

A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue, ed. by Garnett Roper and J. Richard Middleton (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 79-95.

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Islands in the Sun *Overtures to a Caribbean Creation Theology*

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THE CARIBBEAN IS A region of tremendous natural beauty. It is the sort of beauty that leads Harry Belafonte to poetically address his ideal (though unnamed) homeland (“Oh, island in the sun”) and to promise that, “all my days I will sing in praise/ of your forest, waters, your shining sand.”¹ Yet for all its undeniable natural beauty, the Caribbean is a region that is increasingly marred by pollution (for example, unsafe levels of toxins in fish in Kingston Harbour) and deforestation (for example, in Haiti, resulting in catastrophic mudslides in Gonaïves during heavy rains). So, the “forest, waters, [and] shining sand” of the pristine Caribbean are becoming more and more compromised by the human footprint. And this does not yet address the impact of natural disasters (over which humans have no control) like Hurricanes Gilbert and Andrew in 1988 and 1992, respectively, or the devastating earthquake in Port-au-Prince in 2010.

The indelible human footprint on the natural beauty of the Caribbean (our impact on the earth), combined with horrendous natural disasters (the

1. Although Belafonte popularized “Island in the Sun,” the lyrics were written by Irving Burgie (also known as Lord Burgess).

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earth's impact on us), gives the lie to any romantic vision of what we moderns have come to know as "nature" (the realm of the non-human); but it also calls into question the sort of popular piety we find in the Caribbean church that imagines a separation between human "salvation" (narrowly conceived) and our earthly environment. Paradoxically, among many Christians, in the Caribbean and elsewhere, we find a decidedly otherworldly, and often individualistic view of "salvation" as the saving of souls from a fiery judgment to spend an eternity with God in an ethereal heaven, combined with a romantic view of nature as a special place to encounter God—witness the photographs on devotional greeting cards and posters, and even the slides projected behind worship lyrics in some of our churches. Yet little if no thought is typically given to the possible connection—or, better, to the disconnect—between an otherworldly salvation and a romanticized nature.

There is no otherworldly salvation in "Islands in the Sun." What we find, rather, is an idyllic picture of nature joined to a naïve, almost primitive view of human society. Thus Belafonte sings, in the first verse, of "my island in the sun/ where my people have toiled since time begun." Apart from the hyperbolic lack of historical precision, since no people (not even the Amerindian Tainos and Caribs) have lived in the Caribbean from the beginning of time, the remainder of the song continues this romantic idealization of toil, whether it is the woman he sees "on bended knee/ cutting cane for her family," or the man he observes "at the water-side/ casting nets at the surging tide," or even the singer himself "lift[ing] my heavy load to the sky."

The juxtaposition of three verses, each mentioning physical toil or labor, with a fourth verse that fondly remembers drumming and Carnival, suggests that the "calypso songs philosophical" the singer mentions might function not to critique the social order, as much calypso has historically done, but as "philosophical" acceptance of the status quo. But perhaps it is not so much philosophical acceptance of the status quo as much as a positive *ignoring* of historical realities, as when the song's chorus states that this island in the sun was "willed to me by my father's hand." What world is or was the singer (or songwriter) living in, where the Caribbean is the natural inheritance of persons of African descent, without the intervention of European colonial powers? One searches this 1957 song in vain for any reference to the historical fact of colonialism or the history of European chattel slavery and later indentured labor, all of which decisively shaped Caribbean societies (these islands in the sun).

And what are we to say of the present economic and social disparities in the Caribbean, fueled by the ideology and institutions of a global culture of consumerism? It is clear that the perspective of the song could not begin to address these contemporary issues.

SUSPICION OF CREATION THEOLOGY

Caribbean theologians are right to express suspicions about any point of view that is blind to the reality of social inequities, especially if this blindness is combined with a romantic view of nature. When theologians and ethicists attempt to address the pressing needs of society, they often (understandably) focus on matters of human justice and injustice, to the exclusion of significant reflection on the natural environment in which people find themselves. There are certainly existential or pragmatic reasons underlying this suspicion of *creation* as a theme for theological reflection. Given the pressing human needs that face Caribbean people every day, it might seem that a theology of creation would take our focus off what is undeniably of prime importance.

