

'LIFE IN ALL ITS FULLNESS' –IRENAEUS' TRANSFORMATIVE THEOLOGY WITHIN A METHODIST FRAMEWORK

This paper seeks to develop an understanding of 'life in all its fullness' as the process of human beings maturing, in relationship with God, to actualize their authentic personhood. It sets out St Irenaeus of Lyon's soteriology of maturation from his major text *Adversus haereses*. This paper largely centres on his references to the Acts of the Apostles because this provides the context for the early Christians and describes in microcosm Irenaeus' understanding of the divine economy. Biblical references are shown in the text and the citations found in *Adversus haereses* are shown in the endnotes which contain myriad references to other books in the Bible. Whilst the focus of this paper is the theology of Irenaeus it makes connections with John Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection. Irenaeus is significant because he appears to be the earliest Christian theologian to incorporate the Acts of the Apostles into a Biblical canon.

This paper emphasizes a constructive anthropology centred on a positive theology where God longs to fulfil humanity's deepest longing for a meaningful life by pitching his tent amongst us and demonstrating what an authentic life looks like and how it may be obtained. Irenaeus' concept of soteriology understands that humanity's maturation is a movement from childhood to authentic adulthood. It also points to the Christ-event, not as divine triage - a precipitous response to a human catastrophe – but rather the unfolding of an extant single divine economy, which provides humanity with a tangible model of authentic selfhood. The overarching aim of this paper is to provide an understanding of what it may mean to have 'life in all its fullness' (Jn 10.10).

This paper speaks into a context where Christianity faces myriad issues in proclaiming the Gospel, not least from amongst its own members whose differing expressions of

anthropology and salvation can seem antithetical. This paper offers a counter-balance to the strand of Church understanding and teaching that humanity is in and of itself worthless, guilty, condemned, and thus destined for eternal punishment. In proposing a transformative theology of life this paper reasserts Jesus' declaration of life in all its fullness and provides an understanding of soteriology as a progressive movement designed to enable individuals to achieve their God-given potential as human beings. This paper has two aims:

- i. To provide a positive and affirming view of humanity based on the premise that God 'became what we are in order to make us what he himself is'.¹
- ii. To provide a life-giving theology that can be used as a basis for conversation in the public square, with people of all faiths or none, about the meaning, purpose, and potential of human existence.

Therefore, this paper will demonstrate Irenaeus' concept of the divine economy as a soteriology of maturation, his understanding of the nature of humanity, and how the two are not diametrically opposed but rather that they are mutually compatible in order for individuals to realize their potential to, 'receive his handiwork, and... be a perfect work of God'.²

Irenaeus' Soteriology of Maturation

Irenaeus' theological focus is on the divine presence to humanity, since he believes that this is demonstrated throughout the Christian Scriptures. His soteriology of maturation begins at creation and culminates in humanity fully participating in the life of God in eternity (Acts 3.15).³ Consequently, the divine economy also precedes and succeeds the whole of human history. God's continuous presence to humanity reaches a crescendo in the Incarnation when

¹ *Ah* 5.Pref

² *Ah* 4.39.2

³ *Ah* 2.22.4

Christ reveals and enables the perfecting of human beings into God's image and likeness (Acts 3.12-26).⁴ Irenaeus claims the one, unoriginated God creates and enables the transformation of humanity; 'for you did not make God, but God you. If, then, you are God's workmanship, await the hand of your Maker which creates everything in due time'.⁵ He believes the purpose of the divine economy is for human beings to actualize their God-given authentic personhood and become transformed into God's likeness.

Throughout *Adversus Haereses* Irenaeus repeatedly cites Genesis 1.26 but he distinguishes between humanity who is made *in* the image of God and the Word who is already *the* image of God. This distinction presupposes a lack which Irenaeus does not ascribe to sin, but to the need for human beings to develop and grow as they begin to understand their potentiality within the divine economy. God created humanity as a child and within the divine economy Christ completes humanity so that the goal is not to remain in infancy but to grow towards perfection. Christ's victory lies in the revelation of humanity's likeness to God and the liberation of humanity from all that is not life.⁶ Irenaeus argues that Adam was created psychical to become spiritual; he was not created spiritual and reduced to psychical by disobedience. So, Irenaeus interprets Adam and Eve's actions as childish disobedient impatience against a parent; they wanted to receive God's likeness without delay instead of maturing into this state of existence through a continued and deepening relationship with God.⁷ Therefore, sin may be understood as part of the process of human development, rather than a disaster that necessitated any change to the divine economy. Irenaeus believes Adam is symbolic of all humanity but humanity is not cast aside through 'original sin', rather

⁴ *Ah* 3.12.3

⁵ *Ah* 4.39.2.

