

# ST. ATHANASIUS AND THE REDEMPTION OF THE CREATED ORDER

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## ***Abstract***

*“St. Athanasius and the Redemption of the Created Order,”* presents a defense of Athanasius against the charges brought against him by the ecotheologian Michael Northcott. This paper will proceed in the following fashion. In the first section of this paper, the importance of creation’s redemption among ecotheologians will be set in context. The second section will introduce the ecotheology of Michael S. Northcott. The section on Northcott’s theological enterprise will narrow down to his specific charges against Athanasius which cover the following three areas: one, Northcott finds within St. Athanasius’ work a capitulation to Hellenism. Two, Northcott views St. Athanasius as limiting the scope of redemption to the salvation of “rational” human beings. Three, Northcott presents Athanasius as contributing to the separation of creation and redemption within Christian theology. After the survey of Northcott’s charges against Athanasius, the third section of this paper will briefly examine the theology of the Bishop of Alexandria as preserved in *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*. This introduction to Athanasius’ thought will be followed by a defense of the Church Father against Northcott’s claims. The defense of St. Athanasius will center on the following issues: one, the relationship between Platonism and Christian theology within the work of St. Athanasius is best conceived as an antithetical contextualization than a capitulation to Greek philosophy. Two, it will become clear by examining *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione* that there is no reduction in redemption’s scope within Athanasius’ thought. Also, it will be shown that part of the reason for this charge is a misunderstanding of how Athanasius uses the terms “rational” and “irrational.” Three, this defense of Athanasius will show that there is no separation between creation and redemption in his work. Even the Church Father’s intense focus on human redemption will be shown to have cosmic import. The final section of this paper will conclude with some reflections on using the work of St. Athanasius as a basis for ecotheology.

The scope and extent of God’s redemption wrought in Christ’s work has been a matter of debate among Christians.<sup>1</sup> The argument, among Protestant Christians, usually revolves around the availability of redemption to all of mankind or to only an elect portion of it.<sup>2</sup> Renewed studies in biblical theology, however, have driven many recent theologians to consider the redemption of the entire created order.<sup>3</sup> The concern for creation’s redemption has especially been addressed by those Christian writers whose work focuses on the intersection of ecology and theology; these authors are often referred to as ecotheologians.<sup>4</sup> Within this sub-discipline, there is a large amount of concern about creation’s redemption and restoration that is usually coupled with a desire to present the message of the Bible as earth-affirming, while admitting that Christianity has often narrowed the cosmic scope of redemption down to only a concern for the salvation of human souls. Among ecotheologians this shift in focus is often explained by identifying a Church Father in the past as the source of a Hellenizing, dualistic, or anthropocentric tendency that derails the cosmic scope of biblical redemption. St. Augustine is one of the main candidates for this role, and his participation in Platonic and Manichean communities prior to his conversion makes him a likely target.<sup>5</sup>

One prominent ecotheologian, however, does not identify St. Augustine as the source of this shift in redemptive focus, but locates the change in direction within Christian thought in the work of St. Athanasius the fourth century Bishop of Alexandria. Michael S. Northcott in his *The Environment and Christian Ethics* claims that the apologetic work of St. Athanasius is primarily concerned with the salvation of “rational” human beings with little to no regard for the rest of

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Edwards, “God’s Redeeming Act: Deifying Transformation” *Worldviews 14* (2010), 243–257; Derek Flood, “Substitutionary Atonement and the Church Fathers” *Evangelical Quarterly* 82.2 (2010), 142–159; Robert C. Dole, “Penal Atonement: the Orthodox teaching of the Fathers and Three Conversations with John Calvin,” *Reformed Theological Review*, 65.1 (Apr 2006), 39.

<sup>2</sup> A further note on redemption is necessary. It is possible to parse out Christ’s work into very distinct categories where salvation may mean one thing and reconciliation can mean another, while redemption may mean something else entirely. However, for the purposes of this paper, redemption will be used as a catch all word to include all that Christ accomplished via his work. See Edwards, “God’s Redeeming Act” for clarification.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Wright, *The Mission of God* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2005), 415ff; N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (London: SPCK, 2005), 45; N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 225ff. All of these works build upon the earlier ground breaking work of Oliver O’Donovan’s *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids, IVP Academic, 1986), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); Stephen Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010 [2005]).

<sup>5</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 45; David Ferguson, *The Cosmos and the Creator* (London: SPCK, 2004), 32. Both of these authors identify Augustine as the figure who mixes Greek philosophy with the Christian faith and thus transforms the hope of the cosmos into the beatific vision that could be enjoyed by disembodied souls.

creation because it is “irrational.”<sup>6</sup> Northcott quotes the following passage from St. Athanasius, which centers on why the Word came in a bodily form:

A body which could die, in order that, since this participated in the Word who is above all, it might suffice for death on behalf of all, and because of the word who was dwelling in it, it might remain incorruptible, and so corruption might cease from all men by the grace of the resurrection.<sup>7</sup>

Northcott then comments, “It is clear from this passage, and others like it, that for Athanasius, unlike Irenaeus, the redemptive action of God is not directed to the whole created order, nor even to sensate animals, but only to the rational race of humans.”<sup>8</sup> Northcott clearly does not view Athanasius as providing a means for creation’s redemption, and thus he identifies the Alexandrian Bishop as the source of the Hellenizing trend among the Church Fathers that ecotheologians find problematic.<sup>9</sup> However, is this a fair assessment of St. Athanasius? After all he wrote the following:

We will begin, then, with the creation of the world and with God its maker, for the first fact that you must grasp is this: the *renewal of creation has been wrought by the self same Word who made it in the beginning*. There is *thus no inconsistency between creation and salvation*; for the one Father has employed the same Agent for both works, affecting the salvation of the world through the same Word who made it in the beginning.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than viewing St. Athanasius as the source of a less biblical view of redemption, this paper will present the Bishop of Alexandria as including the redemption of the created order in Christ’s finished work as evidenced in Athanasius’ writings.

Before moving on to the main defense of St. Athanasius, it is important to lay out the trajectory of this response. In the first section of this paper, the importance of creation’s redemption among ecotheologians will be set in context. The second section will introduce the ecotheology of Michael S. Northcott. The section on Northcott’s theological enterprise will narrow down to his specific charges against Athanasius which cover the following three areas: one, Northcott finds within St. Athanasius’ work a capitulation to Hellenism.<sup>11</sup> Two, Northcott

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<sup>6</sup> Northcott, *The Environment*, 211.

<sup>7</sup> St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione de Verbi* (New York: SVS Press, 1995), §4.

<sup>8</sup> Northcott, *The Environment*, 212.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Sanguine, *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos* (Ontario: Longwood Books, 2007), 56; Darby Kathleen Ray, *Theology That Matters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 76.

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, § 1.

<sup>11</sup> Hellenism remains a nebulous term that readers will usually fill with their own conceptions. However, for our purposes here, the term should convey the influence of Greek philosophical categories on Christian theology.

views St. Athanasius as limiting the scope of redemption to the salvation of “rational” human beings. Three, Northcott presents Athanasius as contributing to the separation of creation and redemption within Christian theology. After the survey of Northcott’s charges against Athanasius, the third section of this paper will briefly examine the theology of the Bishop of Alexandria as preserved in *Contra Gentes-De Incartione*. This introduction to Athanasius’ thought will be followed by a defense of the Church Father against Northcott’s claims. The defense of St. Athanasius will center on the following issues: one, the relationship between Platonism and Christian theology within the work of St. Athanasius is best conceived as an antithetical contextualization than a capitulation to Greek philosophy. Two, it will become clear by examining *Contra Gentes-De Incartione* that there is no reduction in redemption’s scope within Athanasius’ thought. Also, it will be shown that part of the reason for this charge is a misunderstanding of how Athanasius uses the terms “rational” and “irrational.” Three, this defense of Athanasius will show that there is no separation between creation and redemption in his work. Even the Church Father’s intense focus on human redemption will be shown to have cosmic import. The final section of this paper will conclude with some reflections on using the work of St. Athanasius as a basis for ecotheology. With these parameters set, the paper can now turn to the context of the situation.