But there is also a historical reason for the suspicion of creation as a theological topic. Theology as an academic discipline, both in the Caribbean and throughout the world, has been decisively shaped by a western, Eurocentric habit of mind that distinguishes radically between *history* (people) and *nature* (the non-human). This distinction has its roots in the Renaissance split between freedom and nature, where thinkers like Pico della Mirandola (in his famous *Oration and the Dignity of Man*) began to idealize human beings as transcending the determined and law-bound natural world, and it was fundamental to the rise of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, epitomized in Francis Bacon's quest for the seduction and conquest of nature by science (which illustrates well Susan Griffin's contention that women and nature have been identified in western thinking).²

A theological version of the nature/freedom conceptual framework was given special momentum in the early twentieth century by Karl Barth, who famously distinguished immanent *religion* from transcendent *revelation*. To the former, explained Barth, God has pronounced a decisive *Nein!*³

While Barth himself was opposed to the hubris of modern western humanism, the Barthian distinction between religion and revelation nevertheless contributed to a version of the history/nature distinction found in the Biblical Theology Movement, associated with Neo-orthodox theologians like G. Ernest Wright. In the 1960s this movement tried to preserve the

2. Pico, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* 7–8; Griffin, *Woman and Nature*.

3. *Nein!* (No!) was the title of Barth's famous response to Emil Brunner's 1934 work entitled *Nature and Grace*, which itself interacted with Barth's earlier work. Brunner had proposed the validity of a creation theology (using the term "natural theology," though without the rationalism assumed by the classical tradition of that name). Both Brunner's proposal and Barth's response are published together in *Natural Theology*.

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uniqueness of Old Testament revelation by contrasting debased Canaanite cyclical *nature* religion with the higher monotheistic, linear, *historical* faith of the Bible.⁴ A version of this framework surfaces in the early works of Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad, specifically in his claim that creation theology was a borrowing from Israel's pagan neighbors, and in his refusal to allow that creation was integrally connected to Israel's salvation history, or *Heilsgeschichte*.⁵ The history/nature dichotomy (without the overlaid value distinction) even shows up in Claus Westermann's famous bifurcation between *salvation*, which is a matter of historical deliverance, and *blessing*, which is associated with matters like the birth of children and the fertility of flocks and land⁶—a bifurcation that simply cannot be sustained on exegetical grounds, since salvation in the Bible involves both deliverance from what impedes God's purposes and restoration to flourishing.⁷

One particularly important version of the history/nature dichotomy is found in the prolific writings of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, who (especially in his early works) programmatically claimed that creation faith served to justify the oppressive status quo both in Israel and its neighbors—the legitimation of order, he called it—while salvation/exodus faith challenged the unjust ordering of the world in the name of a free and transcendent God.⁸

This complex theological inheritance may well constrain theologians either to prioritize a concern for human flourishing over a concern for the earth, or to view creation theology with outright suspicion. But this anthropocentric focus, which separates human well-being from concern about the earth, is an artificial polarization, since people only exist, live, and work *somewhere*; that is, any socio-cultural analysis would show that people both

4. Wright, "How Did Early Israel Differ from Her Neighbors?" and *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*. See Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 186–188, for a discussion of the historical grounds why this distinction between Israel and the nations cannot be sustained.

5. See von Rad, "Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation," 55–61; and idem, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:137–39. Thankfully von Rad later came to an appreciation of the role of creation theology in the Old Testament, evident in his mature work *Wisdom in Israel*.

6. Westerman, *Blessing in the Bible and in the Life of the Church*, 1–14; idem, *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?*, 28, 44.

7. See Middleton and Gorman, "Salvation," 45–46.

8. Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 39; "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel"; "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation"; and *Israel's Praise*, 101–121. I have challenged Brueggemann's interpretation of creation theology in Middleton, "Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative?"

impact and are impacted by their environment. It is an artificial polarization from a biblical point of view as well, since humans are consistently understood in the Scriptures as part of the wider cosmos, which is not only created by God, but is the object of God's saving activity.⁹

This is well understood by Caribbean theologian Ashley Smith, whom this collection of essays honors, and his published works often address *creation* as the underlying basis of God's salvation in history. Especially in his seminal 1984 collection of essays, *Real Roots and Potted Plants: Reflections on the Caribbean Church*, we find a pervasive appeal to God as creator of the world and to God's purposes or intentions for creation as an alternative to a sacred/secular dualism and as a prod to appropriate ethical action on the part of Caribbean Christians.¹⁰

Along these lines, Ashley claims that the church "needs to represent an attitude of affirmation in place of the traditional world-denial. To accomplish this, those who speak for it need to give greater prominence to the doctrine of creation."¹¹ Or, as he puts it elsewhere, the key question before the Caribbean church is "what kind of ministry it might exercise at this particular time, in the name of him who continually makes all things new, in order that the purposes of his creation might be fulfilled."¹² He clearly states that to deny the goodness of the material world "is contrary to biblical teaching. It contradicts the Christian doctrine of creation and . . . goes against the New Testament understanding of the cosmic implications of the atonement (Rom 8:18–25). . . . The usual division of reality into sacred and secular is anything but Christian."¹³

