

# Communion and Creation: Relational Theological Anthropology and Flourishing of Creation

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I argue for an extension of relational accounts of the *imago Dei* which includes a kind of priestly relation to the created order. In this relation, humanity is intended to ensure the independent flourishing of creation in a way reflective of the kind of communion we ought to have with one another. Through an analysis of the brokenness of these relationships, I argue that human oppression of other humans and the ravaging of creation are born of the same brokenness in such a way that they contribute to one another as distortions of human *teleological* communion. By drawing on Social Identity Approach in group psychology, I can offer an account of shared human identity out of which humanity acts in distorted ways as a group. By describing oppression and ravaging in terms of broken communal *telos* and group action, I offer a way forward for relating humanity to the created order in a way that neither instrumentalizes creation, nor flattens the distinctiveness of human creation in the image of God.

**Keywords:** Relation theological anthropology, *Imago Dei*, Doctrine of creation, James Cone, Ecotheology

## Introduction

The doctrine of creation in Christian theology will typically tend towards one of two errors. On the one hand, it centralizes the human creature to the extent of making the created order servile to the (often destructive) whims of humanity. On the other hand, it flattens the dynamic relationship between humanity and the created order, neglecting the significance and uniqueness of humanity's creation in the image of God. What should be clear from these mistakes is both that humanity ought to occupy a unique place in our doctrines of creation and that our place in that creation cannot be so centralized as to eclipse the flourishing of creation for our own benefits.

In this paper, I propose a solution to this puzzle which draws on relational accounts of theological anthropology that see human beings as essentially constituted by their relationships with God and other human persons. Humanity, on this account, is created for a communion which includes both God and humanity. I extend this model of the *imago Dei* to also include a kind of communion with the created order. Drawing on priestly models of the *imago Dei*, I offer an account of this communion which sees creation not as something to be used by humankind, but as that for which humankind has a priestly responsibility to provide for its sustainable flourishing. Humanity's ravaging rule of creation is, therefore, not a part of the *imago Dei*, but a distortion of it.

In this diagnosis of the problem of human relation to the created order, I note how humanity's priestly communion with creation is bound up with both fellow-human communion and human communion with God. I thus argue that the distorted relationship we now have with the created order in which we ravage it for our own gain is part and parcel to the brokenness of human society. Drawing on social ontology and the psychology of group behavior, I show that the brokenness of the humanity-created order relationship cannot be reduced to the discreet acts of individuals taking advantage of creation for personal gain, but rather arises from the coordinated actions of human societies. Through an analysis of the psychology of collective action, I offer a more detailed diagnosis of creation's ravaging by humanity that is bound up with the brokenness of human society and, in particular, the oppression of other human persons. From this diagnosis, I argue that the solution to human ravaging of the created order is not the discreet actions of individuals towards environmental sustainability, but cooperative actions which transform how human society treats both the created order *and* human persons within that society.

### **1. Beings in Communion: Towards a Relational Doctrine of Creation**

The key problem in locating humanity within the created order without collapsing the role of creation into its usefulness for humanity is not a new one. However, despite the longevity of this problem, there are many tools that theological anthropology has to offer which have not been adequately brought to bear on this problem. One tool is relational accounts of the *imago Dei* which see the uniqueness of human creatures as their being fundamentally relational in a way reflective of God's nature. The *imago Dei* in humanity sets humankind apart from other creatures and, indeed, from the rest of the created order. As a tool in reconceptualizing the relationship between humanity and creation, the *imago Dei* distinguishes human creatures from others, and indeed from the rest of creation even while situating this unique creature within creation. While presumably there is some relationship between all of creation and the Creator,

it is the particular kind of communion that human beings have with God and one another that makes them unique. We may thusly uphold both the uniqueness and the createdness of humanity in a way that can begin to untangle, in the first place, human uniqueness from the destructive instrumentalization of creation and, in the second place, human createdness from a flattening of the dynamic relationship between humanity and the rest of creation.

### 1.1 The *Imago Dei* as Relational

First, I will elucidate key claims of this relational view of *imago Dei* before turning to the aforementioned problem. This view holds that the image of God in humanity is a reflection of the Triune communion that God has in Godself. There are many prominent thinkers within this view who engage with competing proposals on the nature of the *imago Dei* to varying degrees.

Important for our considerations will be two thinkers in particular. The work of Sung Wook Chung on relational personhood emphasizes the relationship between human community and the Trinitarian community. While many relational anthropologists have pointed to human relationality as reflective of the relationships between Father, Son, and Spirit, Chung's emphasis on the group context of community in his interpretation of this relationship provides an interesting point of contact with the psychological literature this article engages with later on.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Chung's work intentionally draws on a variety of global perspectives on the Trinity and personhood to develop this unique emphasis. His treatment of relational human nature thus offers unique emphases (such as his emphasis on community) which are often missed in western-centric approaches.

John Zizioulas, our second interlocutor, makes an important connection between communion, which he takes to be the *telos* of human relationality, and creation. While Zizioulas is not alone in drawing this connection, he does so in a unique way. To illustrate this, let us note a similar account for comparison. Pope Francis makes a comparable connection in his seminal work, *Laudato Si'*. Therein, he argues that "the natural environment has been gravely damaged by our irresponsible behaviour. The social environment has also suffered damage. Both are ultimately due to the same evil" (Francis 2015, 0.6). This is argued from the indivisibility of the book of nature, so that fellow-human relationality is intimately bound up and inseparable from the human-creation relationship: it all falls under the same "universal communion" with very little to distinguish

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<sup>1</sup> This stands out among other important contributions to the relationship between social Trinitarianism and creation, such as Moltmann's *God in Creation* (1985).

them (Francis 2015, 2.V.92). While this is amenable to the goals of this article, proposals like *Laudato Si'* highlight two unique features of Zizioulas' account. First, Zizioulas uniquely attempts to preserve the distinctiveness of the human creature. While this distinctiveness can be found elsewhere in the teachings of Pope Francis, Zizioulas makes this relationship of humanity to creation a unique one among creatures; no other creature stands in the same relation to the rest of the created order, as will be explored further below. Second, the relationship between oppression and ecological devastation seems to run only in one direction in *Laudato Si'* and other works like it. Pope Francis and others like him readily recognize that the devastation of our environment disproportionately effects society's poorest but, as this article will argue in later sections, says very little about the effect of society's oppression of the poor on ecology.<sup>2</sup> Zizioulas, on the other hand, argues that human communion with creation is an ontological category, meaning that humanity relies on its relation to creation even as it takes up a unique responsibility for creation. For these reasons, engaging with Zizioulas' work on relational human nature provides a fruitful ground for connecting human nature with its relationship to the rest of the created order in a new way. This connection is, however, underdeveloped, and so there is room to chart our own way forward.