### **Understanding the Context**

Denis Edwards lays out the concerns of ecologically minded Christians when he writes, “A theology of redemption for today will be one that communicates the meaning of the Christ-event in a way that is faithful to the central Christian tradition and that is coherent and life-giving for believers in the twenty first-century.” Edwards further adds, “It (a theology of redemption) will be a theology that includes the biological world as well as the world of matter.”<sup>12</sup> This upsurge in concern for ecology among Christian thinkers, which is now several decades old, has primarily been an extended response to the so-called “ecological charge against Christianity,” that began in

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This includes dualist tendencies, but is not limited to that. See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998); Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, Zweiter Band, Freiburg und Leipzig: Academische Verlagsbuchhandlung von J. C. B. Mohr, 1894); R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Edwards, “God’s Redeeming Act,” 243.

earnest after the publication of Lynn White's landmark essay entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," in a 1967 issue of *Science* magazine.<sup>13</sup> Among many environmentalists, this essay by White has been influential in shaping and framing their attitudes toward the Christian faith *viz a vie* its role in the ecological crisis. While the charges set forth by White have been challenged and refuted by Christian theologians, the "ecological charge," remains an active component of the ethos of many within the environmental movement.<sup>14</sup>

While the particular aspects of the "ecological charge" have become fluid since White's essay and the responses to it from theologians, the charge will usually contain some form of the following. One, many people with a strong environmental conscience view the dominion mandate of Gen 1:26–28 as a divine license for exploitation given to humanity by a deity with no concern for the created order. Stated differently, White, and those who followed him, often misunderstood the dominion mandate as a call to domination when it was actually a call to servant leadership with a strong concern for the rest of creation. This proper explanation of the dominion mandate is clarified by the other charge given to humanity in Gen 2:15 which states, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it (NRSV)."<sup>15</sup> Mankind was called to till and keep the garden. This is not the language of domination, but of farming, and it implies a careful use of the land. Two, many of these same environmentally

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<sup>13</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" *Science* vol 155, no 3767 (March 1967): 1203–7.

<sup>14</sup> A number of theologians have addressed White's charges at length. In fact, most books on the environment from Christian authors will contain some level of interaction with White and his classic essay. The following are a representation. Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (San Francisco: Hodder Christian Books, 1974); Loren Wilkinson, *Earthkeeping* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Richard Land, *The Earth is the Lord's* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991); Richard Young, *Healing the Earth* (Nashville: Broadman, 1996); Stephen Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). These works are all from the evangelical perspective, but still demonstrate the trend that through the years the "ecological charge" still has influence. Complaints about the impact of a "sky-god" and his followers are ever present in the op-ed section of publications from the Sierra Club. However, this tenor must be measured by the fact that many environmentalists, much like White himself, have now realized that the ecological crisis is a problem that necessitates reflection from theologians.

<sup>15</sup> The use of the verb pair "to till and to keep" is very significant. These words only occur a few times together in the Hebrew Scriptures, and in every other instance they are used in regards to priestly service before God. This call to priestly service fits the language of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 very well with Gen 1:26–28 providing humanity's kingly position and Gen 2:15 providing humanity's priestly calling. Therefore the opening chapters of Genesis present man as having a call to be priestly-kings in the created order. The royal priesthood is a recurring theme in scripture as the text presents Noah, Abraham, and other figures as priestly-kings. The people of God in the Exodus are called to be a kingdom of priests. Christ is both priest and king, and St. Peter tells the early Christians that they are that royal priesthood (1Peter 2:8ff). The book of Revelation identifies this calling as central to the people of God as well (Revelation 5). For further exploration of this topic see G. K. Beale's, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2004); Chris Wright's *The Mission of God*, and Tom Wright's *After You Believe* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2010) also address this topic at length.

mindful individuals also consider the Christian faith, especially since the time of the Church Fathers, to be otherworldly in focus and hampered by various forms of dualism.<sup>16</sup> The charge of otherworldliness and dualism should always be measured with the final vision of God's redemptive work which is resurrected believers living in a renewed heaven and a renewed earth. Three, some environmentalists point out that some versions of Christian eschatology are problematic as they are earth-denying rather than earth-affirming.<sup>17</sup> The most problematic form of Christian eschatology is the popular version of premillennial Dispensationalism with its belief in the imminent return of Christ that will be followed by the destruction of the earth.<sup>18</sup> However, some of the older forms of vertical amillennialism are also problematic. As with the previous aspect of the ecological charge, the problem with some eschatological systems is overcome by focusing on the final renewal of the cosmos where Christ makes "all things new" rather than all new things implying some form of continuity with the present world. The fourth aspect of the ecological charge concerns how the Christian faith desacralized nature, and thus paved the way for nature's exploitation via the development of modern science.<sup>19</sup> This aspect of the ecological charge is complicated as there is a relationship between the Christian faith and the rise of the scientific worldview. However, this relationship arises out of the development of a particular philosophical theology called Nominalism, but an exploration of this topic is outside the scope of this paper.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> While it is true that some of the Fathers speak almost exclusively of the spiritual portion of humanity, the issue of dualism is aggravated further by the work of the Enlightenment philosopher Renee Descartes. Consider this from Northcott, "Others blame it on the 'Cartesian dualism,' the disjunction between rationality and embodiment, nature and culture which is said to have originated in the philosophy of the Enlightenment." *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 60. There are certain types of dualities that exist within the Christian faith, but it is inappropriate to speak of it as a dualistic religion. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1990), 252–4; contains an excellent introduction to this discussion. The footnotes there can guide the careful reader to the rest of the relevant literature.

<sup>17</sup> Al Trusedale, "Last Things First: The Impact of Eschatology on Ecology" *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith*, 46, (June 1994), 116–22; Hans Schwarz, *On the Way to the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1972), 15; Janel Curry-Roper, "Contemporary Christian Eschatologies and their Relation to Environmental Stewardship" *Professional Geographer*, 42 (2), 158; James L. Guth et al, "Faith and the Environment: Religious Beliefs and Attitudes on Environmental Policy" *American Journal of Political Science*, vol 39, no 2. (May, 1995): 364–82; This article demonstrates the importance of eschatology on environmental attitudes as these sociologists identify eschatological belief as more formative on environmental attitudes than even political affiliation; Northcott, *The Environment*, 115; Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty*, 45

<sup>18</sup> One can see this theology at work in John Walvoord's *Prophecy in the New Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 45.

<sup>19</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> The emergence and impact of Nominalism is one of the most investigated topics in current theological discussions. The advanced reader should consult John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* (London: Blackwell, 1991), 415ff; The neophyte should consult Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

Each of these aspects have been addressed at length by theologians in the field, but the thrust of the “ecological charge” continues to play a role in the minds of some environmentalists. The persistence of this view of the Christian faith is indicative of why the question of creation’s redemption remains important. Therefore, it remains necessary to examine the ecotheology of Michael S. Northcott, especially his claim that St Athanasius is the figure whose work marked the beginning of the Christian faith’s abandonment of creation’s redemption and its capitulation to Greek philosophy. This paper will now turn to the ecotheology of Michael S. Northcott.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Ecotheology of Michael Northcott**

The ecotheology of Michael S. Northcott, like the work of most ecotheologians, is a part of the ongoing conversation between supporters of the Christian faith and those who defend the “ecological charge against Christianity.” Central to Northcott’s approach is the belief that an orthodox understanding of the Christian faith can provide a sound basis for interaction with environmental ethics. He writes:

I will argue that more traditional interpretations of the doctrines of creation, the Trinity, incarnation, redemption and eschatology can in fact provide us with a powerful model of embodied human life, and of self-in-relation, which challenges the atomistic and denatured self of post-Enlightenment utilitarian individualism, and which has the potential to reorientate the modern human project of economic development towards the preservation of central moral goods in human life including sociality and community, and toward the recognition and conservation of related moral goods which may be identified in the natural order.<sup>22</sup>

Essentially Northcott is saying that an orthodox understanding of key Christian doctrines can provide theologians with a basis for developing a response to the various aspects of the ecological crisis, and thus there is no need to reframe the Christian faith, thereby abandoning the central tenants thereof as some ecotheologians have done.<sup>23</sup> Northcott’s orthodoxy, however, is only one unique aspect of his approach.

