of

the primary ways that we experience the world, and an aspect of our being that allows us to contemplate God. Recognizing the “other as subject” in the natural world preserves the possibility that other species come to know God in other ways, ways that we cannot even begin to understand. Who is to say that the salamander, though he may not be able to follow Aquinas’s logical arguments about God, does not come to know God through his very existence, or through another method completely alien to us? It is easy for us to cast aside as lesser anything that does not experience the world exactly as we do, but to do this is to ignore the beauty, grace, and dignity that God imparts upon every earthly creature.

The “I-Thou” relationship begins to dismantle the pyramidal hierarchy of creation. If we are to recognize the otherness in how other creatures relate to each other and to God, we begin to see that the differences between subjects place those subjects on equal ground because it removes human rationality from the top of the pyramid. We are no longer alone at the point between earth and heaven, but rather we exist within a web of relationships with our fellow creatures. McFague reminds us that we do not “choose to be in relationship with others, but we *are* in relationships, from before our birth until after our death” (38). In a very fundamental way, we depend on other creatures for our continued existence. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis chastises human arrogance in forgetting that “we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *Gen 2:7*); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters” (3). As Elizabeth Johnson notes, Darwin’s theory of evolution showed us that that “[h]uman connection to nature is so genuine that we cannot properly define our identity without including the natural world of which we are a part” (Johnson, “Creation” 27). The human species does not and could not exist in a vacuum; we are intimately connected to every other element of creation, and we always have been. To be human is to exist in reciprocal relationships, not just with

other human beings, but with all of creation.

Elizabeth Johnson suggests replacing Aquinas's creation pyramid with a "magnificent circle of life, whose center and encompassing horizon is the generous God of life" (*Ask the Beasts* 268). In "[r]epositioning the human species within the community of creation centered on the living God and reconceiving our identity primarily along the lines of kinship rather than rule," Johnson provides a theocentric visual of creation, re-centering God as the source of all Being and placing human beings "within, not over" the web of creaturely relations (*Ask the Beasts* 268). Human beings share with the rest of the world the fundamental status of being finite creatures, created and sustained by the Unmoved Mover, and as such, "*human beings and other species have more in common than what separates them*" (Johnson, *Ask the Beasts* 268, emphasis hers). Johnson's circle of creation maintains the integrity of McFague's subject-subject relationships amongst creatures because it allows one to recognize the other as beside rather than below oneself.

Furthermore, Christian Trinitarian doctrine teaches that God creates out of subject-subject relationships of love. Scott Northcott writes that "the nature of being itself, being in God, was and is originally one of subject to subject, of diversity, reciprocity, relationality and community" (118). God did not create the world as a series of objects that God would look upon as the lone subject, "but that the world, the universe, in all its rich and yet complexly ordered multiplicity of kinds, is a mirror of the divine three in one" (Northcott 118). Andrew Linzey's *Animal Theology* reminds us that "Creation exists for its Creator...[and] God is *for* creation" (24). He explains that God, as defined by Trinitarian doctrine, "cannot be fundamentally indifferent, negative, or hostile to the creation which is made" (24). God, by God's very nature, creates out of love. If God were to cease loving creation, creation would cease to exist. Therefore, each being, each individual creature must be intimately loved by God in all places

and at all times. God, at the center of the circle of creation, completes the web of reciprocal relationships, undergirding all of creation in love. God creates all creatures as subjects so that they might remain subjects to each other, as they are subjects in God's eyes. If the omnipotent Creator looks upon the lowly creatures as subjects, what arrogance permits some creatures to look upon others as objects? In Linzey's words, "If God is for them, we cannot be against them" (25). We as human beings must shift our perception of our relationship to the rest of creation to recognize that we are among a plethora of diverse species in the circle of creation, each of which may experience God and the world in different ways, but nonetheless remain a subject in God's eyes.