⁶ *Ah* 4.22.1

⁷ *Ah* 4.38.1-4

humanity was injured in childhood and remains predestined to grow into God's image and likeness.

The story of the 'Fall' in Genesis chapter 3 symbolizes this situation because humanity consists of existence (image) but loses sight of its essence (likeness). Humanity 'lost the 'strength' of the 'breath of life'; however, they did not 'lose' the Spirit' (Behr: 2000, 59). Although Irenaeus speaks variously of the identity of and change in humanity he does not believe in a 'lost golden age of primordial perfection' but in a progressive growth towards authentic personhood as the divine aim for humanity. He believes Adam is symbolic of all humanity since all consist of flesh and blood and that Adam could not partake in incorruptibility before Christ's incarnation.⁸ His understanding of the divine economy is predicated on the temporality of creation and the gradual development of humanity towards perfection because human freedom always retains the possibility of sin. Irenaeus understands salvation history as analogous with the story of Jonah who discovered the consequences of estrangement but retained the possibility of a relationship with God.⁹ Similarly, human beings experience temporal death, but can choose to progress towards authentic personhood so that, through resurrection to incorruptible immortality, they may forever praise and glorify God for the love bestowed upon them.¹⁰ Thus, it is not an automatic progression, it is made manifest in the free response of individuals to the divine gift of initiative that offers healing, wholeness, and life.¹¹

Irenaeus demonstrates that the potential for maturation is displayed through the divine-human covenants in the Hebrew Bible (Adam, Noah, Moses) and becomes actualized with the

⁸ *Ah* 3.23.1

⁹ *Ah* 3.20.1

¹⁰ *Ah* 3.20.1-2

¹¹ *Ah* 5.12.6

advent of Christ, who reveals what it means to mature into God's likeness (Acts 7.2-56).¹²

The theophanies in the Hebrew Bible are prophetic and proleptic events, anticipating the pre-incarnate Christ and symbolically representing the future reality that raises 'up anew all flesh of the whole human race' (Acts 3.25-26).¹³ Accordingly, Irenaeus posits a positive theology, which contains an essentially constructive anthropology of humanity's accustomization towards God, centred on the divine economy as a pedagogical method.¹⁴ His soteriology of maturation moves the focus away from divine wrath and human depravity and towards an optimistic view where 'the glory of God is a living man, and the life of man consists in beholding God'.¹⁵ Christ reveals the purpose of the divine economy, which is the constant movement of human beings towards maturity; the attainment of authentic personhood that God has willed as the destiny for all people.

Irenaeus' Understanding of the Nature of Humanity

God transcends all other beings and gives meaning to human reality. In the Irenaean schema, human beings consist of body and soul, and their spirit is associated with the grafting in of the Holy Spirit which leads to authentic personhood. Therefore, Irenaeus speaks of maturing human beings as a unified trichotomy of body, soul and spirit. Humanity, created in God's image, is imbued with rationality and free-will, which enables human beings to choose to grow into God's likeness. Thus Irenaeus' soteriology is based on the physical body's recapitulation into immortality and incorruptibility through unity with God. Accordingly, Irenaeus uses the word *spiritus* in two senses: the spirit of life is present in every individual

¹² *Ah* 3.11.8; 5.Pref.1

¹³ *Ah* 1.10.1

¹⁴ *Ah* 3.20.2; 4.14.2; 4.34.1; 5.2.3

¹⁵ *Ah* 4.20.7.

because they have received their existence, freedom, and rationality from God; and the gift of the Spirit who enables individuals to progress towards the likeness of God (Acts 4.12).¹⁶

