



THE DEPARTMENT OF LITERATURE,
HISTORY OF IDEAS AND RELIGION

Can Theological Semiotics Reconcile Nature and Culture?

Nathan Lyons' Semiotic Imaginary in Dialogue with Christology

Elias Kjörk

Term: Fall 2023

Course: RT1400, 15 hp

Level: Bachelor's thesis

Supervisor: Andreas Nordlander

Contents

- 1. The Modern Discussion of Nature and Culture 5**
- 2. Signs in the Dust 9**
 - 2.1. Culture..... 10**
 - 2.1.1. Anthropological Breadth 10
 - 2.1.2. Theological Height 11
 - 2.1.3. Participatory Bridge 13
 - 2.2. Nature..... 15**
 - 2.2.1. Bio-Semiotic Ravaissonism 15
 - 2.2.2. Evolution 17
 - 2.2.3. Matter 18
 - 2.3. Theological Evaluation..... 19**
- 3. Williams’ Christological Resources 22**
- 4. Lyons’ Supplemented Imaginary 25**
 - 4.1. Dialogue with Christology 26**
 - 4.2. An Alternative Imaginary?..... 29**
- Bibliography..... 33**

Abstract

The philosopher of science Bruno Latour believes modernity is premised on the division of nature and culture into distinct spheres. In response to the problems this division poses, he has suggested a theoretical imaginary that promotes technological “hybrids” as a bridge between them. However, there has been substantial scepticism regarding the viability of Latour’s approach from a theological perspective. Drawing on these lines of critique, Nathan Lyons has recently developed an alternative theological theory of nature and culture. Lyons’ framework offers a semiotic imaginary, highlighting that nature is inherently inclined to receive culture through participation in the Trinitarian relationship. Although Lyons presents a promising alternative to Latour’s ideas, I argue that his theory needs to be theologically supplemented. The objective of this essay is to present and supplement Lyons’ theory through an engagement with Christology. The upshot of my discussion is that this makes Lyons’ theory more theologically robust such that it can serve as a viable alternative to a technological imaginary.

Keywords: Nature, Culture, Nathan Lyons, Bruno Latour, Semiotics, Christology, Rowan Williams

Introduction:

Reflection on the relationship between nature and culture has been prominent throughout Western history,¹ but garnered substantial attention in modernity, especially in disciplines like philosophy and anthropology. On the other hand, its consideration is quite recent in theology. Notably, the philosopher of science Bruno Latour has influenced and framed the overarching discussion.² Latour contends that modernity is premised upon a separation between nature and culture, which according to him, is a façade the moderns attempt to hold up. In reality, modern predicaments, such as the climate crisis or deforestation, lead to convergences of both spheres. He argues that this separation leaves modernity with significant challenges as it cannot articulate a proper discourse of mediation between natural and cultural spheres. In response to

¹ See for instance Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976)

² See Bruno, Latour. *We Have Never Been Modern* (Trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University press, 1993), in addition see Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (trans. Catherine Porter Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013)

this, Latour proposes an imaginary of technological hybrids to bridge the gap between nature and culture.

From a theological perspective a couple responses to Latour's anthropological approach have been attempted.³ Simon Oliver is one that has critically engaged with Latour's and his follower Donna Haraway's technological solutions. Oliver argues that technology is unable to escape the modern constitution as it is strictly immanent, i.e., that it will only imitate already existing human processes. Thus, technology as mediator will according to him lead to a façade that is very akin to the modern discourse Latour critiques. Oliver instead proposes an alternative theological vision in medieval eucharistic theology. While I am sympathetic to Oliver's attempt, his proposal does not fully entertain the possibility that what nature and culture consists of might be wholly different on a theological account.

A more comprehensive contemporary framework would be that of Nathan Lyons. Lyons' approach offers a fresh perspective on the theological interplay between nature and culture, by developing a theological semiotic theory which intends to overcome the dualism modernity puts forth between nature and culture. For Lyons nature and culture is ultimately found in viewing the Trinitarian God semiotically. For him, nature and culture in creation reflects and participates in God. The primary aim of this essay is to present Lyons' work in semiotics as an original contribution in the contemporary discussion of nature and culture. However, my assessment is that Lyons' theory is lacking in its broader reference to creation's fall and reconciliation which makes it difficult to theologically account for the tension between nature and culture. Furthermore, Lyons theory suggests questions regarding creation's integrity and freedom in relation to God. For instance, culture already exists in God according to Lyons, which actualises the issue of whether human culture is already predetermined. My contention however is that these shortcomings can be addressed by integrating dogmatic Christological resources, well-articulated by the contemporary theologian Rowan Williams. Consequently, a second aim of this essay is to demonstrate how Christology can provide a framework for the reconciliation of nature and culture. Finally, I will explore how the imaginary Lyons provides can serve as an alternative to, and critique, of trajectories stemming from Latour's work.

The structure of my essay is as follows: The first section describes the background of the nature-culture discussion with reference to Latour and Simon Oliver's critiques. The second

³ E.g., Simon Oliver, "The Eucharist Before Nature and Culture" (*Modern Theology* 15, no. 3, 1999), 331–353; Michael Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (New York: SPCK, 2014); John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2014), 218–25.

section describes and critically assesses Lyons' theory. To supplement Lyons' theory, the third section explores Rowan Williams' Christological resources. The fourth section puts Williams' Christological resources in dialogue with Lyons' theory to provide an alternative to Latour's imaginary. The upshot of my discussion is that Christology helps Lyons to account for a more nuanced theological theory of nature and culture, something that in turn serves as an even sharper critique of other solutions. In short, a proper theological semiotics can provide a path to reconcile nature and culture.

1. The Modern Discussion of Nature and Culture

To provide a background, I will begin by briefly describing Latour's perspective on the relationship of nature and culture in the context of modernity. Latour works from a common viewpoint that distinguishes culture as distinctively human and meaningful, and perceived in for example intentionality, language, religion, or political discourse. In contrast, nature is distinctively non-human without inherent meaning, and perceived in the external world of for example matter, scientific facts, or biology. Latour's argumentation in his important work *We Have Never Been Modern* unfolds in three stages. First, he outlines modernity's division of nature and culture, and terms it "the modern constitution." Next, he shows the shortcomings and illusionary nature of this modern project. Finally, he proposes an alternative imaginary that supports technological mediation between nature and culture.

What is indicative of the broader phenomenon of modernity is for Latour exemplified by the scientist Robert Boyle (1627-1691) and the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679).⁴ Boyle's scientific project aimed to establish a wholly objective laboratory to discern objective natural facts by the medium of an air pump. By creating a vacuum, no outside factors would disturb experiments. Thereby, Boyle sought to create indisputable, transcendent natural facts, independent of other forms of knowledge. For Boyle this entailed that these facts would carry an authority superior to dictations in political discourse. On the other hand, Hobbes' political theory rests on the concept of a social contract where society is unified by one sovereign individual that guarantees peace and everyone's best interests. Hobbes, thus, replaced any transcendent source of society, such as God, nature, or objective facts, with a wholly immanent way of maintaining the order of society built purely on individuals' self-interest.

In Boyle and Hobbes, Latour observes a symmetry of method and writes that "Boyle is creating a political discourse from which politics is to be excluded, while Hobbes is imagining

⁴ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. 18-19.

a scientific politics from which experimental science has to be excluded”.⁵ Strikingly, both thinkers purify their subject matter by separating politics and science from each other. Expanding on such a division Latour posits that modernity connotes two distinctive practices that describe how moderns engage with nature and culture. Whereas Latour’s concept of *translation* blends elements of non-human nature and human culture into hybrids, his concept of *purification* distinguishes the spheres of the human and the non-human from each other.⁶ To maintain these practises effectiveness, they must be fully separated, although they mutually reinforce each other. Visible translation allows for a more visible terrain of separating human and inhuman from each other, while purification into different spheres provides the fabric for creating new hybrids, to replace outdated ones.⁷ Navigating this space of separation and mutual dependency between translation and purification is what being modern entails for Latour.

Latour contends that this project is dependent on a paradoxical interplay of transcendence and immanence. Nature perceived as a transcendent object, is artificially constructed in laboratories, while society founded on subjective human self-interest, must be acted towards as if it is beyond the range of individual influence.⁸ To describe this Latour identifies a *modern constitution* consisting of four guarantees: first, the capacity to change what is perceived as transcendent nature to our liking; second, immanent culture is seen as a transcendent wall over us; third, there is a clear separation of nature and culture, as well as purification and translation; and fourth, to fully separate nature and culture the modern constitution brackets out God. Thereby it cuts off nature from any Divine presence and society from a Divine origin.⁹ While this does not make personal belief in God impossible, God is rendered irrelevant for investigating nature and for the anchoring of society.

