Heraclitean Nature and the Comfort of the Resurrection

Theology in an Open Space

In his masterful sonnet, “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and the Comfort of the Resurrection,” Gerard Manley Hopkins places us in a landscape recently ravaged by a storm (“yestertempest’s creases”). Spellbound for the moment by the shifting contrast of “cloud-puffball” against blue sky, and the “down dazzling whitewash” at his feet as sunlight and tree shadow dance upon the land’s pockmarked and rutted surface, the poet imagines the whole of nature as did Heraclitus: as a massive, “ever living fire,” where all things arise from and again are consumed by flame. With senses saturated and self-consciousness porous, the poet stands transfixed by nature’s riotous display, a reflective filament in the glittering cascade of it all. “Million-fuelèd, | nature’s bonfire burns on.”

Though seemingly timeless in its peculiar duration, the moment of ecstasy does not last. For as the poet takes notice of the tire tracks and footprints now succumbing to erasure by sun and wind—the only traces left by previous countryside travelers (“manmarks”)—his initial feelings of expansion congeal into thoughts, into hardened and heavy reminders that his own human life is no less subject to volatility and eventual oblivion. He too participates in the cease-
less flow that Heraclitean Nature awesomely displays, but with this
difference (which in the end, he fears, makes no difference at all):
he has become grippingly aware of the contingency of things. Hu-
mankind too—nature’s “clearest-selvèd spark”—is subject to the
cyclical and merciless leveling down of Heraclitean fire.

Overwhelmed with a sense of the tragic, and the reflexive pro-
test such awareness can bring, the poet’s words shift into a frightful
register:

But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd spark
Mán, how fást his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!
Bóth are in an unfathomable, áll is in an enormous dárk
Drowned. O Pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone
Sheer off, disséveral, a stár, | death blots black out; nor mark
Is áný of him at áll so stárk
But vastness blurs and time | beats level.

And yet, in mid-thought—literally in mid-line of the sonnet—the
poet defiantly shifts to an altogether different vision, one buoyed by
eschatological hope:

Enough! The Resurrection,
A hért’s-clarion! Awáy grief’s gasping, | joyless days, dejection.
Across my foundering deck shone
A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fáll to the residuary worm; | world’s wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and
This Jack, jóke, poor pótshed, | patch, matchwood, immortal
diamond,

Is immortal diamond.

How shall we interpret this abrupt disjunction that nearly splits
Hopkins’s sonnet in two? Perhaps one might accuse the poet of being
disingenuous—or worse, pious—as though by declaring “Enough!”
so categorically he has merely suppressed the disquieting truth of his initial contemplation. Would it not be more consistent and courageous, as Friedrich Nietzsche declared, to accept the truth that the only “resurrection” possible or desirable for us (should we even wish to use the word) is the “eternal return” of the Heraclitean cycle, suffering and all? Isn’t the hope for individual survival beyond death, however conceived, in fact a “no” to life as it is, a facile projection that alienates the individual from the species, indeed from the whole of nature? “One will see,” declares Nietzsche, “that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering; whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. In the former case, it is supposed to be the path to a holy existence; in the latter case, being is counted as holy enough to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering. The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering.” Whereas Dionysius presents us with the “promise of life,” the resurrection of the Crucified is, in the end, only the “redemption from life.”

But Hopkins has not suppressed the hard truth of his initial contemplation. He still accepts the reality of death, the sheer contingency of things. The “residuary worm” will yet have its prize, and the world’s bonfire will spew its ash . . . but the Resurrection! This is the substance of his hope, his comfort: Christ is risen; and because I am what Christ was, I shall become what he is. Nature’s anonymous heaving is not, as it was for Heraclitus, eternally cyclical and indifferent to the sufferings and hopes of its “clearest-selved spark.” It is the medium of God’s eschatological art, and from it shall emerge the new creation. Immortal diamond.

This article takes as its subject the disjunctive space between these two visions. I wish to occupy, for the time being, an “open space” between these two frames: between, on the one hand, a Heraclitean vision of the universe that can be characterized by a sense of its vast and impersonal mutability, and, on the other, a vision inspired by the resurrection that can be characterized by a hope for its transfiguration into Christic form. What interests me about this open space is that it fairly well locates the tensions many Christians
feel as they attempt to make sense of eschatological hope in an age when, as a result of widespread secularization and the profound impact of our human and natural sciences, our sense of the world has grown immeasurably. Whereas in a previous age we might have imagined ourselves living in a cosmos, that is, a coherent, hierarchically organized space where all things have their place and participate in an overarching design, we have learned to re-imagine ourselves in a universe, one whose size and complexity, both macro and micro, overwhelms our ability to comprehend; but more, a universe that, while exhibiting patterns of emergent complexity and self-organization leading to “life,” nevertheless leads many today to envision it less like a habitat uniquely designed for creatures of transcendent purpose and more like an amoral and forbidding wilderness—an awe-inspiring yet indifferent immensity in which our tiny and fragile worlds of human aspiration are felt as suspended in a vertiginous expanse.