Another unique aspect of Northcott’s ecotheology is its doctrinal rather than exegetical base. This doctrinal basis does not mean that his work lacks scriptural support, but rather that Northcott assumes an orthodox understanding of the scriptures and historic Christian teachings

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<sup>21</sup> Sigud Bergman, *Creation Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 145. This work presents the theology of the Church Fathers as helpful in formulating an ecotheology. He does a good job of dealing with the charge of dualism in the Fathers.

<sup>22</sup> Northcott, *The Environment*, 163.

instead of exegetically arguing for each doctrine. While most major Christian doctrines are covered by Northcott in some fashion, he is especially concerned about the ecological influence of creation, the incarnation, and the resurrection of Christ. Northcott presents the significance of these doctrines and how they can serve as a basis for a Christian engagement with the ecological crisis; he begins his presentation with his reflections on the doctrine of creation. Northcott's concept of creation begins with an acknowledged belief in theological evolution.<sup>24</sup> However, his version of evolution should be differentiated from its Darwinian counterpart by the fact that Northcott also insists upon the teleological nature of the created order.<sup>25</sup> Not only does he see God behind the process of evolution, but God in Christ is directing the cosmos towards its long awaited renewal in the consummation of the Kingdom.<sup>26</sup> Because of this teleological character, the notion and moniker of creation is preferred to the mundane title of nature as the former label connotes the theological meaning and purpose that belongs to the created order, including the moral order that accompanies it.<sup>27</sup> Northcott claims that the created order has an inherent moral order by virtue of its creation, "In the Hebrew concept of the created order, and the Christian tradition of natural law, the order and goodness of creation is affirmed as reflecting the being of God, and therefore having a moral significance."<sup>28</sup> This moral significance allows Northcott to argue for both an instrumental and intrinsic value for the created order. All the truths that Northcott claims are revealed in creation are reaffirmed in the incarnation of Christ.

As with the creation of the cosmos, the incarnation of Jesus Christ demonstrates God's redemptive plan for the material world and reveals the concern that God has for his created order. Northcott writes, "The incarnation and resurrection of Christ show that God loves material and embodied reality as well as intellect and consciousness."<sup>29</sup> Therefore the incarnation can be viewed as a restatement of God's "very good" that was pronounced over the entire created order (Gen 1:31). This view of the incarnation is confirmed by O'Donovan who writes, "The sign that

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<sup>23</sup> Rosemary Radford-Reuther, *Gaia and God* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1992); Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1985). Both of these works are good examples of theologians that have altered the tenants of the Christian faith in response to the ecological crisis.

<sup>24</sup> Northcott, *The Environment*, 190. This is not meant to be accusatory or any type of value statement. I ask the reader to set aside his/her beliefs concerning evolution and view this sentence as just a statement of fact.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 200. The rejection of teleology is one of the key aspects of Darwinian evolution, and thus Northcott's insistence on the cosmos having a *telos* should be seen as a line of demarcation.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 196

<sup>27</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Northcott, *The Environment*, 165.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.



God has stood by his created order—in the incarnation—implies that this order, with mankind in its proper place within it, is to be totally restored at the last.”<sup>30</sup> For Northcott, the arrival of the *Logos* in the incarnation is not limited to the birth of Christ, but is comprehensive of Jesus’ eschatological and redemptive acts as well. Jesus came to this earth with the intention of dying and rising again thereby dealing with the world’s evil and making creation’s restoration possible. Northcott writes:

The restoration of the true worship of the Lord, and of the justice of human society, also contributes to the transformation of nature into the peaceable kingdom of shalom and ecological harmony. The *telos* of the cosmos is the restoration of paradise, of the natural relationality between humans and God which the story of Adam and Eve represents as the ideal of the divine-human fellowship. Broken covenants, lost blessings, human sin and injustice, and exile are not the end of the story.<sup>31</sup>

In Northcott’s view, the incarnation is a doctrine that has influence over the entire created order. God has reaffirmed the essential goodness of the created order by taking upon himself flesh from the Virgin’s womb. God’s care and purpose for the created order is demonstrated again in the resurrection of Christ.

Within Northcott’s approach, the significance of the incarnation is clarified by the eschatological redemption of the created order, which is anticipated and inaugurated in Christ’s resurrection. Again, Northcott leans upon O’Donovan who writes:

The wholeness of the universe depends on its being a created universe, and therefore on its being reconciled, brought back into the order of its creation. The son of God’s love, in whom we have redemption, is the means by which these two cosmic events, the creation and reconciliation of all things takes place.

Northcott summarizes this concept when he notes that Christ’s resurrection began a series of transformative events that now await their final consummation in Christ’s return, and that the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is the key to Christian environmental ethics, because it is the vindication of the created order.<sup>32</sup> The resurrection, for Northcott, is the main indicator that the creator God has acted decisively to restore his creation at last. Northcott writes, “The original *telos* of the created order, its fundamental goodness and harmony, is reaffirmed by the being of

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<sup>30</sup> O’Donovan, *Resurrection*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Northcott, *The Environment*, 193.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 193; 205.

God uniquely embodied in the material creation in Christ's life, death and resurrection."<sup>33</sup>

Northcott's work, therefore, proffers a wide and cosmic vision of Christ's work; it is a vision of Jesus' work that affirms the goodness of the cosmos and makes a new way of living in the world possible. Finally, Northcott claims that the power of the resurrection has affected the way the Christian community can live in this world:

This paradigmatic act of forgiveness and reconciliation re-establishes the relational structure which is at the heart of the universe and which is first abrogated by human sin and injustice. The possibilities of repentance and renewal in our moral life, of effective resistance to evil and of new and more harmonious relations both in human life and with the order of creation, are all opened up by the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ from death.<sup>34</sup>

In Northcott's view, the power released in the cosmos by Christ's resurrection should empower Christian communities to live in a way that anticipates the final restoration of the cosmos that will occur with the Second Advent. This new way of life includes not only interpersonal relationships but humanity's relationship with creation as well. The church, therefore, should be an embodied anticipation of the world's final restoration.<sup>35</sup>

In summary of Northcott's ecotheology, one can say that his is a position that takes the orthodox teachings of scripture and the core doctrines of the Christian faith seriously. His work remains a positive example of orthodox ecotheology. Northcott views himself as reclaiming the proclamation of the Apostolic teaching that he sees in the work of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. In Irenaeus' work Northcott finds the proper extension of the biblical model of redemption—one that includes the created order. In Irenaeus' conflict with the Gnostic heresy, Northcott correctly identifies the Church Father's concern for the material world:

Against the idea that matter is fundamentally evil and opposed to the purpose of God, Irenaeus teaches that nature and the material world are fundamentally good and blessed by God, and that any tendencies to evil and discord which the material world contains are atoned for and redeemed in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is God in material, embodied form.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Northcott, *The Environment*, 199.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>35</sup> Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, 50; Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 198; Michael Northcott, *A Moral Climate* (New York: Orbis, 2008), 225ff.

<sup>36</sup> Northcott, *The Environment*, 208.

For Northcott, Irenaeus is the main figure that carries forward the biblical teaching on the restoration of creation. Irenaeus sees in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, a restoration of both humanity and the created order. The Bishop of Lyons writes:

The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon rising from the dead, when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, for Northcott, the orthodox view of creation's redemption is carried forward by at least one of the Church Fathers. Unfortunately, Northcott does not think that the theology of Irenaeus survived unchanged into the fourth-century. Rather, Northcott views the post-Constantine era, especially the work of St. Athanasius, as losing sight of the cosmic scope of redemption; and it is within this matrix of thought that Northcott makes his claims against Athanasius.