While Latour argues that the modern constitution has been successful in giving moderns control over their interaction with nature and culture, he sees it as a clever façade. Modern predicaments such as the ozone layer, climate change or deforestation are neither wholly objective nor subjective, natural nor cultural, but rather inhibits both spheres. These predicaments create narratives which are deeply influenced by culture but justified by reference to natural facts. Therefore, he suggests that the division of purification and translation, and the bracketing of God, have never truly functioned. Instead, moderns have covertly been employing what he terms “quasi-objects” or “quasi-subjects”, and sometimes “God,” to mediate between

⁵ Ibid, 27.

⁶ Ibid, 10.

⁷ Ibid, 36.

⁸ Ibid, 32.

⁹ Ibid, 141.

these spheres in times of crisis.¹⁰ These serve as objects or subjects charged with meaning, which interconnect several spheres at once and provides overarching solutions.

Latour argues that the modern constitution obscures and conceals such mediation by not articulating it. Consequently, moderns lack proper language and mediation to address hybrid predicaments. Instead, Latour proposes a *non-modern* constitution that can “keep the Enlightenment without modernity”.¹¹ I interpret this non-modern constitution as Latour wishing to provide an alternative social imaginary¹² where nature and culture can relate to each to better address critical issues. In Latour’s proposed non-modern constitution, the transcendence (objectivity) of nature and the immanence (subjectivity) of society are preserved, allowing an open relation between them. The consequences are an unrestricted production of hybrid “quasi-objects” that can reconfigure the relationship between nature and culture.¹³ The clearest example Latour gives of such hybridity is technology, as technology is non-meaning but nevertheless charges cultural narratives. But, instead of resorting to such hybrids covertly in times of crisis, Latour advocates an active striving towards their propagation, and especially through an engagement with technology. Thus, Latour envisions the reconfiguration of nature and culture through a transparent constitution with the explicit aim of technological mediation. Now, how could theology respond to such a proposal?

Simon Oliver’s article acknowledges Latour’s analysis of modernity but notes the untenable nature of the trajectories Latour’s proposed solution admits. Oliver’s critique insists that Latour’s vision of technology can easily be misused. For context, he first describes the green movement, which advocates a retreat to “pure nature” free from technology. In this narrative, culture is an evil that must be negated so that humanity can return to the natural “Eden.”¹⁴ In deep contrast to the greens stands a follower of Latour, Donna Haraway. Haraway views the green movement as presupposing the same paradigm of division between nature and culture as modernity. Instead, Haraway extends Latour’s technological solution by proposing a cyborg future. In her vision, humans not only construct hybrids of nature and culture, but also between organisms and machines. According to her this can already be glimpsed in phenomena such as the internet or being plugged into medical equipment, since they blur the lines between what is

¹⁰ Ibid, 78.

¹¹ Ibid, 135.

¹² “Social imaginary” is a term coined by the philosopher Charles Taylor which describes “the way that we collectively imagine, even pre theoretically, our social life in the contemporary Western world”. (*A Secular Age*, 146). Describing Latour’s proposal as a social imaginary helps us see that the nature and culture distinction is not simply a theoretical issue but the way we collectively envision and relate towards these spheres. See further: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.), 146-158.

¹³ Ibid, 141-145.

¹⁴ Oliver. “The Eucharist Before Nature and Culture”, 338.

human and not. Haraway argues that instead of fixating on boundaries and divisions between nature and culture, humanity ought to embrace both spheres fully. According to her, our seemingly dualistic categories such as “public and private, male and female, creator and created, truth and illusion, active and passive, God and man”¹⁵ even stem from a similar fixation on separation. Instead, all these categories should be continually negotiated in a hybrid existence.

Oliver, however, expresses concerns about Haraway’s cyborg imaginary as well.¹⁶ Haraway is optimistic that the continual negotiation between what is human and what is technological will provide innovation and creativity by itself without threatening human existence. But Oliver observes that technology does pose humanity serious threats by offering temptations humanity struggles to resist, such as overconsumption. Furthermore, Oliver argues that technology is inherently mimetic, i.e., that it can only replicate humans. As he sees it, Haraway’s immanent project is unable to envision innovation or creativity without resting on other normative principles. As Haraway’s vision is guided only by a continual re-negotiation between humans and technology, however, Oliver argues that she will end up masking a transcendent ethics. Essentiality, this critique undermines Haraway’s attempt at escaping the modern constitution. Akin to how Latour depicts “quasi-objects” as hidden safety nets in the modern constitution, Oliver sees Haraway as ultimately having to resort to hidden transcendent ideals found in nature, culture or even in God. In this sense, she has not at all escaped the issues of the modern constitution but rather intensified the issue.

As a result, Oliver concludes that a technological or cyborg imaginary fails to make sincere difference to the problems of the modern constitution. As Latour’s diagnosis of the modern constitution is serious, Oliver wishes to articulate a constructive theological alternative. Building on Thomas Aquinas, he envisions the Eucharist, with its bread, wine, and communal celebration, as participating in God himself. In this both natural and cultural elements relate the life of God. Thereby, Oliver posits that the eucharist provides an imaginary which can reconfigure nature and culture over and above what Latour and Haraway provides.¹⁷ However, while Oliver’s proposal is intriguing, escaping the modern constitution seems to me to require something deeper than what any of these thinkers provide. Even Oliver’s attempt at redefining the categories of nature and culture in relationship to the eucharist, seems to be working close to Latour’s initial understanding of the spheres of nature and culture.

¹⁵ Ibid, 339.

¹⁶ Ibid, 339-340.

¹⁷ Ibid, 348.

Now, my worry is that this reoccurring usage of “nature” and “culture” in Latour, Haraway and even Oliver already predisposes the discourse towards a dualism that makes mediation between nature and culture burdensome. But could it be that nature and culture is intrinsically related to each other and God, even before the event of the Eucharist? What difference could that make to the imaginaries that Latour, Haraway and Oliver provide? Well, according to Nathan Lyons it is exactly the case that nature and culture are already predisposed to relate towards God. To provide an imaginary that can compete with other modern alternatives, it is to his intricate theory that I now turn.

2. Signs in the Dust

Lyons’ intention is to reimagine the nature-culture distinction by developing a theological theory of nature and culture. His basic argument in *Signs in the Dust* is that “if culture is constituted by signs, and signs are in play through all of nature, then we can say that culture is natural and nature is cultural, through and through.”¹⁸ Lyons' semiotic framework perceives nature and culture as interconnected and interdependent, which provides resources for a constructive imaginary of nature and culture. To provide grounds for this Lyons intends to account for what culture and nature are on a theological conception, but also how they relate to each other.

Lyons’ proposal is divided into two parts that I will look at in their own right. The first part construes a theological and semiotic account of culture. Semiotics discusses what signs are and how they function, which often concerns linguistic matters. Lyons broadens this field by largely approaching semiotics in a metaphysical setting. What Lyons wants to argue is that what culture is designated by is iterations of sign-making at different complexities, so that anywhere signs are in play, one can perceive culture. The second part goes on to integrate and fit this semiotic understanding of culture into the sphere of nature. While the sphere of nature roughly corresponds to Latour’s sense of describing external phenomena such as biology and scientific observations, central to Lyons' concept of nature is its receptivity towards culture. On his account, rather than being static and un-meaning, nature is inherently open to culture.

¹⁸ Lyons, Nathan. *Signs in the Dust: A theory of natural culture and cultural nature* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 9.

2.1. Culture

In developing a theory that encapsulates all variety of culture, Lyons harkens back to medieval semiotics. He begins by looking at culture's anthropological breadth in John Poinot, proceeds to its theological height in Thomas Aquinas and finally ties these perspectives together in Nicholas of Cusa's participatory bridge of art. I will deal with these in turn.