I believe that Ashley Smith is on the right track in his theological appeal to creation to ground both salvation and ethics. We can no longer afford the luxury of suspicion about creation theology, that is, if we ever could have afforded that luxury. It is not just that we are all, in the Caribbean and elsewhere, faced with the global realities of climate change, toxic waste, over-fishing, air pollution, and so on. Beyond the fact that the stresses humans are placing on the environment impinge on all peoples of the earth, including Caribbean people, it is also clear that our ecological crises are integrally connected to societal injustice. As James Cone, the father of black

9. See Middleton and Gorman, "Salvation," 45–54; Fretheim, "Salvation in the Bible vs. Salvation in the Church," 368–69; and Middleton, "A New Heaven and a New Earth," 86–91.

10. A. Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants*, 9–10, 15, 33, 34, 38–9, 41, 44, 53, 65–6, 97–8, 100, 101, 104.

11. *Ibid.*, 15.

12. *Ibid.*, 44.

13. *Ibid.*, 97.

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liberation theology in the United States puts it: “The logic that led to slavery and segregation in the Americas, colonization and apartheid in Africa, and the rule of white supremacy throughout the world is the same one that leads to the exploitation of animals and the ravaging of nature.”¹⁴

This is a profound observation, which should give us pause. Yet there is something missing from Cone’s analysis. I have no intention of denigrating Cone’s historical and sociological approach, which is meant to challenge both ecological theologians and theologians who theorize race to take each other’s work seriously. Yet one searches Cone’s article (of which this is the opening statement) in vain for any substantive theological or biblical analysis following from this important claim.¹⁵

This is a shame, since the Scriptures consistently interpret the connection between humans and the earth in a manner that positively contributes to a vision of human flourishing—at both individual and societal levels. The Bible is a powerful, and often untapped resource on this topic. This suggests that the time is ripe for a *biblical* Caribbean theology that grounds human liberation in God’s intent for creation and envisions a role for the earth within God’s purposes.

However, this creation theology would need to move beyond professional theological interest in a public theology that addresses the large societal concerns of our times. Although such theological concerns are laudable and necessary—and many of the essays in this volume address these concerns with great insight—I believe that creation theology should be serviceable, not just for an elite cadre of Caribbean intellectuals, but for ordinary Caribbean Christians, to empower them in the universal priesthood of the believer, that they might live with dignity, compassion, and power in a broken world, as a healing presence and witness to the coming kingdom of God through Jesus Christ.

These points are integrally connected, since the primary mode of access to theology for most Caribbean laypeople is precisely the Bible. We therefore need to develop a robust creation theology through a careful engagement with Scripture that would address the pressing need of ordinary Christians to internalize a vision of being human in God’s world. Such a vision would integrally connect people and their societal needs to their bodies and their physical environment—and would connect salvation with God’s creational intentions for this world.

14. Cone, “Whose Earth Is It, Anyway?” 23.

15. We find a similar problem in Leonardo Boff’s important attempt at a rapprochement between liberation theology and ecology (Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, esp. 104–114); although Boff does engage the question theologically, the Bible plays only a marginal role in the discussion.

In my reflections that follow, I intend to address the otherworldly bent of much popular Caribbean Christianity, by sketching the biblical teaching of the redemption of creation and by grounding this teaching in Scripture's affirmation of the earthly purpose of human life. It is the burden of this essay that a biblical creation theology addressed to Caribbean realities would both affirm the value and dignity of ordinary life and work in the world and would orient life and work toward God's larger redemptive purposes for justice and earthly flourishing.

THE BIBLE'S VISION OF COSMIC REDEMPTION

Central to the way the New Testament conceives the final destiny of the world is Jesus' prediction in Matt 19:28 of a "regeneration" (KJV, NIV) that is coming; Matthew here uses the Greek word *palingenesia*, which both TNIV and NRSV translate as "the renewal of all things," where the addition of the English phrase "all things" correctly gets at the sense of cosmic expectation.¹⁶ Likewise, we have Peter's explicit proclamation of the "restoration [*apokatastasis*] of all things" (in Acts 3:21), which does in fact contain the phrase "all things" (*tà pánta*). When we turn to the epistles, we find God's intent to *reconcile* "all things" to himself through Christ articulated in Col 1:20, while Eph 1:20 speaks of God's desire to *unify* or *bring together* "all things" in Christ. In these two Pauline texts, the phrase "all things" (*tà pánta*) is immediately specified as things *in heaven* and things *on earth*. Since "heaven and earth" is precisely how Gen 1:1 describes the world God created "in the beginning," this New Testament language clearly designates a vision of cosmic salvation, the redemption of the entire created order.