How might we name and possibly understand the jarring contrast between these two visions? From a Christian theological point of view are there resources, ancient or new, that may help us occupy the space opened up by the seismic shifts in imagination produced by over three centuries of secularization? Is Christian hope in the resurrection only quaint comfort, a mere “hope of worms,” as the second-century Celsus put it, or may it yet renew our sense of being home in the universe?

I. From Cosmos to Universe

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor tells the very complicated and rich story of how “our sense of things” has changed. While this “sense” may include particular beliefs and formulations of experience, what he means by choosing this word is much subtler and therefore more challenging to describe. He is speaking of the background knowledge and practices that contribute to our perception and understanding of the world; the tacit assumptions (or prethetic under-
standings) that allow the contours of our lives and worlds to appear in certain ways. We are undergoing, and have been undergoing, a shift in what Taylor calls our “social imaginaries”: ways of imagining our surroundings that are expressed in our stories, art, images, and practices; our common understandings that make shared meaning and even disagreement possible; sensibilities that are widely distributed and not just held by a cultural elite. A social imaginary is “that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have.” This is why Taylor chooses words like “sense” and “imaginary.” It is that taken-for-granted “tacit dimension” (M. Polanyi) underlying and continually funding our many theories and formulations of experience.

Our age, Taylor explains, is one in which secularization has taken firm root. Of course, the meaning of “the secular” is hardly self-evident, and under no circumstance will Taylor permit us to read his large-scale study as offering tidy formulations of what secularity means, that is, how it is lived, understood, misunderstood, negotiated, combated, or denied. His work is in fact expressly dedicated to making simple definitions and unified theories of secularization problematic. It is certainly not my intention to engage these many issues here, though I would like to tease out one important strand of Taylor’s story, namely, how we have come increasingly to sense that we no longer live in a cosmos but a universe.

A “cosmos,” as used in Taylor’s specific sense, is a more or less ordered whole, a hierarchically organized and largely stable world with intelligible symbolic boundaries. Not just the earth and its array of creatures, but the heavens and all its inhabitants fill out a Great Chain of Being. Each thing has its purpose in relation to the whole, with the whole manifesting an implicit design. Even if disagreement might exist about where things should be located within the symbolic matrix of this whole, there remains little doubt that a proper order does in fact exist.

A “universe,” on the other hand, is not so obviously ordered ac-
cording to principle. It is not that there is no order, no law, or that all is chaos, but order seems to emerge as a temporary eddy within time’s relentless and unpredictable flow. Both spatially and temporally, the universe (despite the etymology) lacks a sense of stable unity, possesses no apparent center, no edge, and exhibits no obvious plan for its ceaseless unfurling. Its vastness both “out there” and “in here” seems to make our little colonized islands of order makeshift and negligible. The links in the Great Chain of Being do not connect in a vertically ascending progression of ontological significance, but are flung forth and, in a sense, suspended in a space with no clear sense of “up” or “down.” Taylor summarizes:

Now this change, which has taken place over the last half millennium in our civilization, has been immense. We moved from an enchanted world, inhabited by spirits and forces, to a disenchanted one; but perhaps more important, we have moved from a world which is encompassed within certain bounds and static to one which is vast, feels infinite, and is in the midst of an evolution spread over aeons... Our sense of the universe now is precisely defined by the vast and the unfathomable: vastness in space, and above all in time; unfathomability in the long chain of changes out of which present forms evolve. But what is unprecedented in human history, there is no longer a clear and obvious sense that this vastness is shaped and limited by an antecedent plan. Our present sense of things fails to touch bottom anywhere.

This way of putting it may seem too encompassing. After all, is it not the case that large segments of the human race cling tenaciously to a sense of an ordered and stable world? Of course. But what is happening in this particular “moment of complexity,” as Mark C. Taylor describes it, is that all maps that might organize our social and cultural worlds and maintain them within stable boundaries are increasingly felt as perspectival, permeable, and provisional—“Heraclitean.” Especially with the emergence of a glo-
balized “network culture” that enables the instant diffusion of information across previously incommunicable spaces, all naive claims to cultural self-sufficiency and privilege are exposed to their own alterity. In a word, our many social-cultural worlds are becoming increasingly “historicized,” and thus demoted from their sense of (metaphysical) necessity or divine ordination. As Gianni Vattimo puts it, our “sense of being” has become weakened.

It is no accident that such weakening, should this be a helpful way of putting it, coincides with the emergence of radically new and disorienting perspectives upon the universe we inhabit. The natural sciences have played a decisive role in upsetting the Great Chain of Being. And yet, scientific modes of knowing are very much a part of—not outside of—the social imaginaries of our age. Scientific knowledge is encompassed within broader intellectual and social matrices, and is thus generated by and generative of a host of social practices that condition other domains of human interests and understanding. However much we might be tempted to think of a conflict between “scientific” and “humanistic” modes of understanding, both in fact share much in common in the production of our secular age.