2.1.1. Anthropological Breadth

Lyons begins with the extensive semiotic anthropology of the 17th century Dominican monk John Poinot. Poinot's definition of signs is foundational: "A sign represents something other than itself to a knowing power".¹⁹ Consequently, Poinot identifies signs as relationships of representation that can be more or less complex. Poinot further divides human signs into two axes. First is the axis of *natural-stipulated-customary* signs. He elegantly summarizes:

"A natural sign is one that represents from the nature of a thing, independently of any stipulation and custom whatever, and so it represents the same for all, as smoke signifies a fire burning. A stipulated sign is one that represents something owing to an imposition by the will of a community, like the linguistic expression 'man.' A customary sign is one that represents from use alone without any public imposition, as napkins on the table signify a meal."²⁰

Here, Lyons attributes the sphere of nature to natural signs and the sphere of culture to stipulated signs in Poinot's anthropology. Notably, Poinot views customary signs as inhabiting aspects of both "natural" and stipulated signs. While customary signs originate by stipulation, Poinot thinks that they become "natural" to a community through repetition.²¹ Lyons is sensitive that one might critique the notion of "natural" on this conception, as Poinot's natural signs are without stipulation or custom. However, Lyons still argues that they become natural in the sense that there is no reoccurring communal imposition to use napkins to dress table, but that this has begun to be suggested by itself over time without conscious reasoning

The other axis consists of *instrumental-formal* signs. Formal signs represent themselves to a cognisor internally and can't be sensed by others, whereas instrumental signs points towards

¹⁹ Poinot John, *Tractatus de Signis* (Trans. Deely, John. *Tractatus de Signis: The Semiotic of John Poinot*, st Augustine's press, 2013), 116/ 3-4.

²⁰ Ibid, 27/ 18-31.

²¹ Lyons, *Signs in the Dust*, 31.

something else, like how the footprint of an Ox points to an Ox.²² Therefore, formal signs can be said to capture internal psychological signification while instrumental signs capture signification in the external world.

All these various kinds of sign are grounded in Poinset's metaphysics of relation. Poinset argues that for signification to occur there must be three relational elements present - "the sign (*signum*), significate (*signatum*) and cognitive power (*potentia*)".²³ While Poinset uses these terms, Lyons opts for the more modern terms of *sign-vehicle*, *signified* and *interpreter*. This metaphysical framework distinguishes signs from pure occurrences, such as a fire producing smoke, in that signs require interpreters. Smoke does not become a complete sign before someone interprets it. However, Poinset maintains that even before an interpreter arrives, one can still perceive a virtual sign that fulfils the metaphysical criteria of being a potential sign.²⁴

Despite Poinset's diverse kinds of signs, he posits that the same tripartite semiotic structure is inherent in all instances of signification, which makes all signification univocal.²⁵ Poinset thus articulates a semiotic which captures all signification regardless of categories such as natural or cultural. Additionally, customary signs bridge the gap between natural and cultural signification, as customary signs originate out of stipulation but become habitual. To ground these insights theologically, Lyons turns to Thomas Aquinas' Trinitarian semiotics.

2.1.2. Theological Height

Lyons' interpretation of Aquinas provides grounds for a semiotic understanding of the Trinity which corresponds to a perfect union of nature and culture in God. This insight is central to how Lyons envisions theology impacting our conceptualization of nature and culture. Two notions are essential for us to grasp Aquinas' semiotic Trinity. The first is the notion that the Son serves as an incorporeal sign. Lyons acknowledges that Aquinas's own writing contain ambiguity regarding incorporeal signs. However, with reference to Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:1, Aquinas argues that angels communicate with language. Since language is indicative of sign-making, for Aquinas, incorporeal signs must also be conceivable. This makes it possible to predicate the Son as the sign-vehicle that signifies the substance of the Father within the Trinitarian relationship.²⁶ However, it is important to qualify this in two ways.²⁷ First, although

²² Ibid, 17.

²³ Ibid, 22.

²⁴ Ibid, 165.

²⁵ Ibid, 28.

²⁶ Ibid, 44.

²⁷ Ibid, 50-51.

the Son shares the substance of the Father he signifies, he is not identical to the father, analogously to how a painted picture of a human is not the human itself. Second, Aquinas' theology does not imply that what functions as a sign-vehicle is lesser than what is signified. In fact, Aquinas sometimes describes higher spiritual "ideas", such as the book of life, as constituting signs of creatures.²⁸

The second notion is Aquinas' view of the Trinitarian relations. According to Aquinas "the essence of relation is the being referred to another".²⁹ Aquinas sees such *being towards another* as constituting the Trinitarian relationships and recognizing personal distinction in the Godhead. On Aquinas' conception, God is wholly simple, which entails that "God is his own existence".³⁰ Therefore, God's way of existing as relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit must be inherent to God's essence. As I previously noted that signs are relations of representation this allows us to construe God's own essence as employing signification. Here The Son is constituted by the act of signifying the Father's substance, the Father by being signified by the Son, and the Holy Spirit as eternally interpreting this representation.

These two notions allow us to perceive the incorporeal Trinity as sign-vehicle (the Son), signified (the Father) and interpreter (the Holy Spirit). Importantly, this semiotic interpretation of the Trinity in no way threatens God's unity or simplicity. This is because it builds on the same distinction confessed in Nicene orthodoxy, of three persons in one godhead. Furthermore, Lyons compares the theological imaginary of this semiotic relationality to that of orthodox Trinitarian theology. Orthodox Trinitarian theology perceives of God as an eternal un-moving movement of love in the distinction of lover, beloved and the union of love. In an analogous sense, Lyons encourages us to contemplate the Trinitarian relations of sign-vehicle, signified and interpreter as an "eternal non-discursive movement of semiosis."³¹

If sign-making constitutes culture, then Aquinas helps us observe a reoccurring movement of cultural signification within the Trinitarian God. One could say that the eternal communication of the Father's substance in the Son, through the Spirit's self-interpretation constitutes this Divine culture. This conceptualization of the Trinity lets Lyons interpret finite culture as participating in God's semiotic culture.³² This is crucial for a theological perspective on culture, which Lyons further elucidates via Nicholas of Cusa's participatory metaphysics.

²⁸ Ibid 51-52.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* (2nd, rev.ed. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920; new advent, 2017) ST I, Q 28, art 2, arg. 3.

³⁰ Aquinas, ST I, Q 3, art 4, co.

³¹ Lyons, *Signs in the Dust*, 55.

³² Ibid, 60.

2.1.3. Participatory Bridge

To establish the relation between Peirce's semiotic anthropology and Aquinas Trinitarian semiotics, Lyons turns to Nicholas of Cusa's participatory metaphysics of art. According to Cusa, all instances of knowledge are signs of a deeper truth. Therefore, all knowledge acquired through e.g., experiences, culture and various traditions, represents a partial truth that participates in God's ultimate truth.³³ This is elaborated on by Cusa's concept of conjecture which he defines as "a positive assertion that partakes—with a degree of otherness—of truth as it is in itself".³⁴ Lyons conceives of human use of conjectures as "an upward curve that endlessly approaches the 'Preciseness of every nameable name'".³⁵ Thus, human conjectures are continually approaching God's fullness of being.

To comprehend Cusa's concept of art, conjectures are central. To illustrate art, Cusa looks at a layman crafting a spoon from material, without a predisposed image of the spoon he will create.³⁶ During this process, the Layman's material receives finite *form*, to the extent that the material participates in the form of "spoonness".³⁷ Importantly, what makes something a spoon is participating in this form of spoonness by conjecturally approaching it. In this conjectural sense Cusa posits that "every finite art derives from the infinite art".³⁸ Hence, it is through participation of the perfect Divine Art, which sets a beginning, middle and end to all, that the layman can bring forth his own creative art. However, for the layman's creation to become a cultural artifact, it must also be recognized by a community, since it acquires its direct cultural meaning thereby. Thus, an object becomes cultural by humans describing it through signs.

Regarding the layman's craftsmanship and society's recognition of it, Lyons observes that:

"Cusa coordinates the two acts that are often thought of as most paradigmatically 'human'—the making of signs and the making of artifacts—as two expressions of the same phenomenon: the construction of creaturely culture through participation".³⁹

³³ Ibid, 67.

³⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Coniecturis* (Trans. Hopkins, Jasper. Complete Philosophical and Theological Treaties of Nicholas of Cusa Vol 1, Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001.) I.II.57, 190.

³⁵ Lyons, *Signs in the Dust*, 69.

³⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de Mente* (Trans. Hopkins, Jasper. Complete Philosophical and Theological Treaties of Nicholas of Cusa Vol 1, Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001.), 2.62., 538.

³⁷ Whether one employs a realist metaphysics, as Cusa does, is important for real participation to be in play. However, in the context of this discussion what Lyons sees "spoonness" as referring to is the potentiality of imagining a perfect spoon in our minds which is the form of the material spoon. In what sense such a form exists in God's mind I deem outside of the object of this essay. See further *Signs in the Dust* p.72-75.

³⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de Mente*, 2.61., 537–538.

³⁹ Lyons, *Signs in the Dust*, 74.

Consequently, Cusa's example specifies the role of culture. On his conception, culture is the realm where nature is transformed through art and continually perfected. In this illustration, the layman's material is transformed by his art and the community's judgment, making it an artifact that one can identify as a spoon. Human culture's role is therefore to elaborate on and perfect natural elements through art and by attributing signification. In Cusa's thought, this implies a conjectural participation in the upward spiral towards God's perfect form. Thus, human horizontal striving of culture involves participation in a vertical ascent. While a spoon might represent a lower-level example of an artifact, Lyons suggests that the same principle can be applied to all other artifacts as for instance musical instruments or modern technology.⁴⁰

This participatory view of Divine Art and human art, can also be linked to the Trinity as Cusa writes that "God is both Absolute Nature and Absolute Art".⁴¹ Lyons takes this to mean that:

"In God, the art/nature distinction collapses entirely because the Divine Art—that is, the second person of the Trinity—possesses the Divine nature in full equality with the Father. The Divine nature is thus an absolutely 'artful nature', because in the single Trinitarian substance is found both eternally original nature and eternally elaborating art."⁴²

Hence Lyons argues that Father's Divine substance is fully elaborated on in the Divine Art of generating the Son. Connecting this with Aquinas' semiotic Trinity, it is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as sign-vehicle, signified and interpreter that would constitute this elaborating art. If Divine Art is constitutive of culture, then in Cusa's framework, the spheres of nature and culture are perfectly united in God. God's substance would here correspond to nature whereas the relational generative Art of the whole Trinity would be indicative of culture.

Cusa's participatory metaphysics helps perceive of finite art and sign-making as a conjectural approaching of the Trinitarian Divine Art. In this way Lyons has developed a theological theory of culture, which also provides the space for human culture to flourish in. Thus, Lyons directs Peirce's anthropology of sign towards a conjectural approach of the semiotic Trinitarian relationship by incorporating Cusa's participatory scheme.

Returning to our initial object of reframing the terms of the nature and culture distinction, Lyons' retrieval of medieval semiotics allows for a view of culture that is deeply related to God.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 73.

⁴¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Coniecturis*. II.12.131, 230.

⁴² Lyons, *Signs in the Dust*, 77.

But where does this leave the sphere of nature? Does human culture, as modernity has it, remain the space of meaning, and in the case of Lyons understanding even theological meaning, whereas nature remains un-meaning? As I will now go on to show, Lyons picture allows for no such dichotomy since these theological semiotic structures are shown to be deeply involved in the very core of what is perceived as nature

2.2. Nature

The second part of Lyons theory shows that nature is inherently open to culture in all of existence. This is shown by integrating his semiotic view of culture into three distinct stages: the biosemiotic, evolutionary, and physical stage. His goal with this is to show how the same overarching semiotic structure operates across all of nature, even if the complexity differs. I will now look at each stage of analysis.

2.2.1. Bio-Semiotic Ravaissonism

To perceive semiotic structures within biological phenomena, Lyons draws upon resources from the field of biosemiotics and integrates them with the philosophy of Félix Ravaisson. Lyons initiates the discussion of biosemiotics by examining the function of how an organism senses and perceives. Contemporary biology has shown that the organisms' sensations guide them towards teleological or goal-oriented action, aiding them in activities such as finding food, identifying predators, or navigation. While sensations prompt organisms to take instinctual action without further deliberation, perceptions are more intricate as they interpret these sensational data.⁴³ Importantly, organisms do not detect sound as sound or colour as colour, but rather perceives these as conveying meaning. For instance, a specific colour might imply a predator whereas a certain sound might be an offspring's call for its mother's milk. Whereas a sheep that suddenly sees a wolf is signified of danger, another wolf might instead see a mating partner.

By this Lyons suggests that "every organism receives signs from its ecological environment and flourishes by interpreting those signs through behaviour directed toward its biological interests."⁴⁴ Here he observes a semiotic structure in biology. First, new sensations, such as different sounds or colours, are here understood as sign-vehicles. Second, these points towards certain signified teleological goals, such as avoiding danger. Lastly, these are interpreted by or

⁴³ Ibid, 90.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 96.

organisms as interpreters. In this sense there is a teleological element latent so that organisms that interpret signs properly will flourish. This amounts to an understanding of biological semiotics as teleological, which is univocally in play both for intelligent human interaction and varying degrees of intelligent organisms.⁴⁵

Lyons then draws on the philosopher Félix Ravaisson's notion of habit. Ravaisson builds on Aristotle, for whom habits are encapsulated in virtues that aid in the maturation of humans' instinctive nature.⁴⁶ This idea entails that what humans perceive as natural behaviour can change by way of the virtues. Its noteworthy that imputation of such virtue is always driven by cultural institutions in Aristotle's thought so that what is natural can never be separated from cultural formation. This idea will later be picked up so that habituation in the virtues is understood as if humans receive a *second nature*.⁴⁷ Ravaisson's work extends Aristotle's concept of habit to encompass interactions with non-human entities. Ravaisson interprets habits as a metaphysical principle in nature that leads to lasting change. According to him, intelligent organisms have a certain interiority that enable them to transcend external influences.⁴⁸ External forces, possibly arising through changes in environment, forces organisms to adapt their action. Through repetition such adaption become inclinations for the individual organism. According to Ravaisson this adaptability is essential for organisms to flourish considering new circumstances. This adaptability is also seen as an ongoing process which means that nature is always moving so that no sharp distinction between first, second, third... nature can be made.⁴⁹ Therefore, Ravaisson views all of nature as a continuous progression of habituations that constantly elaborate on intrinsic nature.

On Ravaisson's conception, habits can be seen as "the embodiment of semiotic meaning".⁵⁰ To support this Lyons references Poinot's customary signs. As Lyons shows, customary signs allow cultural signification to become natural through repetition. While the realm of organism's does not necessarily intentionality notice how their change in habituation achieves certain teleological goals, Poinot's notion of virtual signification might be employed to show how such habituations are semiotic. According to Poinot, even in cases where no intentional actor is present, there is still a potential sign present when signified meaning is at play. Invoking such virtual signification might help us perceive how new acquired habits in organisms are virtual

⁴⁵ Ibid, 106.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Trans. J. A. K. Thompson, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Penguin Classics, 2004.), VII.X., 1152a, 29-33, 190.

⁴⁷ Lyons, *Signs in the Dust*, 112.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 115.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 121.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 123.

customary signs which constantly second-natures nature. In this way Lyons neatly combines biosemiotics and Ravaisson's notion of habit with medieval semiotics. Lyons concludes that "Culture is natural because it is nature's second nature, and nature is cultural, for it is always being second-natured by the semiosis of culture".⁵¹

2.2.2. Evolution

To apply his biosemiotic Ravaissionism on evolution, Lyons demonstrates how developments in the Extended evolutionary Synthesis⁵² can help us understand the role of habits across multiple generations. Lyons highlights three interconnected discoveries that strengthens such a claim. The first finding is phenotypic plasticity. Genotype refers to an organism's genetic information, while phenotype encompasses its concrete life-form and traits. Phenotypic plasticity implies that there can be variations in phenotypes within the same genotype, a concept that has gotten traction in recent empirical work.⁵³ Essentially, this concept suggests that organisms adapt their behaviour in response to environmental variables.

The second finding is genetic accommodation, which demonstrates how phenotypic plasticity spreads throughout a population in four stages.⁵⁴ First, a new environmental change is introduced; second, phenotypic change occurs to adapt to the change; third, the change becomes widespread in the population; fourth, if this change is positive, this will, due to selection, bias the genotypes that commoderate the phenotypic change. That acquired habits can have such an impact highlights that what one might perceive as natural genotypes is not the only determining factor for which populations survive and reproduce.

The third finding is niche construction, which reflects how organisms will actively alter their environments to create more favourable niches.⁵⁵ A illustrative example of this is beavers' construction of dams which may remain for hundreds of years and have profound impact in their life. Recent research has also shown how similar things are done by other species such as birds, bees, and insects. The activities of the organisms result in the creation of new environmental niches, which will influence the lives of subsequent generations by their inheritance of a better suited environment.

⁵¹ Ibid, 128.

⁵² The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis (EES) is collection of new developments in evolutionary theory which together emphasize that other factors than genes are in fact driving the evolutionary processes. See further Lyons, *Signs in the Dust*, 132-144.

