HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

Beyond dualism: The sacred value of biological totems in Christian Platonic thought

Authors:
Zhilong Yan[1]
Aixin Zhang[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Research on Art Totem, Shanghai Theatre Academy, Shanghai, China

Corresponding author:
Aixin Zhang,
aixin1946@gmail.com

Dates:
Received: 02 Sept. 2024
Accepted: 07 Oct. 2024
Published: 29 Nov. 2024

How to cite this article:
Yan, Z. & Zhang, A., 2024, 'Beyond dualism: The sacred value of biological totems in Christian Platonic thought', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a10208. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.10208

The Christian Platonic theology and philosophy have been criticised for many years by various scholars. The dualistic perspective may belittle the value of plant and animal kingdoms, entangling humans in anthropocentric bias and promoting hierarchical systems. However, subsequent theologians and philosophers interpreted these works in ways that allowed negative perspectives and misunderstandings of the material world and its symbols to develop, leaving a mark on history. Therefore, the discussed Christian Platonic theology represents a specific spiritual gnostic view with a unique perspective on spirituality. It values all living beings as uniquely revealing their divine nature. Therefore, although hierarchical views may exist, it does not mean any being should dominate. Instead, it means that, in the being's participation in God's manifestation, the being adds something unique regarding some of God's features. This perspective allows for revising religious viewpoints that have been misunderstood or overly simplified and promotes a fundamental humanistic spirit of care for all living beings' inborn spiritual significance.

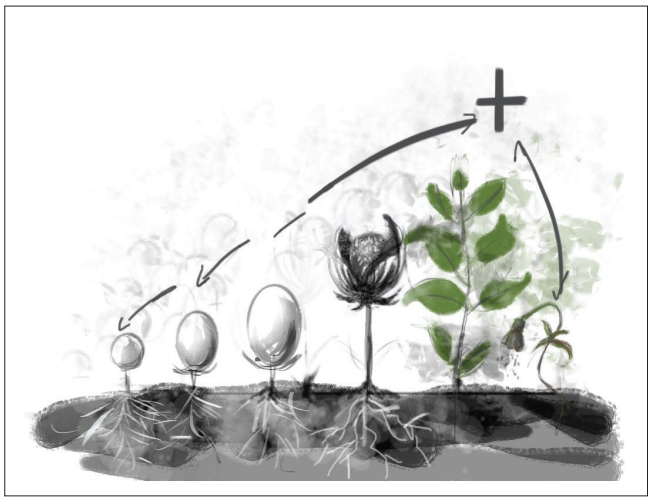
Contribution: This article explores the sacred value of biological totems in Christian Platonic thought, revealing the divinity embodied in all forms of life through a re-examination of traditional dualistic views. This research contributes to ecological theology by emphasising the intrinsic connection between nature and divinity within the framework of Christian philosophy.

Keywords: Totem art; Christian Platonic theology; idolatry; dualism; biological divinity; ecological theology; natural theism.

Introduction

> Let us consider often underestimated aspects of the natural and biological world: plants and oils.
> Seeking the highest, the best,
> Let the plant teach you;
> What it is involuntarily,
> You can achieve voluntarily – that's it. (Harlan & Beuys 2012:137)
>
> The plant ceases its growth in the pollinated blossom and dies. But new opportunities for its realization ripen in the seed. At this stage of potential for new plants it is almost entirely 'potentia' without 'actus'. And in this state, which comes about through the processes we have described, the substantial expression of this 'dynamis' is the most energy-rich substance that the plant will ever produce: fat. It occurs in each germ. Fat as a substance corresponds to 'dynamic', to the potential that can be realized and which has resulted from a selfless, social process – in religious terms, a process of sacrifice. As something willed, as volition, this is possible only for humans. (Harlan & Beuys 2012:137)

The formation of 'growth and oils' in plant seedlings is closely related to the spiritual realm. Moreover, in the case of artistic creation, this process is symbolic. Firstly, these natural processes repeat nature's regenerative capability. Secondly, the extraction and transformation processes in art from nature can be described allegorically (see Figure 1). Although for an average person such manifestations occur almost every day, we do not associate the natural or biological world with the spiritual world. Joseph Beuys directly opens our eyes to the natural works of art. He uses the Creator's tool and does not show the result but the essence of life. That is what is essential in the formation of art. It is evident how skilfully he combines natural materials with philosophical manifestations. He discovers the topics of life, energy, regeneration and other processes through fundamental concepts and a series of signs and witchcraft.



Source: © Artist: Zhang, A., 2024, Symbolism of the plant life cycle and rebirth (pencil drawing), (40 cm x 35 cm), Private collection

Note: The illustration depicts the various stages of the plant life cycle – from seed through germination, growth, wilting, death and rebirth – with the Christian cross subtly integrated into the background to symbolise the theme of sacrifice.