II. “Disenchantment” and “Dark Genesis”

For all the sense of awe that may come with our greatly expanded views of the world, there is something deeply unsettling about them, not least when experienced under the aspect of time’s immensity. If, in a moment of ecstasy, we might lose ourselves in a landscape, natural or otherwise, to feel the droning rush of Heraclitean nature—even taking momentary refuge in its splendid anonymity—perhaps we shall become suddenly gripped, once reflexive consciousness returns, by the sense of futility of being only one among its innumerable swarming creatures, just another scrap flung upon a bottomless heap. This sense of cosmic vanity is, of course, by no means new. Whether there is anything new under the sun is
hardly a question unique to modern men and women. But there is something new lurking about in our age, Taylor contends, and that is the widespread sense of disenchantment and dark genesis that accompanies and intensifies such questions.

What Taylor means by “disenchantment”—to put a fairly complex notion in a highly compressed way—is that we have come increasingly to sense that the world is no longer filled with the spiritual agents and moral forces that gave shape to the worlds of our ancestors. The sense of “presence” that permeated much of the ancient past, whether of a divine or demonic sort, has slowly eroded to leave a sense of “absence,” a vacancy filled in by immanently generated and endlessly fecund “nature.” Rather than intersected and guided by transcendent forces that open our horizons to dimensions beyond our senses, our horizons have become immanentized and flattened. Meaning in the human life-world does not so much come from a transcendent order (though, admittedly for many it still does), but is increasingly thought of as emergent from moral and spiritual resources within. Social configurations and institutions come to be viewed less as temporal instantiations of eternal design, and more as culturally contingent productions subject to constant fluctuation and reformulation. What’s more, our views of the self have become increasingly atomized and buffered. Whereas a previous age presupposed a more porous view of the self—“porous,” that is, to enchanted and more participatory social and natural environments—modernity tends to produce selves with an intensified sense of being located “in here,” within a more sharply articulated and punctiliar space of subjectivity that imagines its outward extension into the world subsequent to self-constitution.

The kind of world that opens up to secularized human understanding is therefore one that extends along a much flatter landscape compared to the multileveled cosmos of a previous age. This does not mean that our world has necessarily become more domesticated, however. In certain respects it has—secularization is in large part a story of rationalization and social discipline; and with mecha-
nization and large-scale planning comes a great deal of leverage for gaining technical control over our natural and social environments. But along with the advances of the human and natural sciences that in part guide secularization has come a sense of our human origins as emergent from time’s “dark abysses,” which according to Taylor has a dramatically decentering effect.

In the nineteenth century, for example, philosophical accounts of history and culture cast human life as part of a saga extending from time immemorial over vast stretches of time, with ours as the most recent sequence of deep, structural changes in consciousness. New forms of anthropological inquiry, along with historical-critical analyses of venerable and ostensibly stable texts and traditions, thoroughly disrupted the naive presumption of immediacy to our past. The disorienting effects of historicization in the human sciences were only intensified as the natural sciences greatly extended the temporal stage upon which the comparatively recent human drama is played. Geology and paleontology came of age by the mid-nineteenth century, as did our understanding of thermodynamics, with the effect that the history of the earth and its many geological forms could now be seen as the result of natural processes unfolding incrementally over enormous stretches of time. Indeed, it was the factor of geologic time that proved fundamental for Charles Darwin. The theory of natural selection through random mutation and heritable traits required the ingredient of time on such a scale for its plausibility.

A feeling for “dark genesis,” as Taylor puts it, finds widespread and diverse expression in our age, and with it a more palpable sense of the sublime. Through the discovery of time’s immensity, and with it the awareness that human beings have evolved from primitive organic forms over the course of billions of years, the story of our origins is one of emergence from dark and obscure depths. The astonishing diversity of species, most of them now extinct, comes increasingly to be seen as guided by impersonal laws of natural selection and self-organization rather than a benevolent,
superintending agent. The whole evolutionary process, it seems, is shot through with contingency and blind experimentation. When cast in the broader perspective of cosmic evolution, generally considered to have occurred over the course of 13.7 billion years, the goings on in our tiny corner of a mid-size galaxy among billions can seem insignificant indeed. “What is our human lifetime in comparison with the eternity of time?” wrote Diderot a century before Darwin. “There is an infinite series of tiny animals inside the fermenting atom, and the same infinite series inside that other atom called Earth. Who knows what races of animals preceded us? Who knows what races of animals will follow those that now exist?” How much more might such a sentiment be justifiable in an age that has thought its way into evolutionary theory, big-bang cosmology, and quantum mechanics!

But the sublimity of dark genesis is not only associable with cosmic and subatomic revelations of this sort. The art, psychology, philosophy, and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have thrown open new perspectives upon human depths that remain largely inexplicable but which frequently express themselves in forceful and determinative ways. Whereas a previous version of the sublime may have found a more pacific correspondence between the “starry skies above” and the “moral law within” (Kant), subsequent iterations have opened us up to a much more chaotic, irrational, and amoral inner climate. Just below our conscious awareness, and very much as a condition of such awareness, is a tangle of prerational impulses and mechanisms so convoluted and legion that any notion of the self’s unity or native innocence can seem foolishly naive.