What it means to be a creature made in the image of God is to be a creature created for this kind of inter-personal communion; human beings are fundamentally beings in and for inter-personal communion (Gunton, 1991, 16). Human beings, on this view, are essentially constituted by their relations, especially interpersonal relations, with God and fellow-human beings (Torrance 1992, 47). This being-constituting relationality is "the trace, echo, reflection and parallels of the divine nature . . . found in God's free and dynamic presence in the person of Christ and the revealed Word" (A. Torrance 2008, 199). To reflect the image of God, therefore, is to be a being in relation, specifically the kinds of relations reflective of the intra-Trinitarian relations.

This grounding of human relationality in divine relationality is key to this view. For, there are many kinds of relations and ways of relating. Grounding the ontology of humanity in divine ways of relating to other divine persons gives a kind of *telos* to human relationality which is consistent with our creation in God's image and that guides the ways we think about human beings as relational.

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance, Francis 2015, 1.I.25; 1.II.29; 1.V.48. This comparison having been made, there is still much more we can learn from *Laudato Si'* about this relationship. While a fuller engagement on this issue is due with *Laudato Si'* in future work, it is at least helpful here for demonstrating where the conversation is and how figures like Zizioulas (and Cone below) can help move us forward in unique ways.

So what does this communion consist of and in what ways do human beings relate grounded in that communion? Sung Wook Chung, drawing on both the deep tradition of western Trinitarian theology and his own Korean evangelical roots, argues that “the triune God is a communion who enjoys the *koinōnia* of mutual love (*agapē*), glorification, welcoming, embrace, respect, hospitality, service (*diakonia*), and submission (*hypotassō*) . . . a communion of submission (*hypotassō*) to one another, in which individuals set aside their rights to equality (*kenosis*) and serve one another with self-sacrificing love (*agapē*)” (Chung, 2017, 148). On this definition of intra-Trinitarian communion, there is mutual, self-giving love of one another among the persons of the Trinity. They give of themselves, seeking not their own flourishing, but only that of the other in communion. This shape of intra-Trinitarian love, on Chung’s view, is perichoretic, meaning “the Father dwells in the Son and the Holy Spirit; the Son dwells in the Father and the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit dwells in the Father and the Son.” The loving communion of Father, Son, and Spirit, in other words, consists in an ontological self-giving grounded in the desire for the good of the other. On the view(s) that Chung explicates, this love is the very being of the Triune God, implying an ontological interdependence of the persons on one another described in terms of mutual inter-penetration of being and participation. This interdependence, says Chung, “characterize[s] the life of the Triune God” (Chung 2017, 147–148). On this view, the Father is only the Father as Father of the Son and Spirit; the Son is only himself as the Son of the Father and the One who has the Spirit; the Spirit is only who he is in having this communion with the Son and the Father. This self-giving of one to the other and the ultimate dependence on one another for being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit defines the nature of the loving communion that the Triune God has in Godself. What it means to have a communion like that of the Triune Godhead is to be in a communion that similarly desires the flourishing of the other through mutual self-giving love and interdependence.

This is the sort of communion for which humanity was created. Chung thus avers that “human beings should pursue a perichoretic relationship with others characterized by mutual openness, penetration, participation, and interdependence” (Chung 2017, 147–148). The essence of such a communion, for Chung, is the kind of community that churches are intended to be: “churches are communities that are called to realize a communion like the triune communion . . . churches can be the signposts of the coming kingdom of the triune God who is a perfect communion” (Chung 2017, 148–149). While Chung readily admits to the flawed and failing nature of churches, he primarily defines them by their eschatological *telos*: the perfect communion of humanity with one another and God. The Church, conceptualized as such, is the *telos* for which humanity was created: a *communio Dei* which includes human and divine

persons in its members, corresponding to the kind of self-giving communion that God has in Godself and grounded in desire for the flourishing of other community members and interdependence.<sup>3</sup>

This is reflected throughout the New Testament teaching on what it means to love one another. We are taught to love one another just as God in Christ has loved us (John 13:34; 1 John 4:19–21). In fact, when Jesus identifies the greatest commandment, that is, to love God, he immediately connects this with neighbour love (Matthew 22:36–40). The New Testament's ethic of love is built on the communal interconnection of divine loving communion, so that humanity was always intended to love and have a loving communion with God and other humans that reflected the kind of love that God has in Godself. This sense of human reflection of intra-trinitarian love is the *telos* of human relationality. What it *means* to be human is be in loving communion in these self-giving, interdependent ways rooted in desire for the flourishing of the other.

This *telos* of loving communion that desires the flourishing of others through interdependence and self-giving and for which we are created is meant to include both human relation to other human persons and human relation to God. Because of this, I have argued elsewhere that the communion for which humanity was created and which constitutes the *telos* of human nature is a single communion containing both divine and human persons (Everhart 2022a, 57). In this communion, intra-trinitarian love redeems and reconciles both divine-human and fellow-human relationships (Everhart 2022a, 59). This single communion, which I call the *communio Dei*, is the *telos* of all humanity in Christ. Our call to belong to that communion is the most fundamental thing about what it means to be human. To speak about humanity's place within the creation, we must understand humanity in terms of its destiny for that holistic communion with God and fellow-human persons.

## 1.2. Communion with Creation

This view of the *imago Dei*, being not the only view on offer, has often been thought competitive with other views. Most significant for our purposes is the view that the *imago Dei* consists in dominion over the created order. Humanity's relationship to the created order has long been considered as a part of, if not the whole, *imago Dei*. These accounts draw specifically on early passages in Genesis which outline humanity's creation and ties that creation to the created order: "God blessed [humanity], saying to them, 'be fruitful and

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<sup>3</sup> I have taken a lot of very quick steps here to explicate this particular view of Trinity and human communion. While recognizing that I do not have the space to defend this view at greater length, such work does exist. See, [Everhart 2022a](#) and Sanders 2010, ch 11–13.

multiply; fill the earth and have dominion over it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”<sup>4</sup> As this blessing comes immediately on the heels of the doubly-stated claim that humanity is made in God’s image, it is argued that this rulership is the meaning of *imago Dei*.

