



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Book of the Word:
Reading God's Creation
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 20-27)

Suggested Article:

📖 Reading the Scripture
Greenly
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 84-88)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful
for your personal or group
study? Please send your
suggestions to
Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

The Book of the Word: Reading God's Creation

The natural world is not simply a resource, or a garden entrusted to our care, but above all a revelation of the ways and will of God. How might we recover a robust yet nuanced understanding of nature as truly a book of God's words, with several levels of meaning?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:15-17

Meditation: "Judge Not according to the Appearance"

Lord, purge our eyes to see
within the seed a tree,
within the glowing egg a bird,
within the shroud a butterfly:
till taught by such, we see
beyond all creatures, thee,
and hearken for thy tender word,
and hear it, 'Fear not: it is I.'

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894)

Reflection

"The image of 'the book of creation' has been remarkably enduring in the Christian world," Elizabeth Theokritoff notes. "But that very fact easily masks some major changes in the understanding of what sort of book it is, how we are to read it, and what we may properly expect to learn from it." Gradually we have come to see Scripture and nature as very *separate* books – the latter being written in a "language of mathematics" accessible only to the scientifically trained among us and (in some people's view) telling us nothing about its author, God.

To help us recover a properly complex understanding of nature as a book of God's words, Theokritoff explores the insights of Maximus the Confessor (580-662), a preeminent theologian of creation.

- ▶ *Creation and Scripture are distinct books in which God does one thing: inscribe the Word that draws us to love him.* Maximus spoke of the "triple embodiment" of the divine Word. "The Word embodied in Jesus has also 'hidden himself for us in the 'words' of existent things, so as to be spelled out by each visible thing as by letters,' and been 'embodied' for our sake in the letters and syllables of Scripture," Theokritoff explains.
- ▶ *We must avoid flat "literalism" when reading each book.* "The letter kills, if we love it for its own sake," she writes; "the beauty of created things can easily rob us of appropriate reverence if it is not looked at to the glory of its Creator." How can we get beyond "words" to their meaning? Based on John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16-17, Maximus says Christ the Creator-Logos implanted in each created thing a word (*logos*) that is the divine presence that makes it unique and draws it to God. "The notoriously untranslatable term *logos* is not only a 'thought' or 'word,' however; it is also rationality, meaning," Theokritoff notes. "What we should



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

today call the 'information' contained in a living organism often comes remarkably close to the concept of the logos that makes a thing itself." Entities are inter-connected into a language through their particular "words."

- ▶ *The words in creation are addressed to us.* They not only enable us to discover how other creatures function, they provide "words of [spiritual] knowledge" and "manners of virtue." To read creation this way requires ascetic preparation to acquire inner peace where our perception is not distorted by gluttony, greed, lust, and other "passions." Theokritoff notes, "with nature as with Scripture, we do not wait to be perfectly prepared before we ever start to read; the effort to read with understanding is itself part of our life-long ascetic struggle."

To help us read the book of creation, Theokritoff commends four principles for reading Scripture: reading with obedience, understanding the Word through the Church, emphasizing the centrality of Christ, and receiving the Word as personal. Creation, as God's book, instructs and judges us. "We should not feel that we are being naïve or primitive if we read the gathering environmental crisis in precisely this light: as a wake-up call from God, an indication that all is not well in humans' relationship with our common Creator," she concludes. Yet this "is a message of hope, for God's warnings are always conditional: we need only turn to him to find ourselves on the path to restoration."

Study Questions

1. Discuss the dangers of a "literal" reading of creation, and of mining creation for pleasing moral allegories. How does Maximus the Confessor's approach avoid these dangers?
2. How, according to Elizabeth Theokritoff, do the principles for reading Scripture apply to reading the book of creation?
3. "The recognition of creation as charged with the words of God has the power radically to change our attitude toward everything we touch," Theokritoff writes. "It calls us to an attitude less of stewardship than 'studentship,' humble receptiveness to what creation can teach." Do you agree?
4. What elements of Maximus the Confessor's way of reading the book of creation are commended in Christina Rossetti's poem "Judge Not according to the Appearance"?

Departing Hymn: 'How Marvelous God's Greatness' (vv. 1 and 4)

How marvelous God's greatness, how glorious God's might!
To this the world bears witness in wonders day and night.
In form of flower and snowflake, in morn's resplendent birth,
in afterglow at even, in sky and sea and earth.

The starry hosts are singing through all the light-strewn sky
of God's majestic temple and palace courts on high;
when in these outer chambers such glory gilds the night,
O, the transcendent brightness of God's eternal light!

Vladimar Briem (1886), translated from Icelandic by *Charles V. Pilcher* (1879-1961), alt.