FIGURE 1: Symbolism of the plant life cycle and rebirth.

This study makes an effort to correct the view that medieval theologians had little appreciation for the material world, namely biological nature, as is commonly thought in theological treatises. Our plan is to show that we are wrong if this is what we believe. Others, such as the traditional theological perspective of Aquinas (1947) and contemporary studies in Christian Platonism, simply accentuate how valuable living beings and humans are as one way God's goodness can be expressed, especially because of teleological features that they have evolved over millions of years – the latter insight also dances freely between presence (beauty) or absence (lack – they lack perfection). Thomas Aquinas (1947), working within this framework, critiqued Plato's transcendental dualism, arguing that forms, however they may be thought of, exist in individual entities and not transcendentally. More recently, Wallace (2020) and Jähnichen (2021) developed this idea in a theological sense through the dual incarnation theory of embodied nature by emphasising that God manifests himself in humanity and in all living beings of nature. With this approach, we should replace longstanding veils of hierarchy to dare to see nature and life differently, as individually divine existences irrespective of species.

Based on this groundwork, the present article contends that Christian Platonism can be reconciled with animistic and totemic practices as an alternative to a challenge or refutation of idolatry, by means of a revisionist theological critique. This study will compare and contrast the evaluations of idolatry and totemic worship to understand their theoretical underpinnings throughout history and in different cultural or theological contexts. Christian Platonism, in some cases, holds that the material world reveals divine goodness, while animism and totemic rituals maintain a sacred status for every part of nature. This study argues that all creatures exhibit divinity – a popular theme in the Christian Platonic tradition based on an understanding of divine goodness infused through each creature individually.

In addition, Moltmann (1985) and Swedenborg (2014) criticised the ancient dualism in Greek philosophy, especially Plato and Aristotle, who separated the material world from the ideal one, and spirit from flesh, and devalued nature. They both stress a cosmology in which the divine is more active and interactive. According to Moltmann (1985), theology is the divine and collective activity of all living beings (including nature). Swedenborg (2014), however, holds that living beings and humans are more closely tied to divinity in that they are part of the divine flow. From this, we can transform our negative attitudes towards sacred totems by critiquing traditional Platonic ideas. Totems are not to be considered just holy symbols but a declaration that the divine is part of every living being, including nature, and all involved entities interact.

Looking back through these medieval scholastic philosophical routes, we can show that symbols formerly considered pagan (like those of the totem, for example) have come under reappraisal and are no longer denigrated. Although far removed from totemic divinity, these aspects assist in portraying our awareness much more starkly than perhaps an innate perception and comprehension of such beings within divine Christian Platonic theology. However, this is not only based on a philosophical position that views the preservation of the rights of biological entities as demonstrating ethical behaviour; it must also be seen in spiritual terms, as these beings are part of cosmic matter. This way, we avoid the mistakes related to devaluing nature or matter. We can approach, in a theological-philosophical sense (and also within ecology), understanding how much value is inherent both in animist beings that have their place not only in spiritual practice but in all places, and clarify questions about supporting environments like forests for spirits.

The second section will discuss the arguments on idolatry from theological differences based on the writings of John Calvin (1909), Irenaeus and Dillon (1992) and Bede (1969), along with Platonic philosophy. This study brings in dualistic oppositions between forms and matter to demonstrate how early Platonism influenced anti-totem degeneration in the High Middle Ages. This chapter also revisits reflections on Platonic thought by subsequent critics, such as feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray.

The third section clarifies Platonic idealism and its role in a certain kind of medieval theology, which was generally doubtful about images or at least complicated by them. This doubt gave birth to a negative attitude towards the material world and its symbolic nature – including totemic imagery. Finally, the section ends with 'God's Participation in Diversity', which rejects classical hierarchical valuations and supports what was described earlier as the intrinsic sacred value of every living entity.

The fourth section reevaluates the dualistic system in Christian Platonic theology, claiming that beings express divinity differently from one another and rejecting the ethical values established through hierarchical classifications

between humankind and other forms of life. This sub-section deals with the objections raised against the semi-divine status of totemic animals compared to human beings, focussing on two radical options: overemphasising this divine quality or denying it altogether. The analysis examines how ancient myths or totems of early humans were accepted into Christianity, stressing the sanctity and variety of corresponding mythological theories through Moltmann (1985) and the eco-theology approach propounded by Swedenborg (2014).