Irenaeus believes humanity first possessed the *naturalia paecepta* but, in Egypt, the Israelites lost sight of their relationship with God and their progress towards maturation was arrested (Acts 7.30-41).¹⁷ Thus they received the Decalogue as the divine provision of the natural law with a pedagogic intent. In Christ there is a return to the natural precepts followed by Abraham as God ‘prepares man for his friendship’ (Acts 10.43).¹⁸ For Irenaeus, the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ fundamentally describe the relationship between the Son and humanity and are therefore used interchangeably. However, he also uses these terms for Christ, for the spatio-temporal relationship between Christ and humanity, and for describing humanity’s condition at the eschaton. In common with the Greek Fathers, Irenaeus combines soteriology with an ontological view of human beings which unites the individual with their identity as permanent and eternal existence (Acts 17.24-31).¹⁹ This concept brings a radical shift in cosmological thought because it frees the world and human beings from the necessity of their biological existence. Humanity’s ontology is authentic personhood and an aspect of being a person is the possession of a specific ‘hypostasis’. This is the capacity to experience freedom even when the spatio-temporal estrangement of the human condition appears as the antithesis of freedom. Humanity is created to be eternal; however the transitory nature of this world threatens human existence. God’s salvific presence strengthens and sustains the eternal essence of humanity through the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4.31).²⁰ This enables the process of transformation through the reconciling and redeeming work of the incarnate

¹⁶ *Ah* 3.12.4

¹⁷ *Ah* 4.15.1

¹⁸ *Ah* 4.16.3.

¹⁹ *Ah* 3.12.9

²⁰ *Ah* 3.12.5

Christ. Consequently, God is intimately involved in creation and stands in solidarity with humanity.

Therefore, Irenaeus' understanding of the divine economy includes three phases: the natural law, the provision of the Decalogue, and the Gospel.²¹ The final revelation in Christ stands in the centre as the promised Messiah 'who did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is Himself'.²² Christ fulfils and extends the Decalogue so that those who live in faith and love towards God and neighbour obey the natural law. Consequently, God's economy includes a relationship between the ethical and the ontological. The Holy Spirit at Pentecost prepares humanity and, through Christ, God, 'confers [upon him] incorruption for eternal life, which comes to everyone from the fact of his seeing God... those, therefore, who see God, do receive life' (Acts 2.38).²³ Accordingly, humanity's progress towards God can be seen in the fulfilment of the Sinai promise on the Mount of Transfiguration (Acts 4.24-28).²⁴ The divine covenant in Christ marks the transition from anticipating the promise of transformation to its actualization in the development towards authentic self-hood.

Individuals are influenced both by sin and by relationship with God, hence the temporal struggle. However, the consequences and benefits are clear: estrangement brings bondage and death, relationship with God brings freedom and life. Genesis 3 symbolizes the effects of estrangement, when human beings retain the existence (image) but do not retain the essence (likeness) resulting in ultimate non-being rather than maturation and immortality in the

²¹ *Ah* 4.13.4.

²² *Ah* 5. Pref.

²³ *Ah* 4.20.5.

²⁴ *Ah* 3.12.5

kingdom of God.²⁵ Christ's presence to humanity renews the human understanding of what it means to be made in God's image and enables individuals to grow into God's likeness.²⁶

Humanity receives the revelation of God's image and is enabled to mature towards the likeness of 'the invisible Father by means of the visible Word'.²⁷ No one is excluded by God, although individuals may choose to exclude themselves.²⁸ The Church, through the Spirit, is called to emphasize that God 'from the beginning even to the end, forms us and prepares us for life, and is present with His handiwork, and perfects it after the image and likeness of God'²⁹ (Acts 2). The Church is thus called to stand in solidarity with all of humanity and to encourage and enable the becoming of individuals into God's image and likeness.³⁰

Throughout human history God's presence through events and experience culminates in the person of Christ who offers to restore, renew and liberate human beings.