Taylor summarizes his account of dark genesis by emphasizing at least two facets. On the one hand, by discovering ourselves as woven into the warp and woof of earth’s evolutionary history, we actually find important new sources for thoroughly rethinking the modern “buffered self’s” alienation from nonhuman reality. The discovery of our “deep nature” can in fact be rehabilitative:
We live in a nature of deep time and unfathomable spaces, from which we emerged. It is a universe which is in many ways strange and alien, and certainly unfathomable. This nourishes . . . a sense of kinship and filiation. We belong to the earth; it is our home. This sensibility is a powerful source of ecological consciousness. It is also means that we are led to think of ourselves as having a deep nature, which we need to retrieve, or perhaps overcome, something which we can find out how to do by examining our dark genesis.  

Herein lay, I think, promising resources for recovering the cosmic breadth of eschatological hope. As I shall explore more fully in a moment, this sense of “kinship” and “filiation” provides rich possibilities for nourishing the relationally starved “subject” that modernity has tended to foster. Furthermore, it allows for important dimensions of resurrection faith that have long remained dormant to become thematic once again. A robust account of resurrection faith puts our kinship and filiation with nonhuman reality squarely in view.

“On the other hand,” continues Taylor, the unfathomable and the alien facets of this universe bring us up against the gigantic, the immeasurable, the inhuman, and this moves us in different ways. As the sublime it may fill us with awe, and while reminding us how little we are, paradoxically make us aware of our greatness. The paradigm expression of this double consciousness is Pascal’s image of the reed: the human being in the universe has all the fragility of a mere reed, but its greatness lies in the fact that it is a thinking reed. But at the same time, we can sense a kinship also with the inhuman, violent, disordered in the universe; and this can trouble us, and/or utterly transform our understanding of our deep nature, discrediting the benign images of the Rousseauian tradition, and relating us to the wild, amoral, violent forces projected by post-Schopenhauerian visions.
This complex of theories, unreflective understanding and moral imagination is the dominant one in Western Civilization in our time. It saturates our world. If on the one hand our renewed sense of kinship and filiation with nonhuman reality can help us rediscover ourselves in an “enchanted” universe, aspects of this kinship and filiation may remind us not only of the shared sense of fragility that comes with such rediscovery, but also demand that we come to terms with the “wild, amoral, and violent forces” that course through our “deep nature”—a point central to the post-Schopenhauerian visions Taylor cites above. It is this unsettling aspect, I suspect, that in part propels Hopkins to break from his momentary assent to the Heraclitean picture. Having sensed something of the blunt and impersonal forces that threaten to “black out” and “beat level” even nature’s “bonniest,” an urge abruptly wells up in him—a kind of ascetic urge, as one commentator describes it—that does not so much lead him to abandon the truth that “nature’s bonfire burns on” but to wait in expectancy for some final fruition of contingent creation. It is to this hope I now turn.

III. Body, Time, and a Word

The “striking fact about the modern cosmic imaginary,” writes Taylor, “is that it is uncapturable by any one range of views. It has moved people in a whole range of directions, from (almost) the hardest materialism through to Christian orthodoxy; passing by a whole range of intermediate positions.” Even though strongly articulated axes of belief, social practice, or aesthetic sensibility might move people in one or another direction, our contemporary age is characterized by a profusion of options that leads to considerable ambiguity, and that increasingly requires the summoning of deliberate (and often eclectic) choices among them. Religious belief has more and more become, in a way that would have been inconceivable just a few centuries ago, a negotiated act. A “purely self-sufficient hu-
manism” has emerged in our age that stands as a possible alternative to theistic belief, making the latter a matter of willed affirmation rather than simply a default position. It is not my intention here to indicate what a theology in this modern cosmic imaginary must do, but only indicate what it might do, especially in view of the stance to which Hopkins alerts us: an option for an eschatological vision in which we may hope to become what Christ already is, namely, transfigured creation.

