Augustine, Creation and COP26

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The recent UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, in November 2021, has served to focus international attention on major environmental concerns of our time. Under the rubric of 'Together for Our Planet', the ambitious, though worthy, goals of COP26 were stated as being: 1) to secure global net-zero by mid-century and keep 1.5 degrees [Celsius] within reach; 2) to adapt to protect communities and natural habitats; 3) to mobilize finance; 4) to work together to deliver.

'To work together to deliver' in this important field is no mean challenge, and will require the use of every available resource. In a spirit of openness and friendly solidarity, reflections from the perspectives of diverse world views should be welcomed to the conversation. In this connection, there remains a need for the further development, at both theoretical and practical levels, of a Christian environmental ethic. Since the 1970s, many Christian theologians have become more attentive to environmental issues. Much work remains to be done.

For some scientists, perspectives offered by faith communities are largely irrelevant in the context of current debates. Faith and science are held to be irreconcilable enemies. Other scientists warmly welcome and value the fruits of theological reflection. Arguably, it has never been more important than now to be 'together for our planet', and to be open to all thoughtful perspectives.

In his deeply insightful book, *Morality and the Environmental Crisis*,[1] Roger Gottlieb provides a long list of sobering environmental facts. The following five may be taken as representative:

- 2017 was the twenty-first consecutive warmer-than-average-year since 1997. During the fall of 2016, the Arctic recorded temperatures 30 degrees [Fahrenheit] higher than normal.

- In a 2004 St. Louis study of newborn children, the average baby was found with 187 toxic substances in their blood.

- The World Health Organization recently estimated that three to six million deaths per year are attributable in whole or part to air pollution.

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1 Roger S. Gottlieb, *Morality and the Environmental Crisis* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019).

- A precipitous drop in insect populations, estimated to be as high as 75 percent, indicates potentially catastrophic effects on human agriculture in particular and plant species life in general.

- Somewhere between 700 million and a billion people live in densely packed urban slums that are part of the megacities resulting from global urbanization […]. Examples [in Latin America, Africa and Asia] are shanty towns literally built on or immediately next to gargantuan toxic facilities, so little sanitation that excrement is an immediate presence of daily life […] there is an immediate and overwhelming level of human-generated pollution in the daily lives of somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of the human race [2]

Gottlieb suggests that since these facts are so anxiety-generating, his readers might wish at this point to reach for a calming drink of water. That too, however, turns out to be problematic. If, for example, we take it from a plastic bottle, the bottle may contain BPA, 'a carcinogen that leeches into the water from the plastic'. He offers other similarly concerning examples and comments, 'These facts tell us that the world is neither stable nor safe.'[3]

The environmental crisis is plain enough for all to see. But how are we to address it – to slow down the dangerous trends, and in time, hopefully, even to reverse them? There is a major problem here – one that brings us fairly directly into the realm of religion and faith.

Gottlieb points out that human destructiveness towards the environment is ages old. What is new in our time is the level of destructive power that we have acquired. Tellingly, he reminds us of the way in which 'God put Job in his place by asking some obviously rhetorical questions: "Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook or tie down its tongue with a rope? […] Can you fill its hide with harpoons and its head with fishing spears? […]"' (Job 41:1-9)

Today, however, 'humans can not only catch whales, but also hunt them to near extinction, implant radio transmitters to track them, teach them tricks in theme parks, and catalogue their DNA'.[4]

In Gottlieb's view, the sheer destructive scope of what we modern humans have done to our environment, 'calls into question the ultimate rationality of modernity'. In the case of religion and philosophy, he argues that, with some exceptions, they have generally 'taught us […] to frame nature's significance in human terms'. While religious environmentalism

[2] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[3] Ibid., pp. 3-5.
[4] Ibid., p. 7.

is now 'a global movement', Gottlieb invites us to reflect on 'how few and far between were the religious and philosophical voices in opposing the last century's juggernaut of technological development and environmental degradation.' He quotes from Professor Steven C. Rockefeller:

> The social and moral traditions that have been dominant in the West […] have not involved the idea that animals, trees, or the land in their own right, as distinct from their owners or their Creator, have moral standing. Only a few saints and reformers have taught that people have direct moral responsibilities to nonhuman creatures.