Human maturation into authentic personhood has always been possible since the Word existed prior to the world, 'the Son of God, who was made man in Jesus, exists *before* man, and, indeed... man is created through the Son and *for* the Son, so as to reach his destiny in the Son, his saviour' (Wingren: 1959, 5).³¹ Irenaeus believes God's creative activity in Genesis 1.26 refers to the whole of humanity, not a collection of individuals, and is Trinitarian since it is originated by the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit (Acts 2.32-33; 5.30).³² In creating humanity after the pattern of Christ, who was *homo futurus*, Jesus was already in the mind of God as the prototype of humanity; the Holy Spirit leads humanity into the likeness of the immortal and incorruptible God.³³ Adam is the *typos* or imprint of Christ

²⁵ Ah 5.12.6

²⁶ Ah 4.34.1

²⁷ Ah 5.16.2

²⁸ Ah 5.1.3

²⁹ Ah 5.16.1; cf. 3.17.3

³⁰ Ah 1.10.1

³¹ Cf. Ah 4.14

³² Ah 3.12.2

³³ Ah 5.16.2; 5.12.1-2.

because he bears ‘in his own body the lineaments of the incarnate Son of God’ (Minns: 1994, 86). Therefore, Irenaeus asserts not the contrast between Adam and Christ but the connection between them, even when humanity loses sight of its possibility and destiny in God.³⁴ Thus Irenaeus’ soteriology is anthropologically positive; God is for humanity. Christ liberates humanity by revealing the divine image and likeness as the *τέλος* of humanity (Acts 1.7).³⁵ Christ is victorious over Adam’s impatience in wanting to receive God’s image and likeness immediately because Christ becomes incarnate at the appropriate time (Luke 3.22-38).³⁶ The Genesis narrative depicts humanity’s loss of both a physical and ethical dimension, which results in temporal death; conformity to God’s image and likeness is revealed through the incarnate Christ, which rests in life in all its fullness.³⁷

Irenaeus employs the parallel dualism of life and death since those who do not receive Christ in faith cannot obtain authentic personhood and ultimately enter into non-being, since the opposite of life is death. Irenaeian theology posits dialectical opposites like God and humanity, heaven and earth, ethical and physical, to assert the synthesis that God stands in solidarity with humanity. In this way Irenaeus unites the spiritual with the ethical and suggests those who do not seek after authentic personhood ultimately destroy themselves, since they reject authentic freedom and the God who offers it.³⁸ Consequently, Irenaeus does not believe God rejects anyone, since even Adam and Eve were not cursed by God, but that rejecting progress towards authentic self-hood is synonymous with rejecting God and one’s self; ‘man should never adopt an opposite opinion with regard to God, supposing that the incorruptibility which belongs to him is his own naturally’.³⁹ Such an existential state

³⁴ *Ah* 3.21.10

³⁵ *Ah* 3.23.1

³⁶ *Ah* 4.38.4

³⁷ *Ah* 3.18.1

³⁸ *Ah* 4.39.1

³⁹ *Ah* 3.20.1

fractures communion with God and prevents growth towards maturation because individuals do not embrace what it means to be truly human, and therefore their potential future destiny. Irenaeus is clear that the focus of the divine economy is a continual movement of human progress towards God and the Christ-event enables humanity to become accustomed to God ‘to bear His Spirit [within him], and to hold communion with God.’⁴⁰ Therefore, it is helpful to understand Irenaeus’ Christology.

Irenaeus’ View of the Humanity and Divinity of Christ

Until the Incarnation makes God visible in Christ humanity’s likeness to God is not readily apparent. In Jesus, ‘human self-hood fully came to its own and lived its fullest life, as human life ought to be lived... His whole life was the life of God’ (Baillie: 1961, 145). Therefore, Irenaeus takes the two propositions, Christ is the image of God, and Christ is in the form of humanity in order to demonstrate that humanity is created in the image of God after the pattern of the pre-incarnate Word. Jesus’ incarnation does not introduce something supernatural into creation in order to effect salvation, it is already extant, rather Christ reveals authentic self-hood to human beings as he exercises his freedom appropriately to show that human beings are designed to be eschatological. The Incarnation reveals the purity of being from which individuals have become estranged. Christ is comparative with Adam but the contrast is revealed by Christ’s authentic being and Adam’s infancy. The revelation of God-in-Christ provides humanity with the revelation of true life in the presence of a world of death. ‘for He is a most holy and merciful Lord, and loves the human race’.⁴¹

Jesus’ hypostatic union means he owns a mode of existence which also belongs to God and lives entirely in freedom and love, which is the foundation of truth, goodness, and mercy.