There is perhaps no more radical affirmation within the economy of Christian discourse than that through Jesus’s resurrection from the dead the eternal God has assumed the corporeality of the world into the heart of divine life—not just for a time but for eternity. “A piece of this world, real to the core,” writes Karl Rahner, “is surrendered . . . to the disposition of God, in complete obedience and love. This is Easter, and the redemption of the world.” The true scope of this free surrender and mutual acceptance between God and creation can only be properly accounted for when understood as an ontological event of the most thoroughgoing kind. So far from reducing the particularity of creation to something abstract or alien, the resurrection of Christ in fact brings that particularity into its maximal fruition. The event of Easter is one in which the totality of a single life—a life lived in utter self-givenness to the human and divine Other—achieves the end for which all creation secretly yearns, namely, eternal communion with (not absorption in) God. Herein lies the ultimate telos of creation. Indeed, creation already participates in that communion, albeit proleptically, and so is moved from within by its momentum and directionality. The risen Jesus is in no way extracted from the world’s corporeality and history. On the contrary, the risen Christ, and the Spirit of the risen Christ from whom it emanates and achieves its characteristic stamp, is to be found at the very heart of creation as the concrete and effective promise that creation is indeed going somewhere, that it is already always oriented toward an eschatological end that endows the whole of it with the future promise of a definitive and
redemptive “yes.” Such directionality cannot be thought of as inexorable. It is not a mandatory march toward some implacable end. It is much more like a “lure,” a noncoercive impulse at the core of things that, while beaconing and summoning and gently assisting, continues patiently and graciously to allow an “open space” for creaturely self-determination and active participation in its realization. After all, the appearances of the risen Christ to his earliest followers were not attended by bombast and rockets’ red glare, but were manifestations of a transfigured “presence” that phenomenally gave itself in the mode of an “absence” so as to preserve that creative, noncoercive distance that alone makes free assent and loving communion possible. “With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight” (Lk 24: 31).

To the extent such an event can be understood by those whose imaginations are shaped by its promise and call, Christ’s resurrection must be understood as establishing in an unprecedented way the “real ontological participation” between God and the flesh of this world. This means that the corporeality of the Easter event, variously rendered by the empty tomb and appearance narratives, is central to its meaning and not at all an incidental feature to be stripped away and disposed of by a demythologizing program that might cite our post-Copernican context as its motivation. Easter is an event in which “God irrevocably adopts the creature as [God’s] own reality”; “the irreversible and embryonically final beginning of the glorification and divinization of the whole reality.”19 Giving very bold expression to Easter’s cosmicity, and therefore to a Christmysticism without reserve, Rahner writes that “the world as a whole flows into his Resurrection and into the transfiguration of his body.”20 Or again: “For he rose again in his body. That means he has already begun to transform this world into himself. He has accepted the world forever. He has been born again as a child of the earth, but of the transfigured, liberated earth, the earth which in him is eternally confirmed and eternally redeemed from death and futility.”21 And yet again: “His resurrection is like the first eruption
of a volcano which shows that in the interior of the world God’s fire is already burning, and this will bring everything to blessed ardor in his light. He has risen to show that has already begun.”

Though it might seem counterintuitive to some, an imagination shaped by the Easter event is one so completely at home with affirming the essential materiality of human existence that it rightly deserves to be called “materialist.” Christians are, or are called to be, “the most sublime of materialists.” Why? Because the resurrection of Jesus explicitly means that no truly human fulfillment can be expected or should even be desired if it does not include the fulfillment of the whole of our material existence. “We neither can nor should conceive of any ultimate fullness of the spirit and of reality without thinking too of matter enduring as well in a state of final perfection.” While those who explicitly adopt the title “materialist” usually mean by it something reductionistic, a more profound and reaching materialism may be affirmed by the Christian who sees in the resurrection the in-breaking of the “festival of the future of the world.”

But what shall we say about this Easter-shaped vision in light of the contemporary social imaginary briefly sketched above? How might it be possible to maintain such an imagination in an age that increasingly situates itself within a frame of immanence?

Perhaps the first thing to say is that the affirmation of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead is no less radical or counterintuitive in our contemporary social imaginary than at any time preceding it, including the immediate context of its original proclamation. It is a mistake to assume that Jesus’s resurrection from the dead could more easily elicit assent in a previous age than today. How else to explain the initial shock and doubt of the earliest disciples who first encountered the risen Jesus? How else to explain the massive energy expended by Christian apologists in the second and third centuries to make intelligible the belief in bodily resurrection to a multitude of philosophical and aesthetic objections? It is an extraordinary claim, no matter its context. And so, even if Easter
might afford a profound “comfort” in the face of apparent nullity, as it does for Hopkins, it is a challenging consolation that must be learned and relearned.

Toward that end, we can further say this: no matter how we imagine our worlds, whether as a hierarchically ordered cosmos with prefixed and stable boundaries, or as a self-organizing universe both wild and far flung in its spatio-temporal immensity, the eschatological vision inspired by Christ’s resurrection is one that affirms our shared corporeality as the very site of salvation, a salvation that is at once immost to its cosmic-historical unfolding, and yet is given by That which transcends the field of its immanence. Allow me to expound on this formulation.

