The Sacramental Sea

EDMUND NEWELL*

This article contributes to environmental theology by exploring our ambivalent attitude toward the sea. It begins by examining the largely negative references to the sea in the Bible, arguing that this is due primarily to the sea’s association with the precreation state of chaos. As such, the sea plays an important role in the biblical salvation narrative, the goal of which is a perfected creation in which “the sea was no more” (Rev. 21:1). It then looks at positive attitudes to the sea related to exploration, religious experience, and the development of natural theology. It concludes that this ambivalent theological attitude gives the sea a highly sacramental nature that speaks to both the contrasting apophatic and kataphatic traditions in theology, which highlight, respectively, God’s revelation and unfathomable nature.

Odi et amo may well be the confession to those who consciously or blindly have surrendered their existence to the fascination of the sea.1

Joseph Conrad, The Mirror of the Sea

There is something about the sea that is both enticing and fearful, so much so that, as Joseph Conrad (quoting the poet Catullus) observed, it can draw out the strongest feeling of attraction, but also its conflicting shadow side: odi et amo, “I hate and I love.” Conrad should

* Edmund Newell is principal of Cumberland Lodge, Windsor, U.K., and an honorary canon of Christ Church, Oxford, where he was formerly sub-dean. He was also canon chancellor of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, and founding director of St Paul’s Institute. Before ordination he was a research fellow in economic history at Nuffield College, Oxford. The author is grateful to participants at theology summer schools at Oxford and Lampeter universities and a seminar at Westminster Abbey for helping to shape his thinking on this topic; to the late Alister Hardy’s family for providing much useful information; and to the editors and Susan Newell for helpful comments on earlier drafts. This article is dedicated to the late Robin Craig, a great maritime historian and teacher who kindled the author’s intellectual interest in the sea.

know, having spent years at sea: he experienced its thrill and exhilaration, felt its peace and tranquility, survived terrifying storms, and watched colleagues drown.

Conrad also wrote, “The true peace of God begins at any spot a thousand miles from the nearest land.” The sea plays an important role in many religions, not least Christianity, where the ambivalence Conrad describes is particularly apparent. The majority of biblical references to the sea draw on its negative connotations; yet there are many accounts within Christian literature of people feeling spiritually uplifted or close to God on or by the sea. This article explores these contrasting attitudes within Christianity, and in doing so argues that there is a deeply sacramental quality to the sea: it speaks more powerfully of the complexity of our understanding of God and our relationship with God than perhaps anything else. By doing so, I hope this article will inform theological thinking on the environment, not least the Christian response to the threat to coastal regions and communities posed by rising sea levels due to global warming.

The Sea in the Bible

Origen called the scriptures “a vast sea of mystery.” The greatest mystery, which pulls together the diverse books that make up the Bible and gives them a logical narrative structure from Genesis to Revelation, is that of salvation: God making right something that has gone wrong with humanity—our relationship with him. From a theological perspective the current environmental crisis, which appears to be largely the consequence of human behavior, can be seen in terms of a damaged relationship with the creator.

The Bible opens with the creation of the earth and its creatures. The need for salvation quickly emerges because of the fall of humanity through our willful disobedience of God. The process of salvation begins when God judges humanity and seeks to purge us of sin by the flood, leaving only a faithful remnant from which a renewed human race can emerge. The theme continues with God establishing a special, covenantal relationship with his chosen people, the Israelites, who are to be a “light to the nations” offering the hope of salvation to all; much of the Hebrew scriptures describe their struggle to stay

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faithful to the covenant. For Christians, the story extends into the New Testament with the saving acts of Jesus Christ, and ends in the book of Revelation with a hopeful eschatological image of a perfected new creation made possible by the salvation achieved by Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The sea plays an important role throughout this narrative thread, and it is from this, and in particular the sea’s association with chaos, that many of its negative theological connotations derive.

