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CULTURE

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From Nature to Creation

*A Christian Vision for Understanding
and Loving Our World*

Norman Wirzba


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Perceiving Creation

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

What is knowledge? The experience of eternal life. And what is eternal life? The experience of all things in God. For love comes from meeting God. Knowledge united to God fulfills every desire. And for the heart that receives it, it is altogether sweetness overflowing onto the earth. Indeed, there is nothing like the sweetness of God.

Saint Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetic Treatises*

In a letter to his son written near the end of his life, the painter Paul Cézanne reflected on the immense difficulty he was having trying to represent in paint what he was perceiving around himself:

I must tell you that as a painter I am becoming more clear-sighted before nature, but that with me the realization of my sensations

is always painful. I cannot attain the intensity that is unfolded before my sense. I have not the magnificent richness of colouring that animates nature. Here on the bank of the river the motifs multiply, the same subject seen from a different angle offers subject for study of the most powerful interest and so varied that I think I could occupy myself for months without changing place, by turning now more to the right, now more to the left.¹

Though having spent a lifetime developing his powers of attention and perception, Cézanne admits that the world presents him with an intensity and richness of color, light, shape, and texture that he simply cannot convey in his work. How can anyone fully communicate the life and movement and mystery of the world? And so the experience of sensation is accompanied by pain, and the knowledge that despite his best efforts there is an endlessness and depth to the world that will forever elude him. The best that he can do is struggle to bear witness to a world in all its complexity and intricacy and interest. Sometimes this struggle would even take him to an apophatic place, a place of silence and restraint, requiring of him that he leave blank spaces on the canvas so as not to impose a fixed form on a reality that is boundless in its dynamism and points of contact.

The poet Mary Oliver speaks similarly and often about the failure of reason and language to communicate the grace of the world. Though having spent a lifetime attending to the beauties and terrors of the places around her, she hardly knows how to get in the right position to take in what she experiences. Can we be present to others without being an imposition on them? What forms of witness are faithful to what is there before us? Seeing a seal pup on a beach, for instance, she slowly approaches and lies down, her back to the pup. Eventually the pup rolls over, with its side against Oliver's back.

... and so we touched, and maybe
our breathing together was some kind of heavenly
conversation

1. Paul Cézanne, *Letters*, ed. John Rewald, trans. Marguerite Kay (New York: Da Capo, 1995), 327, quoted in Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 172-73.

in God's delicate and magnifying language, the one
we don't dare speak out loud,
not yet.²

On seeing roses in some dunes, again she comes close, calms
her breathing, and then asks,

Oh sweetness pure and simple, may I join you?

I lie down next to them, on the sand. But to tell
about what happens next, truly I need help.

*Will somebody or something please start to sing?*³

It is as though we first need to listen carefully and patiently for
the pulse and song of the world, take its movement deep within
our heart and breath, so that we can then imagine and attempt
a sympathetic, harmonious sound from out of ourselves.

The testimonies of Cézanne and Oliver demonstrate that
we are fooling ourselves if we think that an honest and faithful
perception of the world is a simple or automatic thing. Clear,
detailed, and deep perceiving requires considerable patience,
skill, and commitment. To what extent are people in a position
to develop these powers of perception? If we do learn to get
close, do we have the appropriate forms to communicate what
happens? If our powers of perception are underdeveloped or
inadequate, how can we be expected to engage the world as
God's creation, or hope to come to what Saint Isaac the Syrian
called eternal life, the "experience of all things in God"?

In this chapter we will begin by considering how something
like a faithful perception of the world has been rendered more
difficult by the practices and patterns of contemporary life.
Next, I will develop what can be called an iconic modality of
perception, a mode of engagement with the world that is in-
spired by God's own involvement in the world in the person of
Jesus Christ. In calling us to this "iconic" modality I do not mean
that we each need formally to join an Orthodox congregation
(though we certainly have much to learn from this tradition)

2. Mary Oliver, "The Return," in *What Do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems*
(Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2002), 9.

3. Oliver, "The Roses," in *ibid.*, 20 (emphasis original).

but rather that we should develop the ascetic disciplines and
habits of being that address those passions that prevent us from
loving, and thus properly perceiving, others. This iconic modal-
ity of approaching and sensing the world represents a reversal
of the idolatrous impulse described in the previous chapter,
and so makes possible a hospitable embrace of the world. Put
summarily, to perceive the world as God's creation, it is crucial
that people develop the postures and practices made manifest in
Jesus, the true icon of God who reveals to us in his flesh God's
way of being with creatures (Col. 1:15).

The Clouding of Perception

*use this to
call out
parables to
perception*

The anthropologist Marc Augé has argued that in a time of
supermodernity more and more people live in "non-places,"
meaning that the relationships that bind us to, and hold our
interest in, a particular place are being steadily eroded by the
goals, speed, and anonymity of today's global economy. Given
the transient and frenetic character of so much of life, we have
good reason to wonder if boredom and blindness, rather than
affection and attention, will be defining features of our age.⁴
Though people are physically in the world, they do not often
know where they are because their movements take them quickly
across, rather than patiently *into*, the places of their life.

To appreciate the difference, contrast Cézanne's realization
that he could spend months focusing his sensory capacities on
the same riverbank with the contemporary experience of harried
and hurried workers who spend much of their time in transit,
in stores, and in hotels, often glued to a phone or screen. Little
real contact, let alone abiding relationship, is possible in this
sort of world. When attempts to establish contact are made,
they often occur in homogenous, stylized spaces (a strip mall
or cookie-cutter housing development) or are met with imper-
sonal, anonymous responses (as from a computer-generated
voice). The end result of this situation is that senses deaden
and affections wither, even as the volume and pyrotechnics of
stimuli increase. Many people are slowly losing the ability to

4. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-
modernity*, 4th ed. (London: Verso, 2008).

feel alive to and inspired by the places in which they move. For them to have to look at a riverbank, even for one hour, could be interpreted only as an invitation to boredom, or perhaps a punishment.

It would be unfair to blame individual people for this development. Massive and systemic changes in culture and economy have made it very unlikely that something like a patient and affectionate attachment to place will occur. Beginning in our education systems, but then continuing in the way we think about professional advancement, the messaging is clear: life is better elsewhere.⁵ Neither family, community, nor employers seem to have the power or the attraction to hold individuals in a place. And so people must be ready to move at any moment to seize whatever opportunity comes their way.⁶ The end result is that a growing segment of today's population has no idea where they wish to be buried.⁷

Lacking direct, practical, sustained engagement with particular places (and the knowledge that comes from such engagement), consumers in today's global economy find themselves more and more dependent on how the world is presented to them on the world wide web and how it is mediated by marketers, software programmers, app designers, news analysts, and politicians. To consume the world people need to know very little about it. All they need is a credit card and an internet connection. Because so few people have a direct hand in the production of the means of their daily sustenance, it is fair to say that never in history have so many been so ignorant of the contexts and conditions, the vulnerabilities and possibilities, of life.

In 1967 the French critical theorist Guy Debord opened his famous book *The Society of the Spectacle* with these words: "The whole life of those societies in which modern practices of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation

5. See the various essays in *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, ed. William Vitek and Wes Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), esp. Eric Zencey, "The Rootless Professors."

6. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman traces several of these developments in *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000) and *Liquid Love* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

7. For an insightful discussion on why this matters, see Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

of spectacles. All that once was lived directly has become mere representation."⁸ By the "spectacle" Debord did not only mean an image, but the power of consumer and media outlets to shape human life around the acquisition of commodities and images. Simply by purchasing the right clothes or driving the right car one could display one's identification with a social or economic class and the image it signified. Debord believed that the character of human relationships was being fundamentally altered by the spectacle as people were becoming more passive and subject to various forms of market manipulation. An image of life, as presented in various forms of mass advertising campaigns, had come to shape how life is imagined and pursued.

