

**Unfinished Creation:
The Moral and Theological Significance of the Fall**

Andrew Linzey

I want to begin with a story.

[Philip, Bartholomew and Mariamne] all set out [as directed by the Lord] for the land of Ophiani; and when they came to the wilderness of dragons, behold, a great leopard came out of a wood on the hill, and ran and cast himself at their feet and spoke with human voice, 'I worship you servants of the divine greatness and apostles of the only-begotten Son of God; command me to speak perfectly.' And Philip said, 'In the name of Jesus Christ, speak.' And the leopard adopted perfect speech and said, 'Hear me Philip, groomsman of the divine word. Last night I passed through the flocks of goats near the mount of the she-dragon, the mother of snakes, and seized a kid; and when I went into the wood to eat, after I had wounded it, it took a human voice and wept like a little child, saying to me, "O leopard, put off your fierce heart and the beastlike part of your nature, and put on mildness, for the apostles of the divine greatness are about to pass through this desert, to accomplish perfectly the promise of the glory of the only-begotten Son of God." At these words of the kid I was perplexed, and gradually my heart was changed, and my fierceness turned into mildness, and I did not eat it. And as I listened to its words, I lifted up my eyes and saw you coming, and knew that you were servants of the good God. So I left the kid and came to worship you. And now I beseech you to give me liberty to go with you everywhere and put off my beastlike nature.'

And Philip said, 'Where is the kid?' And he said, 'It is cast down under the oak opposite.' Philip said to Bartholomew: 'Let us go and see him that was smitten, healed, and healing the smiter.' And at Philip's bidding the leopard guided them to where the kid lay. Philip and Bartholomew said, 'Now know we of a truth that there is none that surpasses your compassion, O Jesu, lover of man; for you protect us and convince us by these creatures to believe more and earnestly fulfil our trust. Now, therefore, Lord Jesus Christ, come and grant life and breath and secure existence to these creatures, that they may forsake their nature of beast and cattle and come unto tameness, and no longer eat flesh, nor the kid the food of cattle; but that men's

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given them, and they may follow us wherever we go, and eat what we eat, to your glory, and speak after the manner of men, glorifying your name.'

And in that hour the leopard and the kid rose up and lifted up their forefeet and said, 'We glorify and bless you who have visited and remembered us in this desert, and changed our beastlike and wild nature into tameness, and granted us the divine word, and put in us a tongue and sense to speak and praise your name, for great is your glory.' And they fell and worshipped Philip and Bartholomew and Mariamne; and all set out together, praising God.

The story is taken from *The Acts of Philip*, one of five principal apostolic romances written in the fourth–fifth century.¹ It forms part of a quite voluminous quantity of non-canonical material whose origins and dating are frequently obscure. One of the recurring themes of this literature concerns the establishing or restoration of peaceful and friendly relationships with animals.

I have deliberately chosen this story because it is fantastic. So fantastic that some may not be surprised to learn that it was never included in any recognizable canon of Scripture and is described by the editor himself as 'edifying fiction'.² It is fantastic too in another more important sense: it makes the strongest possible claim on our imagination. Rachel Trickett has wryly observed how theologians are 'peculiarly reluctant to concede the innate human capacity to accept the marvellous, to delight in wonder and respond to the strongest claims on the imagination'. 'Artists, by contrast', she explains, 'always assume it; the justification of their work depends upon it'.³

I foray into this little discussion about imagination, belief and truth

1. 'The Acts of Philip', in J.K. Elliott (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 515-16. Elliott has modernized the earlier translation originally in Montague Rhodes James (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), VIII, pp. 446-47, 438-39.

2. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 438.

3. Rachel Trickett, 'Imagination and Belief', in A.E. Harvey (ed.), *God Incarnate: Story and Belief* (London: SPCK, 1981), p. 39. See also Brian Horne, 'Seeing with a Different Eye: Religion and Literature', in Andrew Linzey and Peter J. Wexler (eds.), *Heaven and Earth: Essex Essays in Theology and Ethics* (London: Churchman Publishing, 1986), pp. 121-24. I am indebted to Horne's discussion of Trickett which I have used in connection with other apocryphal material about Jesus and animals in Andrew Linzey and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *After Noah: Animals and the Liberation of Theology* (London: Cassell, 1997), see especially Chapters 4 and 5.

because so much in the Christian tradition, like the work of a good artist, makes the strongest possible claim on our imagination. Partly because so much in the tradition strikes us as 'imaginary', we are inclined to reject it. But, as Trickett observes, such a rejection if pursued to its logical conclusion would lead us to the rejection of almost all literature and the moral insight which results from it.