This view is commonly called the stewardship view of *imago Dei*, as it holds that human imaging of God is found in human stewardship of God’s divine rule over creation. Bill Arnold, for instance, argues, “the image of God is about the exercise of rulership in the world. While it may be objected that an entire species of humans cannot stand in God’s place as an individual kind, it seems likely that the office of God’s representative has been ‘democratized’ in 1:26-27” (Arnold 2009, 45). Arnold and other commentators note a careful, asymmetrical interplay throughout the creation narratives of divine and human authority; humans have a kind of rule derivative of and dependent on divine rulership (Arnold 2009, 59). Sameer Yadav, another proponent of this view, notes how human rulership over the created order is intended to imitate divine rulership over humanity (Yadav 2019, 74ff). Thus, he argues, our rule of creation is intended to be caring in the same way that divine rule over humanity is caring. Humanity, on this view, exercises its imaged-ness by cultivating beauty, goodness, and other divine-like qualities in creation.<sup>5</sup> This could, under the right framework, be understood as cultivating flourishing in the created order.

However, it seems to be seldom the case that this is how this view is used. Too often, as observed in the introduction, humanity’s rule of creation is used to justify the instrumentalizing of the created order in ultimately destructive ways. It has been argued that this is because stewardship views of the *imago Dei*, while intimately connecting humanity with the rest of creation, orient the *telos* of non-human creation toward humanity.<sup>6</sup> An *imago Dei* of stewardship is anthropocentric, centralizing humanity in such a way as to make creation and non-human creatures reducible to categories such as “useful, pernicious, and superfluous” relative to humanity rather having their own flourishing *telos* (Clough 2012, 63).<sup>7</sup> This problematizes stewardship views because stewardship views so often result in the destructive subjugation of creation to meet human ends.

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all NT translations are my own from *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> See as examples among Church Fathers, Basil 1994, 398; Gregory 2004, II.222–224; Augustine 1953, 43.3.

<sup>6</sup> David Clough makes a thorough argument for this problem arising from stewardship views (2012). He continues that argument by documenting many of stewardship’s abuses as he considers the ethics of animal usage in food, textiles, medical research, etc. (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Clough here is critiquing specifically Augustine’s view, noted in an earlier footnote.

While there is on-going debate about whether this is an entailment of stewardship views, such a debate cannot be solved in the space of this paper. Rather, I raise this family of views to note a common (problematic) way that humanity is thought to be related to creation. For our purposes, we may note two problems with stewardship views. First, as noted above, these views essentialize divine rule over and against divine communion as that which is most fundamental about the nature of God and, therefore, about human imaging of God. Second, while it might not be the case that stewardship views entail the instrumentalizing of creation for human ends, it is nevertheless the case that such views leave open-ended the *telos* and flourishing of non-human creation. It's orientation towards humanity implies little about what it means for creation to flourish beyond our own ends. This means that there is nothing *inherent* to such a view of the *imago Dei* to protect creation from being instrumentalized in a way that undermines its flourishing in favor of ours. While we might add *teleological* addendums to avoid such a problem, I offer here a different solution. In solving the first problem, namely that such a view appears to compete with a relational view of the *imago Dei*, I can offer a solution to the latter issue that the relationship between creation and humanity established in stewardship views tend towards the destructive instrumentalization of creation.

Stewardship or rule is certainly a kind of relationship, but it is not the communal kind that is constitutive of being on a relational view of the *imago Dei*, especially when considered in its more destructive, instrumentalizing forms. Rather, let us suppose we could extend the model of loving communion as the *telos* of humanity to include creation as a member. As noted above, Zizioulas uniquely connects human communion with God and other human beings with the essence of the created order, positing a possible way forward between these two families of views. He writes, through Christ's High Priesthood and humanities participation in that priestly ministry, "creation is brought into communion with God himself. This is the essence of [human] priesthood, and it is only the human being who can do it, namely, unite the world in his hands in order to refer it to God, so that it can be united with God." (Zizioulas 2011, 137). Humanity, on this definition, would be created for the self-giving communion which desires the flourishing of the other with God, fellow-humanity, and the created order. Creation, rather than being an object of use or mastery, would be a member of *communio Dei*. This both includes something roughly akin to stewardship in a relational view of the *imago Dei* while also avoiding the instrumentalization of non-human creation by giving it its own *telos* that is not simply human usage (and abuse).

But what would such a communion look like? More specifically, what *telos* does non-human creation have, such that its end is not instrumentalization but



that it is still in some significant way related to humanity's *telos* for *communio Dei*? John Zizioulas has offered a helpful account of communion and creation, arguing that part of humanity's *telos* for communion is a priesthood over creation (Zizioulas 2011, ch 1–2). Unlike kings, about whom God warned Israel that they would only claim all created things for themselves (1 Samuel 8:10–18), the priest offers up created things (and with it, the people of God) unto God. Our priestly role, Zizioulas argues, is derived from the High Priesthood of Christ in which Christ unites humanity with God (Zizioulas 2011, 137–138). Zizioulas draws a connection here between Christ's priesthood for humanity, his being the "firstborn of all creation," and the reconciling of all things in Christ. He argues that creation, in its longing and groaning for its creator (Romans 8:22), demonstrates its *telos* for union with God and that Christ's being the firstborn of creation is part of his priestly role in reconciling all of creation to the Father (Zizioulas 2011, 32). In the same role as our High Priest in which Christ establishes a communion inclusive of God and humanity, he also establishes creation as a part of that communion. Thus, the relationship between humanity and the created order is a priestly one, following after our High Priest who himself is the human *par excellence*. Humanity's relationship to creation is not meant to rule it or use it towards our own flourishing, but to act towards its own flourishing in returning it to God.

The sense in which we have been taught to think of creation as oriented towards human flourishing as the ultimate *telos* of the created order undermines our communion with it and, therein, our role as priests of creation. Zizioulas writes, "when humans claim creation for themselves, the order of the world is reversed and creation wars with God. The Eucharist reveals that humanity, rather than being the owner of creation, is the priest who offers it to God, thus freeing nature and humanity" (Zizioulas 2011, 46). This should change not only how we think about humanity's place in the created order, but the very nature of humanity as a member of a communion that includes the created order. Luke Tallon puts it like this in his introduction to Zizioulas' aforementioned volume,

the Church offers the created world to God and then distributes the life of God to creation. This understanding of humanity and our priestly vocation has several implications for ecology: 1) the current crisis concerns our very being and not just human well-being; 2) our approach cannot be simply *negative* (the cessation of destruction) or *moralistic*, for the situation calls for the *creation* of an ecological-liturgical *culture*; 3) this culture will involve the *transformation* of nature, not in order to fuel human idolatry, but so that it might survive into an age to come. (Zizioulas 2011, xiv–xv)

The *communio Dei* which is the *telos* of humanity, while inclusive of humanity's unique place within creation, includes also the self-giving love that humanity ought to have for the created order in which humanity works towards creation's own flourishing. Rather than using creation as a ruler uses a people for her own perceived ends (even when those ends ostensibly benefit of the ruled people), humanity ought to have a desire for a flourishing of creation that exists beyond our own.