⁴⁰ Ah 4.14.2

⁴¹ Ah 3.18.6

Irenaean Christology does not distinguish between Christ's humanity and divinity.⁴² Both are necessary because God is present to humanity through the immediacy of Christ's divinity *and* his humanity, and 'from the beginning even to the end, forms us and prepares us for life... and perfects it after the image and likeness of God.'⁴³ Christ is the *secunda plasmatio*, but rather than employ the Pauline concept of 'a new creation' Irenaeus prefers to focus on humanity's growth.⁴⁴ Thus, Christ's presence enables the maturation of humanity because he is flesh and blood and recapitulates in himself the original handiwork of God. God 'caused to be made visible to all flesh, [the Word] Himself being made incarnate, that in all things their King might become manifest'.⁴⁵

The corruptible (humanity) is united with the incorruptible (God) because Jesus' life overcomes death and demonstrates what authentic life looks like.⁴⁶ Irenaeus' soteriology of maturation is the 'negation of negation... progress towards God [is] the law of human life' (Osborn: 2001, 94). Through his presence Christ overcomes all that signifies non-being and replaces it with becoming by enabling humanity to fully participate in the life of God. Consequently, Irenaeus' theology of the person focuses on the work of Christ in the flesh; he believes in humanity's bodily resurrection and the immortality and incorruptibility of the whole person through the soteriology of maturation; 'for in no other way could we have learned the things of God, unless our Master, existing as the Word, had become man. For no other being had the power of revealing to us the things of the Father, except His own proper Word.'⁴⁷ Irenaeus insists that Jesus entered the period the Romans considered to be

⁴² Ah 3.9.1;

⁴³ Ah 5.16.1

⁴⁴ Ah 3.18.2

⁴⁵ Ah 3.9.1

⁴⁶ Ah 5.14.1

⁴⁷ Ah 5.1.1

approaching old age, in order that Jesus is seen to live a full generation and thus has passed through every stage of human life.⁴⁸

The humanity of Christ is vital for the freedom of human beings, the divinity of Christ is vital for the growth of human beings into authentic personhood. Both elements are revealed in the presence of Christ to humanity. The Incarnation is understood as God intentionally adapting to humanity so that human beings may adapt to God.⁴⁹ Jesus' life means he stands in solidarity with human beings, his death means humanity is no longer confined to corruption and mortality, his resurrection enables humanity to attain the divine aim of authentic personhood. This is the essence of Irenaeus' soteriology of maturation, which is underpinned by his concept of recapitulation.

Recapitulation

The concept of recapitulation, *σαεαλαιόω*, is central to Irenaeus' soteriology and can be interpreted to mean: creation's restoration; to bring into unity; the perfection of creation; renewal; Christ as the head of the Church. It is possible to read all of these interpretations into Irenaeus' theology and all point to the unity of the divine economy.⁵⁰ Irenaeus' use of recapitulation can be viewed as correcting and perfecting humanity through the Christ, and inaugurating and consummating a new understanding of humanity. Recapitulation begins with the Incarnation, although its affect extends back to Adam because the Word has always been active in creation, and will be complete at the Consummation.⁵¹ Irenaeus' understanding of the divine economy provides for humanity's restoration and perfection. However, recapitulation is not a return to a pre-lapsarian state but the completion of humanity into unity

⁴⁸ *Ah* 2.22.5

⁴⁹ *Ah* 4.38.1-2

⁵⁰ *Ah* 4.Pref.4

⁵¹ *Ah* 4.20.8

with God through the Incarnation. Adam ‘was taken from the dust, and God was his Maker, it was incumbent that the latter also, making a recapitulation in Himself, should be formed as man by God... [by] the very same formation’.⁵² Therefore, Christ has gathered in himself all of human existence to restore God’s image and likeness in human beings.⁵³ The recapitulation of humanity is thus the condition of the possibility of authentic personhood for all human beings. Christ’s victory over sin and death is essential and inevitable because his ethical freedom recapitulates humanity’s incorruptibility and immortality and restores God’s glory upon humanity.⁵⁴ Consequently, Christ is not merely a moral exemplar; he also reveals what it means for humanity to grow into God’s likeness. Irenaeus believes redemption and recapitulation are inseparable from being and incorporate the moral elements of love, reason, goodness, long-suffering, and justice, because this is the essence of God’s nature.