This cosmic vision underlies the phrase "a new heaven and a new earth" found in both Rev 21:1 ("and I saw a new heaven and a new earth") and 2 Pet 3:13 ("we await a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells"; author's translation). The specific origin of the phrase "a new heaven and a new earth" is the prophetic oracle of Isa 65:17–25, which envisions a healed world with a redeemed community in rebuilt Jerusalem, where life is restored to flourishing and shalom after the devastation of the Babylonian exile (the phrase is found in Isa 65:17 and later in 66:22). The this-worldly prophetic expectation in Isaiah is then universalized to the entire cosmos and human society generally in late Second Temple Judaism and in the New Testament.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise specified, the biblical quotations that follow will be from the NRSV.

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This holistic vision of God's intent to renew or redeem creation is perhaps the Bible's best-kept secret, typically unknown to most church members and even to many clergy, no matter what their theological stripe.¹⁷ It is therefore particularly helpful to trace the roots of the New Testament vision in the Old Testament, in order to understand the inner logic of the idea.

THE HUMAN CALLING TO IMAGE GOD ON EARTH

We should note that the Old Testament does not place any substantial hope in the afterlife; the dead do not have access to God in the grave or Sheol (Pss 6:5; 30:9; 88:3–5, 10–12; 115:17; Ecc 9:4–6, 10; Isa 38:9–12, 18).¹⁸ Rather, God's purposes for blessing and shalom are expected for the faithful in this life, in the midst of history. This holistic perspective is grounded, theologically, in the biblical teaching about the goodness of creation, including earthly existence. God pronounced all creation including materiality good—and at the end of the creative activity, “very good” (Gen 1:31)—and gave human beings the task to rule and develop this world as stewards made in God's image (Gen 1:26–28; Gen 2:15; Ps 8:5–8).

In Gen 2:15 the original human task is to work and protect the garden (equivalent to agriculture), while in Ps 8:5–8 humans are entrusted with rule over animal life on land, in air and water (the basis for the domestication of animals). And Gen 1:26–28 combines both agriculture and animal husbandry in its vision of humans created in God's image to rule animals and subdue the earth. Theodore Hiebert is correct to note that, “In the pre-industrial age of biblical Israel, it is impossible that the Priestly writer had more in mind in these concepts of dominion and subjection than the human domestication and use of animals and plants and the human struggle to make the soil serve its farmers.”¹⁹

In all these creation texts, the movement is “missional”—from God via humans outward to the earth. The paradox of these texts is that the fundamental human task is both a matter of humble earthly service and yet a task of great dignity, namely, the responsible exercise of power on God's behalf in tending and developing the non-human world.²⁰

17. This observation is based on my own experience in many different branches of the Christian tradition, both denominationally and theologically.

18. For analysis of these and other texts, see Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 87–99.

19. Hiebert, “Re-Imaging Nature,” 42.

20. This rule of the earth on God's behalf is precisely what Gen 1:26–28 means by the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*), as is recognized by most Old Testament scholars. For an account of the history of interpretation of humanity as *imago Dei*, see

It is sometimes shocking for readers of the Bible to realize that the initial purpose and *raison d'être* of humanity is never explicitly portrayed in Scripture as the worship of God or anything that would conform to our notion of the "spiritual," with its dualistic categories. Instead, Scripture portrays the human purpose in rather mundane terms of exercising power over our earthly environment as God's representatives. In the context of the ancient Near East, which is the Bible's original context, rule of the earth refers most basically to the development of agriculture and animal husbandry, which are the basis of human societal organization and ultimately leads to the development of all aspects of culture, technology and civilization.²¹ To put it another way, while various Psalms (like 148 and 96) indeed call upon *all* creatures (humans included) to worship or serve God in the cosmic temple of creation (heaven and earth), the distinctive way *humans* worship or render service to the Creator is by the development of culture through interaction with our earthly environment in a manner that glorifies God. That is our fundamental human calling.²²

By our communal development of culture through interaction with the earth and its creatures, humans function as God's image (*imago Dei*), mediating God's presence from heaven, where the Holy One is enthroned, into the earthly realm—as God's authorized and delegated representatives. By our faithful imaging of God through the ordinary, everyday tasks of human life (work, education, the raising of children, etc.), the human race was intended to bring the earth to its intended destiny as an integral part of God's cosmos-temple, filled with the divine presence and glory.

But in the biblical narrative a complication or impediment prevents completion of the original human purpose. Humans have misused the power God has given them, rebelling against their creator and turning against each other. This misuse of the power of *imago Dei* is manifest most fundamentally

Middleton, *Liberating Image*, chap. 1.