In the first place, the Resurrection affirms in a most pointed way the “corporeality of grace,” to borrow a rich phrase from Louis-Marie Chauvet. It entails the present affirmation and hoped-for transformation of our embodiment, not its final abandonment in a bid for unmediated transcendence. The affirmation of Jesus’s resurrection, so far from leading us to dualistic despair over our worldly corporeality, releases us more radically into it, and into the deep intercommunion between self and other that bodily life facilitates. We are not to imagine ourselves as Cartesian ghosts operating bodily machinery at a lever’s distance. We are our bodies, which is to say that we only come to be selves in and through the mediations and tacit dimensions (dark genesis) of our shared corporeality. The buffered self is, in point of fact, an impoverishing fiction. We are already (and always) othered-from-within. Bodily existence is ecstatic and recessive, relational and permeable, a subsistence from and vulnerability to the nonhuman Other. It is a cosmic-social body we share. The human person is in some sense a microcosm of the whole insofar as we bear the vestiges of the entire material universe in our bodies, including the biological evolution and social history of humankind. While it may be habitual for us to see the world as in some sense “out there,” as a kind of backdrop in the theater of a human play, such anthropocentrism fails to grasp that
the subject-object distinction we typically assume in our theorizations of experience is in fact comprehended and made possible by a broader, worldly horizon from which we subsist and in which we are thoroughly intertwined. However much we may insist upon the irreducible uniqueness of the human person, and however much we can ascribe unique qualities to human beings more generally, we fundamentally misrepresent ourselves as persons and human communities if we do not see ourselves as the universe itself coming-to-be. We are manifestations of the one world as it *worlds itself*. My experience of the world “out there” is therefore a unique folding or coiling of the world upon and for itself. We are “the world that thinks itself,” declares Maurice Merleau-Ponty. “The world is at the heart of our flesh.”

In a very real sense—if one that is yet incomplete—we already exist in a state of “communion” with our world through this “intercorporeity.” We may even speak here of a “eucharistic communion of creation,” as does Jürgen Moltmann, to highlight the mutual givenness and receptivity of life. “I am” only insofar as I receive. I receive my “me” from the other, both human and nonhuman; and as I do, I have the choice of resisting and resenting this relationality in a separative movement, which is the hallmark of the modern buffered self, or I can accept this gift with hospitality and gratitude so as to more fully realize the human vocation of becoming a eucharistic being. The project of reenchantment, then, is internally consistent with a faith inspired by Christ’s resurrection. It is a faith that loves *la chair*, that deep intertwining of identity and difference that forms the dynamic structure of all bodily life.

Second, the affirmation of Jesus’s resurrection is one that necessarily affirms the narrative history of creation. Not just human life, but the whole of the created order is moved by a destiny and a final vocation given by that Wholly Other who is present to yet not fully encompassable within its “immanent frame.” I wish to clarify this statement by first noting an important irony in the modern social imaginary. With the growing immanentization of transcen-
vidence that in large part characterizes our age, there has come both an intensified sense of time’s immensity as well as its homogeneity. Taylor notes this well, showing how the compression of the multi-leveled cosmos—or what he sometimes describes as its “horizontalization”—has produced a sense of “secular time” wherein all moments are viewed as undifferentiated, empty, and endlessly successive.\textsuperscript{31} This is not to suggest that modern time-consciousness is entirely characterizable thusly,\textsuperscript{32} but in contrast with what another, earlier age may have imagined about the narrative structure of cosmic and human history—the sort of deep structure we can readily associate with an eschatological view of the world—“we tend to see our lives exclusively within the horizontal flow of secular time. . . . We have constructed an environment in which we live a uniform, univocal secular time, which we try to measure and control in order to get things done.”\textsuperscript{33} Here Taylor sees the threat of what Max Weber called modernity’s “iron cage,” one in which human beings are abandoned to their managed immanence.

Hence, we may ask, is time going anywhere, or is life just “one damned thing after another”? Does our human-cosmic drama have a destination, a redeeming telic goal that impels that drama from within, or does it unfold haplessly and without so much as the promise of a final, eschatological word? Does time heap up with richness in texture and meaning, gravitated by an ultimate horizon that fulfills while transcending it, or does it spill forth with no greater prospect beyond what death will ultimately blot out? Is time kairotic or merely chronic?

It is here, finally, where a decisive contrast must be drawn between the adequacy of a Heraclitean vision (repristinated and valorized in Nietzsche’s embrace of the “eternal return”) and the eschatological vision inspired by Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. It is just the sort of disjunctive space that breaks open mid-line in Hopkins’s sonnet (“Enough! The Resurrection”). Johann Baptist Metz agrees, arguing that a thoroughly immanentized time-consciousness closes off the Wholly Other from what is
already possessed or possessable from within. The modern concept of time, however vast its horizontal extension, tends to be “empty” and “enclosed without grace.”

Nothing is ever really “new,” but all is encompassed within a “closed system,” a “totality” wherein time runs its course in endless monotony. Because modernity’s time-horizon is not often attendant to radical interruption and surprise, because it views time in terms of an endless continuum, as a self-generating process operating strictly from its own resources, we increasingly lose what from an eschatological point of view is so basic to human flourishing: hope.

Jesus’s resurrection from the dead is a rupture, an *apocalypsis*, God’s gracious in-breaking into the circle of the same, an event that gives our cosmic and human drama the promise of definitive fulfillment. From a Christian point of view Easter reveals the inmost hope of creation, showing that despite its many vicissitudes, sufferings, and disasters, our history is catalyzed by the promise made concrete and effective in Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. It is “God’s time,” as Karl Barth puts it, a sequence of unsubstitutable moments that have their ultimate dignity and worth conferred upon them by an eschatological Word. Jesus’s resurrection is, after all, an event that disrupts the finality of death, including violent and unjust death. By raising Jesus from the dead God has given death a verbal structure. Death no longer constitutes an unbreachable vacuum that threatens life with the specter of nullity. Neither can death finally conceal history’s injustices and sufferings. In remembering the dead within the narrative structure of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, we allow what has become vanquished to penetrate our memory and open it toward a redemptive future.