Gottlieb finds it striking 'when environmental philosophy did emerge in the 1970s, how little of the "canon" of Western philosophy could be used as a resource'. While religion and philosophy are 'two of our critical cultural resources', they represent 'an impoverished tool kit, a kit itself in need of repair'.[5]

Gottlieb argues for an approach to the current crisis in terms of the recovery of 'spiritual virtue', in which the illusion that 'success measured in possessions, fame, or power will lead to happiness' is replaced by *gratitude* for what we have, as a gift, together with a relationship of *love* and *compassion* to other people and the world around us.[6] He points, in this regard, to valuable resources within the monotheistic religions by bringing in the concept of creation and the attribution of 'nature's existence to an intelligent, caring Force that brought the universe into being and has a deep love for human beings'. When nature is seen as a divine gift, this inevitably 'confers value on it and a corresponding sense of horror at what has been done. […] For the serious theist everything on earth derives its most essential reality through its relationship to God.'[7]

This paper aims to pursue Gottlieb's thought and its potential to help foster the radical moral transformation required in order to make meaningful, practical progress in addressing one of the greatest challenges of our time. Part of the task of 'repairing our toolkit' will involve a fresh look at the rich theological resources of the Christian tradition and a consideration of their potential bearing on current environmental concerns.

The paper's focus is on the theology of creation found in the work of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), arguably the most influential theologian-philosopher of the Christian West. While Augustine's theological legacy is in some respects problematic, the paper seeks to highlight some of the (frequently overlooked) ways in which his reflections on creation can pro-

5 Ibid., pp. 9-11.
6 Ibid., p. 134.
7 Ibid., p. 50.

vide helpful perspectives on ecological and environmental concerns. In particular, might Augustine's mature theological reflections yield insights to help counter the lack of moral motivation, highlighted by Gottlieb and others, in addressing the environmental challenges before us?

It is important at the outset to acknowledge the ways in which the Christian tradition has come short in exemplifying and inculcating right attitudes and actions in regard to the environment in which we live. This failure was exposed in an influential critique, in which the medieval historian Lynn White laid the blame for the developing ecological crisis squarely at the door of the Christian world-view, with its Judaic roots.[8] White's thesis has received widespread scholarly acceptance.[9] Christianity, he argued, replaced an earlier understanding of the 'sacredness' of nature, with an anthropocentric view of humanity as created uniquely in the 'image of God' and with the right of 'dominion', or control, over all other creatures, as described in Genesis 1: 26-30. This encouraged an arrogance towards, and an aggressive exploitation of, the natural world, seen in these terms to exist solely for the benefit and purposes of humankind. White held that '[Western] Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen'. The dominance of this world-view in the West, he concludes, has helped to undergird the modern technological conquest of nature that has led to our current environmental crisis. In this respect, 'Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt.'[10]

Augustine himself has often been held to account for the unhelpful consequences of his alleged disparagement of the material world and privileging of the realm of the spirit. This, it is argued, has contributed significantly to those negative attitudes to the natural world and the neglect of environmental concerns which have been only too apparent in the history of the church.

In the medieval period, the effect of such dualism with an associated focus on the individual, was a radical separation between the doctrines of creation and redemption. Creation became a mere preamble to the central concerns of Scripture which were entirely soteriological. Thought, preaching and action about salvation came to be centred on the rescue of individual souls from damnation in hell. Although this worked out in somewhat different ways in Catholicism and in post-Reformation Prot-

8 Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), pp. 1203-7.

9 David Fergusson, however, remarks that 'The very similar ecological problems faced by countries in Asia today may problematize this thesis, however.' Fergusson, *Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 13, fn. 17.

10 White, 'Historical Roots', pp. 1203-7.

estantism, the result was similar – the loss of the biblical vision of creation and of redemption in its height, breadth and depth, as embracing the entire expanse of the created order. As we shall see, both the critique of Christianity by White and others and this narrowing of vision within the church reflected a distortion of, and departure from, important strands of early Christian thought.

In critiques of Christian failure in respect of ecological and environmental issues, Augustine is often held to be largely responsible for the western church's unfortunate theological trajectory. It is unquestionable that the bishop of Hippo's influence on the western theological tradition has been constant, pervasive and complex. It continues unabated in the 21st century.

It is not clear, however, that in critiques of Augustine's attitude to the natural world, adequate attention has been given to his sustained and serious work on the doctrine of creation. Far from being of marginal or negative interest to him, Augustine's lifelong engagement with this doctrine verged on the obsessive. His persistent and intense wrestling with the creation narrative in Genesis began at the time of his conversion in late August 386, and continued unabated to the end of his life. This was, in fact, a doctrine he viewed as absolutely fundamental to all his other theological work, to his ministry, and to the whole of human life.