At the Incarnation God inhabits humanity in order to complete the perfection of humanity.⁵⁵ However, the eternal material distance is maintained between God and humanity because Christ has always been God and humanity will never be God; human perfection lies in conformity to Christ, not to the Word. Christ is able to perfect all things because he is the ante-type of humanity and humanity is the *typos* of Christ. Thus Irenaeus’ soteriology of maturation is predicated on human beings bearing God’s image and growing into God’s likeness. Accordingly, Christ stands in solidarity with human beings and offers fullness of life to all people.⁵⁶

Salvation necessarily runs throughout history since, if God is omnipotent, all of humanity must have the capacity to be saved from non-being; however, maturation into the likeness of

⁵² *Ah* 3.21.10

⁵³ *Ah* 3.17.1; 3.22.4; 5.14.2

⁵⁴ *Ah* 4.40.3

⁵⁵ *Ah* 1.10.1

⁵⁶ *Ah* 3.5.3

Christ is an individual choice. ‘According to nature, then, they are [His] children, because they have been so created; but with regard to their works, they are not His children.’⁵⁷ Irenaean Christology points back throughout human history, in order that all human beings may be recapitulated, and forward, to the consummation of human history and its perfection which is the *τελειόω* of the divine economy. Therefore, Christ unites vertically, between God and humanity, and horizontally, to encompass the whole of creation. In this view it is essential that Christ is both human, so that recapitulation is possible, and divine, since only God can actualise this potentiality. This is the essence of the Irenaean maxim, he became ‘what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is Himself’.⁵⁸ Christ provides a demonstration of authentic personhood and enables humanity to understand its destiny. Irenaeus believes perfection, or authentic personhood, is an end goal, achieved through an evolutionary process.⁵⁹ The divine economy is predicated on the growth of human beings in relationship with God that results in perfection: perfection belongs to God, and unites individuals to Christ.

Life in All its Fullness

Irenaeus’ theological anthropology is based on his concept of the soteriology of maturation; ‘Adam never left the hands of God, who made him and finally perfected him in Christ’.⁶⁰ This notion is supported by Wesley’s understanding of Christian perfection that it is normatively a growth in grace (Wesley: 2007, 63). Creation is made by God, but not of God; humanity needs time to become accustomed to receiving God. Irenaeus interprets Genesis 1.26 to mean that all human beings bear God’s image and grow into God’s likeness as they choose to be in relationship with God. In the light of the Incarnation, Irenaeus understands

⁵⁷ *Ah* 4.41.2

⁵⁸ *Ah* 5.Pref.

⁵⁹ *Ah* 4.38.3

⁶⁰ *Ah* 5.1.3

Genesis 1.26 in various ways: Christ reveals and restores God's image and likeness to humanity which was lost to Adam; Christ's humanity preserves God's image and likeness in humanity. Irenaeus exhorts humanity to remember that God is the Creator and will perfect those who retain in themselves God's image, and through faith and subjection to God, grow into God's likeness.⁶¹ Jesus is thus the first authentic human being, who exhorts and enables individuals to become authentic persons. Wesley concurs, believing that holiness is a major Christian doctrine because Jesus exhorts individuals to 'be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5.48 [Wesley: 2007, 8]).