Medieval, Platonic theology and totemic imagery

The term 'totem' originates from the languages of North American indigenous tribes, who used totems as symbols or emblems representing a special kinship with their bearers – typically families. A totem is commonly an animal, plant or other natural feature that represents a guardian or symbol of the tribe (Lévi-Strauss 1971). On the other hand, idolatry denotes the worship of particular objects presumed to share sacred characteristics or divine spirits (Eliade 1959; Tillich 2011).[1] Nevertheless, totems and idols have very similar characteristics, especially in religious and cultural practices. The two act as points of contact between humans and the supernatural, a reminder that forces greater than themselves exist (Eliade, 1959). Both totems and idols are understood as ways that individuals learn about the sacred and as items of religious belief (Durkheim 2006; Eliade 1959).

Based on this, the following section discusses theological debates about worship and icons, with an examination of the tension between reason, faith and historical vision. It discusses two important medieval theological schools: scholasticism and mysticism. This analysis helps us understand their differences in perspective and the overlapping aspects of rationalism and faith in each of these schools' eschatological attitudes towards idol worship.

Debates on totem worship

Scholasticism and doctrinal theology focus on deductive reasoning and logical analysis.[2] Thomas (2008), in 'Summa Theologica', writes that reason and logic should be used for theological exploration with the understanding of their limitations regarding divine mysteries like the Trinity.[3] In contrast, William (2012) disagreed with doctrinal theology, which stresses logic while ignoring the other two dimensions of religious experience, which are personal and emotional. This reveals the tension between rational theology and existential faith.[4]

By contrast, Scholasticism and Mysticism – the two major medieval theological traditions – display different attitudes towards idol worship. Scholasticism emphasises the power of reasoning and logic to arrive at faith as a logical concept, while Mysticism tends towards emotional or spiritual experience to attain an immediate connection with God. The differences between these two strategies suggest the range of medieval practical and theological methods of thought.

Theologia Mystica by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (2011) examines Christian mysticism and alternative perceptions of the divine. The angel reminds us that God, in essence, is beyond the reach of human language and description – a notion followed by apophatic or negative theology.[5] It also seems to mean that personal introspection and experience can bring a person close to God. This suggests, finally, that for all its limitations, sound conceptual thought is a foundation: the closer our experience comes to God (and there are entirely respectable faiths embracing immediate union with Jesus and God), essentially public and repeated understanding of whom we believe in becomes even more valuable as support.

There is no explicit opinion on idol worship in the literature of Scholasticism or Mysticism, but we can gather it from their principles. It condemns idol worshipping, at least in a certain understanding of Scholasticism that, for example, views it as violating the Exodus 20 commandment against other gods.[6] Mysticism might see it in a somewhat better light, possibly viewing idol worship as an obstacle to real communication with the divine – something that is blocking our paths from communing on a deeper level and establishing a more personal relationship with God.

On the other hand, Scholasticism and Mysticism hold contrasting beliefs compared to idol worship (typical of pagans). This opposition stems from different philosophical approaches. Scholasticism, being biased towards criticism and logic, is not friendly to idolatry or superstition because it places a logical emphasis on them. Mysticism, whereby the divine is invoked on a personal level, takes a less offensive view and could understand an idol worshiper as someone who walks his own religious path.

1. Idolatry refers to the worship of specific objects believed to possess sanctity or embody divine spirits.

2. Doctrinal theology and Scholastic philosophy are crucial components of Western religious thought and philosophical tradition. There was significant crossover and mutual influence between doctrinal theology and Scholastic philosophy during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Many Scholastic philosophers, such as Thomas Aquinas, were also key theologians. Both approaches tended to employ logical and rational analysis, with Scholastic philosophy placing greater emphasis on dialogue with philosophical traditions.

3. Thomas Aquinas is one of the most important philosophers and theologians of the Middle Ages. His work, 'Summa Theologica', is a milestone in Christian theology and Scholastic philosophy. He was profoundly influenced by the classical philosopher Aristotle, especially in logic and metaphysics. Aquinas endeavoured to harmonise Aristotle's philosophy with Christian doctrine. Additionally, he attempted to use logical deduction and rational inquiry to address theological questions, offering in-depth analysis and arguments on various aspects, such as using reason and logic to explain why all actions are pursued for the sake of 'good'.

4. James (2012). In the 'Philosophy' chapter of his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, discusses aspects related to Doctrinal Theology and Scholasticism. He references Principal John Caird's 'Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion' to further discuss this topic. Here, he appears to criticise the overemphasis on logic and reason, arguing that it neglects individual emotions and experiences.

5. Negative Theology is an approach that seeks to understand the essence of God by negating all positive statements about God (e.g., 'God is good' or 'God is omniscient'). Refer to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's 'Mystical Theology' (translated by Jones, J.D., Marquette University Press 2011). Relevant content can be found on page 89 of the fourth chapter, which primarily discusses how negation transcends all affirmative descriptions of God, thereby approaching the true nature of the divine (p. 89).

