

Creation in the Development of the Human Person according to Irenaeus

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It has become somewhat commonplace in addressing the question “how shall we relate to the Earth?” to say that we ought to avoid either extremes toward deification of nature or exploitation of it. Likewise, in the second century ancient world, polytheistic credulity continued to make sway in popular culture on the one hand,¹ and the Gnostic heresiarchs underplayed the material world on the other. It is in this cultural milieu that Irenaeus offers a Christian worldview of creation. Inasmuch as he understands the divine intent for humankind before the Adamic fall, but also in full view with respect to the abusive and exploitative tendencies of humans thereafter, his view of creation remains christocentric, and only secondarily anthropocentric. This is primarily because the nature of the economy of salvation is centered upon the recapitulating work and person of the incarnate Christ, who, as the second Adam, rectifies what corruption and damage the whole creation incurred through Adamic transgression, and finally restores divine purposes to consummate fruition for all of creation along with humanity. This economy, then, finds the process of human maturation as the immediate goal, but this is necessarily measured against the original divine intent embodied by Christ who came as the human infant. Adam was not made perfect from the beginning, although he was destined for perfection.² In this

1. Plutarch continued to write against superstition in the late first century against the spirit of credulity (see Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians: In the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 64. All English text from *Adversus Haereses* (hereafter, *AH*) will be taken from Reverend Alexander Roberts, ed., *THE ANTE-NICENE FATHERS: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 Volume I - The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) unless noted otherwise.

2. Irenaeus understands the mandate “increase and multiply” in Gen 1:28 to the increasing abundance of divine bestowal on man over time. See *AH* 4.11.1-2 [SC 100:496-502].

brief essay I propose to show that, according to Irenaeus, all creation resources are to be wisely cultivated and used as instruments for the maturation of the human persons made whole in Christ as regenerate and growing to perfection. This process involves creation resources particularly in at least five areas as emphasized by the bishop: pedagogy, social order, regeneration, nourishment and stewardship. I shall identify some key representative passages to substantiate and elucidate the implicated relationship to creation resources in the Irenaean corpus, shedding light that each of these emphases distinctively applies, adapts, and thus prepares humanity to advance toward perfection.

Creation Provides the Means of Spiritual Pedagogy of the Hidden Mysteries

Creation is one such pedagogical tool maturing us by helping us to appreciate the wisdom of its Author. In a delightfully instructive moment, Irenaeus explains the need for right reason to fathom the purposes and structural relationships behind the intricacies embedded in creation:

[W]ith great wisdom and diligence, all things have clearly been made by God, fitted and prepared [for their special purposes] . . . and men ought not to connect those things with the number thirty, but to harmonize them with what actually exists, or with right reason. . . . But since created things are various and numerous, they are indeed well fitted and adapted to the whole creation; yet, when viewed individually, are mutually opposite and inharmonious, just as the sound of the lyre, which consists of many and opposite notes, gives rise to one unbroken melody, through means of the interval which separates each one from the others. The lover of truth therefore ought not to be deceived by the interval between each note, nor should he imagine that one was due to one artist and author, and another to another, nor that one person fitted the treble, another the bass, and yet another the tenor strings; but he should hold that one and the same person [formed the whole], so as to prove the judgment, goodness, and skill exhibited in the whole work and [specimen of] wisdom. Those, too, who listen to the melody, ought to praise and extol the artist, to admire the tension of some notes, to attend to the softness of others, to catch the sound of others between both these extremes, and to consider the special character of others, so as to inquire at what each one aims, and what is the cause of their variety, never failing to apply our rule, neither giving up the [one] artist, nor casting off faith in the one God who formed all things, nor blaspheming our Creator.³

3. *AH* 2.25.1.

The beauty of rhythm and melody of this structure and interconnected order of things is grasped by right reason, which Irenaeus intimates as humble recognition of the Creator, never with the presumption to rise above and beyond him. Nevertheless, Irenaeus encourages right reason and reflection to purpose “proper order of knowledge.”

In a similar vein, using various objects of creation as metaphor and effective instrument of spiritual pedagogy is commonplace in the Scriptures, and Irenaeus exploits them fully in reference to God’s relationship to humanity. In a passage which leads up to the “symphony of salvation,” Irenaeus illustrates from creation to convey a truth that unlike humanity, God is never needy.