The opening of Genesis describes the original chaotic state from which the cosmos is created as a “formless void” and “the deep”: a primordial ocean. The divine act of creation brings order out of this state of chaos. We are told that on the second day of creation, “the firmament” is put in place by divine command. In the thought world of the time, the firmament was seen as a great hemisphere placed within the waters of the deep, separating the waters that were now above and below the firmament. Then, on the third day of creation, the waters below are drained away to expose dry land. The land was imagined as a solid disk resting upon, and surrounded by, the primal waters—what we understand as ocean. But there is another ocean: above the firmament is the heavenly ocean, the blueness of which could be seen from below, and which from time to time would water the earth through a lattice with rain, snow, and hail. Within this thought world, where the oceans above and below can reconnect, the return to chaos is an ever-present threat. As Gerhard von Rad put it,

Man has always suspected that behind all creation lies the abyss of formlessness, further, that all creation is always ready to sink into the abyss of the formless, that the chaos therefore signifies simply the threat to everything created, and this suspicion has been a constant temptation for his faith.4

The destructive force at work that pushes humanity toward chaos is understood to be sinfulness: our disobedience of God. Chaos is therefore closely associated with evil and distancing from God. What prevents the retreat to chaos from happening is God’s will. It is almost possible to summarize the Bible as a description of the tension between these two competing forces: God’s will is done despite our

best efforts to stifle it, from disobedience in the garden of Eden to crucifying Christ.

The sea, of course, is also of central importance in the story of the flood, which is echoed in the story of the parting of the Red Sea and journey of God’s chosen people into the promised land. In the New Testament, the sea, or more accurately a large lake (the Sea of Galilee), features in some of Jesus’ miracles that demonstrate his saving powers; the sea also features in the imagery of a new, perfected creation at the climax of the book of Revelation, when the process of salvation is completed. Elsewhere, some of the key images of the sea in the story of salvation are reprised, particularly in the poetry of the Psalms and in the books of Daniel, Jonah, and Job.

Biblical scholars date the opening account of creation in Genesis as having been written sometime between the eighth century BCE and the Israelites’ exile in Babylon, which began in 586/7 BCE. They attribute it to the “Priestly” school of theology, which emphasized monotheism and well-ordered religious practices. A shorthand description for Priestly theology might be, “Yahweh (God) is in control and is orderly.”

The other creation story in Genesis, that of paradise and Adam and Eve, is thought to be much older and the product of the “Yahwist” school of theology, which operated around the tenth or ninth century BCE. It describes how, when humans are created, they quickly become rebellious and disobedient to God. In chapters 6 to 9, fallen humanity comes under God’s judgment, and God’s response is dramatic and almost indiscriminate: God allows a brief return to the chaotic state before creation. Only Noah, his family, and a representative group of creatures escape the devastation.

Like the opening stories of Genesis, the story of the flood also comes from a mixture of the Priestly and Yahwistic sources. The Priestly account speaks of the heavenly ocean emptying itself down, and of the water below being freed of its bonds, so that for a time the two sections of the primal ocean are reunited. In other words, God wills that, briefly, chaos reigns once more to purge the world of sinfulness. When this purging ends, the Priestly story tells of God entering into a covenant with Noah to establish a new relationship between God and humanity. The covenant is famously symbolized by a rainbow: a symbol of a giant bow of war across the sky, as light refracts through water droplets. In this covenant, God has set aside this watery weapon.
The weapon is set aside but not forgotten. There are clear echoes of the flood in Exodus, in the story of the Israelites’ escape from bondage in Egypt and in their journey through the wilderness toward freedom in the promised land. To get there they must cross the Red Sea. Again, there is a mixture of source material in this story. In the Priestly account, Moses is given power by God to part the sea so the Israelites can cross on dry land; and he is also given the power to let the sea return to its normal state and destroy the chasing Egyptians as they try to cross. God, through Moses, is firmly in control.