6. The specific source for the phrase is from the Bible, 'Exodus 20:3'.

Theologians and totems

Totemism and idol worship in theological discourse life itself, the circulation of society as academia and religion merged, blended their main focus on the totemic body as symbolic object worship. At the same time, totemism – an enduring practice from prehistoric times that symbolises the existential connection of a tribe with an animal – or idolatry was typically a more intense admiration for physical objects. Theologians carefully assessed these practices, guiding a continent amid faith-churning turmoil and religious inequality with plain advice to address the urgent spiritual perils of navigating diverse doctrines in competing evolutions.

John Calvin: Idols and the divine

Idolatry was fiercely denounced during the Christian Reformation by Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1909).[7] He considered idolatry an affront to God, quoting Exodus 20:4 concerning the prohibition of making images of God. Calvin discussed the current habits of idolatry in different cultures, including Persian sun worship and Egyptian animal worship (as well as Greek anthropomorphism), saying that all these practices were distortions and obscured the true essence of God.[8]

Irenaeus of Lyons: Idolatry and heresy

Irenaeus's and Dillon's (1992) *Against Heresies*[9] is a crucial text in early Christian theology. Offering an extensive analysis of heresy and idolatry, it significantly contributes to our understanding of the link between faith, idols and totems.[10] These heretics, they observed, did not worship God but paid homage to human idols carved of stone or wood; they sometimes revered pictures even within Christianity (i.e. the image and likeness of appearances), as well as figures both in paintings and sculptures of ancient philosophers such as Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, practising their pagan rituals.[11] Irenaeus reproached the Simonians for making images of both Simon and Helen, honouring these as gods, and using magic methods, thereby forsaking essential Christian dogmas. Irenaeus (1992:83) reproached the Simonians, stating that 'the mystic priests of these people live licentious lives and practice magic, each one in whatever way he can. They make use of exorcisms and incantations, love-potions too and philters, and the so-called familiars, and dream-senders. They also have a statue of Simon patterned after Jupiter, and one of Helen patterned after Minerva,' thereby forsaking essential Christian dogmas. Irenaeus and Dillon (1992) also defended monotheism by explaining that the idea of creating an idol form contradicts ancient Christianity, as this faith holds there is only one Almighty God who created all things through his Word. Even though he never used the term totem, his ideas certainly inform our understanding of the problematic relationship between totems, idols and faith.

Bede: Religious transformation and the cultural interaction of idol worship

Bede (1969), the author of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, described processes by which Christianity was adopted in England and practised a mild religious proselytisation strategy against idolatry rather than violent destruction of native beliefs. Sprinkling holy water, setting up altars and housing Christian relics through the actions of missionaries was a subtle way to move pagans towards Christianity.[12] It sidestepped confrontation and showed respect for indigenous beliefs; Bede's version is therefore concurrent with Irenaeus and Calvin in their vigorous antagonism to idolatry, though quite different as to process. These theologians stood watch for idolatry and were ever vigilant against it, accusing one another in frequent judging tones; they meant well by their pursuit as they sought to preserve the purity of orthodoxy.

Thus theologians, in their gritty strategies, did not just show restrictions on idolatrous and tribal customs. They, however, all took unconnected paths, using different methods to hold their ground against idolatry. Calvin, by contrast, abhorred idolatry as a contemptible affront to God and insisted upon the special bond of faith. He, too, recognised that faith without reason can be led astray, and thus, he strove to rein in faith through rational argument as well. Their voices together, crying for the transfiguration of native beliefs, is something that can be heard in Bede's attempts to bring Christianity into some sort of reconciliation with England. In a nutshell, all these theologians were alert and critical of belief in idols, which demonstrated their commitment to the faithful path within orthodoxy.

7. It should be specifically noted in the footnote that Calvin is typically not considered a medieval figure. In other words, Calvin was a key figure of the Reformation, rather than a theologian of the medieval period. However, I have chosen to include him because his ideas significantly influenced medieval theology and its subsequent development. Although Calvin's 'Institutes of the Christian Religion' belongs to the Reformation period, his severe critique of idolatry aligns with the views of medieval theologians and is valuable for understanding medieval and post-medieval theological thought.