Such a conception of humanity's place within the created order is beneficial for our purposes in two ways: first, it does not flatten the distinct place of humanity within creation. No other created thing is a priest in the way that humanity is, and so no other created thing has the same responsibility for creation's flourishing. Second, this avoids the orienting of all created things towards humanity's flourishing as creation's final end. This undermines the possibility of destructive instrumentalization of creation by problematic accounts of stewardship and the *imago Dei*. What is noteworthy is that this solution entangles the kinds of relationships essential to the *telos* of humanity in *communio Dei*.<sup>8</sup> It is a single communion established by Christ in which human beings are both restored to peaceful relationship with fellow-human beings and acting as priests of creation. How the distortion of the kinds of relationships are intertwined is incredibly important for understanding the brokenness of humanity's relationship to creation.

## 2. God of the Oppressed and God of the Ravaged

The brokenness of our communion with creation is not independent of the brokenness of our communion with fellow-human beings. Just as the *telos* of humanity's relationship with creation is intimately entangled (and ultimately inseparable) from humanity's relations to God and itself, so too is the brokenness of human relation to creation bound up in the brokenness of fellow-human relationality and divine-human relationality. If this *telos* which includes the priestly relationship of humanity to creation is a single communion of divine persons, human persons, and the created order, it is the whole communion which is broken and not some isolated part of it. The brokenness of

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<sup>8</sup> I have defended this view elsewhere at length (Everhart 2022). A key concern, especially in the context of this paper which thinks about the nature of oppression, is how *communio Dei* can be universal when lines are consistently drawn between believers and non-believers and how the Church itself can be a source of oppression. These are important questions that, unfortunately are beyond the scope of this article. I do, however, deal with them in more detail in the aforementioned article. While we cannot say that all humanity is in *communio Dei*, we can say that there is some sense in which all humanity is created for and called to that kind of communion, even when they resist that calling.

one aspect of this communion will undoubtedly result in brokenness in other aspects. This is the primary goal of this paper: to build out the connections between the brokenness in fellow-human communion and human-creation communion in light of the unity of the *communio Dei*.

It would seem that the divine-human relationship is also a key aspect of this, so that the brokenness of humanity's relationship to God that comes about in the Fall is just as bound up in the brokenness of these two aspects. This aspect will not, however, be given full treatment in this article for two reasons. First, this article lacks the space to treat the intersections of all three aspects of human relationality properly, though I have done this elsewhere (Everhart 2019, 155-164; Everhart 2022a, 10). Second, the broken fellowship between God and humanity has received thorough attention throughout the history of theology, as has its relationship to the brokenness of human relationships and human stewardship over creation. So while the brokenness of the divine-human relationship will be apparent here, it remains a background consideration.

## 2.1. The Oppression of Fellow-Humanity

One need not look far to find the brokenness of fellow-human communion. The history of humanity is rife with broken communions and relationships, as well as distortions of human relationality which serve to damage and mar the dignity of our fellow-human beings. Certainly these expressions take place in the relationships between discreet individuals, such as Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis 4.<sup>9</sup> But such discreet instances of brokenness are bound up in the brokenness of human *telos* for communion. This indicates a broader sense of communion, constituted by multiple relationships between many persons, which is distorted, so that we not only have distorted relationships between discreet individuals, but we have distorted communions which invert and undermine the purpose of that loving communion for which humanity is created. We exist, in other words, in groups which are organized so as to take for one's self rather than give; groups designed around the flourishing of some at the expense of others. We might call this distortion of the communion which we are intended to have with one another, "oppression," as it seeks to instrumentalize others to the end of one's own flourishing and to design communions of persons around such twisted ends.

We see this sort of distortion played out in the history of God's people and condemned by God as contrary to his own nature. Throughout the prophetic literature, God gives condemnations for not individuals only, but entire nations

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<sup>9</sup> Later, in Genesis 9, murder is associated with the desecration of the image of God. In the Ancient Near-Eastern context, this would be like vandalizing the statue of a ruler. See, Bray 2000, 576.

that oppress their poor.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it is significant that these nations are condemned for their oppression as a whole, because it is on this basis that several of the prophets issue warnings or condemnations to Israel (Boda 2016, 35-36). This is indicated as contrary to God's own nature in the Law. Thomas McCall, in a recent monograph, argues that a significant purpose of the Law, understood in the framework of a relationship between God and humanity, is "intended to teach . . . both the holiness of God and the sinfulness of the naive and overconfident sinner" (McCall 2019, 43). Laws and commands of God to care for the poor and not to oppress them are indicative of God's own nature, i.e. that God would have us love the poor in the self-giving way that he does, seeking their flourishing rather than oppressing them for our own (as in the condemnation of Proverbs 22:16). Such oppression stands at the heart of fallen humanity and the brokenness of the communion for which we were created. Rather than loving our fellow-human beings by desiring and working towards their flourishing, we design and distort communion to further our own flourishing at their expense.

A powerful theological treatment of oppression is found in James Cone's, *God of the Oppressed* (1997). In this work, Cone explicates the experience of knowing God as an oppressed black person in the United States and identifies how God's incarnational solidarity with the oppressed liberates both the oppressed and the oppressor, reconciling their broken communion. God's solidarity with the oppressed implies that they have unique epistemic access to God, as well as the nature of oppression. The oppression of fellow-humanity, in this way, provides a window into understanding the ravaging of creation. As Pope Francis puts it, many of those who seek to address the environmental crisis as "professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centres of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems. They live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world's population" (Francis 2015, 1.V.49). If ecotheology is to appropriately address the brokenness of human relationship to creation, "it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (Francis 2015, 1.V.49). If we seek understand the instrumentalizing of creation well, we ought to pay close attention to the perspective of those who have been instrumentalized.