In suggesting that Augustine should be recognized as an important conversation partner in current creational and ecological discussions, the paper, firstly, surveys Augustine's developing engagement with the doctrine of creation. This requires us to attend, in particular, to his successive attempts to grapple with the early chapters of Genesis, culminating in his most mature endeavour, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. A few themes will then be drawn out from Augustine's work, which will highlight the value of his thought as a resource in respect of the concerns of COP26.

UNDERSTANDING GENESIS – AN UNENDING PROJECT

I. On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees

Strikingly, Augustine's first attempt at interpreting the Genesis creation narrative occurred prior to his ordination, in the period immediately following his conversion in 386.

Earlier, as a teenager, Augustine had become disillusioned by his reading of the Scriptures, particularly those of the Old Testament. The attacks of the Manichees on the creation account of Genesis resonated strongly with him.[11] Rebelling against the religion of his mother Monica, Augus-

[11] See *Confessions*, 3.5 – 6.9-10.

tine joined the Manichees, 'a dualistic, Gnostic sect which claimed to represent authentic Christianity, purged of the faulty metaphysics, theology, and exegesis of Catholic Christianity, and to be able therefore to explain truly the nature of good and evil.'[12]

For Manichees, the world came into existence as the result of a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil, light and dark powers. Faith in a single Creator was, therefore, ruled out *ab initio*, and with it the credibility of Christian orthodoxy and of the church. Augustine, remarkably, was a devotee of this sect for a period of nine years. During this time, he believed 'nothing could be answered to the Manichees' arguments.'[13]

There is some irony in the fact that it was, at least partially, on the recommendation of some Manichees that Augustine secured a professorship of rhetoric in Milan. For it was there, under the preaching of Ambrose, whose rhetorical skills first attracted Augustine to his ministry, he was led 'to the general insight that the Bible need not be interpreted exclusively according to the literal[istic] sense, as the Manichees demanded and followed in practice,' and that allegorical exegesis had a proper place.[14]

It is therefore not surprising, following his conversion at Milan in 386, that Augustine's earliest attempt to interpret the first chapters of Genesis should have had a polemical, anti-Manichaean slant. One might say that if Augustine owed one lasting debt to the Manichees, it was the (unintended) impetus they gave to his early and lasting recognition of the foundational nature of creation for Christian theology.[15]

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12 Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology. An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 75.

13 *Confessions*, 5.14.

14 Michael Fiedrowicz, in *Saint Augustine on Genesis*, ed. by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), p. 26. The Neoplatonists had a significant input to the development of Augustine's thought. As Harrison states, 'it was the Neoplatonists who revolutionized Augustine's thought with their understanding of spiritual reality, thereby making it possible for him to break with materialism as well as Manichean dualism […] The key to the solution, however, he locates, not so much with the Neoplatonists, but in the doctrine of creation: "I had not yet come to see that the hinge of this great subject lies in your creative act, almighty one: you alone do marvellous things. My mind moved within the confines of corporeal forms."' Harrison, *Rethinking*, p. 85. See *Confessions*, 4.15.24.

15 On the enduring foundational importance of creation for Augustine's theology, see Harrison, *Rethinking*, chapter 4. 'Creation from nothing is the point at which he naturally begins, but it is also that which determines the way in which he subsequently expounds his entire understanding of the faith.' Ibid., p. 114. Harrison has shown that the key elements in Augustine's mature theology were already in place from around 386. Correcting an influential

This first serious exegetical endeavour was undertaken within a year of Augustine's return from Italy in 388 to his home town of Thagaste in North Africa. The speed and urgency of its production most likely reflects the recent convert's concern to protect a largely uneducated Christian public from what he now saw as a dualistic and dangerous heresy. We are introduced in this work to the two literary genres favoured by Augustine in much of his subsequent theological writing – the anti-heretical treatise and the exegetical commentary. Influenced by the allegorism and Neoplatonic spirit of Ambrose, whose sermons on the Hexaemeron (the six days of creation in Genesis one) he may well have heard preached in Milan during Holy Week, 386, Augustine adopted in this early work a largely allegorical approach to the interpretation of Genesis.