8. Calvin (1909) 'Institutes of the Christian Religion', Chapter 11, Paragraph 1: 'In the Law, accordingly, after God had claimed the glory of divinity for himself alone, when he comes to show what kind of worship he approves and rejects, he immediately adds, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth", (Ex:20:4). By these words he curbs any licentious attempt we might make to represent him by a visible shape, and briefly enumerates all the forms by which superstition had begun, even long before, to turn his truth into a lie. For we know that the Sun was worshipped by the Persians. As many stars as the foolish nations saw in the sky, so many gods they imagined them to be. Then to the Egyptians, every animal was a figure of God … The Greeks, again, plumed themselves on their superior wisdom in worshipping God under the human form (Maximum Tyrius Platonic. Serm. 38). But God makes no comparison between images, as if one were more, and another less befitting; he rejects, without exception, all shapes and pictures, and other symbols by which the superstitious imagine they can bring him near to them (Calvin 1909:68–69)'.

9. Specifically, the works of Irenaeus should be cited with their original publication year, approximately AD 180. However, as I was unable to locate the first edition, the texts cited in this article refer to the current edition year, specifically Irenaeus's (1992) edition.

10. Irenaeus was not a medieval theologian but an early Christian theologian from the second century. His work 'Against Heresies' provided a crucial theoretical foundation for the critique of idolatry, which was later inherited and developed in medieval theology.

11. Irenaeus (1992:89–90), 'They call themselves Gnostics and possess images, some of which are paintings, some made of other materials. They said Christ's image was copied by Pilate at the time that Jesus lived among men. On these images they put a crown and exhibit them along with the images of the philosophers of the world, namely, with the image of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and the rest. Toward these [images] they observe other rites that are just like those of the pagans'.

12. Bede (1969), Chapter 30: In this chapter, St. Gregory's letter to Abbot Mellitus is mentioned. St. Gregory advises that the idol temples of the English should not be destroyed, but rather, holy water should be sprinkled inside them, altars established, and relics placed, to gradually guide the English away from idol worship (pp. 56–57). For the exact wording, please refer to the indicated pages in Bede's work: 'Tell him what I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them'.

Platonic theology and totemic imagery

Medieval theology was also greatly influenced by Grecian philosophy, especially that of Plato and Aristotle. Medieval theologians, especially in Scholasticism (which incorporated their ideas), accepted the foundational principles of Aristotelian metaphysics by integrating them into Christian theology, which was then absorbed by Aquinas (1947) in *Summa Theologiae*. Greek philosophy showed the world an organised and rational thought that can explain theological concepts and defend religious doctrines. This served to mould the theological imagination, inspire religious praxis and foster cultural dialogue, indicating a profound enduring effect.

This section analyses the effect of ancient Greek philosophy on the negative evaluation by medieval theologians of totemism, particularly from Plato. This article is devoted to an analysis of some mistakes in Plato's philosophy, corrected using new points of view from the perspective proposed in philosophical writings – for example, Irigaray (1993). The section argues that Plato inaugurated the Western anti-humanist tradition and should be reconsidered. Its task is to expose Plato's critique of the non-erotic and anti-corporeal, a reading that seeks inspiration in reinterpreting works such as *The Republic*; it renegotiates often-overlooked polemics concerning doctrines against totemism from medieval theologians.

Among other things, we see in *The Republic* that Plato has a theory of Forms wherein higher perfect Forms, barely related, if at all, to material entities, serve as the archetypes for everything. The most important Forms are those that represent eternal truths, as opposed to the mutability of our sensory experience. Philosophers, says Plato, demand knowledge of these permanent truths and escape sensory appearance to concentrate on the nature of things. This pursuit is philosophical in that it differs from those who are only concerned with superficial appearances and objectifiable sensory experiences because they tend to emphasise a thirst for mastery of knowledge rather than understanding or insight into what Plato appears to call details about Forms (Plato et al. 2009:195).

During the Middle Ages, Plato's theory of Forms came to be associated with a triumphant dualism that ignored the material world entirely, which was not what he had in mind. Plato, who considered material entities as our way to grasp the Forms, interconnected the two worlds. This subtlety in Plato's thought was much neglected through later philosophical reinterpretations. In *The Republic*, Plato relates the Allegory of the Cave to capture how people progress from misunderstanding common views on material reality to discovering deeper forms of truth or knowledge. This allegory implies that Plato felt the material world of phenomena should be seen as a beginning rather than worthless when gaining knowledge of Forms. While medieval philosophers might have reduced this complex relationship to a binary opposition, they may also have missed some of the nuance in Plato's philosophy.

Plato's philosophy, meanwhile, seems to delve into the realm of mysteries. He distinguishes between the sensible material world apprehended using our senses and what he calls 'the intelligible noetic cosmos' with reason. He believed that the world of Forms was perfect and that the empirical 'material' world is only an imperfect reflection or instantiation of these same ideals. Therefore, the material world is a shadow reflection of ideal perfect Forms.