The reason the sea plays such an important role in the Hebrew scriptures probably has much to do with the real experience of flooding in various parts of North Africa and the Middle East over the centuries, passed down in stories from generation to generation. The sea was beyond human control and understood to bring about chaos, death, and destruction by the action of God or gods. Not surprisingly, it was therefore associated with sin and evil. Perhaps, too, it has to do with the spread of creation myths from different communities and their assimilation into other cultures. The Priestly account in Genesis certainly bears similarities to more ancient stories of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Greeks, who all describe the beginning of creation in terms of a great primal sea.5 The discovery of texts in the ancient Canaanite port of Ugarit (now Ras Shamra) on the Mediterranean coast in the 1920s suggests that the opening verses of Genesis are based on an ancient Canaanite story about a battle for divine control of the cosmos in which the power of chaos, represented by sea-god Yamm, is overcome by the god Baal. This points to an ancient and universal fascination with the sea, a widespread mistrust of it, and a pervasive sense of its “otherness.”

The waters of chaos continue to play a part in the salvation narrative in the New Testament. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus overcomes the chaotic storm (8:23–27) and is able to walk on the surface of the water (14:22–33). These are strong allusions here to the divine action in creation in Genesis: control over chaos and movement over the face of the waters. But in the Christian scriptures there is also a new dimension to God’s saving work: by having control over the most powerful biblical symbol of chaos and evil, Jesus is acting with divine power.

The other important theological statement about the sea in the New Testament occurs in Revelation: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (21:1). Revelation describes the reordering of the cosmos, a new creation, in which the waters of chaos above and below the firmament vanish. What God removes is twofold: chaos as the source of evil, and as the means by which judgment was previously executed on creation. Just as after the flood, and the saving work of Moses, God puts aside his “bow of war,” now that salvation through Christ is complete in the new creation, God removes the most destructive weapon of all—the waters of the deep.

**Natural Theology**

If the Bible portrays the sea in mainly negative terms, then elsewhere in Christian literature there are many positive references. This is due, perhaps, to more general changes in attitudes toward the sea that took place over many centuries after the books of the Bible were written. For instance, over time the widespread ancient understanding of the earth as a flat disk surrounded by an ocean that was the remnant of the water of chaos gave way to the realization that the earth was a globe, and that crossing oceans led not to oblivion but to new lands and peoples. Similarly, improved shipbuilding techniques gradually reduced the danger of being at sea, and the coast became increasingly associated with leisure and health (what now might be described as spiritual well-being).

Religious attitudes to the sea also changed through the growing influence of natural theology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The idea that divine revelation takes place through nature is ancient, but what differentiated the Enlightenment approach from its earlier expressions was that its proponents regarded the beautiful ordering of the natural world as providing evidence for the existence of God: the argument by design.

A key text that brought the theological understanding of the sea into Enlightenment thinking was the Cambridge theologian Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, first published 1681 in Latin and three years later republished in English as *Theory of the Earth*. Burnet sought to address this question: How could the earth be so physically imperfect if it was created by a God who created a universe that was so well ordered? His argument was that the earth had
been created perfect, and that “deformities” such as seas, valleys, and mountains were the consequence of God’s response to human sinfulness in bringing about the flood, as described in Genesis.6

The publication of Theory of the Earth stimulated considerable interest and discussion on two related topics: the biblical flood and the hydrologic cycle.7 Burnet’s understanding of the hydrologic cycle as subterranean—with water coming up and going down through cracks in the ground—was challenged by his Cambridge colleague, mathematician John Kiell, who argued that what Burnet called “deformities” were, in fact, essential to sustain life through the hydrologic cycle. Kiell correctly described the hydrologic cycle not as the subterranean recirculation of water, but as involving the evaporation of water from the sea to produce rain, which then waters the land, making it fertile. What became clear from the analysis by Kiell and others was that the size of the oceans was of crucial importance in determining the amount of rainfall, and therefore fresh water, available to make land fertile. As a result, the vast expanse of sea covering the earth came to be seen as essential for sustaining life on land. This appealed to natural theologians, who were attracted by the beauty of this cyclical, self-perpetuating, and life-sustaining system.