#### Northcott Contra Athanasius

The first charge that Northcott brings against St. Athanasius is that within his work one may initially find the influence of Hellenistic ideas that alter the biblical picture of redemption that included the created order.<sup>38</sup> Northcott is clear that the Christian proclamation of the resurrection was a corrective to the Roman and Hellenistic tendency to denigrate the body and the material world.<sup>39</sup> This proper meaning of the resurrection, according to Northcott, is lost in the fourth-century. He writes concerning the period after Constantine's<sup>40</sup> conversion:

But this resurrection faith is soon distorted in the subsequent Romanisation [UK usage] and Hellenisation of Christianity and it is here perhaps that we can detect that first fundamental shift in Christian Philosophy which precedes the gradual displacement of meaning and moral significance from the created order and embodied human life to the interior life of the soul and to human rationality and the subsequent evacuation of teleology and purposiveness from nature.<sup>41</sup>

At the core of this charge from Northcott is the belief that with the work of St. Athanasius, the biblical picture of the created order's redemption via the work of Christ begins to recede within

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<sup>37</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V, 33.3

<sup>38</sup> Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 210.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> For a rebuttal of what is the common and popular, albeit unfounded, opinion that Constantine was not a Christian and that he altered the pure faith, see Peter Leithart's, *Defending Constantine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). The view that Constantine is the consummate "bad guy" in Christian history has persisted unchallenged for far too long. Leithart's work is a welcomed advancement in Constantine studies. The majority opinion and attitude is at work in Northcott's views on Constantine and those theologians who wrote after his conversion.

<sup>41</sup> Northcott, *The Environment*, 210.

Christian theology to be replaced by a new focus on the salvation of the human soul away from the earth in the heavenly realm. Northcott writes, “This shift can already be seen in the writings of the highly influential fourth-century theologian and bishop, Athanasius of Alexandria.”<sup>42</sup>

The second charge that Northcott brings against St. Athanasius is that the Church Father’s work limits the scope of redemption. As stated earlier, Northcott finds in the scriptures, and in the teachings of Irenaeus, an image of redemption that is earth affirming and cosmic in scope. Northcott, however, does not view Athanasius as preserving this tradition. Rather, Northcott claims that St. Athanasius’ two volume apologetic treatise on creation and redemption called, *Contra Gentes-De Incartione* actually introduces a truncated view of redemption.<sup>43</sup>

Northcott writes:

However, when we come to his [Athanasius] treatment of redemption in *De Incartione*, we find no mention of the redemptive purposes of God for the created order as a whole, which, according to *De Incartione*, is inherently unstable and corruptible because of its contingency, its finitude, its creation out of nothing. Instead, humanity is the exclusive object of God’s redemptive action in the incarnation of the Son.<sup>44</sup>

Northcott further comments about Athanasius’ theology of redemption as presented in *De Incartione*, “The reason the word of God came into the corruptible world is to redeem the ‘rational race’ from the corruption and death which are its inherent nature and end of the rest of the contingent creation.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, it is clear that Northcott views Athanasius as presenting a theology of redemption that is focused on the salvation of human beings to the exclusion of creation’s restoration.

The last point Northcott makes against Athanasius is related to the previous one. The limiting of redemption’s scope, according to Northcott, is indicative of a bigger problem in Athanasius’ work—creation and redemption’s total separation. Northcott claims that this trend in St. Athanasius’ thought arises from the Church Father’s dependence upon the thought categories of Neo-Platonism.<sup>46</sup> Northcott views Athanasius as being almost entirely dependent upon these Neo-Platonic categories. He offers the following on the influence of this Greek philosophical system on St. Athanasius’ work:

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<sup>42</sup> Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 211.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

In this radical divorce between creation and redemption, and in the hominisation of redemption, we may detect the clear imprint of Hellenistic, and in particular Neo-Platonic assumptions about the corruptibility of matter, bodies and non-rational life which, because they are not eternal but temporal and contingent, are also seen as finite and ever in danger of returning to the non-being from which they originated.<sup>47</sup>

In Northcott's account, Athanasius' supposed shift in redemptive scope is due to the inherently corruptible nature of creation, thus only the eternal soul is important, and therefore the transition from the redemption of the cosmos to that of only the human soul is traceable and explainable. Northcott again makes his charge against Athanasius clear, "Thus, we see that the radical distinction between creation and redemption, and the narrowing of the writ of redemption from its cosmic import in the New Testament, and in Irenaeus, to its significance for human destiny commences not with Augustine, but with Athanasius."<sup>48</sup>

In summary, Northcott makes three charges against St. Athanasius; one, Northcott views Athanasius' writings as the beginning of an unhealthy influence of Hellenism on Christian theology that impacts the doctrine of redemption. Two, Northcott's next claim is that Athanasius' work marks the beginning of a limiting of redemption's scope in Christian thought from the entire created order to only the salvation of "rational" humans. The third charge from Northcott is that St. Athanasius' work lays the foundation for a radical separation between creation and redemption. Are these charges valid? This paper will respond with a 'no' to that question. A better and closer reading of *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione* reveals that the Church Father understands the created order's redemption and the redemption of humanity to be linked together in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Each of Northcott's claims will be refuted in turn using the work of St. Athanasius and those scholars that have commented upon his work. However, before the defense of Athanasius can begin, this paper will offer a brief introduction to

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<sup>47</sup> Northcott, *the Environment and Christian Ethics*, 213.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 214. Here Northcott is distinguishing himself from the majority of ecotheologians and theologians who identify Augustine as the fountain of Neo-Platonism's influence on the Christian faith. Colin Gunton's, *The Triune Creator* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) is an excellent example of the majority approach. Also, Northcott is identifying with the late Jaroslav Pelikan, who in the 1992 Gifford lectures at the University of Edinburgh, identified Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers as early examples of Neo-Platonic influence upon the Christian faith. However, both Pelikan and Northcott write as if the interaction between the Church and Neo-Platonism was entirely one-sided with Neo-Platonism winning the day. This paper proceeds from the vantage point that while the Fathers may use Neo-Platonic language, they fill it with new and Christian meanings. Their refutations of Platonism should be taken at face value and given privilege over modernist revisions of the Father's work.

his theological enterprise so that the reader may better understand the writings of the Bishop of Alexandria.

### **The Theology of St. Athanasius**

The life of St. Athanasius, which is outside this paper's scope, including the various stories of his rise to power, his role in the development of Nicene theology, and his struggles with five different periods of exile are just samples of what is truly an interesting life.<sup>49</sup> Athanasius' struggles with emperors, heretics, and the faithful caused the Alexandrian Bishop to describe his life with the phrase *Athanasius Contra Mundum*—Athanasius against the world—and as one of the sole defenders of the orthodox faith, he was right to feel that way. However, for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on St. Athanasius' theology as preserved in *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*. This brief introduction to Athanasius' theology will cover three main areas: creation, the fall, and redemption/new creation. The range from creation to new creation is an appropriate way to categorize Athanasius' work as E. P. Meijering notes, "In his apologetic piece of writing consisting of two parts viz the *Contra Gentes* and the *De Incarnatione Verbi*-Athanasius makes his purpose, his thoughts on the relation between creation and re-creation crystal clear. The purpose of his text is to show that the Recreator is no other God than the Creator."<sup>50</sup> With Athanasius' purpose kept in mind, his concept of creation can be presented.

For the Bishop of Alexandria, the creation of the universe was a gracious act of a loving God that was accomplished *ex nihilo*, that is, God did not use any pre-existent material in the formation of the cosmos.<sup>51</sup> By presenting the creation of the universe in this manner, St. Athanasius is able to distinguish orthodox Christian thought from the philosophies of his time, including Platonism, which posited that a divine being created the cosmos from existing material.<sup>52</sup> On the error of the Platonist's opinion, Athanasius writes, "How could God be called maker if his ability to make depended on some other cause, namely matter itself? If he only worked up existing matter, he would not be the creator but only a craftsman."<sup>53</sup> In the thought of

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<sup>49</sup> I would recommend the following to the reader: Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (London: Routledge, 2004); Peter Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010); Thomas Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007); Alvyn Petersen, *Athanasius* (Ridgefield: Morehouse Publishing, 1985); J. D. Ernst, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> E. P. Meijering, "Athanasius on God as Creator and Recreator" *Church History and Religious Culture*, 90.2–3 (2010): 175–97.