Trickett defines the problem in this way: '...the act of consenting or believing, like any act of the will, involves that quality of imagination which can entertain and hold in the mind the completeness of a complex truth with all its many facets'; and the role of the imagination as follows: 'To see truth as a process of stripping bare, paring away, is a common rational perception; to see truth as a gathering together, a process of accretion which may appear to lead to paradox and contradiction, but which, in the end, resolves them by asserting completeness, is a function of the imagination.'⁴

What is at stake in the question of the fall is nothing less than our imagination—that faculty which can help us—in Trickett's words—to hold 'in the mind the completeness of a complex truth', and also—at the same time—our fidelity or—more often than not—infidelity—to the moral insights to which it gives rise. The complex truth—in theological terms—to which this debate corresponds is the dual recognition that God as the Creator of all things must have created a world which is morally good—or at least be justified in the end as a morally justifiable process—and also the insight that parasitism and predation are unlovely, cruel, evil aspects of the world ultimately incapable of being reconciled with a God of love.

The concept of the fall—whether it be deduced from Genesis, or by implication from Romans 8 or Isaiah 11, or from the narrative in Philip or indeed from the countless stories of the saints who befriend animals and save them from predator/prey relations—constitutes a composite rejection of the idea that the creation as it now is—is—at least in this respect—God's original will. Such an insight resulting from 'holding together in the mind a complex truth' is as fundamentally important to Christian theology as any doctrinally formulated belief whether of Chalcedon or Nicea. To reject it, as many theologians do today simply on the grounds that it is an imaginative story, or as incidentally the editor of Philip did by suggesting that it could not be as important as other material because it was more interested in 'narrative' than 'doctrine', is perverse.⁵ The truth is that

4. Trickett, 'Imagination and Belief', pp. 38-39.

5. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 438.

theologians are even more adept than non-believers in seeing truth as a 'paring away' rather than as 'a gathering together' but in the process of so doing they fail to see that they make theology not less incredible but more so. The very faculty which—humanly speaking—provides integrity for the whole system is cut away and theologians spend their time debating which little bits left of the system may be rendered intelligible after the central stories have been disregarded.

It seems, therefore, vital to spell out as precisely as possible what kind of inchoate theology will be left if those who wish to reject the notion of the fall have their way. To reject the fallenness of creation means that:

1. *There is no evil in the natural world.* Predation and parasitism are either morally neutral or, even worse, positive aspects of nature to be tolerated or even emulated. Quite practically, lions disembowelling gazelles, cuckoos pushing non-cuckoos out of the nest, tarantulas eating their prey, are not, *cannot be*, moral matters. They may be matters of taste, hygiene or aesthetics but they cannot be moral ones. To deny the fall is to live within a nature that is divorced from ethical truth. The moral realm no longer includes the non-human. 'Human morality'—and it is often so called—has no relevance to the natural realm except possibly in so far as it adversely affects us and then only indirectly as a moral problem. To be appalled, shocked, outraged by the apparent senselessness and futility of nature is a category mistake like being appalled by washing or eating or sexual relations—all *prima facie* without a moral dimension.

2. *There is no possibility of redemption for nature, animals in particular.* Instead the cruelty and awfulness of nature become—in theological terms—agents of a now morally compromised God. Richard Cartwright Austin goes so far as to extol the 'beauty' of predation when witnessing a fish eagle taking its prey.⁶ God must now abide by a new law of the universe—as Matthew Fox puts it—'Eat and get eaten'.⁷ Gone is the operation of the Holy Spirit within creation leading to its rescue from bondage to decay. Absent is the

6. Richard Cartwright Austin, *Beauty of the Lord: Awakening the Senses* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), pp. 196-97. See also my critique, 'The Case Against the Christian Hunter', in *Epworth Review* 20.2 (1993), pp. 22-30; also in my *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), Chapter 7.

7. Matthew Fox and Jonathon Porritt, 'Green Spirituality' (a dialogue) in *Creation Spirituality* VII.3 (1991), pp. 14-15. Also cited and discussed in my article, 'The Case Against the Christian Hunter'.

whole eschatological frame of reference, so central to early Christian reflection upon nature, that creation can only properly be interpreted from the standpoint of its eventual consummation.⁸ Nature cannot be redeemed because there is nothing to be improved upon: no evil to be overcome, no pain to be healed, and no new heaven and earth for which all creatures long. This view deserves the admonition of Luther who, in exegesis of Romans 8, argued: 'We conclude, therefore, that anyone who searches into the essences and functionings of the creatures rather than into their sighings and earnest expectations is certainly foolish and blind. He does not know that also the creatures are created for an end.'⁹ Whatever the limitations of Luther's theology of animals, he grasped here that a redeeming God could not eschew the sighing and suffering of all creatures.