Debord argued that human life had become impoverished and rendered inauthentic by these images because the acquisition of commodities now supplanted relationships with people and places. In the age of the spectacle, the value of things is determined by how well they can be made to be emblematic of a particular style. Who people are is a matter not of *being* a certain kind of person but of *having* the kinds of commodities that will give the appearance of a particular kind of persona or image. The shift from being to having to appearing is momentous because it leads to the diminishment of the capacity of people to engage the life of the world.⁹ In the society of the spectacle, people see an image of what they like and then alter themselves and their world—normally by shopping—to try to match the image. According to Debord, mass-media marketing had taken the place of religion because the inspiration and goals

8. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 12 (emphasis original).

9. In *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), Steven Best and Douglas Kellner give the following helpful summary:

For Debord, the spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization; it is a "permanent opium war" that stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life: recovering the full range of their human powers through creative practice. In Debord's formulation, the concept of the spectacle is integrally connected to the concept of separation, for in passively consuming spectacles, one is separated from other people and from actively producing one's life. Capitalist society separates workers from the product of their labor, art from life, and spheres of production from consumption, all of which involve spectators passively observing the products of social life. (84)

So W.
Blake

of practical life now circulated around possibilities offered in stores rather than in a church.

Since the time of Debord's writing, a great deal has happened to exacerbate the conditions of alienation he described. With the development of web-based shopping, social media, and a plethora of information/infotainment outlets, people can now tailor their experience of the world to an image of the life they want to have. If you don't like how the news is being presented on PBS, no problem. You can easily switch to Fox News or Al Jazeera. Material imperfections of color and shape can easily be adjusted at the click of a mouse or the sweep of an airbrush. At the same time, technological devices of all kinds are being steadily invented to give us experiences of the world on demand and as we desire. If you don't like seeing homeless people, no problem. Contact lenses are being developed that will make them disappear from view. The cultural critic Evgeny Morozov writes,

Even boredom seems to be in its last throes: designers in Japan have found a way to make our train trips perpetually fun-filled. With the help of an iPhone, a projector, a GPS module and Microsoft's Kinect motion sensor, their contrivance allows riders to add new objects to what they see "outside," thus enlivening the bleak landscape in their train windows. This could be a big hit in North Korea—and not just on trains.¹⁰

Media platforms and technological devices are not simply neutral tools that we use to move through life. Their power is much more extensive, because they shape and frame what we perceive and understand the world to be. When people spend enough time in front of screens, it becomes all but inevitable that the whole world takes on the character of something to be watched. Given the technologies we now have for manipulating screens in whatever fashion we like to suit our own particular tastes, if we find the *Mona Lisa* boring, no problem. We can run the image through the Fatify app or add the graphics and colors we like to make it amusing or better than the original!

10. Evgeny Morozov, "The Perils of Perfection," in *New York Times Sunday Review*, March 2, 2013 (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/opinion/sunday/the-perils-of-perfection.html?_r=0). Thanks to Elliott Haught for alerting me to Morozov's work in his 2014 Duke Divinity School master's thesis, "Devices and Discipleship: On Living Faithfully in the Digital Age."

Should we be surprised that people often find the world uninteresting and dull?

Technological devices also have tremendous power to shape who we are as people. Consider the idea at work in an app like Seesaw. This app enables its users to crowdsource decisions, meaning you can run instant polls of your friends to get advice on what to buy, where to live, and what to do. Again, Morozov: "Seesaw offers an interesting twist on how we think about feedback and failure. It used to be that we bought things to impress our friends, fully aware that they might not like our purchases. Now this logic is inverted: if something impresses our friends, we buy it. The risks of rejection have been minimized; we know well in advance how many Facebook 'likes' our every decision would accumulate."¹¹ Silicon Valley's engineers and programmers (and their well-funded backers) aim to give us a "frictionless future," a world that is without opacity, ambiguity, and imperfection. This is a world in which the ideas of human agency and responsibility, and the skills of attention and affection, are fundamentally transformed.¹² This is a world remade to match the desires and expectations we have (or are encouraged by marketers and gurus to have).

My point is not to say that all technological innovations and devices are uniformly bad. It is, rather, to note how the experience of reality can be transformed such that, rather than experiencing "all things in God," and as part of a divine drama moving toward the reconciliation of all things, we increasingly experience "ourselves in all things." To live in today's

11. Morozov, "Perils of Perfection."

12. In *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), Morozov says,

Imperfection, ambiguity, opacity, disorder, and the opportunity to err, sin, to do the wrong thing: all of these are constitutive of human freedom, and any concentrated attempt to root them out will root out that freedom as well. If we don't find the strength and the courage to escape the silicon mentality that fuels much of the current quest for technological perfection, we risk finding ourselves with a politics devoid of everything that makes politics desirable, with humans who have lost their basic capacity for moral reasoning, with lackluster (if not moribund) cultural institutions that don't take risks and only care about their financial bottom lines, and, most terrifyingly, with a perfectly controlled social environment that would make dissent not just impossible but possibly even unthinkable. (xii)

media-saturated, consumer-oriented world means that what the world *is*—how it signifies and what value it bears—is becoming more and more a reflection of how we want the world to be. Why live in the world as given, or commit to the nurture and healing of a wounded world, when we can instead live within a simulated version of it, a version in which we can set the terms of our living?¹³

In the previous chapter I suggested that in the time of industrial, technological, and consumerist modernity, idolatry has become the dominant mode of perception. By idolatry I did not simply mean the fabrication of statues or monuments to our own self-glorification, though there is ample evidence of that. I meant, rather, a form of perception (and thus also a capacity for apprehension) in which what is seen reflects the ambition, anxiety, insecurity, hubris—the deep desire—of the one perceiving. To gaze at things idolatrously is to put in motion ways of naming and narration—and thus also practical and economic forms of engagement with the world—that establish us as the centers and bestowers of value and significance. This is why Jean-Luc Marion says idols function as mirrors reflecting the scope of the viewer's aim. In an idolatrous context we cannot see things as they are. We see them for what we desire them to be. Our situation is made all the more difficult by the fact that we are mostly oblivious to the idolatrous, mirrorlike character of the seeing we do. The effect of so much of our culture's training is to convince us that we really are the center around which the world moves.¹⁴

13. The French social theorist Jean Baudrillard argued in books like *Simulacra and Simulation* that the power of simulation had become so great that people could no longer distinguish between reality and illusion. Postmodernity, for him, is the time in which the distinction between reality and unreality has been erased. As Best and Kellner note, "In a hyperreal postmodern world, reality is dissipated and depleted; it loses its power and force through its cultural processing, through mechanical reproduction and the proliferation of illusions and pseudo-forms" (*Postmodern Turn*, 102).

14. The anthropologist Thomas de Zengotita, in *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), describes the aim of modernity as the replacing of God with the "Me" who expects the fulfillment of every desire. No matter where this "Me" looks, it can now expect to find politicians, marketers, teachers, preachers seeking to please. "They want you reclining there, on the anonymous side of the screen, while they

Is a nonidolatrous form of perception possible? I believe this is a critical question, because what is at stake is the truth of the world and the possibility of our being able to live responsibly and faithfully within it. Idolatry is destroying our world. It is destroying our fields and watersheds, just as it is destroying our neighborhoods and families, because it replaces a vision of how God wants the world to be with a vision for how we want it to be. Idolatry undermines the possibility that we might live fully into ourselves as creatures made by God to love each other, and in doing so experience and contribute to the goodness and beauty of all that God has made.