<sup>51</sup> *De Incarnatione*, §1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, §2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

St. Athanasius, the grace of God's creative power does not end with the completion of creation proper, but rather extends out into the continuous participatory relationship that God maintains with the created order—God moves, upholds and grants being to creation itself.<sup>54</sup> In this model, creation is continually indebted to God in Christ, and thus it is appropriate to say that in the thought of Athanasius, creation is contingent upon God's protection.<sup>55</sup> Firmly seated within this contingent created order is the Image bearing creature—humanity. Mankind is equally as contingent upon God as the rest of the created order, because in St. Athanasius' theology, a human being is inherently immortal only by participation in the divine life via the proper and continual contemplation of God in Christ.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, humanity in the thought of St. Athanasius is first and foremost a contingent creature that stands in need of the protection of God just as the rest of creation does.<sup>57</sup> The difference between man and the rest of nature is that creation is passive in its contingency upon God, who upholds the non-human creation by virtue of his kindness. Humanity's contingent relationship with God, however, is active, which means human beings have the responsibility to contemplate God of their own free will. According to Athanasius, this contingent created order was good and perfect; it existed without the presence of evil. St. Athanasius writes in *Contra Gentes*, "Evil has not existed from the beginning," thus the contingent state of creation was part of the good created order. Creation was, however, entirely set on a path towards nothingness by virtue of humanity's introduction of evil which separated God from humanity and the rest of the created order via the introduction of death in the fall.

For Athanasius, the fall is the introduction of evil into God's good created order.<sup>58</sup> Because God cannot tolerate sin, the relationship with not only man but the entire created order is broken and marred. Granted, God does not completely remove his hand of grace from the created order, but Athanasius makes it clear that in the fall, death gained dominion in the created order. Thus, God's creation, including mankind, begins a slide towards nothingness, because it is now cut off from its source of being and life as the relationship with God is broken.<sup>59</sup> Athanasius

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<sup>54</sup> Athanasius' work reveals a cosmos that is inherently relational. Because God has an ontological existence that is different from all other beings in the cosmos, his life acts as the source of their life. This means that God upholds the existence of the universe. It is within this frame of thought that Athanasius understands passages like Col 1:15–20.

<sup>55</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004), 57.

<sup>56</sup> *Contra Gentes*, §7.

<sup>57</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 65.

<sup>58</sup> *Contra Gentes*, §1.

<sup>59</sup> *De Incarnatione*, §2.

writes the following about humanity's introduction of corruption into the created order, "The presence and love of the Word had called them into being; inevitably, therefore when they lost the knowledge of God, they lost existence with it; for it is God alone who exists, evil is non-being, the negation and antithesis of good."<sup>60</sup> Even though the slide towards nothingness is gradual, its primary consequence, a severed relationship with God, is immediate. Because human beings were created as embodied creatures with the earth given to them as their dwelling place and a place from which they may worship God, the effects of humanity's decision to contemplate itself rather than God were felt in the created order as well. Mankind's fall ruined not only its relationship with God, but introduced frustration into the relationship the human race has with creation itself (Gen 3:17ff). While the mutual interdependence of humanity and the created order is often only assumed in Athanasius, there are places where it is clear. Athanasius writes:

It was unworthy of the goodness of God that *creatures* made by him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God *in mankind* should disappear, either through their own negligence or through the deceit of evil spirits.<sup>61</sup>

Here, one can see in St. Athanasius a concern for creatures made by God and a supreme concern for Image bearing humanity. The entire created order's slide toward nothingness, the result of the introduction of sin and death, was for Athanasius an affront to the nature of the creator God. The maker of the universe had to step into the situation in order to restore the relationship between God and humanity, and thus place creation back on track toward its intended *telos*.<sup>62</sup> The means by which God accomplished the restoration of this relationship was the incarnation of the Word.<sup>63</sup>

The redemption or re-creation that the world needed, according to St. Athanasius, required nothing less than God the Word coming to this world and taking up creaturliness into his being via his enfleshment from the Virgin's womb. Athanasius writes the following about the coming of the Word, "For he alone, being Word of the Father and above all, was in consequence both able to recreate all, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be ambassador for all with

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<sup>60</sup> *De Incarnatione*, §4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, §56.

<sup>62</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 34ff. This work provides a good introduction into what the *telos* of the created order has always been. Those who are unfamiliar with the concept in modern or ancient thought should explore Smith's book.

<sup>63</sup> *De Incarnatione*, §2.



the Father.”<sup>64</sup> The suffering of the Word for all was, in the theology of Athanasius, indicative that redemption in Christ was cosmic in scope. St. Athanasius writes:

Such things the pagans misrepresent and scorn, greatly mocking us, though they have nothing other than the cross of Christ to cite in objection. It is particularly in this respect that one must pity their sensitivity, because in slandering the cross they do not see that its power has filled the *whole world*, and that through it the effects of the divine knowledge of God have been revealed to all. For if they had applied their minds to his divinity they would not have mocked at so great a thing, but would have rather recognized that he was the *savior of the universe* and that the cross was not the *ruin but the healing of creation*.<sup>65</sup>

Redemption, for Athanasius, is the work of God incarnate that sets in motion the very healing of the cosmos. Of course, the main benefactor in this redemption is mankind; however, is that not fitting since it was humanity that introduced evil into the world and began creation’s descent into nothingness? It was the active sin of humanity that led to the passive cursing of creation, and thus the redemption of humanity should precede creation’s restoration, because a restored creation is the home of a renewed humanity; there is no need for the former before the latter (Gen 3:15; Rom 8:18–20). In light of humanity’s great need, it is appropriate for Athanasius to write, “He (God the Word) has been manifested in a human body for this reason only, out of the love and goodness of the Father, for the salvation of us men.”<sup>66</sup> The human scope of redemption in Athanasius’ work does not lessen the cosmic aspects but is a microcosm of the larger problem of sliding towards non-being that all of creation shared prior to the coming of Christ. Within St. Athanasius’ work, this redemption is accomplished in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and because this is a completed work, the effects of this redemption are now being felt in the world. This understanding of Christ’s accomplishments, as preserved in the Athanasius’ works, explains the Church Father’s presentation of Christ’s sacrifice as undoing sickness, death and idolatry in the created world. It is easy to look back upon these claims from St. Athanasius and accuse him of being triumphalistic; however, he simply believed in the redemption wrought by Christ and that this finished work should be visibly manifested in the world.

This presentation of St. Athanasius’ theology as preserved in *Contra Gentes-De Incartione* cannot summarize all that the Church Father said on creation, the fall, and

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<sup>64</sup> *De Incartione*, §7.

<sup>65</sup> *Contra Gentes*, §2.

<sup>66</sup> *De Incartione*, §2.

redemption. For the purposes of this paper, however, one can see that the created order's slide toward non-being because of the fall was the reason that the incarnation was necessary. Likewise, the role that Christ played in redeeming the cosmos, with humanity in its appropriate central role, was also a major theme in the Church Father's work. The cosmos' movement toward nothingness via the fall required God's action. For Athanasius, God acted in such a way that his character as loving creator was revealed for all that would choose to see it. This brief survey of Athanasius' work allows one to better understand the thought world of the Church Father. A better understanding of Athanasius can, in turn, help in mounting a defense against the charges brought by Michael Northcott. With this frame work kept in mind, this paper will now turn to a defense of Athanasius.