⁵³ Ibid, 133.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 135-136.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 139-140.

With these findings, Lyons claims that “the agency of organisms exerts a non-trivial influence on the evolutionary futures of species”.⁵⁶ Consequently, he applies Ravaisson’s notion of habits second-naturing nature on evolutionary processes. He takes both phenotypic accommodation and niche construction as indicative of habits being integrated into the nature of a species over time. Such an interpretation suggests that habituated second natures in organisms can extend far beyond the life of a single individual.

Lyons concludes by connecting this with Cusa’s illustration of the layman’s art being a conjectural perfecting of his material. Lyons contends that a similar idea can be applied to evolution if one perceives its semiotically influenced processes as artfully perfecting nature. Thus, he interprets those actions of organisms throughout evolutionary history which lead to lasting change as a refinement and perfecting of the art or idea of their own species.

2.2.3. Matter

As Lyons has demonstrated how semiotic processes influence biology, his next step is to show how semiotics can be applied to matter. The field that seeks to understand matter from a semiotic point of view is called physiosemiotics. To explore this field, Lyons proceeds with Aquinas’ concept of *intentions in the medium*. Aquinas distinguishes between natural being, which concern how things exist, and spiritual being, which concerns how things are known. Natural being exists on its own right, like how a tree plainly exists, while spiritual being exists as represented, such as a mental image of a tree in a human mind.⁵⁷

This distinction is relevant for how intentional form is communicated for Aquinas.⁵⁸ According to him the form of heat is *naturally* conveyed as it enters an object which consequently gets heated. In contrast, the form of colour in the pupil is *spiritually* conveyed without colouring the pupil it enters. Aquinas here emphasises that our senses work with respect to spiritual being. In Aquinas context, it is at the level of senses that immutation of form is described. But in our contemporary context one might as well describe the medium of form as chemical patterns or energy distribution.⁵⁹ To illustrate this, Lyons refers to the human perception of a eucalyptus tree. To perceive the eucalyptus tree’s physical form, ambient light must first reflect on that tree, capture a specific pattern from the tree’s chemical composition, and then strike our pupil to relay this information to our brain. In this instance light functions

⁵⁶ Ibid, 143.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 155-156.

⁵⁸ Thomas Aquinas, ST I, Q 78, art 3, co.

⁵⁹ Lyons, *Signs in the Dust*, 158-160.

as to spiritually convey information about the tree to our brain. Semiotically understood, light in this example acts as the sign-vehicle which communicates the signified form of the tree's composition to human interpreters.

What Lyons suggests is that all spiritual mediums that convey intentional form in such a way indicate semiotic patterns. For him even when these spiritual mediums are highly complex chemical patterns and energy distributions, Aquinas idea of mediums carrying form still applies. Lyons thus contends that signs are "in play wherever flows of energy are disturbed and rearranged by physical objects, which is to say, in every inch of the physical cosmos".⁶⁰

An objection towards perceiving signs in this context is the lack of an interpreter. One might even argue that the medieval semiotic model Lyons presents is metaphysically reliant on the presence of a third part, the interpreter, for something to constitute a sign. But once again Lyons refers to Poinot's idea of virtual signification. Even in the most basic instances of energy distributions or chemical reactions the potentiality for signification is inherent. Thus, potential signs can be perceived in the relation between sign-vehicle and the signified in these patterns of chemistry or of energy distribution. If the above is correct, the nature – even down to the level of matter – is never absolutely distinct from culture, for it is always potentially semiotic.

2.3. Theological Evaluation

Lyons' semiotic vision of nature and culture interconnects three levels of investigation. First, the Trinitarian relationship perfectly unites nature and culture through its semiotic relationality. Second, Lyons asserts that signs can account for all instances of natural and cultural signification employed by humans. Third, he posits that all natural processes can be viewed as instances of semiosis and thereby culture. This comprehensive conception of culture thus encompasses theological height, anthropological breadth, and natural depth. Significant for Lyons' theory qua theological is that the semiotics of nature and culture at the immanent level participate in the transcendent semiotic Trinitarian life. This reflects the Christian insight that all beings derive their being by participating in God. So where one might be tempted to draw a sharp distinction between nature and culture, Lyons' theory illuminates their inherent interrelationship throughout all levels of existence, and even beyond existence itself regarding God. Thereby, he can assert that nature is cultural, and culture is natural through and through.

Throughout this, it is evident that some aspects of Lyons' work are speculative and novel. In his integrative work regarding nature, he himself acknowledges that he is building on

⁶⁰ Ibid, 161.

relatively new scientific insights. While I am not qualified to evaluate the scientific elements of his work, additional discussion of these scientific aspects would be valuable. Nevertheless, Lyons' work is not contingent on the exact state of scientific research, but rather builds upon the metaphysical patterns that science might help us perceive in nature. Consequently, the part on nature is crucial for his argument but I view it as a way of elaborating on his theological framework. Regarding Lyons' theological framework I have two main theological critiques that the latter part of this essay will now turn towards.

First, it appears problematic that Lyons' portrayal of the receptivity of nature and culture does not align with our phenomenological experience of reality. Modern people often perceive that culture is at odds with nature, rather than in a harmonious relationship. This is most evidently perceived today in issues surrounding greenhouse emission and climate change, where humanity exploits nature for his own gain, rather than perfecting it by culture. How can theology then propose that a perfect Trinitarian union of nature and culture is participated in by creation? With regards to this point, current strands of theology inspired by Karl Barth, are keen on critiquing a too naïve theology of creation. For instance, Barth writes: "Is the doctrine of original sin merely one doctrine among many? Is it not rather, according to its fundamental meaning, THE DOCTRINE that arises from all honest study of history".⁶¹ Does not history repeatedly amount to tension rather than a harmonious relationship between human culture and creation? I resonate with such perspectives and their emphasis on the Christian doctrine of sin and the fall and want to take them seriously. Consequently, I think they ought to be accounted for in a phenomenologically adequate theological theory. A possible rejoinder is that it is unfair to hold Lyons' theory to account for such comprehensive theological ideas, as his primary intention is to put forth a cross-discipline study. While I am sympathetic to Lyons' attempt at cross-discipline integration, omitting creation's fallenness fails to address the tension between nature and culture, which for instance Latour elaborates on. While I do not require Lyons to fully account for sin as a theological category, it is crucial that a theological theory has an inherent awareness of it. This leaves Lyons' theory with a further dilemma: Since it has difficulties describing our experience of tension, it does not clearly articulate the Christian hope of reconciliation. In the next chapter, I will go on to argue that one way for Lyons' theory to account of reconciliation more fully is to integrate perspectives on Christology and the incarnation.

⁶¹ Karl, Barth. *The Epistle to the Romans* (Trans, Edwyn C. Hoskyns 6th ed 1933, Oxford University press, 1968), 84.

Second, Lyons theory further actualizes another question which the participatory account has difficulties to account for, namely the preservation of human cultural endeavours. According to Lyons, cultural signification and creation of art are seen as participation in the semiotic Trinity. When humanity (and nature itself) creatively express itself by cultural art, he thinks that they are tuning in to God's eternal semiotic relationality. Because God is eternally cultural, creation can also be imbued with an elaborating culture. While this analogy can ground the notion of culture in God, its overemphasis might endanger human freedom. What do I mean by that? Arguably, if every instance of culture is already found in God, or God's "ideas", what room is then left for human cultural freedom? Does God's culture in some sense undermine human effort or creativity? As Lyons takes humans as predisposed to relate towards nature creatively to participate in the trinitarian God, it seems to me crucial to address such questions. In other words: an unreflective theology of participation challenges an integral human freedom. But here too, the theology of the incarnation provides resources. Not, to be sure, that it immediately solves this tension. Rather it actualizes these questions by putting the agency of God and humans into the context of the one subject of Jesus Christ. But precisely in working this out, the Christological dogma becomes a resource for a theology of nature and culture.

In a word, I think Christology holds keys for bolstering the theological imaginary and answering both these critiques of Lyons theory. Choosing to emphasize on the incarnation I am aware that I am not painting a complete picture of Christology, which would be out of the scope of this essay.⁶² Nevertheless, the incarnation helpfully provides a foothold to be able to speak truly about the tension between nature and culture, and about God and creation simultaneously. To paint a broad but coherent picture of the incarnation the next section will draw on the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and his treatment of the development of a Christological vocabulary in *Christ the Heart of Creation*.⁶³ Williams is a highly influential contemporary theologian, and his work stresses the recovery of ancient sources for contemporary Christian reflection. This rhymes well with Lyons attempt at recovering medieval resources for answering contemporary problems.