One major reason the idolatrous impulse is so dangerous is that it makes fidelity to others nearly impossible. To see what I mean, consider Wendell Berry's account of the farmer who has just purchased a new section of land. A good farmer will take time to determine what the limits and potential of the land are and then work carefully so as to enhance its potential and minimize its damage. She will see, for instance, that the pasture can sustain only a small herd. To add more, perhaps with the hope of increased profit, would be to injure the field and compromise its carrying capacity. The temptation is to come to the land with all kinds of expectations and dreams of what the land will do for her, and thus violate the limits and the possibilities that are genuinely within it. In other words, the danger is that the farmer will see the land not for what it is but for what she wishes it to be.¹⁵

The situation here is not unlike that of the newly married groom or bride who comes to the marriage with an idealized picture of his or her new spouse. The problem is that no spouse can, or should, live up to another's ideal, because the aim of marital love is to welcome the other as the unique person that he or she is. The work of marriage is to come into the presence of each other so that each can help the other develop to full

parade before you, purveyors of every conceivable blandishment, every form of pleasure, every kind of comfort and consolation, every kind of thrill, every kind of provocation—anything you want. You're the customer, after all, you're the voter, you're the reader, you're the viewer—you're the boss" (268).

15. Wendell Berry, "People, Land, and Community," in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002), 186–87.

potential and overcome his or her failings. Fidelity disappears when a spouse does not recognize, honor, and nurture the other so that the other can maximally be himself or herself. The marriage is bound to wither and fail so long as the spouses remain committed to the *idea* they have of each other and do not see each other for who they are.

How is fidelity to be achieved? By developing appropriate forms of discipline. Berry describes the discipline of good farming in the following way:

If one's sight is clear and if one stays on and works well, one's love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one's visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it. Vision, possibility, work, and life—all have changed by mutual correction. Correct discipline, given enough time, gradually removes one's self from one's line of sight. One works to better purpose then and makes fewer mistakes, because at last one sees where one is. Two human possibilities of the highest order thus come within reach: what one wants can become the same as what one has, and one's knowledge can cause respect for what one knows.¹⁶

Discipline is the key because it is in the daily work of taming one's ambition and cultivating the skills of care and compassion that an embrace of the world in its grace and depth becomes possible. The discipline talked about here is not unlike the posture that Mary Oliver seeks, an embodied posture in which people move close so as to listen, and then carefully respond in sympathy and harmony with the world around. As we will soon see, the Christian name for this discipline is discipleship.

Iconic Perception?

It is now time to develop an "iconic" form and mode of perception. By iconic I mean a perceptive approach to things in which others are not reduced to the scope of utilitarian and instrumental aims. In this mode of perception, people are called to open themselves to the integrity and sanctity of the world,

16. Ibid., 187.

what William Blake once called the world's holiness.¹⁷ What is seen in an iconic mode is not the effect and fulfillment of the gazer's desire, because in an icon we are presented with a depth and transcendence that overwhelms us and calls into question the expectations through which we approached it in the first place. In the welcome of this overwhelming, a new form of subjectivity begins to take shape.

Marion says that in iconic seeing the invisible saturates the visible, giving to what is seen a depth and immensity that eludes capture. "The icon summons the gaze to surpass itself by never freezing on a visible. . . . The gaze can never rest or settle if it looks at an icon; it always must rebound upon the visible, in order to go back in it up the infinite stream of the invisible. In this sense, the icon makes visible only by giving rise to an infinite gaze."¹⁸ This gaze is infinite because in the icon we are invited to look beyond its surface features to an excess of meaning and significance that is inspired and nourished by the infinite God who calls it into being. No meaning that we could give exhausts the other, and so all perception is an invitation to depth, a call to look with greater patience, attentiveness, and love. As Marion notes elsewhere, when we recognize that we cannot assign "a single meaning to the immensity of lived experiences," then a "hermeneutic without end" is put in motion, a hermeneutic that constitutes us as bearing testimony to a world that exceeds comprehension. We are no longer transcendental egos constituting the world. Instead, we are witnesses constituted by what happens to us.¹⁹

Iconic perception teaches that love is the crucial and most authentic movement of seeing. Why? Because love, when it is true, resists and refuses the idolatrous impulse. Love does not pretend to comprehend, nor does it mean to take the other as a possession or object of control. Love begins with the acknowledgment of another's integrity, and proceeds with a disposition

17. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake says, "For every thing that lives is holy" (in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, rev. ed. [New York: Doubleday, 1988], 45). In this same work he affirms the divine presence at work in creation by observing that "Energy is Eternal Delight" (34).

18. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 18.

19. Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 112-13.

of fidelity in the face of surprise, bewilderment, and unknowing. To look with the power of love is to want to see another in all of the other's uniqueness and particularity. How often do we pause and stand amazed before the unique mystery that another is? Love is the welcoming and hospitable gesture that makes oneself available to others, sets them free to be themselves, and nourishes them in the ways of life. As the apostle Paul put it, love "does not insist on its own way," but instead "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (1 Cor. 13:5-8). Iconic seeing never ends because the divine love that founds the world is inexhaustible in its variety and extent. To try to match it with our speech or representations would take forever.

illiv. bur. The movement from idolatrous to iconic seeing is, as we shall see, anything but easy, because what is at stake (and in question) is our presumed position in the world. If idols and icons establish what we perceive the being of things to be, they also express our manner of being in the world. For instance, to see the world around us primarily as a warehouse or store of "consumable goods" presupposes that we understand ourselves to be shoppers who move through this world with the ignorance and ease of the credit card swipe. Things are presented/marketed to us as commodities that are more or less desirable. We cover the role of ourselves as sovereign agents who have the freedom to select from among these commodities and who, in making these selections, construct the identities we desire.²⁰ Shopping can thus represent a way of being in the world that secures personal prestige, comfort, convenience, and control. Why would anyone want to give up a way of being in the world in which we have to know and do so little to get so much?

To recognize that our ways of seeing grow out of and perpetuate ways of being in the world is also to recognize that a transformation of vision goes hand in hand with a transformation of life. To move from an idolatrous to an iconic way of

20. In *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), William Cavanaugh shows that in a consumerist world the freedom achieved has the effect of further separating people from the world in which they consume. The freedom at work is the ability not simply to purchase something (and thus perhaps claim responsibility for it) but to stand above the world as the one who could always choose otherwise.

seeing requires that we approach, apprehend, and engage the world around us in fundamentally different ways. Put simply, we cannot learn to perceive the world *as God's creation* if we do not at the same time also learn to live in ways that make that kind of perception possible.

Seeing creation is no small or easy thing, because much more is at stake than a few ideas about how we think the world began. Viewed biblically, the term "creation" designates a moral and spiritual topography that situates all things in relationship with each other and with God. That means the teaching of creation is about the "character" of the world and the health of the relationships that are operative within it. As Paul Blowers has recently shown, among early church writers creation was understood in an expansive way as the cosmic sweep of God's redemptive activity. As such, creation was a Triune act and could not be understood apart from the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit to lead creation toward its fulfillment and perfection.²¹ To commit to seeing the world *as creation*, therefore, had the practical effect of calling people to *participate* in God's redemptive work.

It is an act of faith and love to see the world in this way, because what we are doing, in the most basic sense, is engaging the world in ways that do not insist on our own way. Why? Because God's ways with the world are believed to be prior and determinative, and because God's love is utterly noncoercive, enabling creatures to move into the fullness of their life. Faith, to slightly modify a formulation by Hans Urs von Balthasar, is the willingness to allow God's love both in and for the world to have its way.²² It is to allow this creative love to inspire, shape, and direct our love in the world. To believe that the world is

21. Blowers observes that "the conviction of many patristic interpreters was that the advent of Christ inaugurates the new, eschatological creation where the gracious, intimate presence of the Creator in and with the creation will finally be manifested as 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28)" (*Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 2). Because creation is a Triune act, "The Spirit was ever at work in constituting, animating, sanctifying, beautifying, and consummating creation—in ways believed to be a cooperation in, and completion of, the work of the Father and the Son" (14).

22. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *Theology: The New Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 401.

creation is, therefore, an act in which we discover ourselves constituted *as creatures* to live into our relationships with others in ways that testify to the divine love everywhere already at work in the world. When we learn to love as God loves, our perception is changed because we now encounter and respond to others so as to nurture them in their life. As I develop my account of disciplined perception, I will draw from the traditions of iconography and monasticism, since both are schools devoted to the correction and instruction of Christian vision. But first, a look at Scripture.

Biblical scholar Ellen Davis says that the moments are rare in the Bible when an author takes us into God's experience of seeing the world: "Biblical narrative usually confines itself to externals; it tells us what a character (including God) said or did. Only occasionally does it move inside the eyes, to tell us what and how someone saw, and when it does so, the specific perception is important."²³ One of these unusual moments occurs at the very beginning when we as readers are given a glimpse of how God sees creation as it is being made. As we have yet to discover, what gives the world its character *as creation* is precisely that God sees it in a particular way.²⁴

The Genesis 1 poem is regularly punctuated with the refrain, "And God saw that it was good" (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Verse 31 repeats and emphasizes the refrain as a summative assessment: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." Creation's goodness—its beauty and splendor, the very quality about it that makes God pause to behold it in moments of rapt attention and appreciation—is a reflection of God's perception of it. Far from simply being a fact about the world, the world's goodness—its character and what establishes it as God's creation—stems from God's way of approaching and engaging the world. But for us to try to perceive as God does involves a double seeing: God sees

23. Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 46.

24. Another key passage illuminating how God perceives creation can be found in God's two speeches to Job in Job 38–41. What emerges is God's detailed, attentive regard for the great breadth and depth of creation. God clearly delights in creatures, even those—like the mighty Behemoth and Leviathan—having the power to crush humans.

the creature made, but also the divine creative work that is bringing it into beautiful being. God, in other words, in seeing a creature also sees the divine *creativity* and *intention* that makes and lets it be.

To appreciate more deeply God's mode of perception we need to attend to what happens on the seventh day. Looking out onto that first Sabbath sunrise, God sees the hospitable love that "makes room" for what is not God to be and to flourish. Divine love is the action that brings creation into being, which means that *God sees each creature and his own love at the same time*.²⁵ Seeing the night and the day, the water and the dry land, the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and the creeping things and wild animals of the earth, God also sees the divine love that desires each and every thing to be the unique thing that it is. In other words, a tree, when seen by God, is never simply a vertical log with varying kinds of foliage or some amount of lumber. A tree is also, and more fundamentally, *an incarnation of God's love—made visible, tactile, and fragrant as a giant redwood or cedar of Lebanon. Perceiving the diverse forms of creation and the love that holds and sustains them in their being, God "rests."*

God's *shabbat* has nothing to do with God being tired or worn out from the labor of creating. Instead it points to the delight God finds in beholding the world, and the delight God expresses in loving the world into being. God's rest, quite unlike our own, is not a means of escape from the pressures and strains of the world. It couldn't be, because God's world is saturated and sustained by love, and love results in *relationship* rather than alienation, *hospitality* rather than separation. God's rest is a perfect, affirming presence to the world, a presence in which others are fully acknowledged and embraced as good and beautiful. In genuine *shabbat* there is no restlessness at all because there is no other place one could possibly want to be, no other thing one could possibly want to have (restlessness can here be defined as the inability or refusal to love and be

25. There is widespread agreement within theological traditions that God does not create out of necessity but *ex nihilo* and in freedom and as an act of love. God's Triune life, in turn, is the lens through which the meaning of this creative love is brought to light. Following Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 4), one can say that God the Father creates with "two hands": through/by the Son and in the Holy Spirit.

grateful for where and who one is and whom one is with).²⁶ To be in a Sabbath frame of heart is to be able to find a riverbank worthy of a lifetime's attention and care because one now sees in it the love of God at work. Is it possible to be tired or bored with God's love?

Sabbath seeing is iconic seeing, because in it the love that creates the world and the love that connects the perceiver to it are joined. Our loving attention, in other words, meets God's loving intention in an unending movement of call and response.²⁷ Here the gaze becomes infinite as one enters the streams of life made perpetually fresh by God's inexhaustible love (think here of Paul's astonishment at the unsearchable, forever-deepening love of God as expressed at the end of Romans 8). In this modality one sees more fully—but never comprehensively—what is there to see by giving oneself to the divine love at work within and around it.²⁸

Giving oneself to what one sees is the heart of iconic perception, because it is in self-giving that we communicate our commitment to engage another as other, rather than as the object of our own desires. In this context, it is important to underscore that from a theological point of view, icons have their true sense only in the liturgical contexts of worship and service. Icons are not pretty pictures to be painted and looked at. Léonid

26. I have developed these themes in *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006).

27. Think here of Jean-Louis Chrétien's description of the "call" of beauty: "What is beautiful is what calls out by manifesting itself and manifests itself by calling out. To draw us to itself as such, to put us in motion toward it, to move us, to come and find us where we are so that we will seek it—such is beauty's call and such is our vocation" (*The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport [New York: Fordham University Press, 2004], 9). God makes a good and beautiful work and then, as the wide sweep of Scripture unfolds, commits to "being with" creatures as their nurturing and healing source. This divine movement of attending to beauty thus acts as the basic inspiration for our own attending to the world.

28. Chrétien says that in the self-giving response to the call of another a prophetic form of subjectivity is born in which another is enabled to speak through me: "The prophetic body becomes a musical body and resounds with a harmony that is no longer human. The prophet is no longer so much a speech-bearer as a voice-bearer. Whereas we bear the other's speech only in our speech, in the prophetic case the prophet's own speech disappears. He only seems to be speaking: his voice no longer belongs to him but constitutes a medium for the other" (ibid., 26).

Ouspensky, one of the great scholars of the icon, says, "The icon never strives to stir the emotions of the faithful. Its task is not to provoke in them one or another natural human emotion, but to guide every emotion as well as the reason and all the other faculties of human nature on the way towards transfiguration."²⁹ The icon is a means of prayer, an exercise in self-detachment, which leads people to seeing every created thing anew because in an icon's veneration disciples are invited to see the world in its divine light, bathed in God's transfiguring love.

Sabbath seeing thus gives rise to a way of being in the world in which perceivers acknowledge and delight in the beauty of the world, even as they recognize and participate in the divine love that animates what is there to behold. To move into Sabbath rest, we are instructed to begin by stopping our activity, if only because so much of what we do amounts to a denial or denigration of God's love and beauty at work in the world. It amounts to the forcing of others to suit our idolatrous impulses. For us to observe Sabbath is, therefore, to try to see and love the world the way God does. It is to make ourselves available to and responsible for the grandeur of God's work. When we see others in ways that participate in God's way of seeing, we practice the kind of hospitality in which the agendas I might have for another are replaced with the desire to address another's need and help the other achieve his or her divinely given potential.³⁰

Sabbath teaching builds upon the crucial theological insight that God and creatures exist in a noncompetitive relationship with each other. Being in a noncompetitive relationship means (a) that creatures and God do not exist on the same plane or

29. Léonid Ouspensky, "The Meaning and Language of Icons," in *The Meaning of Icons*, ed. Léonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 39.

30. This point needs emphasis because it is often, and mistakenly, assumed that God's creation of the world *ex nihilo* represents God's imposition upon creatures or God's exercise of power over creatures. As such, creation is not the reflection of a hospitable God "making room" for others to be themselves (as early church writers often assumed). For a more carefully nuanced account of how creation *ex nihilo* is an exercise of noncoercive love, see Rowan Williams's essay "On Being Creatures," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). Blowers argues that the fundamental error of those who see *creatio ex nihilo* as a violent act is that they fail to see matter as the reflection of God's graciousness and as a vital element within God's economy of salvation (*Drama of the Divine Economy*, 354–55).

level of reality (this, in large part, is what the teaching of *creation ex nihilo*, or creation from nothing, means to express), and therefore (b) that creatures do not have to become small for God to be great (nor is God in any way diminished by the success or full flowering of creatures). Because God and creatures do not compete for reality, God can be present to each creature as its nurturing and healing power. It follows, then, that God's glory is amplified the more each creature lives fully into the divine love at work within it. We, in turn, give glory to God by participating in God's nurturing and healing ways with the world.