21. For further analysis of the human purpose in Genesis, see Middleton, *Liberating Image*, chaps. 2 and 5; Crouch, *Culture Making*, chap. 6; Cosden, *Heavenly Good of Earthly Work*, chap. 4; Wolters, "Foundational Command," 27–33; and Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, chap. 6.

22. This is not meant to exclude what we call "worship" from the appropriate human response to God. There are two important points to make here. First, the cultural development of the earth, rather than "worship" narrowly conceived, is explicitly stated to be the human purpose in biblical texts recounting the creation of humanity. "Worship" in the narrow sense may be understood as *part of* human cultural activity. Secondly, we should not reduce human worship/service of God to verbal, emotionally charged expressions of praise (which is what we usually mean by the term). Note that Paul in Rom 12:1–2 borrows language of sacrifice and liturgy from Israel's cult in order to describe full-orbed bodily obedience (which, he says, is our true worship). This is the typical emphasis of Scripture.

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in disobedience toward the creator (Gen 3), which then blossoms into a pattern of violence and fractured relationships among people (Gen 4–11), which continues to this day. Whereas the early chapters of Genesis do, indeed, record the continuing cultural development of the earth—including the first city (Gen 4:17) and the development of nomadic livestock herding, technology, and music (4:20–22)—we also have the first murder (4:8) and a bigamist (4:19) engaging in revenge killing (4:23–24), until violence fills the earth (Gen 6:11). The biblical tradition understands that human transgression of God's norms leads to death, which is the antithesis of God's purposes for earthly flourishing; our contemporary predicament is that death in its manifold forms has invaded and degraded human life and the entire earthly creation.

SALVATION AS THE RESTORATION OF GOD'S PURPOSES FOR CREATION

The biblical affirmation of earthly life is further articulated in the central and paradigmatic act of God's salvation in the Old Testament, the exodus from Egyptian bondage. Israel's memory of this event testifies to a God who intervenes in the harsh realities of history in response to injustice and suffering. But more than that, the exodus is manifestly a case of *sociopolitical* deliverance from the most intransigent imperial power of the day. And this deliverance is not just *from* bondage, but *to* or *for* shalom, which is attained only when the redeemed are settled in a bountiful land and are restored to wholeness and flourishing as a community of justice living according to God's wise laws.

In line with the creational grounding of salvation, Old Testament legal and wisdom literature reveals an interest in mundane matters such as the fertility of land and crops, the birth of children and stable family life, justice in the city, and peace in international relations. The Old Testament does not spiritualize *salvation* but understands it as God's deliverance of people and land from all that destroys life and the consequent restoration of people and land to flourishing.²³ And while God's salvific purpose narrows for a while to one elect nation in their own land, this "initially exclusive move" is, as Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim puts it, in the service of "a maximally inclusive end," the redemption of all nations and ultimately, the entire created order.²⁴

23. Fretheim, "Salvation in the Bible vs. Salvation in the Church," 371–72; Middleton and Gorman, "Salvation," 45, 47, 52–54.

24. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 29.

Although the Old Testament initially did not envision any sort of positive afterlife, things begin to shift in some late texts. Thus in Ezekiel's famous vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37) the restoration of Israel is portrayed using the metaphor of resurrection, after the "death" they suffered in Babylonian exile. But this is arguably still a metaphor, not an expectation of what we would call resurrection. Then, a proto-apocalyptic text like Isa 25:6-8 envisions the literal conquest of death itself at the messianic banquet on Mt. Zion, where God will serve the redeemed the best meat and the most aged wines; this text anticipates the day when YHWH will "swallow up death forever" (cited in 1 Cor 15:26, 54) and "wipe away all tears" (echoed in Rev 21:4). But the most explicit Old Testament text on the topic of resurrection is the apocalyptic vision of Dan 12:2-3, which promises that faithful martyrs will awaken from the dust of the earth (to which we all return at death, according to Gen 3) to attain "eternal life."