Once we have substituted the theocentric circle of creation for Thomas's anthropocentric hierarchy, we can regard our rational capacity as a gift from God, rather than The Gift through which all creation is saved. Aquinas himself recognized that diversity within creation is necessary because God's glory cannot be shown in one particular being or species. Human rationality may show an attribute of God, but we can no longer say that God's Reason is his primary and most important attribute (or, in Aquinas's terms, that God is solely intellect and contains no material substance). If God is the source and sustainer of all that is, then God is present in the birds, the trees, and the soil we walk upon, not to mention in the face of every person walking down the street.

This brings us to a second, though related, limit of human rationality. The salvation of creation comes about not through reason, but through love in the form of sacrifice. To illustrate this point, Linzey paraphrases Jürgen Moltmann's reminder that "Christian theology is 'found' not in 'the ascent of man to God but the revelation of God in his self-emptying in the crucified Christ which opens up God's sphere of life to the development of man in him'" (25). Linzey commends Moltmann for his recognition of the limits of reason and the impor-

tance of Revelation, but critiques his emphasis on human development in God, rather than creation's development in God. "[I]f this same Christ is the *Logos* through whom all things come to be, how can we be justified in supposed that this 'self-emptying' is for the human sphere...alone?" (Linzey 25). If God creates an entire universe out of subject-subject love, and pours out this same love on the cross, we betray our narrowminded self-interest in assuming Christ's self-emptying sacrifice is solely for human beings.⁵

A Theocentric Reading of Genesis 1

I now return to Genesis 1 in order to show that the substitution of Johnson's circle of creation for Aquinas's hierarchy is compatible with the Christian creation narrative. The first step is to remember that Genesis, like all biblical books, is not a narrative to be read as complete in and of itself. It must be read in the context of other books of the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New. In his Creation homilies, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI emphasizes that the creation narrative is not written in stone in Genesis, but rather "it accompanies Israel throughout its history" (Ratzinger 9). He continues:

For the Christian the Old Testament represents, in its totality, an advance toward Christ; only when it attains to him does its real meaning, which was gradually hinted at, become clear... Hence we only interpret an individual text theologically cor-

5. There is Biblical justification for the redemption of all of creation as well. Isaiah 11:6-7 states that the "wolf shall dwell with the lamb: and the leopard shall lie down with the kid...and a little child shall lead them. The calf and the bear shall feed: their young ones shall rest together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox." Isaiah foresees Christ overturning not only what it means to be human, but also what it means to be a wolf and a lamb, a leopard and a kid, a calf, a bear, and a lion. Christ's love and sacrifice extends beyond the human sphere here, and note that the human being in the scene is a "little child." Surely it is not the child's well-formed reason that allows her to lead the animals.

rectly...when we see it as a way that is leading us ever forward, when we see in the text where this way is tending and what its inner direction is. (Ratzinger 9-10)

The entire Old Testament is “a journeying with the Word of God” (Ratzinger 9) towards some end, and for a Christian, that end is Christ.⁶ The Bible is not a history textbook from which a chapter can be extracted and considered whole in and of itself. Rather, as Pope Benedict argues, the interpretation of one particular chapter must appeal to the “inner direction” of the text as a whole.

Second, it is important to recognize the context in which Genesis itself emerged. The Jewish creation narrative in Genesis 1 first appeared in conversation with the great Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*. The Babylonian narrative details a war between two gods, and the victorious god Marduk splits his enemy in half so that the top of her becomes the sky, and her lower half becomes the earth. Marduk then makes human beings from his own blood and bone “[t]hat the service of the gods may be established”⁷. In the *Enuma Elish*, creation is born in the fire of war and violence, and human beings are molded from the blood of the victor in order to serve the gods.

The Genesis narrative sets a very different tone for creation. Instead of a divine battleground, Genesis 1 tells us that “the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep” (Gn. 1.2), and out of this nothingness, God creates. “[I]t is the void that alone remains and that stands as the sole power over against God” (Ratzinger 13), and from this void, God creates the world and all of her creatures, and finds them all good. The God of Genesis 1 is a fig-

6. The works of Daniel Castillo and Elizabeth Johnson contain similar appeals to considering biblical context (Castillo, 101, Johnson, *Ask the Beasts* 262).