In the first place, Cone does not think that oppression, nor the God who stands with and for the oppressed, can be known aside from the experience of the oppressed. Cone argues that our knowing of God must take place "in the

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<sup>10</sup> For example, see Zechariah 7, Malachai 3, Jeremiah 5:25-29, Isaiah 10, and Amos 4.

context of [our own] experience,” and that it is primarily in the experience of the oppressed that God is truly known (Cone 1997, 16; 32). In fact, he goes as far as to argue that “any view of the gospel that fails to understand the Church as that community whose work and consciousness are defined by the community of the oppressed is not Christian and is thus heretical” (Cone 1997, 35). Knowledge, for Cone, is always experiential. The knowledge of the God who is himself perfect communion and the brokenness of our own communion with one another cannot be known outside of our particular experience. This experience, Cone argues, is always socialized because even in our brokenness, we exist in distorted forms of community (Cone 1997, 14). He therefore argues that, “if the truth of the biblical story is God’s liberation of the oppressed then the social *a priori* of oppressors excludes the possibility of their hearing and seeing the truth of divine presence, because the conceptual universe of their thought contradicts the story of divine liberation. Only the poor and weak have the axiological grid necessary for the hearing and the doing of the divine will disclosed in their midst” (Cone 1997, 86). A theology of oppression, therefore, must be always in conversation with or come from the experience of the oppressed.<sup>11</sup>

For Cone, sin is defined in terms of the rupturing or distortion of community. “Sin,” he writes, “is only meaningful in the context of the Israelite community. Sin is not an abstract idea that defines ethical behavior for all and sundry. Rather it is a religious concept that defines the human condition as separated from the essence of the community” (Cone 2010, 110). It is under this understanding of sin that he can make sense of oppression on a larger scale than discreet acts of racism against black persons in the United States. Cone elsewhere describes certain sins as systems of oppression, identifying them with the powers and principalities in Scripture that crucified Christ and attempt to keep the oppressed from God’s love (Cone 2011, 158). For Cone, these powers are neither merely physical nor merely spiritual, but both spiritual oppression from Satan *and* the oppression of social powers that affirm, enact, and even praise the brutalizing of Christ.

It is in this framework that Cone is thinking about the oppression that he and his fellow black Christians experience in the United States. These cannot be reduced to discreet actions of individuals but are part and parcel to social powers maintaining oppression on a societal and communal scale. Oppression is bound up in the laws and structures of our societies; it is designed by the powerful and is not a mere consequence of the disposition of the day. He recounts key moments in America’s history of violence, both against black

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<sup>11</sup> This is in line, I think, with the ASSET sort of analytic science-engaged theology described in the first piece of this special issue.

bodies and others, noting how the structuring of society moved and shifted to accommodate violence and secure the power of already powerful white men. "I contend, therefore, that the problem of violence is not the problem of a few black revolutionaries but the problem of a whole social structure which outwardly appears to be ordered and respectable but inwardly is 'ridden by psychopathic obsessions and delusions'—racism and hatred. Violence is embedded in American law, and it is blessed by the keepers of moral sanctity" (Cone 1997, 129). Oppression, while certainly occurring from one individual to another, is part and parcel to a distortion of community in which "the oppressed have been victims of mental and physical dehumanization" (Cone 1997, 128). In dehumanizing the oppressed, the powerful can maintain their oppressive social structures and ensure their own flourishing. Such dehumanization is precisely for the purpose of instrumentalizing others made in the image of God. This is the inversion of the communion for which humanity was created.

The significance of community for Cone's understanding of oppression cannot be understated here. Because his goal in this work is to understand God being with the oppressed, what he is ultimately after is liberation. Liberation from oppression further reveals the significance of community, both the kind of divine communion that we are liberated for and the brokenness of the communions from which we are liberated. Cone writes, "because human liberation is God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ, its source and meaning cannot be separated from Christology . . . Jesus Christ, therefore, in his humanity and divinity, is the ground of our present freedom to struggle and the source of our hope that the vision disclosed in our historical fight against oppression will be fully realized in God's future" (Cone 1997, 88). Because this is grounded in Christ's divinity, Cone emphasizes that liberation from oppression is a divine gift and not a gift of white slave masters. Because this is grounded in Christ's humanity, Cone emphasizes that Christ enacts this from the social perspective and position of the oppressed. Human union with the divine, as embodied in Christ, is the basis for liberation from oppression by fellow-human beings.

In union with God in Christ, Cone avers, true reconciliation between fellow-humans can begin: "this vertical sense of personal relationship with the God of Jesus is logically prior to the other components of human liberation. For without the knowledge of God that comes through divine fellowship, the oppressed would not know that what the world says about them is a lie" (Cone 1997, 91). Cone continues that this liberating fellowship with God is central to the *imago Dei*, but not the whole picture. He critiques Barth on this account, demonstrating that Barth was correct to centralize the God-human relationship but that he did not carry this far enough into the concrete existence of human

relationality. Rather, Cone argues that “the image of God is not merely a personal relationship with God, but is also that constituent of humanity which makes all people struggle against captivity. It is the ground of rebellion and revolution among slaves” (Cone 1997, 92). In other words, reconciliation with God must entail reconciliation among fellow-humans, precisely because the brokenness of the God-humanity relationship is bound up with the brokenness of the fellow-humanity relationship. We must be careful, in interpreting Cone, not to foist cheap concepts of reconciliation onto his concept of liberation; what Cone has in mind here is rebellion and revolution that leads to overthrowing the oppressor. In Christ’s solidarity with the oppressed, he frees them to know themselves as made in the image of God, and it is only through the oppressed and their knowing of God that the oppressor can be liberated (Cone 1997, 81). The restoration of vertical communion entails the restoration of horizontal, that is human-to-human, communion.

What is interesting about this connection that Cone makes is that the restoration of communion with God results in a liberation that transforms the social-structures in which human-to-human communion occurs. It is in being formed into the reconciled community identified with the God of the oppressed that true reconciliation can take place. “Because God’s freedom for humanity is the divine liberation of the oppressed from bondage, human freedom as response to God’s gracious liberation is an act for our sisters and brothers who are oppressed. There can be no freedom for God in isolation from the humiliated and abused” (Cone 1997, 92) Here, Cone essentializes belonging to one another in community with the oppressed. Through community, and particularly the sharing of communal history, Cone argues that the oppressed are able to transform societal structures and create communities in which freedom is experienced by oppressed peoples (Cone 1997, 99). Christian reconciliation must include Christ’s call upon us to “change the structures of injustice . . . This means fighting for the inauguration of liberation in our social existence, creating new levels of human relationship in society” (Cone 1997, 93–94). The brokenness of human communion from which Christ liberates the oppressed and which the oppressed transform with Christ occurs at not just the individual level of human relationship, but also at the societal level where oppressive structures are formed. Oppression of fellow-humanity is structural and communal, because it is a distortion of the non-oppressive communion with one another for which we were created and to which we are restored in Christ.