In the beginning, therefore, did God form Adam, not as if He stood in need of man, but that He might have someone upon whom to confer His benefits . . . For to follow the Savior is to be a partaker of salvation, and to follow light is to receive light. But those who are in light do not themselves illumine the light, but are illumined and revealed by it: they do certainly contribute nothing to it, but, receiving the benefit, they are illumined by the light. Thus, also, service rendered to God does indeed profit God nothing, nor has God need of human obedience; but He grants to those who follow and serve Him life and incorruption and eternal glory, bestowing benefit upon those who serve Him, because they do serve Him, and on His followers, because they do follow Him; but does not receive any benefit from them: for He is rich, perfect, and in need of nothing.⁴

When we stand in the sunlight we benefit from receiving the rays and shine forth the light, but in no way do we add anything to the sun. Likewise, Irenaeus argues that God is never needful of us although we receive life and incorruption from him. The act of creating Adam and seeking obedience from humans, therefore, were purely determined by his goodness to bestow benefits of salvation and immortality to them.

Most significantly, Irenaeus notes that this manner of instruction, namely, taking physical objects from creation to illustrate hidden prophetic mysteries, had been used by God throughout the period of the old and new covenants.

He instructed the people, who were prone to turn to idols, instructing them by repeated appeals to persevere and to serve God, calling them to the things of primary importance by means of those which were secondary; that is, to things that are real, by means of those that are typical; and by things temporal, to eternal; and by the carnal to the spiritual; and by the earthly to the heavenly; as was also said to Moses, “Thou shalt make all things after the pattern of those things which thou sawest in the

4. *AH* 4.14.1 [SC 100:538, 540].

mount.” For during forty days He was learning to keep in his memory the words of God, and the celestial patterns, and the spiritual images, and the types of things to come; as also Paul says: “For they drank of the rock which followed them: and the rock was Christ.”⁵

Prophets and apostles made use of various objects from nature or things refashioned as symbols pointing to spiritual, eternal, and prophetic truths necessary for our spiritual welfare and edification. In this vein, of paramount importance is the recapitulative significance of a tree or wood as a type. Throughout the Scriptures this wood continued to speak, as it were, in Isaac taking up the wood (Gen 22:6; *AH* 4.5.4), in Elisha’s throwing a piece of wood into the water to make the axe head float (2 Kgs 6:6; *AH* 5.12.3) and so forth. Finally, as much as the first Adam disobeyed “by occasion of a tree” so the second Adam obeyed “upon a tree” (*AH* 5.16.3).

Hierarchy and Fear in Creation Impedes Corrosion of Society

Sociality and hierarchy among creatures are interdependent entities in the created order. When Adam was created, Irenaeus asserts that “both according to the inspiration [i.e., God’s breath of life] and according to the formation, man was like (ὅμοιος) God,” according to which Adam was “free (ἐλεύθερος) and master of himself (αὐτεξούσιος) . . . in order that he should rule over everything upon earth.”⁶ Moreover, this likeness to God in Adam made it possible for God to “walk and talk with the man prefiguring (τροτυπόω) the future, which would come to pass, that He would dwell with him and speak with him, and would be with mankind, teaching them righteousness.”⁷ This means that before the transgression, Adam’s likeness to God allowed him not only unhindered fellowship with God, but allowed him to optimally exercise the entrusted lordship over everything upon earth according to the measure proper to his maturity. Indeed, Irenaeus tells us that this likeness would be restored by Christ in the future so that righteousness would be taught to mankind in the context of intimate relationship with Christ. But, in the meantime, humanity has violated the divine mandate and something had to contain the proliferation of evil in society. Irenaeus writes:

5. *AH* 4.14.3 [SC 100:546-549].

6. *Epid.* 11; St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 1997), 47.

7. *Epid.* 12; St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 1997), 47.