7. This quote is from the translation of the *Enuma Elish* found at www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm.

ure of love, not creating objects to serve God's own will, but creating subjects in relationship with God. God created "every living and moving creature, which the waters brought forth," and "made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds" (Gn. 1.12,14), and God finds them all good. Already we can see intimate relationships between different elements of creation; living creatures are brought forth from the earth and water. As Pope Francis reminds us, "The laws found in the Bible dwell on relationships, not only among individuals but also with other living beings" (68). God draws existence out of a void and casts aside nothingness, so that all that is is brought forth from other things that are. Even human beings, to whom God gives "dominion," must depend on the "herb bearing seed upon the earth, and all trees that have in themselves seed of their own, to be [our] meat" (Gn. 1.29). Human beings exist as an intimate part of the reciprocal relationships inherent in all of creation.

It is with this framework of creaturely relationships in mind that we approach the often-exploited command to "have dominion over" creation and "fill the earth, and subdue it" (Gn. 1.28-19). As we have already explored the deeply problematic interpretation of Gn. 1.28-29, we turn now to a second interpretation, one that has touted itself as more "eco-friendly." The stewardship model claims that human beings, created in God's image, rule over earth as God rules over us. We are, in a word, stewards, called to act on the earth in God's place. Daniel Castillo argues for what he calls "qualified anthropocentrism," which aligns very closely to this stewardship model. Castillo likens our relationship with the rest of creation to that of a shepherd over a flock: our "dominion" has to do with "securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of each to full fruition" (69-70). In this way, we are called to rule through the service that we render to the rest of creation. Castillo argues that Jesus is the perfect model of this: "The one who rules is the one who serves" (70). Problems arise, however, when human beings become "[d]riven by a desire

to dominate rather than serve” (138). In ignoring our responsibility to serve the world, and instead dominating and exploiting it for our own ends, we fail to live according to our true calling as shepherds of the earthly flock. Pope Francis echoes this idea in *Laudato Si'*. While he says, “The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us,” and thus explicitly refutes Aquinas’s claim to the reverse, Francis continues, “Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator” (83). We see here that anthropocentrism lingers, even in the text that has been touted as the most radical call to care for creation the Catholic church has seen in generations. Although *Laudato Si'* points out our interconnectedness with the rest of creation, we must be aware that even Pope Francis does not entirely cut ties with the hierarchical framework championed by Aquinas.

Castillo’s claim that we are called to serve rather than dominate supports the framework of relationship built in Genesis 1, but the image of the sole shepherd guiding the flock glosses over a key aspect of subject-subject relationships: the inherent reciprocity. Domination is necessarily a one-sided relationship, but servitude allows for the mutual service of all parties. Dependent as we are on other creatures for sustenance, shelter, etc., it is clear that other creatures serve us as well, in their own right and in their own ways that are “other” than ours. Human beings exist within, and not above, the web of relationships that Genesis 1 paints. Rather than taking it upon ourselves to “secure the well-being of every other creature,” we must recognize ourselves as fellow creatures who are also served by others. According to Elizabeth Johnson,

Even at its best, [the stewardship model] envisions human beings independent from the rest of creation and external to its functioning. Lacking a deep ecological sensibility, it establishes a vertical top-down relationship, giving human beings responsible mastery over other creatures but not roles alongside them

or open to their giving. The one-sidedness of the relationship makes the natural world a passive recipient of our management (*Ask the Beasts* 266).

As has already been discussed, creatures such as trees exist independent of human beings and human rationality, while we remain tied to them in a very literal sense. Without their photosynthesis, we would slowly asphyxiate. Without us breathing, trees would just go on making oxygen! This humbling fact reminds us that we, too, are creatures vulnerable to forces outside of our control. If we were to acknowledge our similarity to, and dependence upon, the rest of creation, it would be easier for us to see other creatures as fellow subjects, and fellow servants of each other and of God.