## **2.2. The Ravaging of Creation**

Creation, much like fellow-humanity, has been instrumentalized. The communion which humanity was intended to have with the created order, so that humanity ensures the flourishing of creation, has been inverted in the Fall so that we *use* creation for our own distorted ideas of our own flourishing. This is a distorted communion that takes from the other (creation) rather than giving of the self (humanity) to creation.

This distortion of the communion for which humanity was created, too, is obvious in this present day. Natural resources are becoming dangerously low. Climate change is an ever-looming threat in the weekly news cycle. Species are becoming or are under threat of becoming extinct before our very eyes. To say that humanity has failed thus far in its priestly role to ensure the flourishing of creation is not something most would debate, though perhaps the extent of our failure would be. Rather than trying to prove that which should be obvious or attempting to measure the extent of our failure to have an authentic, loving communion with creation, I will instead focus on the way that these failures have occurred.

The most devastating failures of humanity to care for the flourishing of the environment have seldom been the discreet acts of individuals, but rather the actions (or failures to act) of governments, corporations, and large interest groups. Studies in climate change, at least in the United States, tend to focus on the effects and adaptation efforts of “governments, communities, and the third sector” (due in large part to these being the primary contributors to environmental pollutants, toxic waste, CO2 emission, etc.), though recently there has been a push to include private businesses in these considerations. (Averchenkova et al. 2016, 517–518). Several reports on key dangers to environmental sustainability indicate that “the greatest environmental polluters and exploiters are governments, militaries, and corporations,” rather than merely powerful individuals (Sturgeon 2009, 43). These studies show that the social structures that human beings build in have more power to harm creation than individuals do on their own. As Pope Francis diagnoses it, “many of those who possess more resources and economic or political power seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms, simply making efforts to reduce some of the negative impacts of climate change” (Francis 2015, 1.I.26).

The social structures of governments, large businesses, and our economic structures further have the potential to interact with one another in ways that compound the problem. In one study, five of the world’s largest fossil fuel companies were analyzed for their marketing and public relations spending, revealing that the two most influential factors in that spending are congressional and media attention to issues of climate change, rather than in response to actual disasters to which they contribute (Brulle et al. 2020). By



minimizing congressional and media attention to climate change, these companies maintain their structural power and continue certain harmful practices with minimal oversight and public attention which might detract from business earnings. These powerful structures have the means and resources to manipulate other social structures to maintain their power to ravage creation. Similar to oppression, then, we cannot reduce the ravaging of creation to the discreet actions of individuals; this ravaging is bound up in the social structures in which humans live as communal beings.

These are the same structures, a careful reader will note, which Cone identifies as oppressing fellow-human beings for selfish flourishing. The same United States government, for instance, which has historically oppressed black bodies is the same government that has failed to care for creation, instead pressing it into the destructive service of powerful corporations. This is no coincidence, as the distortion of the communion for which humanity is created is broken at every level. The ravaging of creation and the oppression of fellow-humanity are symptoms of the same disease: the Fall's corruption of that communion for which all humanity is created. Said another way, Pope Francis rights: "a sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings" (Francis 2015, 2.V.91). In this corruption, human beings instrumentalize those and that of which they ought to ensure flourishing. This cannot be reduced, as has been shown in the endemic nature of ravaging and corruption, to discreet actions of individuals, or even to isolated relationships between discreet individuals. Rather, this corruption runs to the very communal nature of humanity, corrupting the kind of communion which we are intended to have. The result is that humans create corrupt social structures designed not for the flourishing of the other, but for a distorted sense of the flourishing of the self. If we are to talk about this corruption of human *telos*, and hopefully its repair, we cannot speak of isolated agents and mere individuals. We must speak, rather, in terms of collective action and intentionality.

### 3. Communion and Creation

Often, theological work on sin is far too bound up in concern for the agency and responsibility of sinful individuals to make sense of collective agency and responsibility. "Traditional theology," McCall notes, "has focused very heavily—indeed almost exclusively—on *individual sin* . . . when traditional theology does consider more corporate or social concerns, even the way it does so shows evidence of myopia" (McCall 2019). When this is considered, such as in the work of Cone, it is accused of neglecting personal responsibility for sin. The concern is that the concept of systemic sin places the blame for sins like

racism on impersonal systems of government and society rather than on the people responsible for building, maintaining, and participating in those systems (Cone 1997, 37). Pope John Paul II criticized that it “leads more or less unconsciously to the watering down and almost the abolition of personal sin, with the recognition only of social guilt and responsibilities.” He continues, “a situation—or likewise an institution, a structure, society itself—is not in itself the subject of moral acts. Hence a situation cannot in itself be good or bad. At the heart of every situation of sin are always to be found sinful people” (John Paul II 1984, 16). I have argued recently that this reading of systemic sin misunderstands the nature of collective agency (to say nothing of the misunderstanding of claims made by proponents like Cone), and that we can indeed have both personal and inherited corporate responsibility for sins committed by structured groups of which we are members (Everhart 2022b). Remembering, to this end, that we are created for a communion that is like Trinitarian communion in which there is both unity and diversity. As Chung puts it, “extreme individualism that dismisses outright the communal dimension of human life squarely contradicts the way of being of the Triune God. Furthermore, extreme collectivism that suffocates celebration of diversity and individuality is opposed to the perichoretic manner of God’s existence” (Chung 2017, 148). Simeon Zahl has argued that many critiques which pit the communal against the individual rely on uncritical (and ultimately false) assumptions about human psychology (Zahl 2021, 345). If we are to make claims as theologians about agency, responsibility for sin, and group activity, we ought to take seriously the claims that psychologists make about group behavior. It is only in engaging in this kind of theological puzzle<sup>12</sup> that we can make the claims we need to about communion and creation.