As the hydrologic cycle came to be better understood, the sea came to be regarded less as the remnant of chaotic primordial waters and increasingly as part of a well-ordered system that was vital for sustaining life. As a result, natural theologians began to describe the sea positively, in terms of God’s providence. This view was popularized by John Wesley, who asked rhetorically,

Who has instructed the rivers to run in so many winding streams, through vast tracts of land, in order to water them more plentifully? Then to disembogue themselves into the ocean, so making it the common centre of commerce: and thence to return through the earth or air, to their fountainheads, in one perpetual circulation?8

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6 This is discussed in Norman Cohn, Noah’s Flood: The Genesis Story in Western Thought (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999).
The idea that the earth had been created and ordered for the benefit of humanity receded in the nineteenth century with the growing awareness that the creative process was evolutionary. In its place, however, a new mystical form of natural theology emerged, in which the natural world came to be seen as a place in which God could be revealed, including through transcendent experience. The shift in direction of natural theology owes much to the influence of the American psychologist William James, the German philosopher Rudolf Otto, and the English priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who in their various ways popularized a more psychological and experiential approach to theology.

One person who was deeply influenced by this way of thinking was the marine biologist Alister Hardy. Hardy (who, incidentally, taught the biologist and strident atheist Richard Dawkins) had no difficulty in reconciling religious beliefs with science, and regarded both as rational human activities that could be mutually enriching. In particular, Hardy was fascinated by the nature and purpose of religious experience. When young, Hardy had a series of mystical experiences that were to have a lifelong effect. In his address as the recipient of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1985, Hardy wrote,

> From very early days I was a keen naturalist, and when out on country walks by myself looking for beetles and butterflies, I would sometimes feel a presence which seemed partly outside myself and curiously partly within myself. My God was never “an old gentleman” out there, but nevertheless was like a person I could talk to and in a loving prayer could thank him for the glories of nature that he let me experience. If I may make an admission—and to do so is only honest—I should say that sometimes, when I was sure that no one was looking! I would go down on my knees to express this gratitude.⁹

These mystical experiences were so profound that Hardy vowed to put his scientific mind to the subject. He remained true to his vow and, in 1969, after he had retired as professor of zoology at the University of Oxford, Hardy established the Religious Experience

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Research Unit at Manchester College, Oxford (now renamed the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre and based at the University of Wales Trinity St. David).

Hardy made a national appeal for data, asking people to respond anonymously to the question, “Have you ever had a spiritual or religious experience or felt a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday life?” Of the six thousand or so anonymous personal accounts he received, eighty-one are experiences closely associated with the sea. They fall into two main categories. One group refers to events onboard a ship or boat in times of danger, including several accounts by sailors from the Second World War. The respondents describe sensing the close presence of God and a feeling of peace and security that overcomes fear. As one commented, “I feel increasingly . . . a sense of being guided and protected by a power beyond myself. This has applied in major events, as in the sea off Dunkirk in 1940, when I felt detached from events and assured that I was safe.”

Writing about his research in the *Times*, Hardy suggested that religious experiences of this kind could have biological significance regarding the human instinct for survival, giving people “strength to do what they would not otherwise be able to accomplish.”

The other common experience described in the database is very different, but no less powerful. The accounts are remarkably similar and describe how, when walking alone along a deserted beach or coastline and looking out to sea, the respondent had an overwhelming sense of the existence of a creator and of being united with the rest of creation. Such mystical experiences verge on pantheism: sensing God not only as creator but within creation. This account of an experience that took place at Borth on the coast of west Wales is typical:

I was walking, alone, towards the sunset along the very fine cliffs and finally stopped and sat looking out to sea, to watch the last moments of the sun’s descent. I remember that the sky was immensely, profoundly blue and continued perfectly clear as the sun’s light waned, and I distinctly recall this gave me a powerful sense of infinity, a reminder of huge tracts

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10 Alister Hardy Centre, database account number 912.
of space and galaxies many light years away. . . . I also re-
member noticing the golden path of the sun on a calmish
sea and the many signs around of the interaction of rock and
water, the worn hollows and spines of one and the ceaseless
movement of the other. It was from this observation that my
mind began to move in the direction of religious thought,
but that is perhaps a misleading way of expressing the fact.
The strongest memory I have is of a conviction pressing in
on my whole being, not merely my mind, that the creation in
front of me, its elemental forces, its huge complexity was not
complete or self-sufficient, but that behind it, within it, was
the Creator or ultimate Reality.12