Irenaeus asserts that the God's unknowability means humanity always progresses towards God because there is always more of God to be seen and known. Human beings are called to be truly human and thus obtain life in all its fullness. The Christ-event reveals God's glory to creation and occurs because God has chosen this way of communion, presence, and growth. Irenaeus' theological anthropology is a reaction against the polarity of the Gnostic's heretical doctrine which conceives of humanity as either 'pneumatic', capable of salvation, or 'sarkic', incapable of salvation. He believes that all of humanity is capable of being perfected into the likeness of Christ. This compares with Wesley's doctrine based on the 'Four All'. Irenaeus relates human freedom and development to the divine economy in order that human beings mature so that they 'shall receive his handiwork, and shall be a perfect work of God'⁶²

Irenaeus describes the infancy of humanity at creation in order to draw out his theme of growth towards perfection, humanity's process of becoming. Irenaeus does not view humanity as fatally flawed but rather believes individuals lack the full likeness of God until and unless they actualize their God-given potential to be truly human. Communion with God

⁶¹ *Ah* 4.39.2-3; cf. 2.28.3

⁶² *Ah* 4.39.2

is the essence of human becoming and must be desired and sought, not created and forced; it is a choice made in freedom. God *is* on account of God's existence; human beings are *becoming* authentic beings when they exercise their ontological freedom. Irenaeus clearly argues for humanity's progress towards perfection in God. He conceives of the divine economy as human progression towards completion in God, made possible because of Christ's victory over sin and death, and God's offer of life in all its fullness to all of humanity.

The incarnation enables the continued progression of humanity from childhood through to mature adulthood, enabling individuals to see how the appropriate use of their freedom enables them to be transformed into God's likeness through the Spirit. Therefore, the Incarnation effects a change in the nature of the relationship between the Creator and the created. However, individuals retain free-will, the capacity for self-determination based on their creation in the image of God who is free and rational. True humanity is defined by a relationship with God, but God does not infringe human freedom by forcing or coercing individuals into relationship. Irenaeus believes 'it was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this perfection, being as yet an infant'.⁶³ Salvation is not an antidote to the Fall: Irenaeus' understanding of the divine economy is predicated on the temporality of creation and the gradual development of humanity towards perfection even though human freedom means individuals always retain the possibility that their growth may be arrested. Irenaeus is a positive theologian who refuses to set God and humanity in opposition because he believes all of humanity may be saved. His constructive exegesis of free-will emphasizes the human capacity for a change in their mode of existence because humanity's state of becoming actually provides the conditions for the possibility of

⁶³ *Ah* 4.38.1

their positive movement towards God. The Christ-event is part of the totality of the divine economy.

Christ's victory recapitulates human freedom but individuals always remain free to decide how they will behave. This is entirely appropriate since any divine enforcement would remove the very gift of freedom. Moreover, choice and achievement are directly related to enjoyment and an understanding of what one possesses. Irenaeus believes that Jesus evidences the right use of freedom and that this is enacted in individuals who choose from within to become like Christ in relationship with God. This leads to incorruptibility and glory as the Spirit perfects humanity. Irenaean soteriology is predicated on the understanding that the process of maturation is evidenced when individuals sometimes make wrong choices, but nevertheless continue to progress towards authentic personhood. This correlates with Wesley's understanding that Christians may make mistakes (Wesley: 2007, 53, 98-116).

Human freedom is constitutive of true being when an individual, through faith in God, begins to actualize their potentiality. Irenaeus contrasts the decisions of Eve and Mary to demonstrate that authentic personhood is dependent upon exercising human freedom aright. Therefore, transformation of the individual into the likeness of God occurs when one's focus is on developing into the divine likeness revealed by Christ. Freedom is God-given self-determination shown in the human capacity to choose between right and wrong, life and death, the acceptance or rejection of God. Thus, humanity's ontological freedom enables redemption and faith in God actualizes this potentiality.

Union with God constitutes true personhood and the aim of the divine economy is to enable human beings to live in the light provided by God's grace and thereby participate in God's

glory. True personhood is a concrete identity in the presence of God. The essence of maturation is the transition from the human condition of estrangement from God, which is characterized by the hatred, violence and exclusion of self and others, towards participation in the life of God which is overwhelming love and inclusivity through presence. This transformation is evidenced in individuals who are present to others in and through their acts of love, mercy and justice. Thus Christ demonstrates the fulfilment of the law described in Deuteronomy and Matthew.