### 3.1. Group Action and Identification

So what is it that constitutes a group’s action or intention to act? This is the first question we must ask, as it reveals the basis of supposed group actions like humanity’s oppression of humanity and ravaging of creation. One approach to this question in group psychology has been Stephen Reicher’s work on Social Identity Approach (SIA). SIA is a combination of two families of psychological theories: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT). According to this approach, the formation of social identity develops the identification of personal selves in relation to the social groups in which we participate (Reicher et al. 2010, 45). This approach emphasizes shared social

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<sup>12</sup> See, Perry and Leidenhag 2021. They define a theological puzzle as a theological question(s) which require(s) some sort of empirical enquiry to fully or properly answer.

identification as the basis for the kind of cooperation and coordination required for a group to act distinctively *as a group* and not just a sum of individual agents. Reicher et al. write, “shared social identification transforms relations between people in such a way as to enable effective co-action. Where SIT implicitly assumes that identification is the basis of collective action and social power, the work [on SCT] fills in the gaps. It details the processes which produce intra-group coordination and hence social power”<sup>13</sup> (Reicher, et al. 2010, 57). Reicher, et al. here are resisting a reduction of group action or intention to a sum of individual members’ actions or intentions. Stephanie Collins explains why a reductionist explanation fails to make sense of group action:

[the group’s] decision is not merely the conjunction of members’ decisions. The members’ decisions were *to assent to the collective’s doing such-and-such*. By contrast, the collective’s decision was *to do such-and-such*. The collective’s decision was determined by the members’ decisions, but it is not to be identified with the mere conjunction of them for two reasons. First, it has a different content: the collective’s decision is ‘the collective will do this’. Second, the collective’s decision arose out of two things: the conjunction of member’s decisions *plus* the fact that they are all committed to [the coordinated structure of said group].<sup>14</sup> (Collins 2019, 169)

Rather than reducing group action to a sum of individual acts and intentions, SIA “provides substance to the notion of a socially structured field within the individual. It thereby explains how large numbers of people can act in coherent and meaningful ways, by reference to shared group norms, values, and understandings rather than idiosyncratic beliefs” (Reicher, et al. 2010, 48). Thus, understanding how we identify ourselves as discreet individuals in relation to larger groups and the role that we play in those groups will allow us to understand how we as particular individuals act in ways that contribute to the agency, intention, and action of collectives.

SIT acts as a conceptual “bridge between the individual and the social and how it allows one to explain how socio-cultural realities can regulate the

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<sup>13</sup> It is also worth noting that some accounts have forwarded an approach to co-action through joint intention. While the nuance that these bring is important, there is not space in this article to give such accounts due treatment. What is important to note is that social identification can become a basis for a shared goal, agency, attention, or even intention in a way that is not necessarily competitive with these accounts. See, (Tomasello 2019, 15-18).

<sup>14</sup> Collins defines a collective as that kind of group that is coordinated in a way that enables group actions and intentions. For our purposes, our coordination as the group, “humanity,” is our *telos* for *communio Dei* under the rule of Christ; the distortion of that *telos* is a distortion of said coordination.

behaviours of individuals . . . social identity provides a psychological apparatus that allows humans uniquely to be irreducibly cultural beings” (Reicher, et al. 2010, 50). SIT arose from a series of studies which analyzed how subjects treated other subjects in virtue of being identified with arbitrarily formed groups (Tajfel 1972, 58). What the studies found was that despite the arbitrary nature of group assignment, groups began to act in accordance with their arbitrary identifications to benefit their own group members. Tajfel therefore reasoned that “people come to define their selves in terms of group membership . . . break[ing] with the traditional assumption that the self should only be understood as that which defines the individual in relation to other individuals, and to acknowledge that, in some circumstances, we can define ourselves through the groups to which we belong” (Reicher, et al. 2010, 48). SIT describes what groups contribute to the identities of individual members, seeing groups as a part of the formation of personal identity.

This formation, whether negative or positive,<sup>15</sup> usually occurs either comparatively with in-group members or contrastively with non-group members. Social identification is about how we as individuals identify ourselves (and don’t identify ourselves) with respect to our membership in various social groups (Neville, et al. 2020, 2). Personal identity is thus both individual and social at the same time. As Reicher, et al. put it “on the one hand, my social identities—‘I am a woman’, ‘I am a Scot’ or whatever—speak in a fundamental way to who I am in the world. But what any of these memberships mean cannot be reduced to my own or indeed anybody else’s individuality . . . social identity provides a conduit through which society inhabits the subject” (Reicher, et al. 2010, 48). In this regard, crucial aspects of personal identity are drawn from participation in social groups. While this explains *that* the individual is identified within a socially constructed world, it does not help us make sense of *how* that said individual becomes identified or *how* social construction occurs.

This is where SCT is beneficial in filling in the gaps. SCT describes the internalization of shared group identity in such a way that can saliently contribute to personal identity. Moreover, the contribution is perceivable to others within our social groups. Said differently, SCT accounts for how the “I” comes to understand itself as a member of the “we,” where “we” is a shared identity recognized by others beyond just the “I.” SCT clarifies “the distinction between social identity and other aspects of the self concept, to explain how the self system is organized and what makes any one part of this system psychologically active in a given context.” (Reicher, et al. 2010, 51-52) This

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<sup>15</sup> See, Reicher, et al. 2020, 49, for more on this distinction.

means that personal identity is not reducible to shared social identity, rather shared social identity contributes to a part of personal identity in a salient way.

SCT is about how we categorize of ourselves, are categorized by one another, and the ways that such mutual categorization contributes to self-categorization. SCT is our individual recognition that we are members of a given group and the recognition by others as members of that group (Neville 2020, 5). SCT, therefore, is not a purely subjective construct of the individual. The identity of the group, as well as my personal identity in relation to the group, is not wholly defined by me. Rather, it is a conglomeration of many members categorizing the group and categorizing each other in relation to the group (Neville, et al. 2020, 4). A shared group identity and the identity of individual members are mutually informing; group identity contributes to an aspect of personal identity, and personal identity can contribute to changes in the group's identity. The definition of a given group grows and transforms as new members are added or as current members change their understanding of the group's identity. The result is a kind of relational feed-back loop in which groups change the identity of members, members change the identity of groups, and so on.

When combined into SIA, we learn that the self, while a distinguishable and individual agent, is always defined in terms of relation to others in groups. Turner, an early proponent of SIA, notes that the self is identified in comparison and contrast to others at various levels abstraction; one can be identified as belonging to this group or that group or one could be identified this particular member of the group versus that member (Turner 1982). SCT develops the ontology of groups implicit in SIT to maintain that "(inter)personal behaviour is not simply underpinned but also *made possible by* a salient personal identity, just as (inter)group behaviour is both underpinned *and made possible by* a salient social identity" (Reicher, et al. 2010, 52).