This is an eloquent description. David Hay, a former director
of the Religious Experience Centre and Hardy’s biographer, noticed
from the style of writing of accounts in the database that it is predomi-
nantly apparently well-educated people who seem to report having
mystical experiences with nature. He speculated that a trigger for this
might be that they are more likely to be familiar with the work of
Romantic writers and poets, who often describe nature in a spiritual
way.13

Romanticism was in many ways a reaction against the Enlighten-
ment. With its emphasis on feelings, the imagination, and the sublime
aspects of the natural world, Romanticism was in sharp contrast to
the Enlightenment’s championing of rational thought and pursuit of
beauty through neoclassical art. To its adherents, Romanticism was
an antidote to the rapid emergence of materialism and man-made
environment associated with urbanization and industrialization: a re-
response to the spirit of the age that shaped an alternative, counterbal-
ancing culture.

At one level, Romanticism was an aesthetic movement expressed
primarily through the arts. At another, it was an expression of self-
discovery, almost akin to a religious quest—and for some it was
both. Among the self- or soul-searching and artistry Romantics were
drawn to the sea, or more accurately the seashore, which provides
an environment highly conducive to introspection and the search for

12 Hardy Centre, 1346.
13 David Hay, Religious Experience Today: Studying the Facts (London: Mowbray,
1990), 48.
self-knowledge. By their very nature seashores, together with coasts and islands, are liminal: borderlands between land and water. Psychologically, they are places where we sense being “on the edge,” between the familiarity and security of land and the unknown that lies beyond. Not surprisingly, for some people this appears to evoke a sense of being on a boundary between material and spiritual worlds. George McLeod, the founder of the modern-day Iona Community, famously described the Scottish island of Iona as a “thin place” where the membrane between the material and spiritual seems permeable. This has been said of other places, too, and Hardy’s research confirmed this reaction as a common type of religious experience.

In many respects Hardy was the successor of the Harvard psychologist William James (brother of the writer Henry James) who, at the end of the nineteenth century, undertook the first significant study of religious experience. James’s findings were delivered in the Gifford Lectures of 1901–1902 at Edinburgh University and published simultaneously as The Varieties of Religious Experience. His research involved collecting and analyzing accounts of mystical experiences, from which he identified four defining characteristics. For James, a religious experience is *ineffable*, defying description in words; it has a *noetic quality*, giving insight into a deeper truth; it is *transient*, lasting only minutes or seconds; and it is *passive*, creating the sense of being out of control and under the influence of a superior power.14

Among the examples James cites are several centered on the sea. Perhaps his choice was influenced by his own travels across the Atlantic, but what is for sure is that he also identified the two common experiences associated with the sea that are found in the Religious Experience database. The first, a sense of well-being in the face of extreme danger, is well expressed in an account by a sailor, Frank Bullen, who converted to Christianity on board ship and wrote his autobiography with the title *With Christ at Sea*. When suspended upside down over the sea, hanging by one foot from a broken boom, Bullen describes feeling “high exultation in my certainty of eternal life . . . I suppose I could have hung there no more than five seconds, but in that time I lived a whole age of delight.”15 A very different account cited by James is by the German writer Malwida von Meysenbug,

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who, after years of being unable to pray, found herself on a seashore when, she wrote, “I was impelled to kneel down . . . before the illimitable ocean, symbol of the Infinite. I felt that I prayed as I had never prayed before and knew what prayer really is: to return from the solitude of individuation into the consciousness of unity with all that is.”

Again, the powerful effect of the seashore as a spiritually liminal space is evident.