⁶² Most noticeably I am lacking a treatment of the theology of the cross and the motif of redemption. Such theology could most likely help to sharpen my critique but also to resolve the notion of fallenness in Lyons account further. Thus, beginning only with the incarnation is in no way intended to be a dismissal of these motifs but rather a way of opening deliberation about all of Gods saving action.

⁶³ Rowan, Williams. *Christ the Heart of Creation* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018)

3. Williams' Christological Resources

To put it briefly, Williams contends that the development of a Christological vocabulary serves to maintain the integrity in the relationship between uncreated and created, and between God and humanity.⁶⁴ By following Williams' development of that thesis through some major dogmatic theologians, it will become clear for this inquiry how Christology provides resources to speak about both fallenness and the creative endeavour of human culture.

Williams initiates his discussion by putting Christological reflection into the context of the early centuries AD. He notes that the gospels' and Paul's view of Christ challenge an identity of Christ as angelic or superhuman.⁶⁵ However, on their own these sources only manage to reflect unsystematic strands of Christology. Further reflection on Jesus's identity occurred in the second through third century and culminated with the council of Nicaea (325 AD), which affirmed Christ's full humanity and divinity.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, this council did not solve the issue, since it revealed a deeper tension of whether there were one or two subjects in Christ. Surrounding this discussion was concerns that the Divine might replace or overwhelm the acting capacity in the human Jesus. Williams suggests that the council of Chalcedon (451 AD) attempted to walk a middle route without a definite resolution, in asserting that neither nature changes the other in Christ, while affirming one *hypostasis* as the sole acting capacity in Christ.⁶⁷ Williams perceives of Chalcedon providing as an imaginary for further reflection on Christ's dual natures without the risk of absorption or fusion. Consequently, and genuine to our investigation, he frames reflection surrounding Chalcedon as a quest for maintaining the tension of two integral natures and one hypostatic centre of action in Christ.

Different approaches to this question emerged in Western and Byzantine theology. Even before Chalcedon, Augustine in the West developed one aspect of such Christology by making an analogy with the Church. He uses the concept of the *Totus Christus* (the complete Christ) which orders the complex relationship of the eternal Word, Jesus Christ, and the Church as the Body of Christ into one unity.⁶⁸ His suggestion is that because the eternal Word can unite itself with human nature and act in capacity of both, the action of a community – the Church – can be analogously united with the eternal Word.⁶⁹ The incarnation thus shows that the agency of the Word is never in competition with human nature. Analogously to this, Augustine wishes to

⁶⁴ Ibid, xiii.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 54.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 63.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 67-70.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 74.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 79-81.

say that the agency of the Word is not in competition with the action of a community. Rather a Christian community can unite its action with that of Christ so that it also is characterized by the loving filial relationship the Son has towards the Father. This is qualified by the idea that while human nature was perfectly taken on by the Word in the incarnation, the church's agency is *not* perfectly taken up by the Word. This is because the church is also characterized by its sin and fallenness. Nevertheless, Augustine's pre-chalcedonian reflection shows a sensitivity to how a fallen humanity can be reconciled with God through the incarnation. Augustine's point with his analogy is thus that the incarnation helps us see how the agency of the church can be united with God without competition.

Turning to Byzantine perspectives, Williams also examines Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus. In Maximus' Christological vision the notions of *logos* and *tropos* are essential. According to Maximus, every kind of being is prefigured by a *logos* which imputes its intelligible structure. A *tropos* on the other hand is the way in which a *logos* is actualised in a particular mode of being, in for instance one's act and will.⁷⁰ A human *logos* would thus be something universal that all humans share whereas a particular human *tropos* would be specific to one person. Here its crucial to note that sin is not a part of the human *logos*, but rather a privation of a human *tropos*. In other words, sin is not realising one's *logos*. This is where Maximus vision of the incarnation becomes acute. According to Maximus, Christ's incarnation does not change the *logos* of human nature, but rather actualises its *tropos* in a new and perfect way. Christ's *tropos* would here be animated by the Son's Divine hypostasis which is constituted by its perfect filial relation to the Father.⁷¹ Still, Christ acts as both divine and human since "the one hypostatic agent holds the two forms of action inseparably together".⁷² What distinguishes Christ from other humans is therefore not a different human nature, but His complete realization of human nature, characterized by living entirely open to the filial love of the Father. So, in this sense Christ can be said to take on the human *logos* in its entirety even without sin. But what is the point of this? Williams takes Maximus intention to be that the incarnation "creates a new set of relations between humanity and Divine life."⁷³ This is so that "in (personal) union with the incarnate Logos, human agents are enabled to act as they are meant to in regard to their entire human and non-human environment".⁷⁴ By being united with the

⁷⁰ Ibid, 101.

⁷¹ See Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua Vol. 2* (ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), *Ambigua* 26, 1268a, 23.

⁷² Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 103.

⁷³ Ibid, 106.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 107.

incarnate *Logos* humans are thus able to participate in Christ's uniquely possessed relationships with both humans and God, i.e., a new human *tropos*. It is therefore by entering Christ's relationships with other humans and his Father that the privation of human nature can be overcome.

John of Damascus theology concretely applies Christological ideas onto the question of the legitimacy of icons. During the iconoclastic debate in the 8th century, controversy arose as to whether it was permissible to depict the ungraspable Divine nature. Furthermore, since Christ's humanity was seen as united to His divinity, some considered it heretical to try to paint either of His natures. But John argues that natures do not exist in the abstract but are realized *en energia* (in actuality).⁷⁵ Thus, one can never portray an abstract Divine or human nature as such. John's contention is that what icons of Christ portray is the *hypostasis*, the one person of Jesus Christ. If human persons can be represented in art, the inability to depict icons of Christ would imply that he is not truly human. For him, this implies that one can convey Christ's personal Divine revelation through the material representation of icons. Consequently, John demonstrates how the unique relationship of human and Divine in Christ can help us grasp the integrity of created being. Williams takes John's argument to be that since the hypostasis of the Divine Word has taken on human nature and thus even matter itself, the Divine can be represented by creation as personal, without overtaking the human or material reality.⁷⁶ What he wishes to point out with this is that everything which becomes connected to the incarnate Christ, even material reality, can be a conveyer of Divine meaning and Divine agency.

In Williams' mind, the major concerns of Christological thought is brought together in Aquinas medieval synthesis. In response to the prior tradition, Aquinas develops the concept of *esse* which signifies the active existence and will, inherent in someone who exists.⁷⁷ For Aquinas, Christology is about answering *who* has the two natures rather than *what* they are. According to him, the "who" of Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God, and, as a result, the *esse* of Christ is wholly constituted by the Son's relationship to the Father.⁷⁸ Therefore, the agency of Jesus Christ is wholly animated by His filial relationship, so that what Christ does cannot be separated from it. Nevertheless, "any talking about Christ our saviour would have to involve talking about what it is to be the Word of God, but the Word of God is not identified as *such* by the humanity it takes on".⁷⁹ Thus predicating something of Christ as a human does not

⁷⁵ Ibid, 110-112.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 114.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 26-29.

⁷⁸ See Aquinas, ST III. Q. 17, art. 2, co.

⁷⁹ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 35.

necessarily correlate to the Divine Word, but every act of Christ is dependent on His *esse* as animated by His filial relationship. Importantly, the *esse* of Christ never conveys merely human agency but represents the eternal Word's filial relationship.

In Aquinas concept of *esse* many of the concerns of the prior tradition are picked up. In the three thinkers I analysed before, the crucial issue is keeping the integrity of several realities intact simultaneously. For Augustine, it is the how the agency of the Church and the agency of the eternal Word can coexist. For Maximus, it is how the human *logos* is fully realised in the *tropos* of the Divine *Logos*. For John of Damascus, it is how material reality in the case of icons can convey Divine meaning. Williams argues that Aquinas concept of Christ's one *esse* is a systematic way of speaking about all these concerns. Speaking about one *esse* expresses how Christ's two natures and their agencies can be unified by them both being animated by the filial relationship. Consequently, every other agency that becomes connected to Christ is also directed towards that filial relationship. Furthermore, the union of agency that Christ allows for becomes a way for fallen humanity to reconnect to God. This can be seen in both Augustine's vision of an imperfect church acting through Christ, and Maximus vision of how a new human *tropos* can be directed towards the fully realized *tropos* of Christ.