Here, Cornford (1922) explains this Pythagorean view of the world as dualistic; both material and human flesh are inferior to the divine. The soul and the Ideas are in a higher, divine sphere; therefore, their true character is being from God and being good. He opines that the soul is mired in material filthiness while it inhabits a body. Therefore, purity is required for its ascension to God. The stark difference between the material and the divine is laid bare in this perspective.[13]

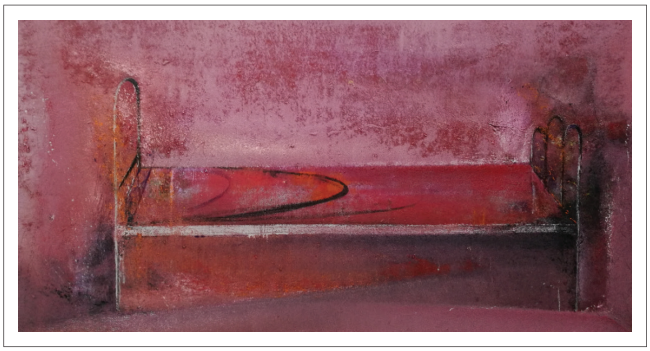
This makes it more of an interaction, a sharing or participation between the material and ideal worlds, as proposed by Delport (2020:233), than anything resembling a strictly binary dualism. It posits that the two realms are interpenetrating and influencing one another, so much so that the material world could be said to actively participate in an ideal reality rather than simply being a reflection of the other. This interpretation leads to a more interconnected reading of Plato's metaphysics.

Cooper presents a panpsychist and theologically rich ecological view that is friendly to the body (2015:125). He questions the commonsense dichotomy of matter and body as lower; instead, he claims that the material world is perfect since it was made by a wholly beneficent God, and he speaks positively about both soul and flesh in their coexistence serving definitive value.[14] This perspective underscores the physicality of our being and the dynamic interaction between God and the universe.

What has arisen from Plato to modern scholarship is a fluid, intricate Platonic dualism. This progression informs us how the material and ideal worlds are related, transcending dualism toward an interdependency that influences not only these two realms but also our understanding of them. This development of thought can be seen as a diversified and deepened perspective between materialistic and idealistic worldviews.

13. Original text: 'From God it came, and to God it will return. But only on condition of becoming pure. So long as it is imprisoned in the bodily tomb, it is impure, tainted by the evil substance of the body' (Cornford 1922:141). There is a similar viewpoint in the article about the immortality of the soul and the constraints of the material world: 'in its other aspect, as a harmony of its own three parts, with its own peculiar concord, virtue. When disembodied, it would temporarily lose the former function, but would remain a harmony in the second sense, more or less well tuned according as it departs this life more or less' pure' (Cornford 1922:149). These citations emphasise the oppositional relationship between the soul and body, further highlighting the author's negative attitude towards the physical body.

14. Cooper (2015) discusses the concept of spirit-mind-body existence: how the life of the spirit encompasses the life of the soul, which includes the mind and body, but not as a reality separate from the soul. This perspective, influenced by thinkers like Paul Tillich, presents the body as a part of the structure of existence that encompasses all functions. Refer to the citation from Tillich as quoted by Cooper: 'Life as spirit is the life of the soul, which includes mind and body, but not as realities alongside the soul. … It is the all-embracing function in which all elements of the structure of being participate (Cooper 2015:206)'.



Source: © Artist: Yan, Z., 2019, Red Bed (*Oil painting*), (120 cm × 220 cm), Private collection

FIGURE 2: Red Bed.

In *The Republic*, Plato considers artistic creations as imitations of the Forms. Works of art are representations, and so is much of the material world; therefore, they cannot mislead us. Plato illustrates this with a triple imitation of the bed: an ideal Form, which is a god-made form; the physical bed crafted by artisans, which deviates from the ideal; and finally, the bed represented in paint, another variance away from perfection. This ordered concept emphasises the degrees of reality and truth that are implicit in Plato's philosophy.

The present study will examine the artwork of modern times, *Red Bed*, to further explain Plato's theory on the bed (Figure 2). A bed in all its materiality and *Red Bed*, created by the author of this study, also depict how an object can extend to a realm beyond where it came from. At a third level of artistic creation, *Red Bed* as an artifact is not merely an iconographic representation of a bed but also an image – and an abstraction from the divine Form – in the most general biological sense we can make of it. Through its red colour and artistry, the piece reflects on this balance or imbalance of matter and spirit: reality depicted versus imagination implied.

Red Bed is a visual representation through which we translate and experiment with an ancient philosophical idea of Plato – the theory of triple imitation in contemporary art. For the viewer who encounters *Red Bed*, not only would they see the form of a bed but also be guided to reflect upon and resonate with the world represented through the creation.