At the same time, many of the themes which appear in his later efforts make their first appearance here. These include God's freedom and immutability and the goodness of his activity. Using both the Catholic creed and exegesis of the text, Augustine seeks to refute the core dilemma posed by the Manichaean dualist system, namely, that 'one must accept the existence of an eternal principle that is parallel but opposed to God, or else one is caught up in a host of aporias and absurdities'. In summary, '[h]e set the one creator God over against the dualism of two principles, and over against the idea of an emanation he set the creative action of an all-powerful God who freely created the world out of nothing.[16]

II. Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis

Augustine was ordained a priest in Hippo in 391. His biographer Possidius tells of Manichean activity in Hippo at this time, particularly that of a presbyter named Fortunatus, and of the impression their teaching had made on a number of Christians.[17] This led to a concentrated response from Augustine, both in his writing and preaching, and the production of a second commentary on Genesis, most likely between 393 and 395.[18]

As one of Augustine's first attempts at a literal interpretation of Genesis, this work marks a significant stage in Augustine's exegetical and theological development. Unfinished (it came to an end at Genesis 1:26,

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stream of Augustinian scholarship, she states, 'Augustine's early thought was not only fully Christian; it was fully Augustinian.' Ibid., p. 286.

16 Fiedrowicz, Saint Augustine, p. 33. Cf. *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*, 1.2.4; 1.6.10 – 7.11.

17 'The plague of the Manichaeans has infected and permeated very many.' Possidius, *Life of Augustine*. 6.1.

18 'And so, with God's help, the Catholic Church in Africa, began to lift its head, having for a long time lain prostrate, seduced, oppressed and overpowered.' Possidius, *Life of Augustine*, 7.

although he had originally intended it to cover all six days of creation) and hitherto unpublished, he tells in the later *Revisions* how he rediscovered it in the course of writing this later work.[19] He makes clear that his aim had been to deal specifically with the historical and literal sense of the text (although he mentions the four ways of interpreting scripture handed down by earlier exegetes, as history, as allegory, as analogy, and as etiology).[20] Whatever his reason for abandoning the project,[21] he decided at the time to keep the work 'as an indication – in my opinion not a useless one – of my first attempts to explain and study the works of God.'[22]

Rather strangely, the Manichees are not mentioned by name in the *Unfinished Literal Commentary*. Augustine, however, clearly has them in view.[23] He was well aware that a literal approach to interpreting Genesis was the only one acceptable to Fortunatus and his colleagues. He seems therefore to have moved deliberately onto their methodological turf, with a view to showing that 'the biblical account of creation was acceptable even when taken literally, and could measure up to scientific and literary standards.'[24]

In a programmatic introduction, Augustine issues a series of introductory principles which govern his approach throughout. The opening sentence is significant:

> The obscure mysteries of the natural order, which we perceive to have been made by God the almighty craftsman, should rather be discussed by asking questions than by making affirmations (*non affirmando, sed quaerendo*).

Scientific humility before the book of nature should be matched by exegetical humility, in exploring 'the books which have been entrusted to us by divine authority.' This spirit is made essential by human fallenness

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19 *Revisions* 1.18.

20 Augustine, *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis*, 2.5.

21 In reference to Augustine, Roland Teske SJ suggests that in light of the 'highly spiritualized view of human beings before the fall that he presented in his earlier *De Genesi adversus Manichaeos*, it seems plausible that the problem of giving a literal interpretation of the differentiation of the sexes in this passage brought the work to a halt.' Teske, in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 377.

22 See Teske, in *Augustine through the Ages*, p. 377. In *Revisions*, Augustine advises people to assess the unfinished *Commentary* in light of their reading of the later twelve books of his *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. *Revisions*, 1:18.

23 See, e.g., *Unfinished Literal Commentary*, 5.23-4.

24 Fiedrowicz, *St Augustine*, p. 107.

and the limitations of creaturely finitude. He cautions, however, that 'the doubts and hesitations implied by asking questions must not exceed the bounds of Catholic faith'. This is important because heretics 'have been in the habit of twisting their exposition of the divine scriptures to fit their way of thinking, which is quite at odds with the faith learned by Catholics.'[25] The rule of faith (*regula fidei*) is thus introduced for the first time by Augustine as a hermeneutical criterion, providing the framework within which his engagement with the text will proceed.

Augustine proceeds by way of questioning the text, suggesting, for example, alternative possible interpretations of a phrase. He rejects any superficial understanding of the meaning of 'literal', and recognizes the way in which scripture language and expression are accommodated to the human capacity of understanding. Relentless questioning of the text in order to get at its true meaning, within the context of the 'rule of faith', finds repeated emphasis throughout.[26] The heretical tendency, he affirms on the other hand, is to impose a prior subjective meaning on the text.[27] He warns against making ill-considered claims[28] and is happy to propose for discussion numerous possible interpretations of a passage. He only insists that the interpreter should 'avoid asserting anything rashly, and something you don't know as if you did; and remember that you are just a human being investigating the works to the extent that you are permitted to do so.'[29]

Before turning to Augustine's major work on the Genesis creation narrative, brief note should be taken of two other contexts in which his constant fascination and preoccupation with the creation story found expression.