Biblical Context: Creation Narratives in Job and Psalms

In keeping with the principle that we established when we returned to Genesis, namely that no book in the Bible should be regarded as a complete narrative in and of itself, I now present a brief analysis of two other Old Testament creation narratives – the Books of Job and Psalms – in the hopes that the context of these other books will continue to illuminate the God-given relationships between humanity and the rest of creation. We begin with chapters 38-41 of the Book of Job.

In anguish over all that he has lost in the preceding chapters, Job accuses God of unjust punishment of the innocent. He contends that he has done nothing to provoke the wrath of God such as he is experiencing now. Then God answers him “out of a whirlwind” (Job 38.1), and gives another account of the creation narrative. According to Johnson, these four chapters constitute “the longest piece of writing on the natural world in the Bible” (*Ask the Beasts* 269). God walks Job almost step by step through Genesis 1, demanding, “Where wast thou when I laid up the foundations of the earth...when the morning

stars praised me together... Who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth as issuing out of the womb?" (Job 4.8). This recounting of creation contains more descriptive detail than the Genesis tale, but it follows the same progression, beginning with the earth, sky, and sea and ending with the beasts who walk on land. The biggest difference between the Genesis text and the Book of Job is that human beings (and their dominion) are entirely absent from the latter. "Instead of being placed at the apex of creation, Job is led to see divine activity in the awesome, independent working of the natural world over which he has no mastery, not only technologically but also theologically" (Johnson, *Ask the Beasts* 271-272). The activity and goodness of God continues to overflow in the world without humanity. After this four-chapter-long monologue ascribed to God, Job "reprehend[s him]self" and does "penance in dust and ashes" (Job 42.6), recognizing the splendor and glory of the world that God has laid out for him, and his own inability to comprehend it. The Book of Job lays out a creation narrative that, although mirroring the structure of Genesis 1, puts human beings in a position to wonder, open-mouthed, at the world of which they are a part. "Where were you?" the Creator asks, and Job humbly acknowledges and accepts his created nature.

Psalm 103⁸ contains yet another creation narrative, which also conspicuously lacks a command for human dominion. The psalmist praises God for the diversity and extravagance of God's creation, and gives a very different account of creation than Genesis 1 or Job 38-42. Like the other narratives, this psalm begins with abiotic creation, praising the Creator of the sky and water, but then the psalmist asks, "Who makest thy angels spirits: and thy ministers a burning fire" (Ps. 103.4). Psalm 103 is clearly not building a hierarchy that progresses from the lowest levels of creation to the highest; angels, whom Aquinas deems higher intellectual beings than humans, appear just after the sky and the sea. The psalmist takes a more holistic approach to

8. I follow the Vulgate numeration of the Psalms, using the Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition.

creation, and paints miniature pictures that are more recognizable in our own experience of the world because they show many different creatures interacting with each other. Ps. 103.10-13 depicts a stream running through a valley, with “beasts of the field” drinking from the stream and “birds of the air” flying over it. Later, God appoints “darkness, and it is night: in it shall the beasts of the woods go about,” but when the “sun ariseth, . . . they shall lie down in their dens” (Ps. 103.20-22). These snapshots of the natural world betray no ordering of creation except around God as their Creator; the world becomes a theocentric circle, rather than an anthropocentric pyramid. Human beings appear in Ps. 103.23, but with no more emphasis placed on the human’s “work” and “labor” than on the “roaring” of the lions two verses before. Psalm 103 depicts “an interwoven assembly of everything from sky, sea, and land, each one part of a grateful community of creation praising God” (Johnson, *Ask the Beasts* 276). While human beings contribute a voice to sing God’s praises, we are far from forming the whole choir. The emphasis here is on the relationships amongst God’s creatures, and between the creatures and their Creator.