#### Athanasius Contra Northcott

At this point, this paper will return to the charges brought by Northcott against St. Athanasius and offer a defense of the Church Father. The first of these claims is that St. Athanasius' work represents the beginning of a compromise between Christian theology and Hellenistic philosophy, especially Neo-Platonism. At one level, Northcott is correct to note the presence of Platonic phrases and categories in the work of Athanasius.<sup>67</sup> The presence of Platonic terminology is partially due to the education that Athanasius received. Meijering writes, "We know that in his youth Athanasius not only had a theological education, but also a philosophical one."<sup>68</sup> The Church Father had access to and training in philosophical thought, which would have included various schools of Platonism. In both his apologetic works and in his anti-Arian writings, Athanasius uses platonic terminology.<sup>69</sup> These platonic categories, however, do not remain unchanged by St. Athanasius who modified their content with the scriptures. Therefore, Northcott is not correct to present the relationship between Platonism and Christian theology in such a one-sided fashion. The dual nature of Athanasius' training causes Meijering to write the following about St. Athanasius:

Therefore, we cannot regard him as an eclectic who deliberately combined two different worlds. What we do find in his writings is a combination of arguments derived from reason and revelation. His way of reasonable argumentation must have been formed by what he read in philosophical books and in ecclesiastical

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<sup>67</sup> E. P. Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius of Alexandria: Synthesis or Antithesis?* (London: OUP, 1974), 116.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> In the apologetic works the platonic terminology centers on cosmological concerns while the anti-Arian writings center on ontological concerns.

writers who had already used philosophical arguments before him, and his ideas about revelation must have been formed by what he read in the Bible and in ecclesiastical writers.<sup>70</sup>

St. Athanasius significantly alters these Platonic categories with Christian theology. Two examples can suffice to show that theology is the dominant influence in Athanasius' work. First, Athanasius ends *Contra Gentes* with an extended discussion of the created order that contains platonic language.<sup>71</sup> However, the further explanation of God's relationship with the created order offered in the opening sections of *De Incartione* presents a strong break with Plato's conception of creation because the Greek philosopher taught that God created the universe from preexisting matter, while Athanasius insists that creation was *ex nihilo*. Athanasius writes, "But those who hold this view do not realize that to deny that God is the cause of matter is to impute limitation on him, just as it is undoubtedly a limitation on the part of the carpenter that he can make nothing unless he has the wood."<sup>72</sup> The second example is the vast difference that exists between how Platonism presents humanity's "fall" and Athanasius' presentation of mankind's fall. In Platonic thought human beings began their existence as pure spirits, and their "fall" was a failure to contemplate the divine which resulted in these pure spirits being imprisoned in flesh, an embodied existence that Platonism viewed with disdain. Athanasius, on the other hand, presents humanity's creation as an embodied spirit as good. The fall, which Athanasius also describes as misplaced contemplation, is presented as something that happened to humans in this realm, and the solution—the incarnation of the Word—includes the promise of the resurrection of the flesh which displays matter's basic goodness. Since it is therefore inappropriate to proffer St. Athanasius as a theologian who entirely capitulated to Platonism, how then should one think of the Church Father's relationship to Greek philosophy?

Perhaps the best way to explain the antithesis between theology and Platonism in Athanasius is by analogy with the contextualization that missionaries often face when taking the gospel to new areas. Contextualization is a process by which a missionary studies their receptor culture with the specific goal of translating the Christian faith in a way that the receiving culture

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<sup>70</sup> Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism*, 117.

<sup>71</sup> *Contra Gentes*, §50.

<sup>72</sup> *De Incartione*, §2.

can understand without sacrificing the core aspects of Christianity. The resulting contextualized theology will often include some philosophical categories from the receptor culture.<sup>73</sup> St. Athanasius appears to be engaging in a form of contextualization in his *Contra Gentes-De Incartione*. The Church Father is writing in a fashion that people in his surrounding culture could understand. Athanasius was providing a defense of the cross that would provide his readers with responses they would likely encounter from learned Jews and Greeks. Meijering implies that this type of contextualization is present in Athanasius' work, "As he clearly expresses in the beginning, one of the purposes of his apologetic work is to show that the Christian faith is not unreasonable. This is obviously the reason why he constantly uses philosophical language and theories in order to express the Christian faith."<sup>74</sup> St. Athanasius claims that he is trying to offer a reasonable explanation of the Christian faith in categories that Greek culture could comprehend, "that nobody may regard the instruction of our doctrine as worthless and presume our faith in Christ to be unreasonable."<sup>75</sup> The interaction between Platonism and Christian theology in the work of Athanasius is best described as an antithetical contextualization. Meijering summarizes this well:

The orthodox Christian faith which Athanasius puts into clear contrast to Platonic idolatry is a kind of Christian faith which is to a large degree expressed in Platonic terms. Our conclusion is that orthodoxy and Platonism in the depth of Athanasius' thought are in antithesis to each other, *viz*, in the antithesis of true worship and idolatry.<sup>76</sup>

Athanasius believes that the orthodox faith could be expressed in Platonic terms, while Platonism itself remained pure idolatry. This presentation has much more in common with contextualization than it does capitulation, thus Northcott is incorrect to identify St. Athanasius as the source of compromise with Hellenistic philosophy. Rather, the Church Father's work reveals a long and intentional wrestling with the thought forms of his surrounding culture that yields a presentation of the Christian faith that is accessible to his readers and provides them with answers to the questions that their culture was asking. Instead of being the source of a new direction in theology, Athanasius is standing in the foot steps of the great apologists that wrote

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<sup>73</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1994), 267; David Hesslegrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization* (Illinois: William Carey Press, 2003).

<sup>74</sup> Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism*, 117.

<sup>75</sup> *Contra Gentes*, §1.

<sup>76</sup> Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism*, 136.

before him. As Northcott is incorrect on charging Athanasius with being the source of Hellenization, it will also be clear that the Church Father does not limit the scope of redemption.

### ***Limiting Creation's Scope***

The second charge that Northcott brings against St. Athanasius is that the Church Father limits the scope of redemption to only the salvation of “rational” human beings at the expense of the rest of “irrational” non-human creation. Rather than viewing Athanasius’ work as the extension of the biblical and cosmic view of redemption, Northcott claims that Athanasius work presents no concern for creation’s redemption. Northcott writes, “When we come to his treatment of redemption in *De Incartione*, we find no mention of the redemptive purposes of God’s created order as a whole.”<sup>77</sup> The response to this charge will be two fold. The first section will demonstrate that there is no limitation of redemption’s scope in Athanasius’ work, while the second section will address Northcott’s misunderstanding of Athanasius’ use of the terms “rational” and “irrational.” The full scope of St. Athanasius’ concept of redemption can now be examined.

Northcott states his claim against Athanasius strongly when he writes, “For Athanasius, the redemptive action of God is not directed to the whole created order, or even to sensate animals, but only to the rational race of humans.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, according to Northcott, one should not be able to find any concern for creation’s redemption in the work of Athanasius. However, this is not the case; in fact, God’s relationship with the created order is one of the unifying themes of Athanasius’ work.<sup>79</sup> Khaled Anatolios writes, “With reference to the *Contra Gentes-De Incartione*, however, what is striking is that far from a mutually exclusive opposition of ontological and soteriological and historical categories, it is precisely the interlocking of the two perspectives that provides the key to the coherence of the work.”<sup>80</sup> A brief survey of *Contra Gentes-De Incartione* reveals that God’s relationship with creation, especially the restoration of that relationship in the work of Christ, is Athanasius’ concern. In *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius writes, “For if they had really applied their minds to his divinity they would not have mocked at so great a thing, but would rather have recognized that he was the *savior of the universe* and the

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<sup>77</sup> Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 211.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>79</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (London, Routledge, 1996), 116.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

*cross was not the ruin but the healing of creation.*<sup>81</sup> The Church Father then notes in *De Incartione*, “The *renewal of creation* has been wrought by the self-same Word who made it in the beginning.”<sup>82</sup> The comments made by Athanasius in the opening sections of both volumes are confirmed near the end of *De Incartione* as well. Athanasius writes:

He it is who was crucified with the sun and moon as witnesses and by his death salvation has come to all men, *and all creation has been redeemed*. He is the life of all, and he it is who like a sheep gave up his own body to death, his life for ours and our salvation.<sup>83</sup>

Athanasius makes the scope of redemption very clear in his works. For the Church Father, Jesus is the savior of the universe. The cross of the Christ that Athanasius proclaims accomplishes nothing less than the renewal of all creation, and the redemption of all that exists. Therefore, Northcott’s claim, that in Athanasius’ apologetic work one cannot find any concern for creation’s redemption, is simply factually incorrect. At best, Northcott could claim there is a lack of clear explication of creation’s redemption, but even that would be unfair since Athanasius is following the biblical model which demonstrates that the final restoration of humanity precedes the renewal of creation (Rom 8:18–20). Northcott’s misunderstanding of Athanasius continues with regard to the meaning of “rational” and “irrational.”