III. Confessions

At the end of the *Confessions*, Augustine, probably around 400, wrote three chapters (books 11 – 13) on creation which effectively offer another commentary on the first two chapters of Genesis. Given the autobiographical nature of the first nine books, the final four, with their apparently radical change of content, seem to have little connection with what precedes. This has often been taken as indicative of the overall lack of thematic and structural unity in this Augustine's most famous work. Why would Augustine conclude his *Confessions* in this way?

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25 Augustine, *Unfinished*, 1.1.

26 Ibid., 2.5; 3.6-8, 10; 5. 19, 21, 24; 6. 26, 27; 9.30; 14.44.

27 Ibid., 1.2-4.

28 Ibid., 3.10.

29 Ibid., 9.30. cf. 8.29.

Pointing out the 'numerous subtle cross-references' between its two parts, Henry Chadwick suggests that the 'last four books make explicit what is only hinted at in the autobiographical parts, namely that the story of the soul wandering away from God and then in torment and tears finding its way home through conversion is also the story of the entire created order. It is a favourite Neoplatonic theme, but also, as Romans 8 shows, not absent from the New Testament.'[30]

More recently, Jared Ortiz has argued that creation, understood not as 'a static set of dogmatic teachings' but rather 'an encounter of the awake mind with the truth about reality', is the 'primary hermeneutical tool' for reading *Confessions* with understanding. [31] Approached in this way, it quickly becomes apparent that in the Confessions, 'Augustine lives, speaks and thinks in terms of creation', and the unity of the whole can be appreciated.

In the closing chapters it is 'a prime task for Augustine to show that the Manichee dismissal of the authority of the book of Genesis is utterly mistaken, since no book is richer in Christian mystery when properly interpreted. The narrative of the creation interpreted in books XII and XIII sets the context for the total account of the nature and destiny of the soul.'[32] It is significant that Augustine's best known sentence, in the first paragraph of book 1, should have creation at its core.[33] For Augustine, the deepest longings of the human soul make sense only in the context of creation.

In this context, reference should also be made to Augustine's massive *City of God*, books 11-12, written about 412, in which once again he tackles early Genesis. In particular he discusses the six days of creation, generally following the treatment they are given in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*.

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30 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated with an introduction and notes by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. xxiv. 'The creation, made out of nothing, is involved in the perpetual change and flux of time […]. Because it comes from God, it knows itself to be in need of returning to the source whence it came. So Augustine's personal quest and pilgrimage are the individual's experience in microcosm of what is true, on the grand scale, of the whole creation.' Ibid., p. xxiv.

31 Jared Ortiz, *"You made us for Yourself": Creation in St. Augustine's Confessions* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2016).

32 Chadwick, in Augustine, *Confessions*, p. xxv.

33 'You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.' *Confessions*, 1.1.

IV. The Literal Meaning of Genesis and City of God

In this context, passing reference should also be made to Augustine's massive *City of God*, books 11-12, written about 412, in which once again he tackles early Genesis. In particular he discusses the six days of creation, generally following the treatment they are given in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*.

Augustine was not to be deterred from his decades-long aim to complete a 'literal' commentary on the Genesis narrative. Sometime after commencing *On the Trinity* (probably in 399), he tells us, he began *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. It ranks with *On the Trinity* and *City of God* as one of Augustine's crowning theological and literary achievements, although far less well-known. Remarkably, 'during the last several years of its composition (Augustine) had all three works under way.'[34]

Written in twelve books, it is divided into three parts. Firstly, in books 1-5, he engages with the creation narrative up to Genesis 2:6. He includes the following in his treatment: a Trinitarian framework of creation, a proposed relationship between the two creation narratives, a discussion of God's providential government and rest, and a detailed explanation of causal reasons by which creation unfolds in its historical development.

Secondly, in books 6-11, he deals with the creation of humanity, original sin, the origin of the soul, the relationship between men and women, especially in marriage, and the relationship between spiritual bodies and natural bodies.

Finally, in book 12, added after he had completed the original commentary, he considers the visions of paradise of which Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12: 2-4.

Caution and humility before the text continue to mark Augustine's exegetical approach in this his most mature interpretation of Genesis. He would later state, 'In that work more questions are asked than answers are found, and of the answers found only a few are established with certainty. The rest have been proposed as still needing further study.'[35]

One of Augustine's abiding concerns was the threat to the church's witness from an irresponsible use of Scripture which operated on the superficially pious principle (in the words of a familiar slogan): 'The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.' In words that still speak searchingly, Augustine writes, 'It is impossible to say what trouble and grief such rash, self-assured know-alls cause the more cautious and experienced brothers and sisters.'[36]

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34 Teske, in *Augustine through the Ages*, p. 376.