It is important to note that this developing vision of the afterlife has nothing to do with "heaven hereafter"; the expectation is manifestly this-worldly, meant to guarantee for the faithful the earthly promises of shalom that death had cut short. The Wisdom of Solomon, chapter 3 is particularly helpful here. This text, which in the Septuagint, though not in the Protestant canon, specifically associates "immortality" with reigning *on earth* (Wis 3:1-9, esp. 7-8); that is, resurrection is a reversal of the earthly situation of oppression (the domination of the righteous martyrs by the wicked, which led to their death) and thus is the fulfillment of the original human dignity and status in Gen 1:26-28 and Ps 8:4-8, where humans are granted rule of the earth.²⁵

These ancient Jewish expectations provide a coherent theological background for Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, which he construed as "good news" for the poor and release for captives (Luke 4), and which he embodied in healings, exorcisms, and the forgiveness of sins (all ways in which the distortion of earthly life was being reversed). These expectations also make sense of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that the meek would "inherit the earth" (Matt 5:5) and later in Matthew that "at the renewal of all things" (the cosmic "regeneration") the disciples would reign and judge with him on thrones (Matt 19:27-30). This helps us understand Rev 5:9-10, which envisions a redeemed church from "every tribe and

25. Contrary to Leonardo Boff's misreading (*Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 79-80), the use of the metaphor of "rule" either in the Bible or in contemporary theology does not automatically legitimate unlimited dominion or exploitation of the earth. Rather, "rule" is an ancient way to speak of the exercise of power, which may be beneficent or destructive. It is used in Second Temple Jewish tradition to dignify human life, often in situations of oppression. Jesus himself suggests (and models) that the normative exercise of rule is humble service of others (Mark 10:42-45).

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language and people and nation” constituted as “a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” Also Rev 22:3–5 indicates that when God’s throne (which is currently in heaven) is finally established on earth, God’s servants will “reign forever.” The word “forever” disabuses us of the idea that this might be some sort of temporary millennium, to be followed by an otherworldly eternal state. Rather, what Revelation offers is the eschatological restoration of the original human calling as *imago Dei* to administer and develop this world to God’s glory.

The eschatological restoration taught by Jesus and envisaged in Revelation has begun in the church, which is even now being renewed in the image of God (Eph 4:24; Col 3:9–10) to become the “new humanity” (a much better translation than “new self,” which we find in most modern translations).²⁶ This means that day-to-day sanctification is a matter of the restoration of our humanness, with all that entails, as we are called to live up to the stature of Christ, whose perfect imaging becomes the model for the life of the redeemed (Phil 2:5–11; Eph 4:13). The day will come when we are fully conformed to the likeness of Christ (1 John 3:2), which will include the resurrection of the body (1 Cor 15:49).

So when Paul describes Jesus’ own resurrection from the dead as the “firstfruits” of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor 15:20), he claims that the harvest of new creation has already begun, the expected reversal of sin and death is inaugurated. This reversal will be consummated when Christ returns in glory climactically to defeat evil and all that opposes God’s intent for life and shalom on earth (1 Cor 15:24–28). Then, in the words of Revelation 11, “the kingdom of this world [will] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah” (Rev 11:15). At that time, explains Paul, creation itself, which has been groaning in its bondage to decay, will be liberated from this bondage into the same glory God’s children will experience (Rom 8:19–22)—that is, the glory of resurrection.

The inner logic of this vision of holistic salvation is that the creator has not given up on creation, but is working to salvage and restore the world (human and non-human) to the fullness of shalom and flourishing intended from the beginning. And redeemed human beings, renewed in God’s image, are to work towards and embody this vision in their daily lives.

THE OTHERWORLDLY HYMNODY OF THE CHURCH

The tragedy is that this kind of holistic vision of salvation is found only rarely in popular Christian piety or even in the liturgy of the church. Indeed,

26. The KJV has “the new man.” This term portrays regeneration as corporate, not just individual.

it is blatantly contradicted by many traditional hymns (and contemporary praise songs) sung in the context of communal worship. This is an important point since it is from what they sing that those in the pew (or auditorium) typically learn their theology, especially their eschatology.

From the classic Charles Wesley hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," which anticipates being "changed from glory into glory/ till in heaven we take our place,"²⁷ to "Away in a Manger," which prays, "And fit us for Heaven, to live with Thee there,"²⁸ congregations are exposed to—and assimilate—an otherworldly eschatology. Some hymns, like "When the Roll Is Called up Yonder," inconsistently combine the idea of resurrection with the hope of heaven:

On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise,
And the glory of His resurrection share;
When His chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.²⁹

Some hymns even interpret resurrection without reference to the body at all, such as "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?" which in one stanza regards death as liberation ("Till death shall set me free") and in another asserts: "O resurrection day!/ When Christ the Lord from Heav'n comes down/ And bears my soul away."³⁰

A hymn like "When We All Get to Heaven" may be too obvious, but notice that "The Old Rugged Cross" ends with the words, "Then He'll call me some day to my home far away/ Where his glory forever I'll share."³¹ And "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" climaxes with the lines:

When my feeble life is o'er,
Time for me will be no more;
Guide me gently, safely o'er
To Thy kingdom shore, to Thy shore.³²

27. Stanza 4 of "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," written by Charles Wesley in 1747.

28. Stanza 3 from "Away in a Manger," written by John Thomas McFarland sometime between 1904–8 (the author of the hymn's first two stanzas is unknown).