Among von Meysenbug’s acquaintances was the French Nobel Prize–winning writer and dramatist Romain Rolland, who, like James, was fascinated by psychology and religion. Rolland was particularly fascinated by Eastern mysticism, and from his study of Hinduism and other religions far removed from Western influences such as Romanticism, he concluded that there is such a thing as the “oceanic feeling.” Rolland believed that the basic and almost universal religious impulse comes from feeling a sense of the infinite. Such a disorientating, mind-bending experience could be triggered by staring into the night sky, a view across a vast landscape, or by looking out to sea. The horizon, at which a vast expanse of sea meets a vast expanse of sky, is a particularly powerful symbol of the infinite and eternal, and a pointer to what lies beyond our experience or comprehension. Rolland’s interpretation resonates strongly with many of the accounts in the Religious Experience database.

Although he was not a religious believer, Rolland had personal experience of the oceanic feeling and understood how it might lead to religious belief. It was the subject of a correspondence Rolland had with his friend Sigmund Freud, who, in 1927, published his response in the opening section of his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Freud, too, acknowledged the validity of the oceanic feeling, although he said he had not experienced it himself.

Another common feature of the Religious Experience database is the association of the sea with mystery. As St. John Chrysostom observed in a sermon around 1,600 years ago, there is a strong resonance

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between contemplating the mysteries of the sea and the mysteries of God:

We wonder at the open sea and its limitless depth; but we wonder fearfully when we stoop down and see how deep it is. It was in this way that the [Psalmist] stooped down and looked at the limitless and yawning sea of God’s wisdom. And he was struck with shuddering.\textsuperscript{19}

Despite our increased knowledge of oceanography and marine biology, the sea continues to remain a powerful image of the mysterious and the unknown. Even today, most of the earth’s seabed is yet to be mapped, and the giant squid is yet to be seen in its natural habitat. The inability to locate the wreckage of the Malaysia Airlines airplane that vanished on March 8, 2014, somewhere over the Southern Indian Ocean, highlights both the vastness of the seas and oceans (which cover 70 percent of the earth’s surface) and the largely unknown nature of the seabed. Remarkably, more humans have been to the moon than to the deepest parts of the ocean.

The third key feature of the accounts in the Religious Experience database is the importance of solitude. All the respondents refer to being alone when their religious experience takes place. For those walking by the sea, the solitude may last only minutes or hours. Sailing can prolong and heighten the experience, and seems to attract those who are content without human company. For long-distance, single-handed sailors, their solitude can last weeks or months. It is akin to the experience of a hermit or monastic solitary. This begs the question whether sailors who have been pushed the limits of human endurance can offer any insights into the spiritual dimension of being alone on what Conrad called “the majestic monotony of the sea.”\textsuperscript{20}

The first person to sail single-handed around the world was the Canadian-born American Joshua Slocum. Slocum set sail from Boston, Massachusetts, in his boat \textit{Spray} on April 24, 1895, returning to Newport, Rhode Island, over three years later. Although Slocum’s circumnavigation included numerous stop-offs, the 46,000-mile voyage nevertheless involved extended periods of solitude.

\textsuperscript{20} Conrad, \textit{Mirror of the Sea}, 5.
Soon after his return, Slocum wrote an account of his experiences called *Sailing Alone around the World*, which quickly became an international bestseller. Slocum’s fame spread, and he has since inspired generations of long-distance sailors. A remarkable feature of Slocum’s account is its psychological and spiritual nature. A recent biographer of Slocum observes that his “long voyage was as much an inner voyage through the psyche as an outward voyage over ocean waters. . . . As he stripped away the sea’s layers and penetrated its mysteries, a deep spirituality awakened.”21 The key to this awakening was what Slocum referred to as his “solitude supreme,” which only manifested itself after he confronted initial feelings of deep isolation. “I was destined to sail once more into the depths of solitude,” he wrote, “but these experiences had no bad effect on me; on the contrary, a spirit of charity and even benevolence grew stronger in my nature through the meditations of these supreme hours at sea.”22

If solitude induced a spiritual state, it was also overtly religious. Describing sailing alone in the Pacific, he wrote, “Then was the time to uncover my head, for I sailed alone with God. The vast ocean was again around me, and the horizon was unbroken by land.”23 Commenting on his voyage to a journalist a few years later, Slocum said, “No man ever lived to see more of the solemnity of the depths than I have seen, and I resent, quickly, the hint that a real sea story might be other than religious.”24