Transformation through sacramental participation is seen in the Irenaean connection between the Eucharist and Creation; God nourishes both the elements and the recipients and, through Christ, enables humanity to participate in the life of God. This is possible because the Eucharistic act unites God and humanity; it is the *antidotum vitae*, providing communicants with strength from God to progress towards authentic personhood. Irenaeus' concern is not for a change in the bread and wine, but in the communicant; 'the flesh which has been nourished by the body and blood of Christ, and is part of him, is capable of receiving God's gift of eternal life'⁶⁴. Irenaeus asserts that the focus of the divine economy is the unity of God and humanity, through the perfecting of human beings into the image and likeness of God, which will be complete at the eschaton. In the *hic et nunc* human beings are prepared and sustained on the journey by the Eucharist. This is shown by Wesley who understood the Eucharist to be both converting and confirming (cf. Maddox: 1994, 228-9). The role of the Church is to assist individuals to become authentic beings as they believe, in faith, that Christ reconciles them with God in the temporal and completes their transformation at the Consummation. Consequently, the Church has eschatological freedom from historical and

⁶⁴ Ah 5.2.3

individual limitations as it proclaims God's soteriology of maturation and enables humanity to actualize its potentiality. This coheres with the Methodist theology of grace.

Conclusion

Irenaeus' soteriology is entirely dynamic, consisting of humanity's liberation from estrangement and growth towards perfection. Irenaeus' belief that authentic personhood is visible in the person of Jesus is demonstrated through repentance, forgiveness and justice which are intrinsic to authentic self-hood because they unite the ethical and the ontological. Human beings are children of God because they are created in the image of God, this includes the freedom to choose God to grow into God's likeness through a process of spiritual maturity. Irenaeus believes creation exists to participate in God's glory, and that this has always been the intention of the divine economy. The Incarnation enables the realization of humanity's destiny because Jesus fulfils the Hebrew Bible and offers human beings God's limitless love, grace and glory. This enables individuals to be children of God rather than slaves to God solely through adherence to the Decalogue. This is possible because 'the complete grace of the Spirit... will render us like Him, and accomplish the will of the Father; for it shall make man after the image and likeness of God'.⁶⁵ Thus, Irenaeus asserts a consistent and constructive divine economy containing a wholly positive view of humanity and emphasizing the image of an active and loving God who parents human beings so that they may achieve their potential.

The divine economy is utterly centred on God's grace and benevolence and Christ's recapitulation of humanity from death to life. At Pentecost, the Spirit is provided to strengthen and sustain life and unity in humanity so that it may continue to become

⁶⁵ Ah 4.38.1

accustomed to God. The Church offers the promise and first-fruits of humanity's destiny and the Spirit makes transformation possible as humanity conforms to Christ.⁶⁶ This occurs because the Church has received the deposit of the Spirit, and the pedagogy of the divine economy; the Church militant is an active participant in the journey of humanity realizing its destiny. Consequently, Irenaeus contrasts the ageing of the world with the maturing of humanity to show that the Consummation is an end to creation's temporality. Irenaeus insists that God's Spirit enables individuals to realize their potential, the likeness of God.

Irenaeus insists the *naturalia praecepta*, the Decalogue, the divine covenants with humanity, the advent of Christ, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, are all intrinsic to a soteriology of maturation as human beings become accustomed to receive God and become transformed into the likeness of God after the pattern of Christ. Individuals participate in the life of God, through the Holy Spirit, thus realizing their destiny of authentic personhood and obtaining life in all its fullness.

In a post-Darwinian, post-Freudian, pluralistic world, Irenaeus' understanding of humanity, his soteriology of maturation and its place within the divine economy, enables us to move beyond a destructive view of humanity and towards an interpretation of Scripture that offers a constructive view of both human beings and of the nature of God.

Mr Wesley also lived through a time of great social, political, economic and intellectual upheaval. He developed his theology to address the demands and needs of his time. Whilst this paper makes only passing references to Mr Wesley, there are numerous places where the soteriology of Irenaeus and the theology of Wesley agree, which provides ample opportunity

⁶⁶ Ah 4.7.4

for discussion and creates a significant link between an early Church Father, Mr Wesley, and our contemporary world. After all, it is entirely possible that, if their places in history were reversed; Irenaeus would be a Methodist scholar!

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All Scriptural quotations are from the NRSV translation unless otherwise stated.