Resurrection memory serves as a protest, grounded ultimately in eschatological hope, or a “hope against all hope,” that those who succumb to the leveling down of time’s relentless flow, and especially those whose life intervals are filled with injustice and untold suffering, have a reconciled future that cannot be achieved within our field of immanence alone. Intersected thusly by a redemptive,
transcendent horizon (whether we speak of this horizon as beckoning us from above or beyond hardly matters), we may look at the history of suffering all the more unflinchingly, pace Nietzsche. The sufferings of others, including those of the dead, are not simply to be accepted (and ultimately justified) as a necessarily tragic aspect of the world process, but are the as-yet unreconciled eventualities of our contingent history that continue to speak to the living as a summons for making our history a more just and beautiful one.

Eschatological hope of this sort does not require a specific cosmological picture for its meaningful articulation. Although it stands in critical contrast with a cyclical view of time—something that fairly well describes every tragic vision, whether of ancient or recent vintage—an eschatological vision inspired by the resurrection is certainly capable of integrating the greatly expanded cosmological pictures that our natural sciences continue to unveil. Moreover, while several other aspects of secularization might rightly stand in need of robust criticism from a theological point of view—one may think of the buffered self as especially susceptible to critique—secularization as such should not be thought of as inimical to robust eschatological hope. To the extent that the Christian view of God as transcendent is one of the enabling conditions for the process of secularization itself, it also affirms the fundamental goodness of contingent creation by claiming for it a final, eschatological destiny precisely as creation. The Incarnation and Resurrection together affirm a supremely rich finality for creation in a way that also preserves the ontological difference between God and creation. If this is so, then the process of secularization is, in principle, one that can be appreciated as a gift precisely because creation is itself a generous “letting be” in which God gives to it an open space within which to exhibit creativity, self-organization, and the possibility to respond, without coercion, to the divine offer of love. The immensity of time is not a directionless or cyclical wasteland that haunts all edges of life with the threat of nullity; rather, it is the gift of a “distance” that makes possible free communion between God and creation.
IV. Being in an Open Space

To expand upon these last few statements, if only briefly, I conclude with a meditation upon this gift of distance, and the paradox of divine presence and absence that constitutes the sort of God-world relationship that makes creaturely self-determination possible.

In his consideration of time’s immensity, and the discoveries of such impersonal laws like gravity and the protracted processes of natural selection and self-organization, John Haught argues that the very sense of the sublime they can evoke, and that can lead some to declare human existence as bereft of any transcendent purpose, may in fact be interpreted as the condition for a more profound form of divine intimacy. A God of noncoercive love, argues Haught, would establish for the world “its own autonomous principles of operation,” including the temporality for their creative unfolding. The possibility for creaturely self-transcendence, which is what the processes of natural selection and self-organization precisely enable, presupposes a divine self-distancing—the gift of an open space, we might say—as its condition. “This ‘self-distancing’ of God,” writes Haught, “is in no sense apathy but, paradoxically, a most intimate form of involvement.”

In other words, God is nothing like the otiose and remote first cause of deism; for it is out of a longing to relate deeply to the world that God foregoes any annihilating “presence” to the world. This retracting “presence,” however, is the very condition of dialogical intimacy. God’s will is that the world becomes more and more independent, and that during its evolution its own internal coherence intensify, not diminish. But this “absent” God is “present” to and deeply united with the evolving world precisely by virtue of selflessly allowing it to achieve ever deeper autonomy—which occurs most obviously in the evolutionary emergence of human freedom. The God of self-giving compassion is in fact the only God that normative Christian faith can claim legitimately ever to have
encountered, and yet this founding intuition about the nature of ultimate reality all too seldom enters into our thoughts about whether the universe has a “point” to it, or whether the evolution of life can be reconciled with religious hope.\textsuperscript{42}

Such an assessment in no way denies the dramatic transition in our social imaginaries outlined by Taylor above, but interprets that transition in light of a Christian theology of creation that affirms the contingent freedom of creation as a divine gift. This can only seem counterintuitive to those whose preconceptions of divine reality situate God and creation in a contrastive relationship, or who imagine divine influence within or upon the world as the work of a nervous cosmic manager. One of the possible outcomes of a God-world relationship constituted in the way Christian theology envisions it—namely, as structured by a qualitative difference in which the transcendent creator God gives to contingent creation the open space for its own self-actualization—is that the world and its inner processes can be interpreted within the sphere of its immanence. Such an interpretation must be possible if, indeed, creaturely freedom is genuinely free; if creation is not simply coincident with or an emanation of God. Interpretive ambiguity is therefore at the heart of our experience of the God-world relationship. On the one hand, we can plausibly view the immensity of time, our dark genesis, the indeterminacies built into the fabric of physical and biological processes, and the unpredictable eventualities of history as utterly lacking some underlying or transcendent telos, in which case some version of the (tragic) sublime is all but inevitable in assessing their final significance. On the other hand, we can view those very immensities, indeterminacies, and unpredictable eventualities as the conditions that make possible a free creation that can actively participate in the formation of its own unwritten future, and thus as a field of openness into which creation may continually grow in its cocreation with God. “God’s humble self-withdrawal,” writes Haught, “takes the form of God’s being the inexhaustible
‘futurity’ whose continuous arrival into the present is always restrained enough to allow the cosmos to achieve its own independent evolution.”