Others who have followed in Slocum’s footsteps report similar experiences. In 1968–1969, Robin Knox-Johnston became the first person to sail round the world nonstop, single-handed. Reflecting on the impact of confronting natural elements on the religious beliefs and superstitions of sailors, he commented, “I have found myself thinking deeply on the matter when out in rough weather in a small boat. . . . However practical you like to think you are, the feeling comes that there is more to it than just natural laws, and if you have been brought up in a society that bases its philosophy on the existence of a Superior Being, you come to consider that this Being is responsible, and to

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23 Slocum, *Sailing Alone*, 76.
24 Spencer, *Alone at Sea*, 149.
accept that he exists.” Chay Blyth, who between October 1970 and August 1971 sailed around the world single-handed “the wrong way round” against westerly winds, later wrote, “Ten months of solitude in some of the loneliest seas of the world strengthened every part of me . . . deepened every perception and gave me a new awareness of that power outside man which we call God.”

The Sacramental Sea

The sea, then, affects us in many and varied ways. It can attract, repel, delight, frighten, calm, or heighten anxiety. It can induce feelings of melancholy or delight. Its moods are as varied and fluid as water itself, and if we so wish we can project onto the sea the full range of human temperament. It is, as Conrad suggests, a mirror—not only of the blue sky, but of the psyche and soul. For the Roman Catholic writer Hilaire Belloc, however, the sea was something even more profound. Belloc, who was an accomplished sailor, wrote an account of sailing round Britain called The Cruise of the “Nona.” The book concludes with an eloquent and perceptive description of the sea from a theological perspective. For Belloc, the sea “presents, upon the greatest scale we mortals can bear, those not mortal powers which brought us into being. It is not only the symbol or the mirror, but especially it is the messenger of the Divine.” From this Belloc concludes that the sea “is the common sacrament of this world.”

This article has sought to explore the sacramental nature of the sea: that is, how it speaks of, and connects us with, God. From what I have discussed so far, it is apparent that it does so in many different ways. What makes the sea’s sacramental nature so profound is that it resonates with the two contrasting approaches to theology and spirituality: the kataphatic and apophatic. The kataphatic approach to religion emphasizes what is known and experienced and can be put into words, often by the use of metaphor. It is sometimes described as “positive” theology or spirituality, and is the dominant approach in Christianity. It is understandable that a religion grounded in the life

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and teaching of one person, Jesus Christ, should have this emphasis. For Christians, Jesus is both human and divine, and so gives a unique insight into the nature of God in a way that makes the divine tangible. The role of the sea in the biblical story of salvation is set firmly within the kataphatic tradition. In contrast, the apophatic tradition, or *via negativa*, is grounded in an understanding of God being ineffable: ultimately unknowable and mysterious, and therefore indescribable. Within Christianity, the growth of this tradition owes much to the influence of Neoplatonism, with its grounding in Classical philosophy and emphasis on the mysterious “otherness” of the divine.

Perhaps uniquely, the sea speaks with equal weight to both the kataphatic and apophatic traditions. This is significant, because, as Beldan Lane puts it, there is a “dialectical tension” between the two traditions, which ultimately need each other.28 Within Judaism and Christianity there is a profound sense that God is both revealed and hidden. The experience of faith for many sits within this tension: God is both mysterious and unknowable, and yet at times seems close and familiar. People who have had profound religious experiences of the type described above can also experience years of spiritual barrenness.

Over the centuries, a number of influential thinkers and writers have emphasized the sacramental dimension of creation in ways that resonate with both kataphatic and apophatic thought. Among them, it was the medieval Scottish theologian John Duns Scotus who regarded the material world as a sacramental symbol of God. For his near contemporary, the German mystic Meister Eckhart (who faced accusations of heresy), divinity was inseparable from nature. Similarly, the faith of the visionary nun and natural scientist Hildegard of Bingen involved a powerful interaction between theology and nature. Following in their tradition much later, Gerard Manley-Hopkins believed that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God” and called the mystical or sacramental quality of nature “inscape.” This is best explained by his comment on nature: “what you look hard at seems to look hard at you.”29 This observation captures precisely the mesmerizing effect of looking at the sea and its mirror-like quality.