29. Stanza 2 from "When the Roll Is Called up Yonder," written by James M. Black in 1893.

30. Stanzas 2 and 4 from "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?" Stanza 2 was written by Thomas Shepherd (published 1693) and stanza 4 by Henry Ward Beecher (published 1855). Stanza 4 originally read: "Ye angels from the stars come down/ And bear my soul away."

31. Stanza 4 from "The Old Rugged Cross," written by George Bennard in 1913.

32. Stanza 3 from "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," author unknown (this American folk hymn became widely known during the 1930s).

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Likewise, “Come Christians, Join to Sing” affirms that “On heaven’s blissful shore,/ His goodness we’ll adore,/ Singing forevermore,/ ‘Alleluia! Amen!’”³³

This notion of a perpetual worship service in an otherworldly afterlife is a central motif in many hymns, like “My Jesus I Love Thee,” which affirms that “In mansions of glory and endless delight,/ I’ll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright.”³⁴ In a similar vein, “As with Gladness Men of Old” asks in one stanza that, “when earthly things are past,/ Bring our ransomed souls at last/ Where they need no star to guide,” and in another stanza expresses the desire that “In the heavenly country bright/ . . . There forever may we sing/ Alleluias to our King!”³⁵

Thankfully, most hymnals no longer have the sixth verse of “Amazing Grace,” which predicts:

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.³⁶

Yet Chris Tomlin’s contemporary revision of this classic hymn, known as “Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone),” reintroduces this very verse as the song’s new climax, ready to shape the otherworldly mindset of a fresh generation of young worshipers unacquainted with hymnals.³⁷

This overview of hymns just scratches the surface of worship lyrics that portray the final destiny of the righteous as transferal from an earthly, historical existence to a transcendent, immaterial realm. As the popular theologian and preacher A. W. Tozer is reputed to have said: “Christians don’t tell lies; they just go to church and sing them.”³⁸ Perhaps that is too harsh; nevertheless, I can testify to the steady diet of such songs that I was exposed to, growing up in the church in Kingston, Jamaica, which certainly reinforced the idea of heaven as otherworldly final destiny.

33. Stanza 3 from “Come, Christians, Join to Sing,” written by Christian H. Bateman.

34. Stanza 4 from “My Jesus I Love Thee,” written by William R. Featherston in 1864.

35. Stanzas 4 and 5 from “As with Gladness Men of Old,” written by William C. Dix ca. 1858.

36. Stanza 6 from “Amazing Grace,” written by John Newton, published 1779 (originally entitled “Faith’s Review and Expectation”).

37. This version of the song was released in 2006.

38. This quote is found all over the Internet, without an explicit citation from Tozer’s works. Noted Tozer scholar James L. Snyder admits that while it may not be found in a specific published work, the quote accurately echoes what Tozer has said in some of his sermons (available in audio recordings): “it is Tozer and it expresses his feelings on the subject” (personal communication, December 20, 2010).

ECHOES OF CREATION THEOLOGY IN CARIBBEAN MUSIC

I am, however, perpetually grateful that along with such exposure I came to know, through sheer proximity, the this-worldly theology of Rastafarianism, especially as mediated through the music of Bob Marley and the Wailers. While I am a committed Christian and thus cannot affirm everything found in Rasta theology, I nevertheless discern a deeply rooted biblical consciousness in the lyrics of many Wailers' songs.³⁹ For example, the song "We an' Dem" claims that, "in the beginning Jah created everythin' and he gave man dominion over all things," and "Pass It On" asserts that, "In the kingdom of Jah/ man shall reign."⁴⁰ These lyrics express (in androcentric language, admittedly) the biblical vision of this-worldly dignity granted humans at creation, a dignity that will be restored in the kingdom of God.

And Peter Tosh's version of "Get Up, Stand Up" (a song he co-wrote with Marley), understands well the implications of a creation-oriented eschatology for ethics, when it contrasts the doctrine of the rapture with a desire for justice on earth:

You know, most people think,
A great God will come from the skies,
And take away every little thing
And lef' everybody dry.
But if you know what life is worth,
You would look for yours
Right here on earth
And now we see the light,
We gonna stand up for our rights.⁴¹

The song goes on to critique the "preacher man" for taking the focus off earthly life and affirms that the singer is "Sick and tired of this game of theology, die and go to heaven in Jesus name." This is the very theology that leads Marley, in the song, "Talkin' Blues," to admit, "I feel like bombing a church, now that you know that the preacher is lying." But if Tozer is right, it isn't just

39. I have explored the theology of a number of songs by Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Bunny Wailer in, "Identity and Subversion in Babylon."