The Gospels contain multiple accounts in which an iconic form of perception can be observed. Consider the following characterization of Jesus's mode of perception: "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:35-36; cf. Mark 6:34). When in Luke 7:12-15 Jesus sees the widow who has just lost her son, he has compassion and raises her dead son. When in John 5:2-9 Jesus sees the man who has been an invalid for thirty-eight years, he approaches him and heals him. Over and over again we see that Jesus never simply sees others as the surface beings that they are. He sees beyond the surface and into the creative, enlivening love at work within them. When that love, and all the potential life that love represents, is stifled or thwarted by hunger or disease or alienation or demon possession, Jesus addresses it by feeding, healing, comforting, and exorcising the demons of those wounded. His seeing and response—the compassionate response being the clearest indication that iconic seeing has occurred—is a joining with the divine love always already at work within creatures. By ministering to others, Jesus's love comes into harmonious alignment with the divine love that first brought creatures into being and daily sustains them.

Recall too that Jesus is understood to be the lord of the Sabbath (see Matt. 12:8; Mark 2:28; and Luke 6:5). This means that in his life and ministry we are able to see what the full realization of Sabbath observance practically looks like. Like

God the Father, who in the creation of the world witnesses to its goodness, beauty, and love, so too Jesus the Son witnesses to creation's loveliness and worth by extending the love that liberates and nourishes creatures to maximally be themselves. Jesus never sees others as what they currently are: degraded by sin and frustrated in their ability to be what God has made uniquely possible in them. Instead he sees them in terms of what they could be if God's love within them were set free and fully activated. Jesus, we could say, using the language of iconography, sees everyone and everything as already transfigured by God's love.³¹ Or, drawing on Pauline language, Jesus sees everyone as the "new creation" that he or she can become by being in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

Drawing on the Iconographic Tradition

What makes iconic seeing possible at all? This question cannot be taken for granted, especially when we remember that in the church's history there have been vigorous attacks against icons and all that they represent. We need to be clear about what iconic seeing is and what it is not. To start, it is not at all or in any way a seeing of God's eternal and ineffable essence. Consider here the work of John of Damascus, one of the earliest and most able defenders of icons. In his *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* he says over and over again that the iconographic image points to the archetype without in any way being that archetype. There is an abyss between Creator and creation, which means

31. Ouspensky writes, "The beauty of the visible world lies not in the transitory splendor of its present state, but in the very meaning of its existence, in its coming transfiguration laid down in it as a possibility to be realized by man. In other words, beauty is holiness, and its radiance the participation of the creature in Divine Beauty" ("Meaning and Language of Icons," 35). Developing this point further: "All the visible world represented in the icon changes, becomes the image of the future unity of the whole creation—the Kingdom of the Holy Spirit. In accordance with this, all that is depicted in the icon reflects not the disorder of our sinful world, but divine order, peace, a realm governed not by earthly logic, not by human morality, but by divine grace. It is the new order in the new creation" (40-41). Pavel Florensky, another of the great thinkers on the meaning of icons, says, "The icon is the image of the future age," because in it we are called to glimpse each creature in its fully realized, God-created beauty ("On the Icon," *Eastern Churches Review* 8 [1976]: 11-36, quote on 30).

that everything material, though participating in God as the source of its life, is never to be identified with God.

Also of great importance is John of Damascus's insistence that the veneration of icons does not amount to the worship of matter because God alone is to be worshiped.

I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked. . . . I reverence the rest of matter and hold in respect that through which my salvation came, because it is filled with divine energy and grace.³²

Two matters of importance need elaboration: first, that icons are made possible by the incarnation of God in the flesh of Jesus Christ; and second, that matter is filled with what has been called the "divine energies."

Defenders of icons have long noted that to attack the possibility of an icon is also to attack the incarnation that is the heart and blood of Christian faith. It is, in principle, to deny that Jesus was fully human, fully flesh, and fully divine. It is to succumb to the gnostic, Docetic, or Manichaean temptations that would have us deny that matter could ever be a suitable home for the divine life. John of Damascus is clear that if God did not enter into matter, then matter cannot be taken up into God: "I venerate the Creator, created for my sake, who came down to his creation without being lowered or weakened, that he might glorify my nature and bring about communion with the divine nature."³³ Entering into flesh does not suddenly make flesh divine: "For the nature of the flesh did not become divinity, but as the Word became flesh immutably, remaining what it was, so also the flesh became the Word without losing what it was, being rather made equal to the Word hypostatically."³⁴

32. Saint John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 29 (treatise 1.16). In treatise 2.14 he says that matter is not to be revered as if it were God but "as filled with divine energy and grace" (71).

33. Ibid., 22 (treatise 1.4).

34. Ibid., 86 (treatise 3.6).

Icons are a matter is home to divine life: God into matter, matter into God.

A vision of salvation as *theosis* sits behind this way of thinking. *Theosis*, or deification in Christ, assumes that God became a human being so that human beings can participate in the divine life. This teaching has roots that extend deeply in the writings of the early church. Tertullian, for instance, wrote: "God lived with men as man that man might be taught to live the divine life: God lived on man's level that man might be able to live on God's level."³⁵ Clement of Alexandria said that God became man so that we might learn from a man "how it may be that man should become God."³⁶ But it is Vladimir Lossky who has recently defended this vision most clearly. As he presents it, for human beings to participate in the divine nature does not mean that God's transcendence and God's ineffable nature have thereby been reduced. To see how this is possible we need to distinguish between God's *essence*, which is forever unknowable and inaccessible, and God's *energies*, which are the divine operations that go forth from God and communicate God in the world. These energies are not creatures but God himself (though not according to God's substance) and flow eternally from the one essence that the Trinity is. "In the order of the economic manifestation of the Trinity in the world, all energy originates in the Father, being communicated by the Son in the Holy Spirit."³⁷

The distinction between God's essence and energies is important because our union with God, our participation in God's life, is a participation in God's energies rather than God's essence. "The union to which we are called is neither hypostatic—as in the case of the human nature of Christ—nor substantial,

35. *Adversus Marcionem* 2.27, quoted in Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 5.

36. *Protrepticus* 1.8.4, quoted in Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 5. Two very helpful books elaborating the theme of *theosis* in the patristic period are Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), and Georgios I. Mantzarides, *The Deification of Man: Saint Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984). For a recent, ecumenical assessment see Michael Christensen and Jeffery Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

37. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 82.

as in that of the three divine Persons: it is union with God in His energies, or union by grace making us participate in the divine nature, without our essence becoming thereby the essence of God."³⁸ This means that we remain as creatures while becoming God by grace, or as John of Damascus put it succinctly, "What is deified does not become God by nature, but by participation."³⁹

Why does this discussion of the divine energies matter? Because it helps us understand that from the beginning God has desired to be "with us" as God Emmanuel, that God has been communicating himself in the broad sweep of history that goes from creation to consummation, and that God wants us to share and participate in the divine life and love that is the source of all being, goodness, and beauty. God does not simply want to be beheld (or feared) by us. The astounding thing is that God wants to be our companion (see John 15, where God's followers are called friends) and wants us to share in God's life as the way of love, joy, and peace. God's energies have come to their fullest and most poignant expression in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but this divine energy radiates throughout the whole creation. As Lossky puts it, "The divine energies are within everything and outside everything."⁴⁰

The basis for this way of speaking is again christological. Beginning with John's Gospel, Christians have described Jesus as the eternal, creating Word. "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:3). In the Christ hymn of Colossians the language of Christ as the creator and redeemer of all creation is put in equally striking terms: "He is the image [icon] of the invisible God, the

38. Ibid., 87.

39. Saint John of Damascus, *Three Treatises*, 33 (treatise 1.19). Ouspensky ("Meaning and Language of Icons") gives another helpful way of describing what happens to human nature in *theosis*:

Human nature remains what it is—the nature of a creature; but his person, his hypostasis, by acquiring the grace of the Holy Spirit, by this very fact associates itself with Divine Life, thus changing the very being of its creaturely nature. The grace of the Holy Spirit penetrates into his nature, combines with it, fills and transfigures it. Man grows, as it were, into the eternal life, already acquiring here on earth the beginning of this life, the beginning of deification, which will be made fully manifest in the life to come. (34–35)

40. Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 89.

icon restored, the human nature in which we are being combined

firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:15–17).