A central aspect of Northcott’s second claim is that Athanasius limits redemption to only “rational” humans at the expense of the rest of the “irrational” creation. Northcott understands the relationship between “rational” and “irrational” in terms of cognition, which is fine in a modern/postmodern setting. While Northcott’s concern for sensate animals is admirable and commendable, he is reading a concern back into the thought world of Athanasius, who was using the terms “rational” and “irrational” in a completely different sense. Rather than using these terms to describe cognition, Athanasius uses them to describe a *relational* status that is exclusive to human beings. In the Greek original of Athanasius’ apologetic work, the interplay between the words rational, (*Logikos*) irrational (*alogos*) and Word (*Logos*) would have been clearly visible, but this interplay is lost in translation. In the work of Athanasius, the term “rational” or *Logikos* is used to describe a relational status that humans have with the Word of God or the *Logos*. Very simply, the Church Father is stating that only human beings are made in the Image of God,

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<sup>81</sup> *Contra Gentes*, §2.

<sup>82</sup> *De Incartione*, §2.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, §37.

because they are in the Image of the Word, while the rest of the created order is not made in this image and is thus “irrational” or *aloga*.<sup>84</sup> This status as Image bearing creature is to be understood, in the work of St. Athanasius, as an extra grace. The Church Father writes, “Giving them (humans) a further grace, he created human beings, not simply like all the irrational animals on the earth, but he made them according to his own image.”<sup>85</sup> Behr comments on this status held by human beings:

This ‘extra grace’ is to be made in the Image of Jesus Christ, which Athanasius understands as sharing in the power of the Word, being ‘rational’ rather than an irrational animal. Instead of locating the locus of the ‘Image’ exclusively in the soul or mind, the content of what it is to be ‘rational’ is here determined in terms of relationship to the Image, Jesus Christ the Word of God.<sup>86</sup>

This “extra grace” is explained as the human race’s ability to reflect upon and worship God actively by choice, and this understanding of rationality is not directly tied to cognition, otherwise mentally handicapped people would be “irrational” and unable to bear the Image, which is not the teaching of orthodoxy.

The temptation is to view the emphasis that Athanasius puts on humanity’s relational status as a tremendous benefit, because at one level it is a status that nothing else in the created order possesses. However, there is a responsibility that comes with that status as well. For St. Athanasius, the created world is a gift from God as Petersen notes, “The doctrine of creation itself expresses God’s gratuitousness and joy in creation as a whole—not in man alone, and certainly not in the soul alone, as Hellenism might suggest. The created world is then seen as an expression of the overflowing of divine generosity.”<sup>87</sup> This created order, however, is contingent because of its creation out of nothing, but this contingency should not be understood as a lack of value. Rather it is an opportunity for God in Christ to demonstrate his love for creation, including humanity, as it remains continually dependent upon God’s gracious provision for its ongoing existence.<sup>88</sup> The created order’s dependency, however, is different for each aspect of creation. The “irrational” creation is upheld by God actively, because he declared it good and thus values it (Genesis 1). The “rational” portion of creation, however, is required to receive God’s gracious

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<sup>84</sup> John Behr, *The Formation of Christian Theology: The Nicene Faith, Volume 2, Part 1* (New York: SVS Press, 2005), 184ff.

<sup>85</sup> *De Incarnatione*, §3.

<sup>86</sup> Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 189.

<sup>87</sup> Alwyn Petersen, *Athanasius* (New York: Morehouse, 1996), 56.

<sup>88</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 136.

gift actively. Therefore the “extra grace” of bearing the Image makes a level of worship available to humans that is beyond that of the rest of creation, but it also means that humanity must elect to use this gift in joyful adoration. Behr clarifies this matter:

Thus, unlike the rest of creation, human beings are charged with receiving this gift actively. Although the general pattern of the relationship between God and creation, in terms of activity and passivity, remains, a new fundamental dynamic is introduced: human beings are themselves active, in so far as they must keep themselves receptive to such grace, even if it is only by receiving this grace that they are able to be active in this manner.<sup>89</sup>

Therefore, it is clear that Athanasius’ use of the terms “rational” and “irrational” in regards to creation is not a statement about mental acumen or value; rather, it is a statement about the relationship between God the Word and human beings. Because of this understanding of Athanasius’ writings, it is incorrect for Northcott to present the terms “rational” and “irrational” as a dichotomy based upon cognition or value, since St. Athanasius offers the cross of Christ as the source of redemption for both parts of the created order. Northcott’s misunderstanding of Athanasius continues with the charge of separating creation and redemption.

### ***The Separation of Creation and Redemption***

The final charge brought by Northcott against Athanasius is that the Church Father began the separation of creation from redemption within Christian theology. As a matter of concession, it must be stated that at some point in Christian theology creation and redemption were separated as theological categories, and this did have negative results on how Christians perceived the created order. Noted biblical theologian Gerhard von Rad once stated that the created world was nothing more than a “back drop” upon which the drama of salvation was played.<sup>90</sup> However, it is a mistake to blame this separation upon the work of Athanasius whose vision of Christ’s redemptive activity remained consistently cosmic. Behr writes this about the scope of Athanasius’ work, “In a comprehensive and compelling manner, Athanasius expounds the central mystery of Christian theology, the incarnation, but in a manner that embraces all aspects of God’s work from creation to recreation.”<sup>91</sup> Petersen affirms this line of thought, “As Christ is seen in contradistinction with the first Adam, so the effects of the resurrection are seen in

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<sup>89</sup> Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 190.

<sup>90</sup> Gerhard von Rad, “The Theological Problem of the Doctrine of Creation,” trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken, in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: SCM, 1966), 138–39.

<sup>91</sup> Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 168.



contradistinction with those of the fall.”<sup>92</sup> Petersen’s comments imply that just as Adam’s sin affected all of the cosmos, the work of Christ likewise has universal effects. St. Athanasius clearly states that creation and redemption belong together in a passage that has been mentioned before but deserves further review:

The renewal of creation has been wrought by the self same Word who made it in the beginning. There is thus *no* inconsistency between *creation and salvation*; for the One Father has employed the same agent for both, *effecting the salvation of the world* through the same Word who made it in the beginning.<sup>93</sup>

With purpose and clarity, Athanasius makes his point; there is no separation between the creative acts of God and the redemptive acts of God, because both acts have been accomplished by the same agent, the Word of God. In fact, redemption in the thought of Athanasius is nothing less than the re-creation of the cosmos and a reorientation of that created order back to its prelapsarian *telos*. Northcott, however, never mentions or interacts with this passage from Athanasius’ work, and this is unfortunate as it refutes one of his central claims against the Church Father. There may be a shift at some point within Christian tradition concerning the connectedness between creation and redemption, but this separation should not be blamed on Athanasius.

In defense of Northcott, however, there is an intense focus upon the plight and redemption of human beings in the apologetic work of St. Athanasius. The Church Father writes, “It was our sorry case that caused the Word to come down, our transgression that called out his love for us, so that he made haste to help us and to appear among us.”<sup>94</sup> Even more sharply, Athanasius writes, “He has manifested in a human body for this reason only, out of love and goodness of his father, for the salvation of us men.”<sup>95</sup> Perhaps it is from these statements that Northcott fashions the separation of creation and redemption in Athanasius’ writings, but in the work of the Church Father the turn toward humanity’s plight is not unrelated to creation’s redemption. In fact, this turn toward human sin is necessary, because the problems in the created order are the result of human action (Gen 3:17).

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<sup>92</sup> Alwyn Petersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1996), 113.

<sup>93</sup> *De Incarnatione*, §2.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, §1.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, §2.