35 *Revisions*, 2.24.

36 *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 1.19.39.

In the field of science he recognises that people of no faith who study 'the earth […], the sky […], the magnitude and distance of the constellations […], the cycles of years and seasons […], the nature of animals, fruit, stones and everything else of this kind', are able to attain true knowledge which 'they can substantiate with scientific arguments or experiments.' In a passage of enduring resonance, he writes:

> Whenever […] they [non-Christians] catch out some members of the Christian community making mistakes on a subject which they know inside out, and defending their hollow opinions on the authority of our books, on what grounds are they going to trust those books on the resurrection of the dead and the hope of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven, when they suppose they include any number of mistakes and fallacies on matter which they themselves have been able to master either by experiment or by the surest of calculations.[37]

For Augustine, 'the Bible was not a manual on the natural sciences. He interpreted the account of creation in such a way that even when the biblical text raised questions proper to the natural sciences, he always focused his answers on theological aspects of the matter.'[38] On several occasions he acknowledged the possibility that better interpretations of a particular passage than the one he was offering might be found: 'I myself may quite possibly come to a different interpretation that corresponds even better with the words of the holy scriptures. I am certainly not insisting on this one in such a way as to contend that nothing else preferable can be found.'[39]

Recognizing that Genesis did not provide a straightforward historical account of origins enabled Augustine to establish a theological framework which would prove able to accommodate later scientific developments. This can be seen in his positing of two 'aspects' in God's creative activity, corresponding to the two creation accounts in Genesis.[40] On the one hand, God created all things, including time and space, in an instant from nothing (*ex nihilo*). The order God had created, however, was essentially dynamic, divinely endowed with the capacity to develop over time. Augustine uses the image of a seed growing, through a long process, into a tree.[41] God's creative action continues beyond the initial act of origination. In Augustine's more technical language, at the outset God embed-

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37 Ibid.

38 Fiedrowicz, *Saint Augustine*, p. 156.

39 *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 4.28.45. See also, for example, 1.18.37; 12.1.1.

40 Books 1-3 deal with the first phase and books 4-11 with the second.

41 *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 5.23.45.

ded in the world 'seminal reasons' (*rationes seminales*) out of which all things take their shape in time and space, under the sovereign guidance of the Creator, whose activity in creation is necessarily unceasing. As McGrath puts it, 'The blueprint for that evolution is not arbitrary, but is programmed into the very fabric of creation. God's providence superintends the continuing unfolding of the created order.'[42]

Addressing the challenging requirement of exegeting passages whose lack of clarity makes possible a number of differing interpretations, Augustine 'lists three criteria of interpretation in such cases: the intention of the biblical writers, the context, and finally the rule of faith.'[43] As already noted, Augustine was also convinced that where scientific positions had been established by sound arguments, 'in this case the exegete must include scientific results in his quest of an interpretation and respect them in the name of reason.'[44]

What Augustine learned from his repeated encounters with Genesis was profound and far reaching. It is clear his handling of the doctrine of creation in general and of the text of Genesis in particular was far richer than his detractors have often allowed. Far from being merely preliminary to his wider theological interests, creation was in fact determinative of his treatment of the whole. This carries important ecological implications.

AUGUSTINE AT COP26

Had it been possible for Augustine to attend the COP26 gathering in Glasgow – having received in 5th century North Africa an unexpected invitation together with a time-machine! – what wisdom might he have offered to the international gathering? In light of his engagement with Genesis and creation, it seems likely that he would have developed some of the fol-

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42 Alister McGrath, *Mere Theology* (London: SPCK, 2010), p. 115. Cf. David Fergusson, 'To see God simply as a placeholder for a supernatural act of origination is to miss most of what Genesis has to say about the character of the world in its relationship to the Creator. To concentrate merely on origination is to miss many of the motifs of the creation story. These are subsequently developed by Genesis with respect to human responsibility and disobedience, land, blessing, covenant, and much else.' Fergusson, in *Genesis and Christian Theology*, ed. by Nathan MacDonald, Mark W. Elliott and Grant Macaskill (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 156.

43 Fiedrowicz, *Saint Augustine*, p. 161. See *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 1.21.41.

44 Fiedrowicz, *Saint Augustine*, p. 161. As David Fergusson points out, 'The encounter of exegesis with modern science is not exclusively a modern preoccupation.' Fergusson, in *Genesis*, p. 155.

lowing points, doubtless among many others. They are, of course, those of a distinctively Christian worldview. Among other perspectives, however, the urgent need for wisdom from any and every quarter in addressing the current ecological crisis, should have secured for him a sympathetic and careful hearing.