As reflection on this theme developed, it became clear that it is a major mistake to think of creation apart from Christ. Saint Athanasius argued that no part of creation is ever without Jesus as the eternal Word of God. "The Self-revealing of the Word is in every dimension—above, in creation; below, in the Incarnation; in the depth, in Hades; in the breadth, throughout the world. All things have been filled with the knowledge of God."⁴¹ The incarnate Word is present everywhere, ordering, directing, and giving life to all things, yet being contained by no single thing. Christ is the Word through whom all things come to be and through whom all things will be renewed and redeemed, for Christ shows that there is no inconsistency between the creation of things and their salvation. Though the Word entered into flesh at a particular time in the person of Jesus, the eternal, immaterial Word was not far from creatures before then, "for no part of creation had ever been without Him Who, while ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are."⁴²

★ Athanasius clearly understands creation as the expression of God's Word at work within it. The great error is to think we can see creation properly without also seeing the Word that informs and directs it. Perceiving the pleasure that is possible by immersing oneself in the material world, we are in great danger of forgetting God as the source of all. When this happens, we move into an idolatrous frame of mind. To see how this happens, we need to hear Athanasius at some length:

For learning of the diverse forms of pleasure and girded with the forgetfulness of things divine, taking pleasure in the passions of the body and only in things of the moment, it paid regard to opinions about them and thought that nothing existed other than visible phenomena, and that only transitory

41. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. a religious of CSMV (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), 44 (§16).

42. Ibid., 33 (§8).

and bodily things were good. So perverted, and forgetting that it was made in the image of the good God, the soul no longer perceived through its own power God the Word, in whose form it had been created, but turning outside itself it regarded and pictured non-existent things. . . . It no longer saw what a soul should perceive, but, carried in every direction, it saw only what affected its senses. Hence, filled with every fleshly desire and confused by its notions of them, it then represented in bodily and tangible terms the God whom it had forgotten in its mind, applying the term "God" to visible phenomena and heeding only those things which it wished and regarded as pleasurable. The prime cause, therefore, of idolatry is evil.⁴³

As Athanasius understands it, there is foolishness in the idolatrous gesture because it takes but a moment's reflection to see that one must be claiming to be a god in order to make a god, because the maker is always better than what he or she makes. That such god-makers die is proof enough that they are not gods. It would be more honest, though of course still silly, for the people who worship such idols to fix their gaze on the (mortal, fallible) idol maker.

But besides idolatry's foolishness, there is also the matter of its degrading all that comes within its sphere. Why? Because idolatry is the outgrowth of human passions that are irrational (Greek *alogos*). To fix our gaze, and thus also the ordering of our lives, on what is inherently irrational is to wreak havoc on the world. If Christ is the Word (*Logos*) that brings order, goodness, and beauty to the world, idolatry is the irrational, a-logical gesture that ends up undoing the world. Idolatry amounts to blindness, because idolaters can see only through the lens of their perverted hearts. "Just as those who turn away from the sun to dwell in the shade circle around in many pathless tracks, not seeing those at hand but imagining the absent to be present, and 'seeing do not see' [Matt. 13:13], in the same way those who have abandoned God and have darkened their souls have distracted minds, and like drunken and blind men they imagine things which don't exist."⁴⁴ Such people end up unleashing violence upon the world they profess to love because they love

43. Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, ed. and trans. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 21 (§8).

44. *Ibid.*, 65 (§23).

not what is but the phantasm they wish for. In other words, the idolatrous impulse distorts and harms creatures by causing us to see them in terms of the agendas that please us. They cannot be themselves because the idolater fails to see them in terms of the divine love that is constantly at work within them, leading them into the fullness of their life.

Creation means that the character and significance of the world become intelligible through the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

His way of meeting, welcoming, nurturing, healing, reconciling, and celebrating others is the way of all created life at its best, because Christ's ways with creatures build and strengthen them to enter-fully into the kinds of relationships that promote peace, resilience, and joy. As Graham Ward has put it, Christ is "the archetype of all relationship," meaning that in him we now see what every creaturely relationship should be.⁴⁵ Though creatures may for a time live within relationships that cause pain, alienation, and affliction, Jesus shows that this is not how relationships within creation are to be. Creation most becomes itself when it is healthy and whole, governed by peace and Sabbath delight. The seventh-century monk and theologian Maximus the Confessor gave powerful expression to this view when he wrote,

The wisdom and sagacity of God the Father is the Lord Jesus Christ, who holds together the universals of beings by the power of wisdom, and embraces their complementary parts by the sagacity of understanding, since by nature he is the fashioner and provider of all, and through himself draws into one what is divided, and abolishes war between beings, and binds everything into peaceful friendship and undivided harmony.⁴⁶

Christ is the eternal *Logos* who holds together all the *logoi* (words) that inform and direct created things to be what they are. Each thing in the world has a *logos* or principle of intelligibility and coherence within it that allows it to be the thing that it is. But creation as a whole is also directed in some way by principles of order and growth (otherwise it would have

45. Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 1.

46. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* 41:1313B, in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 161-62.

been impossible to call the world a *cosmos*) that enable mutual flourishing. Without the eternal *Logos* as the principle of loving harmony, what would hold the world together? Jesus the Word is intimately and personally present to each thing, leading it into the goodness and beauty of its own life but also of its life with others.

Put more generally, Jesus reveals the eternal Word to be the power of love at work within each thing and between all things, a power that leads and nurtures creation into fullness and life. Lossky makes the connection between each creaturely *logos* and the divine energies that express God's will for the world this way: "The divine 'willings' are the creative ideas of things, the *logoi*, the 'words.' . . . Every created thing has its point of contact with the Godhead; and this point of contact is the idea, reason or *logos* which is at the same time the end towards which it tends. . . . The whole is contained in the *Logos*, the second person of the Trinity who is the first principle and the last end of all created things."⁴⁷ Viewing the matter this way, we can see that it makes no sense at all to speak of "pure nature." Whatever is, is only because it already participates in the divine love that brings it into being, daily sustains it, and ultimately leads it to fulfillment in union with God. Creation is the good and beautiful place in which God's love is forever at work.

Put practically, Jesus shows us that the primary task of discipleship is for people to be a healing, nurturing, and reconciling presence in the world. When creatures are degraded, as they clearly are when animal livestock are kept in close, stifling confinement (all so that we can have cheap meat), or when mountains are blown to hell (all so that coal and electricity can be provided more cheaply), Christians are called to protest and protect the sanctity of life that is there under attack. They are called to implement and model ways of producing food and packaging energy that honor the goodness and beauty of creatures.⁴⁸ When this happens, Christians will in fact be "good news" to other creatures because they will be in the world in

47. Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 98.

48. See my book (coauthored with Fred Bahnson) *Making Peace with the Land: God's Call to Reconcile with Creation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012) for examples of creation-honoring ways of food production. For further reading, see Jennifer Ayres, *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology* (Waco: Baylor

ways that are sympathetic and harmonious. They will be ministers of a gospel that has been "proclaimed to every creature under heaven" (Col. 1:23).