For since man, by departing from God, reached such a pitch of fury as even to look upon his brother as his enemy, and engaged without fear in every kind of restless conduct, and murder, and avarice; God imposed upon mankind the fear of man, as they did not acknowledge the fear of God, in order that, being subjected to the authority of men, and kept under restraint by their laws, they might attain to some degree of justice, and exercise mutual forbearance through dread of the sword suspended full in their view, as the apostle says: "For he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, the avenger for wrath upon him who does evil."⁸

Pre-lapsed Adam was immature in every way, and perhaps sociality with other creatures was the most vulnerable point. For this reason it seems reasonable that God has to impose "fear of man" into his social structure as the wise and only viable means to curtail evil and violence in the face of humanity's total self-annihilation. Irenaeus remarks: "The Word of God, however, the Maker of all things, conquering him by means of human nature, and showing him to be an apostate, has, on the contrary, put him under the power of man. For He says, 'Behold, I confer upon you the power of treading upon serpents and scorpions, and upon all the power of the enemy,' in order that, as he obtained dominion over man by apostasy, so again his apostasy might be deprived of power by means of man turning back again to God."⁹

The interdependence of hierarchy and sociality is manifest. The cosmos was disordered by the enemy's apostasy that involved humanity's estrangement from God, and so proper authority must be restored in order to rectify sociality between God and humanity. The grace of healing human sociality begins when Christ as man reclaims his authority over all creation by repossessing the dominion taken by the enemy and confers it to his followers.

Created Humanity Prepares for Regeneration

Irenaeus notes that the healing of the blind man in the Fourth Gospel differs from Christ's healing of other infirmities because of sin. All others caused by disobedience were healed by means of a word such as "Behold, thou art made whole, sin no more," (John 5:14; KJV) but the man born blind received sight by an outward act, actually using the dust of the ground.

8. *AH* 5.24.2 [SC 153:298-300].

9. *AH* 5.24.4 [SC 153:306].

Doing this not without a purpose, or because it so happened, but that He might show forth the hand of God, that which at the beginning had molded man . . . also the Lord spat on the ground and made clay, and smeared it upon the eyes, pointing out the original fashioning of man, how it was effected, and manifesting the hand of God to those who can understand by what hand man was formed out of the dust . . . in order that we might not be seeking out another hand by which man was fashioned, nor another Father; knowing that this hand of God which formed us at the beginning, and which does form us in the womb, has in the last times sought us out who were lost, winning back His own, and taking up the lost sheep upon His shoulders, and with joy restoring it to the fold of life.¹⁰

What is noteworthy here, asserts Irenaeus, is not only that humanity was made reminiscent of Genesis 2 in that the healer's hand is really the same hand that fashioned man at first, but that this healing incident portrays the Word as the Shepherd who had redemption in mind from the beginning of creation, and that he came seeking the lost to give him eternal life by restoring his sight. For this reason, Irenaeus writes: "And inasmuch as man, with respect to that formation which, was after Adam, having fallen into transgression, needed the laver of regeneration (τοῦ λουτροῦ τῆς παλιγγενεσίας) said to him . . . 'Go to Siloam, and wash' thus restoring to him both his perfect confirmation, and that regeneration which takes place by means of the laver . . . that he might both know Him who had fashioned him, and that man might learn to know Him who has conferred upon him life."¹¹ While the restoration of the body from the elements of creation is the apparent story, Irenaeus clearly draws the parallel between the physical salvation and the spiritual one. In this way the human person may understand that the Word the Creator intended her to progress toward maturity, preparing her to know the Word the Redeemer through spiritual regeneration.

Creation Provides Nourishment Integral to Human Perfection

God "nourishes us by means of the creation" obviously as food for our physical sustenance, growth, and energy.¹² More importantly, this was a polemic against Gnostic thinkers who had taught that creation of matter was caused by a "defect" and even resulted in chaos in the universe.¹³ But Irenaeus brings forth the argument that the creator who

10. *AH* 5.15.2 [SC 153:204-206].

11. *AH* 5.15.3 [SC 153:208-210]; emphasis mine.

12. *AH* 3.24.1 [SC 211:476].

13. See Paula Fredriksen, "Hysteria and the Gnostic Myths of Creation,"

fashioned Adam and provided food from material creation in order to sustain the body is the same Father we read in the Gospels providing material blessings through the Son.