Celebrating its diversity, Augustine recognizes in the universe a unified, good and beautiful whole.[45] The goodness of the created order derives from and is grounded in the goodness of its Creator who nevertheless remains ontologically distinct from, while pervasively present to, all of time and space. The dynamic nature and depth of the interrelatedness of creatures comes from the fact that all creation, in its goodness, is drawn to move towards the God of ultimate goodness who is its source.

Despite the fall and the effects of sin in the world, creation is good, inasmuch as it reflects the order intended for it by its transcendent Creator God. The divine transcendence has a levelling effect on all parts of the creation.[46]

Since God is the goal as well as the source of the created order, the movement of creatures, possessing an 'equality of being', through space in time, is 'toward their source of existence in God through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.'[47] Such 'unity in diversity'

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[45] 'And all things are very good, whether they abide close to you or, in the graded hierarchy of being, stand further away from you in time and space, in beautiful modifications which they either actively cause or passively receive.' Augustine, *Confessions*, 12.28. Cf., 'All things are beautiful because you made them, but you who made everything are inexpressibly more beautiful' Ibid., 13.28. See also Augustine, *City of God*, 12.22: '"God saw that it was good." This statement, applied to all his works, can only signify the approval of work done with the true artist's skill, which here is the Wisdom of God. It is not that God *discovered* that it was good, after it had been made […] he is not discovering that fact, but communicating it.'

[46] While the Reformed tradition, which owes so much to Augustine, has too frequently succumbed to the lure of dualism by devaluing the material realm and viewing creation only as the prelude to the more important issue of the salvation of the 'soul', its spirituality has nevertheless yielded important material on the appreciation of a world shot through with the glory of God. This is particularly so in theologians like John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. See Belden C. Lane, *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[47] Scott A. Dunham, *The Trinity and Creation in Augustine. An Ecological Analysis*, Suny Series on Religion and the Environment (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 126. An analogy might be that of a sunflower which fulfils its nature by turning to face the sun. If the sunflower possessed free will and chose rather to find its place in a dark, damp cupboard, it would

under God gives moral undergirding to the ecological sensitivity widely called for today in recognizing how 'human decisions cause reverberations throughout an ecosystem'.[48]

This important point requires to be weighed in relation to the problematic issue of hierarchy. It is clear that Augustine believed that creation was shaped by some form of hierarchy. He observed that 'creatures are ordered in relation to one another in various ways'. Ecological ethics have tended to see hierarchy as a problem – one of 'valuing the spiritual over the physical, the human over the nonhuman, the male over the female, and the eternal over the finite.'[49] This 'divinely-established' arrangement is seen to justify the domination and exploitation by humans of their environment.

Some clarifications, however, are required. For Augustine, hierarchy must always be understood in terms of an appreciation of the created order as divine gift. He speaks of the order and beauty of the world as an order of love (*ordo amoris*).[50]

It was Jesus' two great commandments to love God and to love one's neighbour as oneself 'that gave Augustine a mandate and a way to orient all life, loves, and thus ethics.'[51]

The hierarchy discerned in Scripture by Augustine is one in which the anthropocentricism excoriated by many eco-theologians requires to be radically reappraised. It is a hierarchy intimately related to the order of love and intended to reflect that order, as the divine will. Within it humans are called to reject every path of domination.

Arguably, the key to Augustine's understanding of the proper relationship of human beings to the rest of creation lies in his well-known distinction between human 'enjoyment' (*frui*) and 'use' (*uti*) of all else in the world.[52] Here, too, misunderstanding has been rife.

In book one of *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine defines his use of these terms: 'To enjoy is to cling to something lovingly for its own sake; to use, however, is to refer what has come your way to what love aims to obtain, provided that it deserves to be loved.'[53]

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wilt and shrivel and fail to fulfil the purpose of its existence. This, for Augustine, was humanity's essential problem in a nutshell.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 'Neoplatonism and its vision of unity with the One certainly focussed Augustine's quest for an ordered love (conf. 7: 9-11, 17; 10. 29, 40).' Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages*, p. 322.

51 Ibid.

52 Augustine's major discussion of this is in *On Christian Teaching*, Bk. 1.

53 Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.4.4.