Hilaire Belloc appreciated more than most the breadth and depth of the sea’s sacramental nature. He understood that the sea could create vivid images to fire the imagination as well as clear the mind to contemplate ultimate mysteries; that at one moment the sea can seem a bountiful source of life, and at another a vast, barren wilderness. He understood, too, that the sea’s capricious nature captures precisely the human condition, with its varying moods, and the questions these can throw up about the meaning of life and the nature of God.

To the kataphatic mindset, the sea’s vastness speaks of the infinite; its permanence speaks of the eternal and of changelessness; its quixotic fluidity speaks of spirit; its life-giving properties speak of a loving and generous creator, and its awesome power speaks of the creator’s omnipotence. To those drawn to the apophatic tradition, the sea’s hidden depths speak of the mysterious and unknowable. More important, however, is the sea’s remarkable ability to still and empty the mind. This emptying, or kenosis, is at the heart of contemplative prayer in the apophatic tradition. Rather than fill the mind with words and images, apophatic prayer seeks to clear the mind and to allow the void to be filled by God.

Within Christianity, the growth of this tradition owes much to desert spirituality. One of the reasons that the desert fathers sought barren terrain is that starkness removes distractions and so is an aid to contemplative prayer. For that reason, in much spiritual writing about the desert it is possible to replace the word desert with sea without changing the meaning. As monasticism spread west from the deserts of the Middle East and North Africa, remote coastal locations and islands proved ideal desert locations for religious communities or solitaries. The idea of the ocean as a desert is particularly associated with early Celtic monasticism and persists today, and perhaps helps to explain why a number of religious communities are drawn to coasts and islands. To put it plainly: the sea, with the repetitive and timeless sound of breaking waves, helps people to pray.

Perhaps, too, for the Celtic monastics who went on pilgrimage by allowing themselves to drift at sea, there was a sense that by entrusting themselves to the sea, they were entrusting themselves to God. In this way, the physical interaction with the sea was a visceral expression of its association with the divine. Many of the early Christian mystics drawn to the monastic way of life were influenced by the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato used the image of the vastness of the sea to express the goal of mysticism, which he described as “turning towards
the great sea of the beautiful.” Christian ascetics were attracted to this image, living their lives with the purpose of turning to the great beauty of God, of achieving “mystical union” with God.

The sea’s sacramental nature is reinforced, too, by the interaction between land and sea. If the sea speaks of God and the spiritual realm, then so does land speak of the physical. Seashores, coasts, and islands can therefore be liminal: boundaries between the physical and spiritual, the finite and infinite, life and death, known and unknown, temporal and eternal, kataphatic and apophatic. The sea’s allure can therefore be just as strong for a landlubber who likes to sit on a beach, as it is for a swimmer, surfer, or sailor.

The sea’s ability to speak to both the kataphatic and apophatic traditions, and to induce positive and negative feelings, echoes Conrad’s description and reinforces Belloc’s view of the sea as the “common sacrament.” The God we think we know and experience can be the God who is ultimately unknowable and absent. The God we give thanks to for the blessings of life is also the God we rail against at times of suffering and death. In this respect, the sea—perhaps uniquely—speaks of the problem of theodicy: of reconciling belief in a God who creates us out of love and yet who allows suffering. There is no easy theological explanation for this ambiguity, but the sea, by its very nature, speaks to the problem: its life-giving waters that delight and inspire awe and wonder can at the same time be deadly and terrifying.

In the anthropocene, when the impact of human activity on the environment is becoming all too apparent, the sacramental nature of the sea offers a timely reminder of to whom we are ultimately responsible in our stewardship of the environment, and the complexity of our interactions with the creator. It speaks, too, of our need of God to save us from the folly of overconfidence in the ability of humanity to control the natural world, and helps us reflect prayerfully on our place and role in the created order.