For although the Lord had the power to supply wine to those feasting, independently of any created substance, and to fill with food those who were hungry, He did not adopt this course; but, taking the loaves which the earth had produced, and giving thanks, and on the other occasion making water wine, He satisfied those who were reclining at table, and gave drink to those who had been invited to the marriage; showing that the God who made the earth, and commanded it to bring forth fruit, who established the waters, and brought forth the fountains, was He who in these last times bestowed upon mankind, by His Son, the blessing of food and the favor of drink: the Incomprehensible acting thus by means of the comprehensible, and the Invisible by the visible; since there is none beyond Him, but He exists in the bosom of the Father.¹⁴

Jesus could make wine apart from the already existing substance, namely water. Likewise, he simply multiplied the loaves and the fish that were already there, although he was more than capable to create bread from “thin air” as it were, which was the case with the provision of manna. But the text purports to assert, Irenaeus argues, the oneness of the demiurge in Genesis with the Father of Jesus in the Gospels.

The second polemic against the Gnostics is the explicit affirmation of body as materiality of Irenaeus anthropology.¹⁵ Just as the likeness to God is not possible without the spirit, Irenaeus stresses that the body is indispensable to constitute the perfect human nature. In another place he says: “Now the soul and the spirit are certainly a part of the man, but certainly not the man; for the perfect man consists in the commingling and the union of the soul receiving the spirit of the Father, and the

Vigiliae Christianae 33 (1979): 287-90. Irenaeus summarizes the various Gnostic interpretation of “the formation of creation [as] either in ignorance, or passion, or in defect” (AH 2.4.2). Furthermore, he reports that the Gnostics of various traditions follow Simon Magus who asserted that even the Maker of this world himself was the product of a defect (AH 2.9.2). This idea of “defect” as the source is also verified explicitly in a Nag Hammadi document: “the matter of chaos, which had been expelled like an aborted fetus . . . had resulted from [Pistis’s] defect . . . [and] there appeared for the first time a ruler, out of the waters . . . ‘yalda baoth’” (Orig. World 99.24-100.14).

14. AH 3.11.5 [SC 211:148].

15. Simon Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism*, trans. Carol Harrison (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 153, points out the subtlety of Valentinus’s docetism in that “he implies in fragment 3 that the digestion of food did not take place in Jesus’ body in the same way as in other men.”

admixture of that fleshly nature which was molded after the image of God.”¹⁶

As we had seen in the first section, the status of physical objects does not merely stop at being visible in a given time, but extends toward fulfillment in the future with still more significant value. More importantly, Irenaeus’s christological interpretation would allow us to see a higher, more comprehensive purpose behind creation’s role in providing food for our nurture. The physical nourishment for human material plasma points further to the Word and the Spirit as nourishment for perfect maturity. This is implicit in his response to the broader question of why man was not created perfect from the beginning. Irenaeus writes:

He might easily have come to us in His immortal glory, but in that case we could never have endured (βαστάζω) the greatness of the glory; and therefore it was that He, who was the perfect bread of the Father, offered Himself to us as milk, because we were as infants. He did this when He appeared as a man, that we, being nourished, as it were, from the breast of His flesh, and having, by such a course of milk nourishment, become accustomed to eat and drink the Word of God, may be able also to contain in ourselves the Bread of immortality, which is the Spirit of the Father.¹⁷

Christ accommodated himself to us in assuming the body because we were infants in need of growth before we could receive the Spirit. The Pauline metaphor on babes only fit for milk is given because our reception of the incarnate Christ is the ultimate aim. When this passage is harmonized with our earlier text on what constitutes the perfectly mature human person, Irenaeus implies that insofar as we came physically and spiritually immature in need of elementary nourishment in both realms, physical nourishment and feeding on Christ and the Spirit are both essential and necessary for human development to perfection.

16. AH 5.6.1 [SC 153:78]. Citing 1 Thess 5:23, Irenaeus views human perfection as being proper to the body, the soul, and the spirit.

17. AH 4.38.1 [SC 100:946-948]. Ysabel de Andia, *Homo Vivens. Incompatibilité et divinisation de l’homme selon Irénée de Lyon* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1986), rightly claims that the process of deification and the economy from creation are parallel; but this broad conception of human deification must also be qualified with a narrower usage in Irenaeus according to whom deification or receiving immortality occurs only after becoming “accustomed” to receiving the Spirit. See the above text and esp. AH 3.19.1.