Suggested Tunes: WHITFIELD or LANCASHIRE

The Book of the Word: Reading God's Creation

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce Maximus the Confessor's view of what "the book of creation" contains and how to read it.
2. To adapt principles for reading Scripture to our reading the book of creation.
3. To consider how recognizing that creation is charged with the words of God changes our attitude toward the natural world.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Caring for Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn 'How Marvelous God's Greatness' locate one of the familiar tunes WHITFIELD or LANCASHIRE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), from whom we learn much about the fourth-century Christians who sought a faithful life in the deserts of Egypt, tells the following story about St. Anthony (251-356), the reputed founder of that influential movement: "A philosopher once asked St. Anthony, 'How do you manage, Father, deprived of the consolation of books?' Anthony replied: 'My book is the nature of created things, and this is before me whenever I wish to read the words of God.'"

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to lead you to himself through the glory of the creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 1:15-17 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Ask a group member to read the poem aloud, or invite members to reflect on it during a period of silence.

Reflection

In the previous study guide, "Valuing the Goodness of the Earth," Jame Schaefer commended Aquinas's view that natural things, both living and nonliving, have a "sacramental quality" as windows to the presence and nature of God. In this study Elizabeth Theokritoff explores this idea more thoroughly in the writings of Maximus the Confessor, a seventh-century theologian highly venerated in the Church, East and West.

Many early Christians referred to "the book of creation." Maximus offers a subtle interpretation of this view. In order to understand his interpretation, focus on the meaning of *logos* (it can mean word, rationality, meaning, and ratio). The complex interrelationship among the *logoi*, or "words," in things allows the world to make sense to us at various levels – mathematically, scientifically, morally, and spiritually. Notice how Maximus relates these created *logoi* to the Creator-Logos, the divine Word that is miraculously embodied in Christ, Scripture, and the creation.

Study Questions

1. A “literal” reading finds meaning in the universe, but it does not point to God. Elizabeth Theokritoff mentions two opposed ways of stopping with a “literal” reading of the book of the universe: Stephen Jay Gould reduces his reading to “nature’s factuality” that says nothing about its Author, while others so attend to “the beauty of created things” that they ignore its pointing toward “the glory of its Creator.” Maximus avoids these mistakes by seeing the “words” of things as the divine Word embodied in them, and interpreting them through Christ and Scripture.

Maximus thinks the words in things “do not address only our reasoning brain, enabling us to understand how other creatures function; the book of creation is also filled with ‘words of [spiritual] knowledge’ and even ‘manners of virtue.’” So, how does he avoid the danger of mining them for pleasing moral allegories? He says we must rid ourselves of “passions” like pride, which might lead us to assume nature has nothing difficult or demanding to teach us. Also, as we read the book of creation in light of the incarnation of the Word in Christ and Scripture, we can notice that nature is fraught with humble sacrifice and demanding judgment of our ways.

2. Assign four groups to review the application of the principles, which is not summarized in the study guide. The first one, *reading with obedience*, suggests we adopt “a sense of wonder and an attitude of listening” toward all the parts of creation (not just the beautiful or useful ones) and the whole of nature in its interdependence. Elizabeth Theokritoff says, “It is on this level that we may grapple with the ‘hard sayings’ of creation—things that seem to us pointless, cruel, or ‘bad design.’” The second principle, *understanding the Word through the Church*, encourages us to “[integrate] the material world into worship, spiritual life, and our relationship with God,” though she warns against using “elements of ‘eco-worship’ from non-Christian sources.” The third principle, *emphasizing the centrality of Christ*, relates natural processes to Christ in two ways: the nature of Christ informs our perception of natural processes (her examples are the role of death, failure, and extinction in the evolutionary process, and our daily dependence on lowly creatures), and the work of Christ draws us into loving service to non-human creatures and systems. By the final principle, *receiving the Word in creation as personal*, she understands not “an individualistic reading of it, or to say that it concerns only my inner life,” but being prepared to “look for what God might be saying to me, today, through the natural world around me.” (Note her example of “reading” the difficult case of eagles feeding only one of their two chicks. She warns against restricting our attention to beautiful features of nature, constructing a “supposedly benign ‘mother nature.’”)
3. Theokritoff thinks that this recognition would change our attitude in two ways. First, we would adopt a spiritual asceticism, or self-discipline, to prepare ourselves differently to study and appreciate the natural world. “Limiting our wants and appetites ceases to be simply a moral obligation for the sake of sharing resources more equitably; it becomes the fast that prepares us for reading, placing between ourselves and the world ‘a wondering and respectful distance’ from which everything becomes an object of contemplation.” Also, our study of nature on all levels would “keep sending us back with renewed awe to the book [of creation] we hold in our hands.”
4. Christina Rossetti commends an askesis, or disciplined preparation by God’s grace, in order to read the book of creation aright: “Lord, purge our eyes to see.” With examples (seed/tree, egg/bird, shroud/butterfly) she suggests that we must learn to see the meaning of things in their mature form that is drawing them, through surprising changes, to completion. She applies this pattern to us: we are being drawn by God’s “tender word” to our completion in loving friendship with God.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.