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The Theologian as Wounded Innocent
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We often learn as much about a person by how they die as by how they live. Indeed, how one approaches one’s own death is often the most accurate reflection of one’s attitude toward life. This was certainly true of Alejandro García-Rivera’s courageous last months. Those privileged to spend even a few minutes with Alex during those days were inspired by his witness to the wondrous, extravagant gift that is our creaturely existence. In the midst of what could only have been a harrowing physical, emotional, and spiritual struggle, Alex never ceased to affirm life, whether by inquiring about the well-being of his students, planning future scholarly projects, welcoming dozens of visitors to his home, or tending the idyllic garden that graces the entrance to that home.

It is no coincidence that Alex’s last book, his last testament, is titled, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology* (2009). This is truly, I think, a masterful work that breaks much new ground in a number of areas, particularly in its call for the articulation and development of a thoroughgoing theological cosmology. In order to appreciate the theological and spiritual richness of this work, however, I think it must be read in the context of Alex’s entire oeuvre, as both a culmination of his entire scholarly project and, at the same time, a groundbreaking new direction for that project. Today, we can only speculate wistfully about how this undertaking, the development of a theological cosmology, might have evolved in the future. It is now left to those of us inspired by his work to attempt, in our own small ways, to take up the challenge he laid before us.

To that end, I would like to offer some reflections on the book, *The Garden of God*, but do so in relation to Alex’s somewhat earlier work, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (2003). I want to postulate that it is precisely this latter eponymous concept—so strange-sounding at first glance—that makes possible and generates a theological cosmology. More specifically, it is the Christian’s own (Alex’s own) identity and life as a “wounded innocent” that breaks open and reveals this earthly “veil of tears” as indeed “the garden of God.” It is no coincidence that Alex locates the origins of his book, *The Garden of God*, not in some personal experience of beauty, but in his horrifying realization, as a young physicist working for Boeing, that he was unwittingly helping to manufacture nuclear cruise missiles:

I would be helping bring hell to earth.

. . . Mystical visions are supposed to be moments of great ecstasy. What does one do with a mystical vision of hell?

*The Garden of God* was born from a “mystical vision of hell,” a physicist’s vision of a nuclear conflagration. That’s the definition of a wounded innocence.

It is the honest confrontation with creatureliness, contingency, and mortality that liberates us to worship the God of life, the Creator of the garden we are invited to help tend. It is only then that we become once again, even if only at the end of our lives, the little children to whom the Reign of God, the Garden of God, belongs. Alex embraced and radiated the hard-won simplicity of the wounded innocent.

As he intimates in his book, *The Garden of God*, such a wounded innocence is already represented in the Bible in the figure of Job. For this reason, García-Rivera argues in that work that any doctrine of creation ought to be grounded not only in Genesis but in Job. The Book of Job sets forth a hermeneutic for interpreting both Creation and the human person. We can only understand and, indeed, justify both Creation and humanity—we can only really talk about the goodness of Creation—when we do so from within what García-Rivera calls “the web of evil.” It is in the confrontation with this web of evil that, paradoxically and unexpectedly, the authentic goodness and beauty of Creation are revealed, not as ours but as God’s:

God’s creation has its own integrity. It is not a machine with which one can tinker with abandon. Job is not being invited to reverse-engineer God’s creation so that he can create beautiful creatures like God. The wisdom being offered Job is not one of engineering
design or wanton consuming but one fitted perfectly to the human creature:
to help bring abundance of life and beauty to what is already a marvelous creation. Bringing abundance to the natural has more to do with gardening than engineering.3

From his confrontation with the web of evil, Job thus emerges as a “wounded innocent.” The struggle between innocent faith and innocent suffering is the crucible in which is revealed, from out of the whirlwind, the utter gratuity of Creation. “Where were you when I founded the earth? . . . While the morning stars sang in chorus and all the sons of God shouted for joy? . . . When I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling bands? . . . Who has laid out a channel for the downpour and for the thunderstorm a path to bring rain to no man’s land, the unpeopled wilderness; to enrich the waste and desolate ground till the desert blooms with verdure?” (Job 38: 4ff).