Stewardship of Creation Is Sustained by Worship

Proper stewardship ensues from a proper knowledge about authority and thereby a humble disposition proper to it. First, it must be grounded in our firm knowledge of who really rules over all creation. In the second temptation account Jesus is offered the kingdoms of this world as a return for worshipping the devil who promises that “all these things are delivered unto me, and to whomsoever I will I give them.”¹⁸ Creation, however, is not subjected to the devil’s power; indeed God is the one who is sovereign over even a sparrow whether it should fall to the ground. He expounds on what attitudes of stewardship may be inferred from this:

When placed in the exalted position of every grace (ὑφεί οὐτως παντοδαιμοῦ χαρίσματος) that can be received, we should not, either by trusting to works of righteousness, or when adorned with super-eminent gifts of ministration, by any means be lifted up with pride, nor should we tempt God, but should feel humility in all things, and have ready to hand this saying, “Thou shall not tempt the Lord thy God.” As also the apostle taught, saying, “Minding not high things, but consenting to things of low estate; “that we should neither be ensnared with riches, nor mundane glory, nor present fancy; but should know that we must “worship the Lord thy God, and serve Him alone,” and give no heed to him who falsely promised things not his own, when he said, “All these will I give thee, if, falling down, thou wilt worship me.”¹⁹

Irenaeus takes the opportunity here to insert a spiritual lesson that our desire to possess absolute power over creation would be symptomatic of having been “lifted up in pride” that would eventually blind us to the devil’s lie, which, by the way, also “proceeds from him when puffed up with pride.”²⁰ Instead, we are given the example of Christ’s humility and his teaching to “worship the Lord thy God, and serve Him alone” (see Luke 4:8). Irenaeus would not hesitate to prescribe worshipping God alone as the sure antidote against the temptation of this inordinate desire and pride to usurp God’s absolute authority over creation.

Conclusion

Against the Gnostic theories of demiurge and his mischief with matter, Irenaeus makes unequivocally clear that God in his providence ordained creation for the sake of the human person. The design of creation as seen from various perspectives is chiefly for the human per-

18. *AH* 5.22.2 [SC 153:284].

19. *AH* 5.22.2 [SC 153:282-284].

20. *AH* 5.22.2 [SC 153:284].

son's fully-orbed development into perfection, on the ground that he is made in the image of the incarnate Son. This development is none other than the progressive unfolding of the economy of salvation that affirms the integrity of the tri-partite constitution of the human person. Therefore, the physical nourishment, the instruction for the mind, and spiritual regeneration must come into play and be sustained by a life of proper worship, all on the basis of Christ's recapitulating work. Such is the nature of salvation proper to the nature of the human person; and according to Irenaeus, the rest of creation suitably serves to bring it to perfection.

In addition, it is noteworthy that in all of these emphases, Irenaeus's prescription of how creation must be cared for does not seem to echo some of our contemporary environmentalist voices that all of nature must be kept and preserved in a pristine condition. Neither does he suggest that creation may be exploited without check or abused at will in the hands of human beings. Rather, fallen humans in need of regeneration having a propensity for evil must be curbed with a healthy measure of fear, even as foreseen by divine wisdom in employing the instrumentality of social hierarchical structure.

The role of creation is to serve the development of humankind toward regeneration and perfection. This means that the second-century thinker perceives that three things occur for the original design and divine order of things to be best served. First, it entails the incarnate Person's initial healing of individual human persons from their flawed condition to become regenerate through "the spirit of the Father." Second, all of the rest of creation may be used as pedagogic and restricting influences in preparing human persons to this union in Christ. And lastly, those who have already begun their journey by receiving the "Bread of Life" do best in committing themselves to a stewardship of developing the resources for these ends "with great wisdom and diligence" and humility as worship to God. To the extent that creation could be cared for and harnessed to nourish the *whole* person, faithful stewards cultivating with all creativity and zeal, images Christ who recycles mud to bring healing to corruption-stricken humanity, while being humbly mindful of his role though "adorned with super-eminent gifts" in service.