This exposition of Plato's ontological stratification – a carefully articulated taxonomy delineating different levels or modes of proximity to the truth – underpins his theory about the interplay between images and truth. Plato posited that images or art cannot reach the truth. This view was to have an immense effect on medieval theology. Plato considered that art had to be *mimesis*, an imitation of the material world, and as it belongs to the imperfect copy of reality he called the 'Forms'; in other words, this meant an insurmountable methodological abyss between art and truth according to Plato's philosophy.

Later in the medieval period, this conception of totems would evolve into full-blown suspicion and denial of images – a milestone moment concerning totem understanding. Medieval theologians – following this lead, as it were – saw the material world and art or images themselves to be a couple of steps removed from either truth and redemption on the one hand (there is but One True God revealed in Jesus) or eternal Idea or archetype on orthodoxy's other side. These interpretations also led to attributing a constricting nature to religious symbols like totems and somewhat similar ownership of reality, with even less positive views on bodily assimilation. As a direct result, it provided an intellectual justification for the theological debates of medieval times: in doubting all forms of representation – idolatry and totemism – it cast shade over materiality and artistic production.

However, if our horizon expands into the most remote areas of Plato's philosophical thought, we realise that his theory does not necessarily outlaw images or art. In this section, we have already traced the historical complexity of medieval theology as distortion or reinterpretation continues to trace backward through Plato's philosophy.

Medieval theological discussion was pervaded by Plato's dialogues on the transcendent 'Forms' and mind-body dualism. As Koterski writes (2008:105–106), Plato's religious and sacred ideas are not merely remnants; they were transformed into compatible faith imperatives by the medieval church fathers and teachers. Plato's creator speaks of eternal Forms (models for composition on Earth), while medieval thinkers say that God is the only cause, unencumbered by anything from without … and so forth. The creators responded that Forms exist in the mind of God, not as distinct beings, and they were just seeing how the Creator creates. While ameliorating it a little from Plato, this softened dualism is still existential – with adverse religious narratives of totems reflecting upon the negative attitudes toward material entities and corporeality held sincerely, introduced by Platonic antecedents.[15] As a result, the chasm was established – the fabric of this supplementary narrative shed this undercurrent subtly upon all subsequent theological plots.

One might refer to Irigaray (1993), who delivered a fundamentally felicitous and precise feminist critique of Plato's treatment of gender. Through such works as *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (Irigaray 1999), she examines the erasure of sexual specificity from 3000 years of Western philosophy and the suppression into invisibility of female subjectivity. Like many, Irigaray contends that Plato systematises a diacritical gender difference according to which women are excluded, and figures such as Diotima become marginal figures or simply players in the philosophical discourse reserved for men like Socrates.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), Irigaray observes that in the *Symposium*, Diotima is narrated by Socrates, never speaking with her own voice. This is a view that reveals

15. Although the medieval rejection of idolatry was primarily rooted in biblical critique, Plato's scepticism towards artistic representation and the material world also played a role. Plato believed that artworks are imitations of reality, and reality itself is an imitation of the ideal forms (Plato 'Republic', Book X, 597e). This perspective influenced medieval theologians, making them cautious about the material world and artistic representation. Augustine frequently cited Plato's ideas in '*City of God*' to critique idolatry (Augustine '*City of God*', Book VIII, Chapter 5).

deep-seated feelings of femininity being marginalised, overlooked and dismissed in the history of Plato. Instead, Irigaray insists that Socrates fails to have a comprehensive understanding of love as taught by Diotima, implying that 'eros' is conceptually elusive. This ignorance is part of the personal but also philosophical and cultural; it shows how deeply women's experiences, as well as their bodies, have been left out of the male-centred system.[16] Irigaray's critique extends not only to male philosophical texts individually but along the trajectory of Western philosophy. Since Plato, Western philosophy has always been constructed according to a system in which reason is an abstract activity transcending subjective experience – and it is this structure that she contends represents male thought. This explains the status of the female experience and the body, which are considered erratic, sensualist and material by qualification compared to reason and transcendence. In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), Irigaray claims that this binary antagonism not only forecloses the possibility of female subjectivity but also impoverishes and simplifies male subjectivity.

O'Brien (2021) similarly comments on Plato's representation of Socrates, which is presented as being essentially devoid of sexual desire. This representation not only reduces Socrates's erotic nature to nothing but implies, in effect, an evasion of gender and sexual questions. Plato may go so far as to invite us to consider whether Socrates is ill-suited – as well as unreliable in his testimony – to grasp what would play the erotic passion of philosophy (O'Brien 2021:21). This perspective agrees with Irigaray's criticism, which shows Plato's philosophy's gendered and limited aspects.