SIA, for our purposes here, is best summarized thusly:

It stresses the sociality of the construct in at least three ways. First, social identity is a relational term, defining who we are as a function of our similarities and differences with others. Second, social identity is shared with others and provides a basis for shared social action. Third, the meanings associated with any social identity are products of our collective history and present. Social identity is therefore something that links us to the social world. It provides the pivot between the individual and society. (Reicher, et al. 2010, 45)

Through a shared identity, human beings can coordinate their actions so as to take actions as a collective rather than merely as a sum of individuals. One way that shared identity is established in individual agents is through a shared *telos*

or end: many studies have shown “increase shared social identity by invoking a sense of shared fate with other passengers.” (Neville, et al. 2020, 14.) This is not unlike the *teleological* account of the relational *imago Dei* offered earlier in this article. Insofar as the *communio Dei* is the *telos* of humanity in Christ, all of humanity has some level of shared identity out of which humanity as a group can take corporate actions. When this *telos* is distorted in the Fall, humanity’s actions are also distorted from the intention for which we are created: to act in ways that ensure one another’s and creation’s flourishing. This results in humanity as a group oppressing one another and ravaging creation. Further, we are capable of building groups within the larger collective of humanity that are likewise distorted so as to distort the shared *telos* of humanity in loving communion with one another and creation.

### **3.2. Oppressing Humanity and Ravaging Creation: A Broken Communion**

The veracity and actuality of oppression and ravaging in our world make clear that these actions are bound up in the coordination of various structured groups, such as nations, corporations, churches, and, broadly speaking, the whole of humanity. The social structure of humanity, I argue, is its intended *telos* for *communio Dei*. This is a shared purpose towards which all human beings can and ought to work under the lordship of Christ. It can, under this structure, act and have intentions. And as that structuring is distorted, so too are the actions and intentions changed. As noted above, shared social identities can contribute to a personal identity out of which one acts as an individual. So, one could take on features of a corrupt shared identity and bring those features into other groups with shared identities. Doing so has the potential to also change the shared identity of the second group in a significant way, thus distorting that group’s shared identity, group actions, and group intentions. If humanity’s communal *telos* is corrupted in the Fall, then all human beings share in their other socially structured groups the distortion of that *teleological* communion.

This, I submit to the reader, is how oppression and ravaging are instantiated in national, local community, and incorporated structures. They have the same source in the brokenness of human communal *telos*. Furthermore, we can observe these sins transcending cultures, times, nations, and borders of nearly every kind in humanity. Humanity as a whole, intended for loving communion with God, one another, and creation, acts in collective ways through many kinds of instantiated structures to oppress fellow-human beings and to ravage creation.

As socially structured actions, it bears considering how these actions can affect one another. I have already stated that one group can share its distortion

with another group via a shared member (or members) who takes on social identity features of the first group and contributes them to the shared identity of the second. It stands to reason, especially since many of the structures that enact oppression and ravaging are the same structures, that the same recursive effect could occur between two group actions. A group's intention to oppress could contribute to the personal identity of its members, who then intend to ravage in a certain way due to that contribution of oppression. Because these actions are born out of the same broken group identity, they can have a recursive effect on one another, enabling, encouraging, and forming the group towards taking such actions. Oppression can contribute to ravaging and ravaging can contribute to oppression.

Let us consider some concrete ways that this occurs. Much work has already been done to demonstrate how environmental crises disproportionately affect BIPOC.<sup>16</sup> That the scarcity of resources and ecological crises would have the most impact on the poorest and most powerless of our societies is no great leap in logic. Ravaging, in such cases, compounds the damage done by oppression. But recent work has also taken to studying how social inequalities, such as racial inequalities, can also contribute to environmental crises. One recent study demonstrated that the age-old practice of redlining, in which BIPOC were segregated into different neighborhoods than wealthy whites, has resulted in significant ecological issues. Because the distribution of "nature" is unequal across these different racially segregated areas, there is a compounded lack of balanced ecosystems to sustain plant and animal life, thus compounding the death of vital ecosystems and their inhabitants caused by urbanization (Schell, et al. 2021). Another inter-disciplinary study of coastal formation from rising sea-levels showed that areas of the coast predominantly populated by BIPOC tended to receive less environmental care and support due in large part to governmental policies which ignored racial demographics (Hardy, et al. 2017). One result of this was that many of the ignored coastal areas, home to several significant species, became uninhabitable due to rising sea-levels and coastal collapse. In this case, structured racial oppression led directly to the ravaging of creation. These are only examples of studies<sup>17</sup> which are beginning to demonstrate that, just as environmental crises disproportionately affect racially oppressed groups, so to do the social injustices that racialized groups face contribute significantly to environmental crises (Black 2016, 178–179). Racialized oppression, and presumably other forms of social oppression, compound the damage done by creational ravaging, demonstrating a mutuality of injustice between environmental and racial injustice.

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<sup>16</sup> See for examples, Maher 1998; Black 2016. The disproportionate effect of environmental and climate problems on BIPOC has been called environmental injustice.

<sup>17</sup> See also, Trainor et al. 2007; Trask 2009; Bachram 2004.

The upshot is this: while it is clear that oppression and ravaging come from the same distortion of human communal nature, it is also true that these social realities affect one another. When we ravage creation, the damage done to our environment will only serve to deepen the gap between the oppressor and the oppressed as resources necessary for human flourishing are depleted. When we oppress one another, we increase the needs of human beings in a way, that leads to further ravaging of the created order. Because our oppression creates greater need, we take more and more desperately from the created order to sustain (however minimally) the lives of our poorest. But this is not in service of human life, rather it is for the maintenance of the exaggerated and distorted ideas flourishing of the oppressor and ravager. These two realities of the brokenness of humanity not only come from the same place, but they compound the damage that each other does.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Communion with Creation**

Humanity was created in the *imago Dei* for communion. This communion for which we are created includes our responsibility to ensure and provide for the sustainable flourishing of creation. Where humanity has failed to do this, there is a clear distortion of our communal *telos*, so that what we see is not mere discreet acts against the created order, but collective action to which our individual actions contribute and which does far greater damage than any individual human could on their own. Moreover, because the ravaging of creation is bound up in a distortion of our communal *telos*, it both contributes to and is contributed to by other distortions of our communal *telos*. In particular, I have noted the interconnectedness of distorted communion with fellow-humanity, which I call oppression, and distorted communion with creation, which I call ravaging. These distortions compound the damage of one another and form communities and groups to further oppress and ravage. The solution to oppression, according to Cone, is a liberative transformation of the social structures that oppress (Cone 1997, 93–99). While liberation itself is part of the solution to ravaging as a key contributor to its distortion of *communio Dei*, it also would seem that a similarly liberative transformation of ravaging social structures is due. Because the structures of our societies that oppress and ravage are distorted forms of our communal *telos*, reconciliation and transformation brought through Christ the liberator cannot be reduced to discreet acts of liberation; Christ must transform us and the shared identities through which the social world inhabits us. It is only in such a liberative transformation of our broken communions that we can have an authentic, loving, and priestly communion with the created order.



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