By this brief analysis of Christological dogma in Christian tradition I want to underline how reflection on the incarnation shows that there is no compromise between Divine and created agency. In Christ there is not a replacement of the created agencies in for instance the church, the human *logos* or material reality. Rather Christ unites these created agencies with the uncreated Divine agency. Most systematically this is expounded upon in Aquinas concept of *esse* which articulates how one can speak about one subject in Christ with two distinct natures and agencies. In the last part of my argument, I will use these insights to frame the nature and culture distinction. If the true union of nature and culture is found in God, then this is a Divine agency whereas the creative conjectural culture of human beings can be seen as a human agency. In line with this Christology, I wish to show that there is an intricate relationship between these two realities, and that this has consequences for reconciling nature and culture.

4. Lyons' Supplemented Imaginary

Let me begin this section by recapitulating the argument of this essay: First I looked at Latour's diagnosis of and solution to the modern constitution but deemed his and Haraway's technological imaginaries untenable. Then I looked at Lyons' alternative imaginary, and while promising, I raised two theological critiques. First, his theory seems to bypass the tension

between nature and culture that can be attributed to the fall and sin. Second, his theory's participatory account risks undermining creative human activity. To answer these critiques and develop Lyons' theory, I will now integrate the last section's Christology into the discussion. Having done that, I will conclude by presenting Lyons' imaginary as an alternative to Latour.

4.1. Dialogue with Christology

Regarding my first point of critique, I argued that a strictly positive view of participation does not properly consider the tension between nature and culture. While Lyons' imaginary does highlight how deeply ingrained the receptivity of nature and culture is in creation, it does not provide further imaginative resources for underscoring the fragmentation and reconciliation of nature and culture. Here is where I believe a Christological vocabulary clarifies his theory. In a Christological frame the tensions of reality which are indicative of a fallen creation, are resolved in the person of Christ. As Williams' Christological resources point out, the incarnation as such opens the possibility for realised relationships by inviting humans to participate in Christ's union of Divine and human. To show how the reconciliation of nature and culture can be perceived Christologically, I will now elaborate on the two ways Christ reconfigures nature and culture; first a transcendent way in His capacity of being God; second, an immanent way in His capacity of being human.

According to Lyons, Jesus Christ is not a representation of the semiotic Trinity but truly is the eternal Word, the sign-vehicle of the Father, made flesh.⁸⁰ What does this change? This understanding shows that the incarnation is not simply a representation of the semiotic Trinity, but rather the second person of the Trinity becoming flesh. Consequently, God's perfect semiotic relationality is brought down to creation. To understand what this entails Aquinas' notion of *esse* is helpful. Christ's having one *esse* means that Christ always acts in capacity of His perfect filial relationship. Christ's action is always a Trinitarian revelation regardless of the Divine or human character of it. To elaborate further, Augustine, Maximus, and John of Damascus all understand Christ as uniting the agencies in the created order to the Divine. Christ redirects the church, the *tropos* of individual humans and even icons as material representations towards expressing His Divine filial relationship. Essentially, this means that all of creation is drawn towards the Trinitarian relationship in the incarnation.

If nature and culture is then ultimately united in the Trinitarian relationship, the incarnation serves as a bridge between this perfect union and fallen creation. This means that Christ brings

⁸⁰ Lyons, *Signs in the Dust*, 206-207.

down the perfect Trinitarian union of nature and culture towards creation by uniting himself with its agency in his one *esse*. By participating in Christ, the semiotic filial relationship is then extended towards a fallen creation so that it too can be directed towards the Father's eternal culture that begets the Son through the Spirit. In this sense Christ reconfigures nature and culture by drawing creation into a relationship with the transcendent culture in the Trinity.

So far, this is perhaps interesting from a systematic theological point of view, but what would be the transport for the question of nature and culture, with which I am concerned, i.e., in the immanent sphere? To explore this, I wish to return to Lyons notion of participation in the semiotic Trinity. According to Lyons human culture is an art which perfects nature and approaches God conjecturally, that is endlessly approaching the fullness of God. What this means is that human culture can be an endless participation in the Trinity's Divine Art. This aspect of participation shows that creative cultural endeavours is a part of what being human entails. In other words: proper culture is a way of participating more fully in God. But once again, my critique of Lyons is that this aspect of participation is often undermined in human culture-making, as culture is often in tension with nature rather than the perfection of nature. How can one then envision a reconciliation of "immanently" participating in God with culture? My contention is that this is possible by looking at Jesus Christ. More precisely, I wish to borrow Maximus idea that Christ fully realises the human *logos*. If one aspect of human participation in God is cultivating and perfecting nature through culture, then a theoretical theological notion points in the direction of Christ fulfilling the human calling of perfecting nature through culture. Interestingly, I believe that there are concrete instances in scripture which reflect such a theology.

First, the scriptures point towards Christ having worked as a carpenter before His ministry (Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55). Taking this seriously implies that, for approximately thirty years of His life, Christ was involving himself in the producing of art. I want to clarify that this does not necessarily mean that he must have made the most beautiful houses or stunning artefacts; its more about recognizing Christ's involvement with art throughout most of His life. One could even look towards Isaiah's prophecy, traditionally associated with Christ, that says that "he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." (Isiah 53:2). This can be seen to indicate that Christ did not perform anything extraordinary in his earthly action.

Second, there is John's notable reference to Christ appearing as a gardener after His resurrection (John 20:15). Instead of viewing this as a coincidence, one could rather perceive it as a purposeful hint towards a reading of Christ as the second Adam. Christ as a gardener post-

resurrection, alludes to a return to the garden of Eden and the restoration of the original task that was given to the first Adam when “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” (Gen 2:15). This is as if humanity was set in Eden as gardeners to tend to God’s creation. Associated with this the assignment to name all the animals, which deepens the sense of humans tending to creation by imputing semiotic meaning. Christ as a gardener can be interpreted as an allusion to him being the second Adam, who goes beyond the first Adam as fulfilling his task. This is also something Lyons hints at when he writes that Christ is “the second Adam who renews the Edenic project of cultivating nature”.⁸¹ What this gardening image encapsulates is what perfecting nature through culture entails. A garden loses its proper order and meaning without being tended to by humans. However, taking care of a garden does not entail that the natural elements somehow disappear but rather presents them in an orderly way. Thus, applying such an image of gardening to the resurrected Christ might help us envision a theological reconfiguration of nature and culture.

Finally, I want to highlight the Eucharist, which also is Oliver’s original proposal of reconfiguring nature and culture. Without describing Oliver’s entire scheme,⁸² he sees the Eucharist as an integration of both culture and nature involving bread, wine, and cultural celebration. Bread and wine were the most common elements of food and drink at the time, but they are also significant as being among the most basic instances of humans taking nature and cultivating it. When Christ uses these elements of nature and culture to signify His body and blood, they gain an integrity that allows them to participate in His person and redemptive work. Furthermore, the very meaning of nature and culture is transcended, but not eliminated, to represent the Divine life. Christ’s inauguration of the Christian practice of the Eucharist therefore provides the Church with a concrete instance of reconfiguration in its very essence of worship.

In these three instances there are threads which helps to construe an imaginary where Christ makes himself involved and represented in something like Cusan artmaking, by perfecting nature through culture. By abiding in such an imaginary, Christ brings forth a vision of culture as directed towards a conjectural approach of God’s fullness. The human prospect of uniting, elaborating on and perfecting nature through culture is thus drawn up into the Divine Artmaking of the Trinity in Christ. But without a proper Christology this idea ends up without an integral relationship between human art and Divine Art as it might risk understanding the Divine Art as

⁸¹ Ibid, 208.

⁸² See further: Oliver, “The eucharist before nature and culture.” 342-350.

competing with human art. I suggest instead that Christological dogmatics, most systematically expressed by Aquinas concept of *esse*, allows for no such competition between human and Divine agency. Instead, the incarnation reconnects the activity of a fallen humanity towards God and thereby provides resources for an integral participatory relationship of created and uncreated. Here, the fully realised human Jesus Christ serves as the example for all of humanity to perfect nature with culture, or in other words: to participate more fully in the Trinitarian God.