In the last chapter of his 2003 book, A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art, García-Rivera already sets forth this theme of the wounded innocence from which sprouts the garden of God. In that chapter, he examines Caravaggio’s masterpiece “The Incredulity of St. Thomas.” He suggests that the encounter between Jesus and Thomas depicted in that stark painting offers an example of a “wounded innocence”—an innocence that, like the glorified body of Christ, still bears the wounds of our common mortality. Alex suggests, further, that the dynamics of our common wounded innocence provide a key, not only to human existence, but to the life of Christian faith and, even more specifically, to the theological vocation:

The risen Jesus “teaches” Thomas to sense anew through the union of his physical and spiritual senses . . . Jesus teaches Thomas the possibilities of a full humanity, the possibilities of a united physical and spiritual sensibility, the guiding hand of a risen but wounded body . . . Caravaggio’s fine work also reflects my own spiritual journey in writing this book. Like the apostles huddled in fear after the Lord’s crucifixion, I experienced a few dark nights of the soul as I left my laptop in the evening after a day of writing and rewriting. I felt as a trespasser might who had jumped the fence over to his neighbor’s property. What was this theologian doing in the properties of the art historian and art critic, of the artist and the art gallery? Yet as I struggled with the issues of these difficult disciplines, the work of art always took me deeply into what seemed a familiar field, a common ground in which there were no fences. This field was the heart of my own humanity in which I glimpsed a mysterious Beauty that transcended all fences, all methodological issues, and all claims. Here on the common ground of the beautiful, the theologian has a place along with the art historian and the critic, the artist and the museums for it is a common humanity that binds us. Whatever the wounds of history have done to isolate and separate the theological from the historical, the spiritual from the artistic, or the textbook from the living, a new humanism, a wounded innocence, I have come to believe, can bring them together.4

This wounded innocence is, I think, the difference between the innocence of the newborn infant lying in that manger in Bethlehem and the innocence of the man who, three decades later, presents himself to Thomas in the Upper Room. It is the difference between Job before the whirlwind and Job after the whirlwind. It is the difference between Ricoeur’s first and second naivetés, i.e., the difference between the simple wonder of a child who has not yet learned to grasp at life and the wizened wonder of an old person who has learned to stop grasping at life. In that difference lies the possibility and hope of our redemption as human beings, as Christians, and as theologians. But only if we dare, as Thomas did, to peer into our common wounded existence and discover there, as Alex did, “a mysterious Beauty that transcends all fences.” It is in this act of seeing and touching that we accompany Jesus not only to his cross, but also to the resurrection:
The invitation to touch his wounds urges Thomas to choose innocence over cynicism, to choose wonder over security. Thomas followed Jesus up to the cross. Now Thomas must follow Jesus into his resurrection by the aesthetic act of touching. The aesthetic dimension of the imitation of Christ culminates in the invitation to follow Jesus into a new innocence by touching the wounds of the risen, wounded, and innocent Christ. Indeed, the religious insight of the imitation of Christ lies less in the heroic bearing of wounds than participating in a wounded innocence. It is in this wounded innocence that Justice and Beauty find their unity. It is in this wounded innocence where the human creature conforms to the image of Christ that, in turn, allows us to see ourselves as an image of God.5

The theological cosmology which Alex traces in the transition from “a wounded innocence” to “the garden of God” is rooted in this intrinsic relationship between Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, between Justice and Beauty. Such a theological cosmology has manifold implications for our understanding of Christ, the Church, the human person, and theological method. In the remainder of this paper, I would like to explore some of these implications.

The Christ who emerges in between a wounded innocence and the Garden of God is a cosmic Christ, but one who still bears the wounds of crucifixion. Our encounter with Christ can only take place in the concrete, historical present. Consequently, that encounter is with the cosmic Christ revealed by the Spirit in and through His “new creation.” Yet the cosmic Christ is the same as the Christ of the gospels, the wounded innocent who presents himself to the apostles in the Upper Room. Alex’s cosmic Christ is one who, in the words of Johann Baptist Metz, “makes demands on us” even as he reveals the extravagant beauty of God’s garden. Indeed, it is precisely that beauty which makes demands on us that compels us to join the Gardener in tending the Garden. Since the Jesus of the gospels is only present to us today in the form of the cosmic Christ, the Christian’s access to the Jesus of the gospels presupposes his or her encounter with this cosmic Christ. Alex thus suggests, I think, that without such an encounter, the Jesus of the gospels remains but another role model rather than the One who liberates us because He transforms all of Creation. In The Garden of God, Alex García-Rivera thus demonstrates that a theological aesthetics calls for a theological cosmology, and that theological cosmology, in turn, calls for an understanding of Christ, wherein Christ is made present in his fully cosmic dimension:

By fully cosmic, I mean Christ made present in the cosmos through the action of the Holy Spirit. The fully cosmic dimension of Christ is revealed in the beauty of endless living natural forms. This is only possible through the Holy Spirit who makes Christ in heaven also present on earth. In other words, the fully cosmic Christ is also the Christ who sends the Holy Spirit. More important, Christ in his fully cosmic dimensions shows us that to be fully human is to be at home in the cosmos.7

For García-Rivera, such a view of Christ also has important implications for the Church. He states these quite clearly:

The church of the twenty-first century must think anew its ecclesial identity. Is the Christ of the church also the Christ of the world? If so, then does not an ecclesial self-understanding that sees the Christ as its personal possession place Christ under institutional house arrest? On the other hand, is the Christ of the world also the Christ of the church? Can Christ be yanked out of the matrix of apostolic faith to take on as many faces as there are people, the result being his not having a face at all? I believe this twin dilemma can only be solved by a responsible doctrine of the cosmic Christ … If we ask the church the cosmological question—Where is Jesus now?—the answer has both an earthly and a heavenly dimension.
Jesus has ascended to heaven. He, however, is now made present to the church on earth through its Eucharist and the action of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the cosmic Christ is to be found in heaven. His presence on earth, however, is mediated through the Holy Spirit. Thus, in a divided universe, where heaven and earth are not yet one, the cosmic Christ is present in the cosmos both as an eschatological (heaven) and pneumatological (earth) presence.8

If a Christian’s encounter with the “matrix of apostolic faith” is inseparable from his or her encounter with the cosmic Christ, so is the Christian’s encounter with Christ in the Church inseparable from his or her encounter with Christ in the world. In the epiclesis or descent of the Holy Spirit, Christ’s Eucharistic presence is revealed not only as an ecclesial presence but as a cosmic presence.

Through the action of the Holy Spirit, this wounded, cosmic Christ thus reveals Creation to itself, and, especially in the Eucharist, He reveals the Church to itself. This cosmic Christ remains wounded, together with His creation and, one might dare to suggest, His church. Indeed, García-Rivera’s “Garden of God” is never romanticized or sentimentalized:

The universe is also a refugee with us. As such, it points out that a theological cosmology is, in part, a theology of suffering and not simply a theology of nature. A theological cosmology must address suffering in a cosmic way. It must help us understand what Paul meant in Romans 8 when he tells us that creation groans to be fulfilled. Suffering, in other words, is the context in which a discussion of the universe’s final state must take place.9

If this is true, as I believe it is, then we must go on to ask what the implications are for ecclesiology, i.e., our understanding of the nature of the Church. If “the Christ of the world is also the Christ of the church,” and if this is the same Christ that appeared to Thomas, then I think García-Rivera’s work challenges us to ask what it might mean for our understanding of the Church to embrace Her as the mystical body of this cosmic, Wounded Innocent.

This cosmic Christ also reveals the human person to him or herself. Drawing on the work of Teilhard de Chardin, García-Rivera posits the human as “the exemplary phenomenon of nature.”10 This implies that the human cannot be understood in terms of nature; rather, nature should be understood in terms of the human, which is nature’s “exemplary phenomenon.”11 And the nature of the human is revealed in Christ. So the starting point for a theological cosmology is the cosmic Christ, who interprets the human, which in turn interprets nature: “If the key to the universe is the human, then the key to the human is Christ.”12 As García-Rivera points out, this interpretive dynamic is quite different from that of the scientists of Teilhard’s day, for whom the starting point for understanding the human was material nature (e.g., the human being is but a complex animal).

Inasmuch as both the human and nature are fundamentally Christic in character, they are revealed as fundamentally a gift, or donum:

Thus, in the creation, God gives the cosmos its own rationality and dignity. In the incarnation, God opens up Godself as gift to the cosmos. Finally, in the ascension, the cosmos is opened up to God.13

And the “exemplary phenomenon” of the donum that is the cosmos is the human person as a gift. As such, the person is likewise “opened up to God” and invited to participate in God’s own self-gift. This is what it means to have been created in God’s image and likeness.