40. *Jah* is the shortened form of the divine name YHWH (Yahweh/Jehovah) found in expressions like "hallelujah!" (which literally means "praise YHWH!"). Rastafarians love to quote Ps 68:4 in the KJV: "Sing unto God, sing praises to his name: extol him that rideth upon the heavens by his name JAH, and rejoice before him."

41. These lyrics are transcribed from Tosh's *Equal Rights* album (1977); the song first appeared on the Wailers' *Burnin'* album (1973) with slightly different lyrics. The lyrics are different again on Tosh's *Captured Live* album (1984) and on Bunny Wailer's *Protest* album (1977).

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the preacher who is lying, but also the worshipers who blithely sing hymns of escape to an ethereal heaven—when the Bible teaches no such thing.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CARIBBEAN CHURCH

Yet the preacher without a doubt bears the larger share of guilt. As Jas 3:1 warns: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Here the culpability of Caribbean Christian leadership is evident. For it is the mandated responsibility of church leaders to teach “the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27), rather than some truncated version of this purpose. Of course, the otherworldly orientation of popular Caribbean theology could easily (and legitimately) be blamed on our colonial past, since we learned this theology from our European colonizers. But to shift the burden of responsibility to others would be to let ourselves off too lightly. The Caribbean church must engage in serious self-examination and come to terms with the fact that its own leaders have perpetuated an escapist theology that entrenches ordinary Christians still further in despair and paralysis, as they pine for a heavenly home distant from the everyday realities of Caribbean life.

Historically, the otherworldly vision that has been inculcated into the consciousness of the Caribbean church allows for little or no explicitly Christian norms to guide life in contemporary society (with the prominent exception of sexual mores). In particular, an otherworldly focus on heaven hereafter prevents the biblical gospel from addressing the economic and societal realities of our time. Thus when Caribbean preachers begin to speak (as they are now doing) to the genuine need to overcome poverty among their congregations, their preaching often echoes the idolatrous greed and selfishness of Western consumer culture, baptized with a thin veneer of Christian language.

While it is laudable to motivate church members to move beyond acquiescing in poverty, the so-called prosperity gospel that is gaining ground in the Caribbean church is a betrayal of the biblical vision of shalom, which ought to direct the church towards communal care for neighbors and the earth. The point is that simply casting out the old demons of otherworldliness, without an engagement with a truly biblical spirit or ethos, allows the wandering spirits of the age—unclean spirits—to inhabit our very souls. Today the Caribbean church is in danger of buying into the worst elements of consumerist individualism at the heart of Western culture.

We, therefore, need a radical reformation in the Caribbean—in both the teaching and worship of the church. I propose that if the church’s

teaching and worship were grounded in a biblical creation theology that addresses earthly concerns in a holistic manner, this would have the potential to guide the church's life in the contemporary world in at least three ways.

First of all, a biblical creation theology can provide a foundation and orientation for the value and holiness of daily life as we live out our identity as *imago Dei* in society. This identity, as it is renewed in Christ, obliterates the artificial split between "sacred" and "secular" and gives meaning to the mundane challenges of life, work, family and education, interpreted as the outworking of our sacred calling to be human in God's world. As Ashley Smith so eloquently puts it:

The enlightened or awakened Christian who is aware of the biblical doctrines of creation and redemption is liberated from the fallacy that there is a part of the world which is outside of the sphere of God's activity and his love, and therefore, inherently, unholy and under condemnation. Being aware of the holiness of all creation and of God's concern in all that happens in the world, the Christian . . . participates wholeheartedly, joyfully and responsibly in all the affairs of his community.⁴²

Secondly, biblical creation theology can provide an ethical challenge to the present unjust and corrupt status quo. Understanding the biblical vision of God's original intent for life on earth can allow us to discern a world out of whack with how things were meant to be. Creation theology thus provides the church with a critical principle of dissent from the injustice in the world, so that we do not simply baptize the present as God's will.

Finally, a biblical creation theology provides an empowering vision of God's purposes for shalom that can energize church members—both as individuals and in community—to utilize their gifts and opportunities to make a difference in the world by how they live. A church that has its eyes firmly fixed on the coming of God's kingdom from heaven to earth, rather than on leaving earth for heaven, will seize the moment (the *kairos*) and seek to contribute to healing, justice, and earthly flourishing in the whole range of human life and activities. In this way, the church in the Caribbean may grow into a living foretaste of the coming of God's kingdom to this our beautiful—yet broken and needy—earthly home.

42. A. Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants*, 38–39.