I believe that this interplay of transcendent and immanent reconfiguring of nature and culture mutually complement each other. Without the transcendent dimension, Lyons' theory loses its deep connection to God and the Christian narrative of creation's reconciliation. It is God that acts first in the incarnation and in salvation rather than humans in their fallenness. But without the immanent dimension human integrity is undermined so that God does the work *instead* of humanity. Christological dogma helps us see that Christ can fulfil both these dimensions at the same time as these are not conflicting realities. Rather, the human agency participates in the Divine agency. Integrating Christology can therefore help us formulate an answer to the two critiques I raised earlier; first that Lyons theory does not properly articulate the tension between nature and culture; and second that it risks undermining human cultural freedom. Regarding the first critique, Christology shows how God redeems fallen creation through the incarnation of the eternal Word. Here, Christ transcendentally draws creation into the Trinitarian semiotic relationship in capacity of being fully God. Simultaneously he immanently realises the human calling of perfecting nature through culture by being fully man. In this sense, the privation of nature and culture that sin has brought on is reconciled in Christ, which consequently becomes a call for humanity to reconcile them as well. Regarding the second critique, Christology helps us see how human artmaking and sign-making can retain its integrity in relationship to God. Christ in no way replaces the agency of human beings or even matter itself, but rather opens the way for them to be reconciled as a conjectural participation in God. Thus, Christ's union of creator and created in his one *esse* keeps creation's agency and integrity intact, without risk of competition, absorption, or fusion into God.

4.2. An Alternative Imaginary?

Having devoted most of this essay to expounding Lyons' theoretical framework, and its integration with Christology, I now wish to revisit my initial question: can it stand as a viable alternative to the technological imaginary put forth by Latour and Haraway?

From my perspective, Lyons successfully presents an alternative imaginary by critically examining the fundamental premises underlying the modern conception of nature and culture.

While Latour introduces technological hybrids as a solution to modern dilemmas, his imaginary inherently assumes a division between the spheres of nature and culture. Latour operates on a framework where nature pertains to the non-human and unmeaning, while culture is associated with the human and meaning. Although Latour critiques the complete separation of nature and culture, he does not negate this fundamental distinction between the unmeaningful and the meaningful. This is problematic as it limits the potential relationships that nature and culture can have with each other, creating an unresolved tension regarding what is inherently meaningful or not within the modern frame. As he himself seems to hint at, natural facts very often do put on cultural narratives which makes the separation of meaning from nature immensely difficult.

In contrast, Lyons' theory dispenses with the need to make such a definitive distinction in the first place. Ultimately, this is because the semiotic Trinity possesses a perfect union of nature and culture in the Son's unceasing representation of the Father's substance through the Spirit's interpretation. Creation analogously mirrors this union of nature and culture so that seemingly disparate elements, such as animal perception, evolutionary developments, and chemical processes, all acquire deeper meaning by signs. Therefore, nature is intrinsically meaningful given its receptiveness to semiotic processes. Moreover, culture is always to be purposely intertwined with nature by humans, as is aptly demonstrated in Lyons' analysis of Cusa. Through Cusa, he reveals the role of humans as facilitating a perfecting of nature through culture. Through creative art and sign-making, humans do not diminish nature but rather enable its receptive essence to be transformed and illuminated by cultural form. The imagery of the resurrected Christ as a gardener embodies this theologically, where humans once again are to tend to and name creation. Consequently, in the resurrected Christ, one can discern human art and sign-making in connection to a restored creation as a new "Eden". As Lyons aptly summarizes his theory: nature is cultural, and culture is natural. In their capacity for mutual interpenetration, there is no room for a problematic division between the natural and the cultural. Both are intertwined and directed towards a common objective - to conjecturally approach the transcendent. This perspective differs significantly from the idea that nature is devoid of intrinsic meaning or that culture can conform nature to human liking.

As is evident in Latour's theorizing, the division of the spheres of nature and culture must be bridged externally by, for instance, technology. In contrast, Lyons' theory reveals an internal connection that is already in place between nature and culture throughout creation. Proper human culture is thus an attempt at further clarifying, participating and elaborating on this relationship. Importantly, technology at its right place can serve as an instance of such an

elaboration, as Lyons theory can encompass technology as an instance of human creative art. His approach may therefore align with Latour's insight that quasi-objects can aid in reconfiguring nature and culture. Thus, one does not need to totally abandon Latour's important anthropological work to accept Lyons theological theory. However, I still contend that Lyons framework transcends Latour framework since his theory does not have to perceive of quasi-objects as abnormal phenomena. Instead, such quasi-objects are indicative of the structure of reality, as participating in the semiotic trinity.

Donna Haraway, on the other hand, seeks to abolish the distinction between nature and culture altogether. It may be argued that this is somewhat akin to Lyons' approach, as both emphasize the mutual interpenetration of nature and culture within a dynamic relationship. However, where I see Lyons' theory promoting harmony and mutual integrity, Haraway blurs the lines between categories. Haraway's vision lacks a clear direction for the spontaneous hybridization of nature with culture, and humans with technology. Instead, she thinks that immanent processes will naturally come to replace old binaries. But, as Oliver notes in his critique, this vision risks masking transcendent ideals exactly like the modern constitution does. Where Haraway has a purely immanent horizon that does not dictate the direction of human endeavour further, Lyons theory provides a framework that involves both transcendence and immanence and directs all human striving in a conjectural approaching of God. This leads Lyons to a much clearer view of how nature and culture can be directed towards a common objective. Furthermore, Lyons' point is not that spheres of nature and culture are unable to be detected, but rather that they can never be separated. This refusal to separate is what provides grounds for nature and culture's mutual enrichment and unity, rather than their fusion.

Consequently, Lyons' theory serves as a compelling alternative to the imaginary's proposed by Latour and Haraway. Although the tension Latour and Haraway point out is not fully explicated in Lyons theory, a more Christological account can help Lyons work out these issues. Thus, I conclude that to speak truly about nature and culture, and to reconcile them, they ought to be understood Christologically. As Paul notes "He is before all things and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). While humanity as fallen does *not* hold together the perfecting of nature through culture, indicative of the very structure of reality, Christ does hold it together. In him the tension between nature and culture can be overcome so that they both are directed towards God in participation of the Trinitarian semiotic relationality. Therefore, the comprehensive question of nature and culture can find its constructive imaginary articulated in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this essay has been to explore Nathan Lyons' alternative approach to Bruno Latour's technological reconfiguration of nature and culture. Lyons' semiotic theory of culture, characterized by its integration of theological height, anthropological breadth, and natural depth, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate relationship of nature and culture at all levels of existence. For Lyons, the essence of creation lies in its participation in the semiotic Trinity's perfect union of nature and culture. This participation results in a dynamic interplay between nature and culture. In contrast to Latour and Haraway, Lyons' theory challenges any stark division or fusion of nature and culture. However, I have argued that Lyons' theory might not fully address some theological concerns regarding creation's fallenness, reconciliation and free agency. Nonetheless, I have illustrated how Lyons' theory can be integrated with Christology to elucidate how nature and culture are reconciled in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, both in a transcendent and immanent way. If such integration is plausible, Christological reflection can help Lyons' theory account for a reconciled nature and culture. Thereby, Lyons' theory can foster a more robust theological imaginary that rivals that of Latour.

Bibliography

English Bible quotations are from the New International Translation.

Primary sources

Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*. Trans. J. A. K. Thompson, *Nichomachean ethics*, penguin classics, 2004.

John Poinsoot, Tractatus de Signis. Trans. Deely, John. *Tractatus de Signis: The Semiotic of John Poinsoot*, st Augustine's press, 2013.

<https://archive.org/details/tractatusdesigni0000john>

Nicholas of Cusa, *De Coniecturis*. Trans. Hopkins, Jasper. Complete Philosophical and Theological Treaties of Nicholas of Cusa Vol 1, Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001.

Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de Mente*. Trans. Hopkins, Jasper. Complete Philosophical and Theological Treaties of Nicholas of Cusa Vol 1, Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001.

Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, Vol. 2, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. Trans. *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* Second and Revised Edition, 1920, Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province Online Edition Copyright © 2017 by Kevin Knight.
<https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>

Secondary sources:

Barth, Karl. *The epistle to the Romans*. Trans, Edwyn C. Hoskyns 6th ed 1933, Oxford University Press, 1968.

Glacken, Clarence. *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976

Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*, Trans. Catherine Porter Harvard University Press, 1993.

Lyons, Nathan. *Signs in the dust: A theory of natural culture and cultural nature*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

Milbank, John. *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2014, 218–25

Northcott, Michael, *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, New York: SPCK, 2014.

Oliver, Simon. "The eucharist before nature and culture." *Modern Theology* 15.3 (1999): 331–353.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

Williams, Rowan. *Christ the Heart of Creation*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.