In a helpful article, Andrew McGowan has spelled out the implications of Augustine's understanding.[54] As McGowan expresses it, 'Love is the purpose with which God creates, and the order to which God calls. When power or order serves its own ends and not those of God, it is perverse.'[55] Such will to power (*libido dominandi*), in place of the will to love, 'appears solely as the correlate to freedom' and is 'the desire to act as though we are gods, ends or goods in ourselves rather than solely in our relationship to God and God's will to love.' This defines our fall as humans and determines 'the set of ways in which we exploit, rather than steward, what God has given.'[56] As McGowan says, 'It is not hard to see how environmental degradation is a result of this "will to power" on the part of humanity.' While 'the historical reality of human existence reflects the distorted attempt that human beings have made to dominate one another and the earth, (the) Judeo-Christian tradition inescapably bestows on humans a pre-eminence which is intended to reflect and foster the order of love which is God's will.'[57]

When all persons and things are understood in relation to God within the 'order of love', it follows that 'only proper use, use for the right end, constitutes "use" in this sense rather than abuse. That proper use is not merely conformity to rules, but the celebratory engagement with the other that arises from shared participation in the *ordo amoris*. The things thus used are neither inconsequential and hence to be exploited, nor ultimate ends and therefore to be worshipped, but must be approached in relation to their and our highest end, who is of course also their and our source - God.'[58]

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54 Andrew McGowan, 'To Use and Enjoy: Augustine and Ecology' <https://anglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/To-Use-and-Enjoy-Augustine-and-Ecology-Andrew-McGowan.pdf> [accessed 8 October 2021].

55 Ibid., p. 9. He cites *City of God*, 12.5: 'All things are good, in that they exist and have their own way of being, their own appearance and in a sense their own peace.'

56 McGowan, 'To Use and Enjoy', p. 9.

57 McGowan argues that while 'ecotheology is justified in seeking to re-emphasize the theme of affinity between humans and other creatures […] that has a genuine and important place in Christian thought and practice […], the rejection even of a relative or modified anthropocentrism […] is problematic.' This is because it involves both the 'avoidance of the distinctive calling of humankind too far removed from biblical witness to be useful for Christian ethics, (and) also involves a collapse of subject and object whose implications for any sort of ethics are unhelpful.' Ibid.

58 Ibid., pp. 12-3. 'Use and enjoyment are therefore ways of acting within the God-world relationship.' Ibid., p. 13.

Contrary to widespread misunderstanding, Augustine rejects a hierarchy of power and develops a vision of a good world in which no creatures are devalued. Human activity is to be guided by an understanding of the cosmos as God's good creation. Love of God and other creatures must control all human thought and practice, including the manner in which we relate to our environment.

What would Augustine have made of the actual outcomes of COP26 which ended on Saturday 13th November 2021? I think he would have appreciated the generally friendly spirit in which the discussions of these important matters was conducted. I suspect he would have regretted, but not been entirely surprised by, the failure of the conference to deliver the action and commitments needed to reach the targets of the earlier Paris Agreement.[59] At the same time, he would surely have applauded the manner in which COP26 succeeded in raising global ambition on climate change, with 90% of the world's economy now committed to net-zero targets. The race to net-zero 2050 has begun, with a host of new initiatives and pledges. Augustine would have fully endorsed COP26's strong emphasis on the need to engage, and not ignore, the imperative of climate action in particular and care for our environment in general. Our participation in the divinely established order of love, requires of us no less. His is a message of deep spiritual and moral challenge, as well as of energizing hope, as we 'work together for our planet'.[60]

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[59] In a personal email, Professor David Fergusson wonders whether 'Augustine's realism in the *City of God* about the politics of the earthly city might introduce a more sombre note in relation to some of the aspirations of the COP26 participants'. In a wider context, John J. O'Keefe highlights the potentially positive contribution to current ecological debates of Augustinian realism about the status of the world in which we live, at a time when 'we want a world we don't have' in *Augustine and the Environment*, ed. by John Doody, Kim Paffenroth and Mark Smillie (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), p. 106. Commenting on Augustinian realism, in a review of this book, Sean Hannan remarks, 'While some measure of ecological utopianism would be integral to any soundly environmentalist worldview, there remains something compelling about this reminder of the skewed state of a world sweltering in its own sin.' *Reading Religion. A Publication of the American Academy of Religion* <https://readingreligion.org/books/augustine-and-environment> [accessed 8 October 2021].

[60] Much of the work on this paper was undertaken during a period of study leave in the hospitable environment of Westminster College, Cambridge. I am grateful to Lindsay O'Riordan and the Church of Scotland study leave team for their invaluable support, and to Emma Brown and her colleagues at Westminster College for making my stay there such an enjoyable and comfortable experience.