Disciplined Perception

What remains for us to consider is how we today, living in a world marred by the effects of idolatry, can develop the perceptive capacities to see creation properly. How are our doors of perception to be cleansed so that when we see a creature we see it as the material manifestation of God's wisdom and love? What changes in the manner of our living need to occur before we can get into a position to apprehend what God wants us to sense?

In answering these questions we have much to learn from iconographic and monastic traditions, because they are so resolutely focused on the purification of perception. Recall that an icon is not about representing the world to us as it now is. It is, rather, about helping us see each thing in terms of its transfiguration in Christ. To see another as already participating in and enjoying God's loving presence requires that idolatrous ways of seeing that would reduce others to our desires and expectation have been overcome. For this reason Pavel Florensky argued that only saints can paint icons because they have undergone, and continue to undergo, a process of transformation in which, as Paul says in Galatians 2:20, it is no longer they who live but Christ who lives in and through them. The name for this kind of transformation is asceticism: "The ascetic purification of the soul, the removal from it of every subjective and accidental trace, reveals to the ascetic the rediscovered truth of human nature—the eternal truth of that creature created on the model of Christ, and therefore on the absolute model."⁴⁹ Throughout his writings Florensky maintained that the beauty of this world can be properly described only as God's love for the world. For us to see this beauty we must ourselves participate in this love. "In love and in love

University Press, 2013), and Mallory McDuff, *Natural Saints: How People of Faith Are Working to Save God's Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

49. Florensky, "On the Icon," 26.

beauty
of
God's
love for
the world

Conversion of heart of man from a dark seeing alone is real knowledge of the Truth conceivable.⁵⁰ In other words, unless one undergoes the *metanoia* (Greek: change of heart and direction) and purification that make Christlike love effective in one's body and being, one will not be able to see another as God's creature.⁵¹

Asceticism is the path that leads us in this Christlike way. But asceticism, as reflected in various practices of renunciation like celibacy, fasting, and weeping, is often mischaracterized as hatred of the body and of material things. This is most unfortunate, because what asceticism is ultimately about is the correction of the chaotic desire and moral disorder within us so that we can perceive and welcome the world as God does.

Asceticism is the discipline and art that, at its best, enables us to contemplate the beauty that radiates throughout creation.

As such, asceticism is the prelude to true perception. Or as Florensky put it, "the aim to which the ascetic aspires is to perceive every creature in its first-created, victorious beauty. The Holy Spirit reveals Himself in the ability to see the beauty of creation. To always see the beauty in everything would mean 'to resurrect before the general resurrection' [Saint John Climacus], would mean to anticipate the final Revelation—the Comforter."⁵²

Asceticism is the discipline that polishes the glass on our doors of perception so we can see the world as the manifestation of God's love, and then also go through the door to meet the world in acts of kindness, compassion, and hospitality. The action of loving, inspired as it is by the ministries of Christ, equips us to see the beauty of God at work in the world.⁵³

50. Pavel Florensky, quoted in Victor Bychkov, *The Aesthetic Face of Being: Art in the Theology of Pavel Florensky* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 27.

51. Florensky developed this theme in *The Pillar and Ground of Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), esp. "Letter Nine: Creation."

52. Ibid., 35-36. Christlike love so transforms persons that they can be said to have a different, new mind, what Paul in Phil. 2:5 and 1 Cor. 2:16 called "the mind of Christ."

53. Blowers provides the following helpful summary of Christ as the unifying, harmonizing *logos* of the world, who then serves as the pattern for our love in the world:

Maximus' own admonition that the *logoi* of creation must be contemplated only through the focusing lens of the gospel of the crucified and risen Lord bespeaks the discipline of seeing the world as already shot through with

One's manner of approaching the world determines the kind of world one sees. Asceticism is all about attending to customary ways of approaching others that lead to distortion because what we see is dominated by the anxiety or hubris or insecurity we so often feel. Far too often we are blind to the fact that our attempts at loving are really masked forms of control or manipulation. Recognizing and healing this blindness is a necessary but difficult and long labor. To see how this is so, we turn now to monastic and contemplative traditions.

Learning to see others goes hand in hand with learning to see oneself. It is crucial to attend to oneself and to discover the deep currents that lead us to feel, think, and act in certain ways. When one begins this process, one quickly learns how much that motivates us functions in subterranean regions that elude conscious grasp. This means we are often not the best or most honest judges of ourselves. To understand ourselves we need the help of others to point out and bring to the surface the many impulses that promote the ego or that compel us to perceive things the way that we do. We need the discipline of Scripture reading and meditation to allow the Holy Spirit to read our lives. And we need regular and concentrated times of prayer to be quiet, to listen, and to attend to the many thoughts competing for control within us. The goal, as it often came to be summarized, is to learn to perceive in a dispassionate, detached manner.⁵⁴

Maximus, who will serve as one of our guides in the exploration of contemplative perception, says, "A pure soul is one

the grace of the Creator's deep, kenotic condescension. Thus humanity does not look out upon the creation as "domain" per se but as the theatre of a cooperative mission with the triune Creator to lead creation toward its goal of reconciliation and transfiguration. . . . God calls humanity to exercise its freedom to cooperate with Christ in rebinding the particular and the universal in the grand network that is the cosmos. (*Drama of the Divine Economy*, 356-57)

54. Thomas Merton described this manner clearly in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) when he wrote, "We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached from ourselves in order to see and use all things in and for God. . . . There is no evil in anything created by God, nor can anything of His become an obstacle to our union with Him. The obstacle is in our 'self,' that is to say in the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external, egotistic will" (21).

freed from passions and constantly delighted by divine love."⁵⁵ It is easy to misunderstand the meaning of the passions. When monks like Maximus decry the passions, they are not (in Stoic fashion) advocating a loveless or disengaged manner of life. They are instead concerned about how our attachments to others are saturated and distorted by anxiety, ambition, boredom . . . (the list goes on and on) so that authentic love for another becomes impossible. When we are filled with the passions, what we think is love for another turns out to be variations of love for oneself or love for the world as we desire it to be. Put in contemporary language, the passions lead us to want a world on our terms, on demand, and at a great price.

Dumitru Stăniloae, one of the great interpreters of Maximus in the twentieth century, said, "Passion is a knot of contradictions. It's the expression of an egotism which wants to make all things gravitate around it; it's the transformation of the world exclusively into a center of preoccupation as well. Passion is a product of the will of egocentric sovereignty; it's also a force which pushes man down to the state of an object carried here and there against his will. Sometimes it seeks the infinite; other times it chooses nothingness."⁵⁶ The contradictions at work are many, but one of the more glaring is readily to be seen in the kind of worship of the human body that ends up so objectifying it that it becomes degraded to the point of being fodder for the multibillion-dollar cosmetic, pornographic, and fashion industries. The body, we could say, falls within an idolatrous gaze that reduces it to an expendable toy or instrument.

At the heart of the passions we often find the belief that the self is an autonomous, independent absolute. As Maximus puts it, self-love is the mother of the passions. This means that we go to great lengths to satisfy ourselves and bring glory to ourselves. Self-love leads to deep forms of attachment that actually get in the way of a welcoming and open embrace of another. Self-love makes harmony with each other and the world a virtual impossibility.

55. Maximus the Confessor, *Four Hundred Texts on Love*, in *The Philokalia*, vol. 2, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), 56 (1.34).

56. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2003), 79.

Monastic detachment, we can now see, is not detachment from the world, as if created things were somehow evil, but rather detachment from oneself and from the deep desires that get in the way of welcoming others for who or what they are. For Maximus, the creatures of this world are not evil. They could not be, because they are the work of God. That means that the problem is not the world but the disordered faculties within ourselves that prevent us from perceiving and engaging the world in an open, truthful, and compassionate manner.