3. *There is no human obligation to cooperate with God in the redemption of nature, animals in particular.* If the awfulness of animal suffering in nature is morally neutral, even divine will, there can be no summons to alleviate that evil or regard as a Christian-like task the healing of disordered relationships within creation. Quite simply: the human task does not and cannot include the natural world. 'Human morality' is properly for humans only. Except perhaps in this one regard: eat and be eaten. It is astonishing that ecologists should so readily have taken up this neo-Darwinian slogan with such unfortunate implications for human as well as natural society. For if God, the Lord and Sustainer of all that is, is so logically determined by this one inexorable law of the universe, shall we be so naive as to suppose that such a limited God is actually interested in a wholly different, indeed contradictory, norm for human society? However unsophisticated the general theological view of Philip in his narrative of the leopard and the kid, he preserves for us the insight that the gospel of Jesus has implications for the life of each and every sentient being. Whether or not a neo-Darwinian version of divine limitation can sustain human life from the very same predation which it sees as the inexorable law of the universe in relation to nature and animals seems highly questionable. The idea that we begin by being insensitive to animals and then proceed to a similar insensitivity to humans may not be as ideologically

8. See, e.g., Francis Bridger, 'Ecology and Eschatology: A Neglected Dimension', in *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.2 (1990), pp. 290-301.

9. Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (ed. Wilhelm Pauck; Library of Christian Classics; London: SCM Press, 1961), XV, p. 237.

ungrounded as some of us had supposed.

4. *There is no morally just God.* This of course is the inevitable conclusion, already implicit in the work of some of the anti-fall theologians, to which their whole argument points. God cannot be God to nature in at least this one crucially determining respect: God cannot redeem nature. But if this is true, then it must also be true that God is a morally capricious being whose purpose or plan in creating is morally flawed and to which we humans hold no duty of allegiance and certainly not worship. It is really important to get this matter straight: we may from time to time entertain genuine doubts and difficulties in relation to what may be God's purpose in creation and how that purpose may eventually be achieved; we may even have doubts about the means and the ends implicit in such a process; we may be especially doubtful about how far human activity can directly or indirectly contribute to the divinely purposed new heaven and earth, but however admissible, legitimate, even compelling these doubts may be, to reject absolutely the possibility of a transformed new heaven and earth in which all sentients will be redeemed is logically tantamount to denying the possibility of a morally good God. A non-redeeming God in relation to nature is worse than a no-God; it is to endorse the common despair that all life is morally hopeless because there is no moral justifiability for its existence.

I have stated these implications (as I see them) boldly and provocatively because (as I see it) great insights and truths are involved in jettisoning the story of the fall of creation.

Some may argue that I place too much weight on one particular story but it hardly needs to be pointed out that the Gospel writers (or more accurately compilers and redactors) wove together stories and fragments of narrative into what we now know as 'canonical Gospels'. The genre of narrative lies at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The story of the fall is inextricably related to the story of redemption; the one is impossible without the other. The question that should be before us is whether the ethical treatment of the non-human is possible at all without a narrative of messianic expectation. If we, and all creation, have nothing fundamentally to hope for—according to God's own promise—what can be the point of ethical striving?

It is therefore unsurprising that the frequent backcloth to this theological issue is the intensely practical question, namely: What, or whom, are we to eat? If 'eat and get eaten' is the moral law of the universe, or if predation is 'beautiful', there can be no moral imperative to live without injury. The truth is that human beings can now

approximate the peaceable kingdom by living without killing sentients for food. Whether this has always been possible is something about which, at worst, I am doubtful; at best, I have an open mind. But whatever the past complexity, I believe that we should now rejoice at the fact that so many of our human contemporaries can live without killing sentients in order to eat—and eat well. Not only should we act generously in accordance with the moral freedom that we now enjoy but—most especially—we should learn the deep theological message implicit in its contemporary realization: we are the species who can dream divine-like dreams and by divine grace actualize them. Humans are the one species capable of continuing the story of God incarnate.¹⁰

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10. This paper was originally given to a Consultation composed of ecologists and animal advocates entitled 'Ethical Relations with Other Creatures' in Arkansas, sponsored by the Center for Respect of Life and the Environment of the HSUS (Humane Society of the United States) and I acknowledge my debt to the comments of those present at the gathering.