St. Athanasius makes it clear that the evil present in the world today is the result of human activity.<sup>96</sup> The fall has introduced death and disorder into creation, and according to Athanasius, if this evil were allowed to proceed without divine intervention, then the created order would slip back into the nothingness from which it came.<sup>97</sup> Because the created order is a gracious gift from God, however, creation could not be allowed to dissolve. St. Athanasius writes, “It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil.”<sup>98</sup> The solution to the presence of evil and disorder in creation, according to Athanasius, is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ resurrection is the sign that humanity will be rescued at last, and thus, the created order will be renewed as well. Athanasius writes:

The supreme object of his coming was to bring about the resurrection of the body. This was the monument to his victory over death, the assurance to all that he himself conquered corruption and that their own bodies would eventually be incorrupt; and it was in token of that and as a pledge of the future presentation that he kept his body incorrupt.<sup>99</sup>

One can see here that in Athanasius’ work, the resurrection of Christ ensured the resurrection of all mankind. The resurrection of the righteous will, in turn, result in the restoration of the created order. Athanasius notes:

Because of the Father’s love for humanity, on account of which he not only gave consistence to all things in the Word but brought it about that the creation itself, of which the apostle says ‘it awaits the revelation of the children of God,’ will at a certain point be delivered ‘from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of the children of God,’ (Rom 8:19, 21).<sup>100</sup>

Athanasius in his turn toward humanity’s plight and its solution in the resurrection of Christ is not separating creation from redemption, rather the redemption of mankind ensures the renewal of creation. In this regard, St. Athanasius is merely following the exposition of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8. The resurrection of humanity is the event that triggers the final renewal of the cosmos which is the Christian hope. O’Donovan writes of this hope, “Before God raised Jesus from the dead, the hope we call ‘Gnostic,’ the hope of redemption from creation

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<sup>96</sup> *Contra Gentes*, §3.

<sup>97</sup> *De Incarnatione*, §3.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, §6.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, §37.

<sup>100</sup> *Contra Arianos*, §10.

rather than the redemption of creation, might have appeared to be the only possible hope. ‘But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.’ That fact rules out any other possibilities for in the second Adam, the first is rescued.”<sup>101</sup> Northcott is simply incorrect in his identification of Athanasius as the source of separation between creation and redemption in the history of Christian theology, especially since the Church Father consistently proclaimed the Apostolic witness concerning the Christian faith, which includes the following:

In proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, the Apostles proclaimed also the resurrection of mankind in Christ; and in proclaiming the resurrection of mankind, they proclaimed the renewal of all creation with him. Therefore, the resurrection of Christ directs our attention back to the creation which it vindicates.<sup>102</sup>

Athanasius’ shift in focus to humanity’s redemption in his work is, thus, not an abandonment of concern for the created order. Rather, the restoration of humanity—the renewal of the Image of God—is that which ensures creation’s restoration since redeemed humanity will need a renewed home. Having completed the defense of St. Athanasius, this paper will briefly explore Athanasius’ significance for ecological concerns.

### **Athanasius Pro Mundum**

At this point, it is possible to reflect upon the defense of St. Athanasius posited above. The debate about creation’s redemption among ecotheologians was set in its proper, historical context. The theological enterprise of both interlocutors was presented so that the reader could better understand Northcott and his claims against Athanasius as well as the theology of the Church Father. In regards to the defense proper, this paper showed that it is better to view Athanasius’ relationship with Greek thought as an antithetical contextualization than a capitulation. Also, this paper demonstrated that St. Athanasius does not limit redemption’s scope but maintains its cosmic import. Finally, this paper argued that it is improper for Northcott to claim that the Church Father is the beginning of creation’s separation from redemption. Rather, this paper showed that Athanasius’ apologetic work holds creation and redemption together via the person and work of Christ. Northcott’s claims, therefore, should not be accepted as they are currently fashioned. Before leaving Athanasius, however, this paper will briefly proffer how his work may be utilized for a theological approach to ecology.

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<sup>101</sup> O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 51.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

First, it must be stated that any use of St. Athanasius work will be an attempt at constructive theology—the Church Father’s work does not directly speak to the ecological crisis. This realization, however, does not mean that one cannot glean ecological wisdom from Athanasius’ work. In fact, Denis Edwards has already explored Athanasius’ work and found in the Church Father’s doctrine of theosis a great hope for creation’s redemption.<sup>103</sup> The cosmos’ transformation at the Second Advent remains a central concern in St. Athanasius, and it is the clearest example of a direct correlation between the Church Father’s work and ecological concerns. However, there is also in Athanasius’ apologetic work an emphasis upon the power released upon the church via Christ’s resurrection that can also be utilized to help motivate Christians who are involved in environmental projects.

For Athanasius, the coming of God the Word that culminates in Christ’s resurrection has released a power in the universe that can be neither ignored nor stopped. Many people may attempt to disregard the power, but in the mind of the Church Father, the redemptive act of God can only go forward. St. Athanasius writes, “When did people begin to abandon the worship of idols, unless it were since the very Word of God came among men.”<sup>104</sup> Athanasius continues, “Similarly, not only does the wisdom of Greeks no longer make any progress, but that which used to be is disappearing. And demons, so far from continuing to impose on people by their deceits and oracle-givings and sorceries are refuted by the sign of the cross if they so much as try.”<sup>105</sup> The Church Father summarizes his position well near the end of *De Incarnatione*:

When the sun has come, darkness prevails no longer; any of it that may be left anywhere is driven away. So also, now the Divine Epiphany of the Word of God has taken place, the darkness of idols prevails no more, and all parts of the world in every direction are enlightened by his teaching.<sup>106</sup>

We noted earlier that many people interpret passages like this in Athanasius as triumphalistic.<sup>107</sup> However, we also noted that it is better to explain these statements as reflecting Athanasius’ genuine belief that Christ’s work accomplished redemption and unleashed resurrection power upon his people. Filled with this resurrection power, Athanasius presents the church as proclaiming the gospel in the face of opposition, routing demons, destroying idols, and even

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<sup>103</sup> Edwards, “God’s Redeeming Act: Deifying Transformation,” 250.

<sup>104</sup> *De Incarnatione*, §46.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, §55.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> See the discussion of this in the introduction of Leithart’s *Athanasius*.

facing martyrdom without fear. It is precisely this power that ecologically minded Christians need to access in order to bear witness that God loves the material world.

Christians that are concerned about the environment face opposition on all fronts. Conservative Christians will often identify them as “liberal” and resist their efforts. Many of these same conservative objectors will also claim that environmental concerns are not part of the gospel or the church’s mission, and are a waste of time or resources. Liberals, on the other hand, will accuse ecologically minded Christians of “high jacking” their cause in order to use it as a backdoor for evangelism. The “green” Christian is caught in the crossfire with many enemies and few allies. This is a situation that many of Athanasius’ contemporaries could understand, and the power that sustained them—the resurrection power of Christ—is still available for his church. Environmentally concerned Christians can gather a renewed fervor for their cause by reading the apologetic work of St. Athanasius. After all, the actions that display a concern for the environment are also actions that reflect a concern for people, and thus preach the gospel. On this point, Athanasius and Northcott could agree:

The rituals encouraged by the recognition of global warming—turning off lights, turning down the heating, cycling or walking instead of driving, holidaying nearer to home, buying local food, shopping less and conversing more, addressing the causes of fuel poverty locally and internationally—are good because they are intrinsically right, not just because they have the consequence of reducing carbon emissions. Such actions correct modern thoughtlessness, they sustain the moral claim that it is wrong to live in a civilization that depends upon the systematic enslavement of peoples.<sup>108</sup>

These actions do, indeed, preach the gospel and are thus powered by Christ’s resurrection. May the tribe of environmentally concerned Christians increase, and may they find the power that drove St. Athanasius to live a life of uncompromising defense of the orthodox faith. May someone someday write something like the following about the “green” Christians, “On the whole, I think Athanasius was on the side of the angels, a salutary antidote to the wilting cowardice that has too often passed as piety in the modern world.”<sup>109</sup> The ecological crisis needs a strong response from deeply concerned Christians, believers that have tapped into the power that drove St. Athanasius.

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<sup>108</sup> Michael Northcott, *A Moral Climate* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 273.

<sup>109</sup> Leithart, *Athanasius*, *xiii*.