

Martin D. Henry (*ITQ*, vol. 66/2, 2001, 108)

Environment or Creation?

Heraclitus – a byword for transience – was, oddly enough, the first western thinker to guess at the presence of another reality he called ‘Logos’, lying deep within the flux of appearances. Subsequently, Plato canonised the distinction between appearance and reality, and in more recent times Schleiermacher, himself an authoritative translator of Plato, reinvigorated this ancient, seemingly indestructible, and invaluable dichotomy between what appears to be the case, and what is the case.

Traditionally, the doctrine of ‘creation’ has acknowledged God to be the universe’s unique, transcendent, and abiding source. In seemingly presenting God as an isolated, absolute, dominating force over against the world, this doctrine has been interpreted as sowing in human beings, ‘made in God’s image’, the seeds of an exploitative attitude towards the environment. A newer, more immanentist, quasi-pantheistic view of God’s relationship to the world, a view that has been gaining ground since Schleiermacher’s day, would prefer to see Christians living out their faith not in traditional flight from the world, but as life-affirmers, even as ‘friends of the earth’. Yet the widespread increase in sensitivity to the environment prompts the question: ‘Whose environment?’ The answer, surely, must be: ‘Humanity’s environment.’ But then, who or what decrees humanity to be the centre of the universe around which, as the term ‘environment’ hints, everything revolves? Humanity itself? Christianity, however, sees God, rather than humanity, as being ‘centre-stage’. Moreover, were the current, more immanentist vision of ‘God-in-the-world’ to be adhered to, what Christianity means by ‘redemption’, would presumably also have to be re-interpreted.

Yet if one were to see pantheism, with Schopenhauer, as really a ‘euphemism for atheism’, then ‘redemption’, in a pantheistic or quasi-pantheistic perspective, could only mean either an unbearable, indiscriminate, Nietzschean endorsement of everything, or else humanity’s own ability to create an earthly eschaton. That this latter has not so far materialised, is not, of course,

to say that it never will. But to hope it will, is to part company with the Christian understanding of hope, which does not spring from confidence in the world's own resources, but is rather rooted in a belief in the benevolent, transcendent origin of the world. The world by itself, as Baltasar Gracián remarked, and as the traditional Christian formulation *creatio ex nihilo* itself suggests, is nothing. Zero. But if taken in conjunction with God, it can amount to a great deal. This is one of the consolations of being a zero.