Among the faculties one of the most important is clearly the heart, the deep center within ourselves that prompts us to desire and do things in the world. But another crucial faculty is the intellect, the power within us that enables us to see and then characterize things as being this or that kind of thing. How we name and narrate the world is important because it is our naming and narrating that determine how we will relate to it. "Things are outside the intellect, but the conceptual images of these things are formed within it. It is consequently in the intellect's power to make good or bad use of these conceptual images. Their wrong use is followed by the misuse of the things themselves."⁵⁷ It is thus of the highest importance that the intellect be trained to watch for how the passions infiltrate and distort the conceptual images we make of things. "The intellect functions in accordance with nature when it keeps the passions under control, contemplates the inner essences of created beings, and abides with God."⁵⁸

This brief look at how the passions distort our seeing and knowing of the world enables us to make some crucial observations about what it means to see creation. Such seeing begins with attention to how personal ambition, fear, and boredom get in the way of seeing things for what they are, that is, expressions of God's love, and as such, the material manifestations of God's goodness and delight. "God, full beyond all fullness, brought creatures into being not because He had need of anything, but so that they might participate in Him in proportion to their capacity and that He Himself might rejoice in His works (cf. Ps. 104:31), through seeing them joyful and ever filled to overflowing with His inexhaustible gifts."⁵⁹

57. Maximus the Confessor, *Four Hundred Texts on Love*, 77 (2.73).

58. Ibid., 105 (4.45).

59. Ibid., 90 (3.56).

the sickness of the post-modernist West, but most esp. America

Attentive self-regard, informed by the reading of the Scriptures and corrected by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, leads next to the cleansing of our perceptive and cognitive faculties so that we can approach others without the many, sometimes conflicting, agendas we bring into the world. Only then can genuine love of others take root in us. Only then can our love be said to be a witness to and participation in the selfless, Christlike love that gives life to the world in gestures of healing, nurture, reconciliation, and celebration. In this love the other is not absorbed into me or made to somehow satisfy aims that I have chosen. It is, rather, a hospitable love in which my attention and energy circulate around the other in seeking the other's well-being. To see creation means that we need, in ecstatic fashion, to go out from ourselves to meet others on their own terms. This ecstatic movement is the movement of self-offering love.

Self-offering love is a practical skill rather than merely a pious sentiment. To practice it, disciples need to learn the arts of neighborliness, arts like home construction, food production, machine invention and repair, medicine and health care, town planning and design, and education—all done with the clear purpose of enabling others to maximally develop their own lives and our shared life together. In certain respects, this will require a fairly radical re-visioning of forms of Christianity that have focused on individual "spiritual" attainment at the expense of "right livelihood" and a just economy. As Berry put it, "You cannot know that life is holy if you are content to live from economic practices that daily destroy life and diminish its possibility."⁶⁰ Amen

Is perceiving creation the ultimate goal? Depending on the monastic text or author one reads, one might think that our final goal is to leave creation altogether behind so that we can attain something like a pure vision of God. In Maximus, for instance, we read, "Love is the holy state of the soul, disposing it to value knowledge of God above all created things. We cannot attain lasting possession of such love while we are still attached to anything worldly."⁶¹ Or, "It is said that the highest state of prayer is reached when the intellect goes beyond the

60. Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *Art of the Commonplace*, 309.

61. Maximus the Confessor, *Four Hundred Texts on Love*, 53 (1.1).

flesh and the world, and while praying is utterly free from matter and form. He who maintains this state has truly attained unceasing prayer."⁶² Maximus is not alone in warning of the dangers of attachments to a world that is transitory, ephemeral, and the source of so much pain and heartache. But is this way of speaking a reflection of residual dualism, or a sneaking-in of gnostic impulses, and thus fundamentally a denial of God's love made real in a material world?

The difficulty is how to balance an affirmation of the goodness of creation with the long histories of idolatrous appropriation of it. The crucial insight to remember is that a Christian perception of the world is, as Saint Isaac the Syrian said, "the experience of all things in God," which means that right perception will always, at the same time, draw us more closely into a recognition of and participation in the love of God. What needs emphasis is that every creature is what it is only because God loves and sustains it in its being. Each created thing is the material manifestation of God's love—what the Orthodox tradition calls God's "energies"—at work within it. To reject any such creature would thus amount to a rejection of God's love. If the created world is a participation in God's life—as Maximus puts it, each creaturely *logos* is embraced by the eternal, divine *Logos* (without the *Logos* being contained within any creature)⁶³—it would seem that any form of disparagement or abandonment of creation amounts to a denial of God. Or as we saw when attending to iconographic traditions in theology, the disparagement of matter is ultimately a disparagement of the incarnation.

The call to leave the world of matter behind or to transcend its materiality is a dangerous call if it leads people to a denial of God's creative love in the world. Why? Because such denial inevitably leads to the world's degradation and destruction rather than its healing and redemption. A better way to proceed is to live with the warning about the difficulty of appreciating how passions and attachments intervene in even our best efforts to cleanse our souls and participate in the ways of love. Douglas Christie has recently pointed out that when a person is deeply devoted and open to a loving reception of the world,

62. Ibid., 76 (2.61).

63. Maximus the Confessor, *Two Hundred Texts on Theology*, in *The Philokalia*, vol. 2, 139–40 (2.10).

it is but a matter of time before that person realizes that no image, no thought, no word can be fully faithful to what is seen and engaged. We saw this at the start of this chapter when we witnessed the difficulty Cézanne and Oliver had in representing the world adequately. Our temptation, perhaps even our default setting, to use the language of Marion, would be to halt an infinite gaze at some finite, manageable point, and thus render the gaze idolatrous.

Reflecting on artistic attempts to come to terms with the endlessness and mystery of the world around him, Christie notes that becoming clear-sighted is an infinite journey into depth. Cézanne, like other painters, admitted that he was "becoming more aware of [the world's] endless complexity and intricacy, the shifting moods of a place depending on the time of day and season. It cannot be grasped or known, not completely. It can only be seen, partially and provisionally. Then seen again. And yet again. Here one senses the recognition of the need for a kind of rumination in which one can be drawn ever deeper into the mystery of what one beholds, and forward in search of the forms that can best express what one sees."⁶⁴

Seen with these concerns in mind, perhaps the call to leave all images behind should be interpreted not as an abandonment of the world but as an abandonment of the fixity or finality of any image for the sake of a deeper and more sympathetic engagement with the freshness, surprise, and mystery of creation. There is, in other words, an indispensable apophatic dimension to all perception of creation, a dimension in which quiet and silence and the acknowledgment of our ignorance are allowed to chasten personal desire and ambition. Such an interpretation, I think, would speak well to our faltering, too often destructive attempts to live faithfully in a world of God's inexhaustible love. It would speak to the unfathomable grace that circulates throughout creation and that calls us to perceive in the first place. And it would create in us the humility and the openness that are prerequisite for us becoming available to address the needs and the potential of fellow creatures.

64. Christie, *Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 173 (emphasis original).

The Human Art of Creaturely Life

There appears to be a law that when creatures have reached the level of consciousness, as men have, they must become conscious of the creation; they must learn how they fit into it and what its needs are and what it requires of them, or else pay a terrible penalty: the spirit of the creation will go out of them, and they will become destructive; the very earth will depart from them and go where they cannot follow.

Wendell Berry, "A Native Hill"

Human beings have lost their creaturely nature; this has been corrupted by their being *sicut deus* [like god]. The whole created world is now covered in a veil; it is silent and lacking explanation, opaque and enigmatic.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*

In 1988 Jean-Luc Nancy convened a group of leading French philosophers to consider the question, "Who comes after the Subject?" Nancy wanted to assess the status of human subjectivity after