Within such a perspective, Jesus’s resurrection from the dead can be seen as the eschatological and ontologically definitive promise God makes to an open creation: a promise that, while in no way compelling a particular script for our as-yet unwritten future, nevertheless reveals that amidst all the risks, sufferings and ambiguities that such openness entails, creation is heir to a definitive and just future that shall never pass away.

Of course, it is possible to find oneself moved simultaneously and in different ways by both of these positions, which is why Hopkins’s sonnet is so striking. Although he clearly opts for an eschatological vision—there is no ambiguity about that—still “nature’s bonfire burns on.” Such is an indication of the negotiated act the poet makes in embracing an eschatological vision over a tragic vision. The possibility of the latter is not denied, but is instead encompassed within the broader horizon of transcendent hope. Which is why when Hopkins speaks of the comfort of the resurrection, there is nothing quaint about it. However much consolation such hope may provide for the time being, it is hardly one that absolves those who embrace it from squarely facing the travails that attend an open creation (Rom 8: 22). Indeed, it is a hope that opens up desire to a yearning for an eschatological end that nothing within our field of immanence can ultimately satisfy.

Notes

1. “This world, the same for all, neither any of the gods nor any man has made, but it always was, and is, and shall be, an ever living fire, kindled in due measure, and in due measure extinguished,” The Fragments of the Work of Heraclitus of Ephesus on Nature, trans. G. T. W. Patrick (Baltimore: N. Murray, 1889), 88–89.


4. Ibid., 173.
5. Ibid., 323, 325.
8. See Taylor’s treatment of this in his analysis of the “disciplinary society,” esp. 90–145 of A Secular Age.
11. Some of the figures Taylor specifically associates with the sublimity of inner wilderness include Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, Henry David Thoreau, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence and Robinson Jeffers.
12. Taylor, A Secular Age, 347.
13. Ibid.
14. One thinks most immediately of Nietzsche’s revalorization of Heraclitus in this regard. “[Heraclitus’s] affirmation of transitoriness and destruction, the decisive element in dionysian philosophy, affirmation of antithesis and war, becoming with a radical rejection even of the concept of ‘being’—in this I must in any event recognize what is most closely related to me of anything that has been though hitherto” (Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is, trans. R. J. Hollingsdale [New York: Penguin Books, 1979], 81).
17. Ibid., 18. For more on this “open space” between belief and unbelief, which, according to Taylor, was first given systematic expression by William James, see Charles Taylor, The Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).
22. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
30. The phrase is Taylor's. See *A Secular Age*, ch. 15.
31. “A purely secular time-understanding allows us to imagine society ‘horizontally,’ unrelated to any ‘high points,’ where the ordinary sequence of events touches higher time, and therefore without recognizing any privileged persons or agencies—such as kings or priests—who stand and mediate at such alleged points. This radical horizontality is precisely what is implied in the direct access society, where each member is ‘immediate to the whole’” (Ibid., 209). Taylor is particularly influenced here by Benedict Anderson’s discussion in *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).
33. Ibid., 59.
35. Annie Dillard beautifully captures something of the tragic fatalism lurking within such a view: “No gods have power to save. There are only days. The one great god abandoned us to days, to time’s tumult of occasions, abandoned us to the gods of days each brute and amok in his hugeness and idiocy” (*Holy the Firm* [New York: Harper & Row, 1977], 43).
37. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 100–118.
38. Consider the following comment from Alfred North Whitehead: “The pilgrim fathers of the scientific imagination as it exists today are the great tragedians of ancient Athens, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides. Their vision of fate, remorseless and indifferent, urging a tragic incident to its inevitable issue, is the vision possessed by science. Fate in Greek Tragedy becomes the order of nature in modern thought” (*Science and the Modern World* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997], 10).
39. Numerous examples of this integration abound, including that found in the work
of Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and, more recently in the religion and science dialogue, John Polkinghorne, Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, Nancey Murphy, Phillip Clayton, and John Haught.

40. Though it is not possible to explore further here, Taylor’s account of secularization includes an extensive analysis of the “affirmation of ordinary life” that a strongly “incarnational spirituality” makes axiomatic (*A Secular Age*, 142–45). Here especially Taylor is influenced by Louis Dupré’s similar insistence in his *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).


43. Ibid., 119.