Precisely as donum, then, the human person is also fundamentally a participant, an actor, for “[t]here is a reciprocity of labor, a labor of gratitude, between gift and recipient that progresses toward a spiritual transformation . . . What was gift now becomes giver.”14 In other words, the act of reception is indeed an act that inspires gratitude and requires labor. Here García-Rivera quotes Lewis Hyde:

It is only when the gift has worked in us, only when we have come up to its level, as it were, that we can give it away again. Passing the gift along is the act
of gratitude that finishes the labor. The transformation is not accomplished until we have the power to give the gift on our own terms. Therefore, the end of the labor of gratitude is similarity with the gift or with the donor.\textsuperscript{15}

This is where beauty and justice meet, in the transformation of receptivity into gratitude and, finally, into a participation in the Donor’s own self-emptying love in the world.

Finally, the kind of theological cosmology which García-Rivera proposes has at least two important ramifications for the theological task itself. First, that task must be grounded in the practical dynamism set in motion by God’s act of love in Creation, wherein we are invited to participate in God’s own self-gift. This implies a receptivity defined by a spiritual transformation of the person and a social transformation of human relationships and structures. In other words, theology arises at the meeting point of aesthetics and ethics, beauty and justice, spiritual praxis and social praxis, contemplation and action, and finally between woundedness and innocence. And it arises precisely out of the inherent tensions between those polarities, as an attempt to understand those tensions. Consequently, any premature resolution of the tensions always presages the demise of theological reflection.

Secondly, a theological cosmology demands an understanding of the theological enterprise as inherently interdisciplinary precisely because, ultimately, theology and all the disciplines are grounded in our common humanity, our shared wounded innocence. For García-Rivera the key to this interdisciplinarity is the willingness of each discipline to eschew any type of reductionism. And, in turn, the key to avoiding reductionism is the willingness to take Beauty as a starting point, that is, to view the cosmos as gift:

If beauty is to be our starting point, then one must recognize what is one of its most important characteristics. Beauty is experienced above all as a gift. If one allows that the universe through its beauty is also a gift to be received, then the epistemological and metaphysical divide may be bridged. It is what makes reality a cosmos and not merely a universe. Beauty, let me claim, allows us to see the cosmos not only as a datum to be understood but also as a donum to be received. In this, it is one with the theological tradition. The donum of the cosmos comes to theology not merely through the doctrine of creation but also through the doctrines of the incarnation and ascension.\textsuperscript{16}

Lest one be tempted to think that theology as such thus asserts a kind of methodological hegemony over the other disciplines, García-Rivera—in the footsteps of not only Hans Urs von Balthasar but also Teilhard de Chardin—takes to task much of post-Enlightenment Christian theology precisely for its refusal to take beauty, and therefore gratuity, as its methodological starting point. The result has been the reduction of theology to either conceptualism or moralism. As a wounded innocent, the theologian can only stand—or kneel—in awe and wonder before a God who not only gives Himself freely in the act of creation, but a God who, in the Incarnation and Ascension, actually invites us to participate in God’s own self-gift, God’s own life. The starting point of theology, therefore, can only be silence. Yet this is a hard-won silence, the silence of Job standing before the whirlwind, the silence of Thomas standing before the wounded and risen Christ, the silence of the young physicist at Boeing who one day more than thirty years ago “fell into a kind of waking dream, a mystical-like experience … I could see, smell, and hear the flame, smoke, and roar of a terrible conflagration.”\textsuperscript{17} From that horrific experience was born a great, inspiring theologian who, today more than ever, is tending the Garden of God. Thank you, Alex.

ENDNOTES

2 Ibid., 112.
3 Ibid., 112-113.
5 Ibid., 85-86.
8 Ibid., 39, 43.
9 Ibid., 14.
10 Ibid., 27.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 59.
14 Ibid., 79.
15 Ibid., 79-80.
16 Ibid., 59.
17 Ibid., viii.

Father Arthur Poulin, *Cactus by the Bay*, acrylic on canvas, 24” x 36”, 2011