The image of a choir of creation singing God’s praises suggests yet another way in which other creatures can act independently of human beings: they worship God through their existence and activity. The psalmist of Psalm 103 sees God in every mundane earthly action described, from rain falling from the sky to sparrows making their nests (Ps. 103.13,17). Elizabeth Johnson notes that “[b]y virtue of their being created, of being held in existence by the loving power of the Creator Spirit, all beings give glory to God simply by being themselves” (*Ask the Beasts* 276). Johnson proposes that existence itself is a form of worship. The ability to reason does not give human beings a leg up on any other creatures. Existence itself, which we share with every other creature, is enough to “extol the excellence of [our] Maker” (*Ask the Beasts* 276), and as a form of worship, existence al-

lows all creatures to come to know God.

Lest a Thomistic skeptic claim that human beings both exist and contain the ability to reason, thus giving us an additional method to learn about God than merely living, I suggest that we return to McFague's concept of "otherness." Being rational creatures, we assume that we can and should use our reason to learn about God. This forms the backbone of Aquinas's entire body of theological writings, as he uses logic and reason to think about who God is, and who we are in relation to God. This is all well and good, but if we approach other creatures with an attitude of respect and humility, if we approach them as subjects rather than objects, we preserve the possibility that other creatures come to know and worship God in other ways, perhaps ways that we cannot even conceive of. If we believe that a lion cannot understand human reasonings about God, who is to say that humans would understand a lion's worship of his Creator? Or a salamander's? Or a tree's? Approaching creatures as subjects forces us to decenter the human narrative and remain open to the possibility that there are other forms of worship, and other ways to come to know God. Human reason is a powerful tool, but it needs human humility to recognize the utterly "other" than itself, not as its inferior, but as a "Thou" with its own harmonies to add to the earthly symphony of praise.

Part III: Conclusion

Replacing Aquinas's anthropocentric hierarchy with Johnson's theocentric circle of creation establishes a theological basis for human humility in the midst of a created world. We no longer dominate the earth and exploit her and her creatures for our own gain, and neither do we sit at the top of a pyramid and extend our hands down to the lowliest creatures. We extend our hands, but we extend them outwards, across the web of relationships held together by God at its

center. This requires us to recognize the “otherness” of the rest of creation, and admit that each individual creature resides in the palm of God’s hand. We must abandon our anthropocentric notion that reason alone approaches knowledge of God, and learn to serve *and be served by* the overflowing abundance of God’s creation. In the midst of our current ecological crisis, this has never been more critical. Only through the recognition of reciprocal relationships amongst a community of subjects can we truly experience the ecological conversion that Pope Francis called for five years ago.

I conclude by returning to the appeal made by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, that Genesis (or any biblical book) cannot be interpreted in and of itself, or even within the framework solely of the Old Testament. As Christians, we must interpret Genesis as ever pointing towards Christ in the New Testament. In the Gospels, we find a radical example of how to serve and be served by the “other” in the person of Jesus Christ. In John 13, we see Jesus humbling himself by washing the feet of his disciples. He then instructs them, “If then I being your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (Jn. 13.14). Again and again, Jesus’s life calls Christians to serve the “other,” even, and perhaps especially, those considered lowly. Jesus also, however, allows himself to be served, even, and perhaps especially, by those considered lowly. In Luke 7:37-50, we get an account of “a woman that was in the city, a sinner” washing Jesus’s feet with her tears, and drying them with her hair (Lk. 3.37-38). Then Jesus says, “Many sins are forgiven her, because she hath loved much” (Lk. 3.47). The person of Jesus fulfills the reciprocal relationships in the Old Testament creation narratives because he embodies both the radical call to serve and the humility to allow oneself to be served by another. Far from espousing domination over and exploitation of the earth, as Lynn White Jr. suggests based on his interpretation of Genesis 1, the Christian religion in its entirety provides a framework from which we can recognize others in love, and

serve and be served by God's creation.

In this paper, I have argued that Christians are called to recognize other creatures as fellow subjects of God's love. It is my sincerest hope that, humbled by this recognition, we begin to see ourselves as within, and not above, the world. The wellbeing of the earth depends upon it.

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