The Irigaray criticism has exhausted one subfield of contemporary feminist philosophy. Most feminist theorists see Irigaray's work as having at least partly and discomfortingly unveiled the systematic obfuscation of gender in philosophy, presenting us with a necessary stopping point for re-evaluating what is inherent to philosophical inquiry. Her critique disrupts Platonic philosophy and the philosophical tradition in general, asking how philosophers understand gender (and the body) as an element of philosophical significance.

From here, we may continue to consider how Irigaray's critique helps us unlock the truth about medieval representations of matter and body. Medieval theologians derived from the Platonic dichotomy saw matter and body as lower. They adopted this view entirely because of Platonic thought, which ignored the divine goodness and beauty manifesting through material existence. Here, Irigaray's critique serves as a reminder that the lack of consideration for gender and body is not just a philosophical concern but also clearly theological, broadly affecting our metaphysical view regarding the material world, including bodies.

16.Irigaray (1993) describes Diotima's role in the chapter 'Sorcerer Love': Diotima. She does not take part in these exchanges or in this meal among men. She is not there. She herself does not speak. Socrates reports or recounts her words' (Irigaray 1993:20). Irigaray (1993:24). Irigaray further explores the concept of love, emphasising: Love is thus an intermediary between pairs of opposites: poverty/plenty, ignorance/wisdom, ugliness/beauty, dirtiness/ cleanliness, death/life, and so on. And this would be inscribed in his nature given his genealogy and the date of his conception. And love is a philosopher and a philosophy. Philosophy is not a formal learning, fixed and rigid, abstracted from all feeling.

Platonic theology, biological totems and divinity

Medieval theology and the hierarchy of beings

The material (primarily biological) reality was often considered farther from the truth in medieval theological discussions. Medieval theologians regarded totem worship as 'idolatry of primitive tribes', inevitably perceiving the fetishistic reverence for individual animals or plants, sanctified by their practical use, as problematic. Such worship was considered an innovation in religion or an archetype. Moreover, they held totemism and idolatry in ill-repute since this kind of worship was regarded as evincing a negative attitude towards the physical. This metaphysical position became the theoretical foundation of medieval theological discussions, introducing uncertainty about idolatry or totemic foundations.

However, this interpretation of the 'Great Chain of Being' seems somewhat random, as if the hierarchy of value were determined by how much a being resembles humans or divine images.[17] Humans were considered the most divine-like, while all other living beings were thought to be fundamentally separate from the sacred, and thus placed lower, where humans could subdue them.

On the gender critique of human and non-human dualism, Haraway (2013) and Wolfe (ed. 2003) both offer substantial insights. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (2013), Haraway theorises the cyborg as a way to dismantle normative binary oppositions by suggesting an identity that is hybridised from both human and machine, allowing this identity to transcend gender divides. Wolfe (ed. 2003) considers human-animal relationships to be influenced by gender and power dynamics. The subject of species discourse, which questions the role humans play in understanding monsters, reflects inherently regulatory distinctions and selfish intentions. In *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (2003), Wolfe challenges biological determinism regarding humans and animals. Wolfe (2003) also cites Derrida (2002), who in *Eating Well* [18] critiques the Western philosophical tradition's 'carno-phallogocentrism'.[19] Derrida and Wills

17.Plato's theory of forms divides the world into the 'forms', which are completely real, and the 'sensory things' that imitate them. Aristotle, through his teleology, posits the existence of a supreme perfect being and classifies animals according to the perfection of their souls. This concept of the 'Great Chain of Being' was further developed in Neoplatonism and the medieval period. For related perspectives, see Bunnin and Yu (2009:289).

18.Jacques Derrida's essay 'Eating Well' (originally titled *Manger bien*) was first published in his book *Specters of Marx*, a widely recognised philosophical work that explores the legacy of Marxism and the effects of globalisation. This essay represents an important discussion by Derrida on ethics, law, and our relationship with animals, particularly in the context of moral and political philosophy concerning the act of eating (Derrida 1994).

19.'Carno-phallogocentrism' in Derrida's usage refers to a Western philosophical tendency to combine logos with corporeality and male power structures: (1) *Carno-*: Derived from Latin 'caro', meaning 'flesh'. (2) *Phallo-*: Derived from Greek 'phallos', meaning 'phallus', commonly associated with masculinity and power symbols in cultural theory. (3) *Logocentrism*: In Derrida's philosophy, refers to the central position and obsession with 'logos' (speech, reason, logic) in Western philosophy. Based on my understanding and considering the context of philosophical and ethical studies: (1) *Corporeal-logocentrism*: This translation simplifies the 'phallus' aspect, focusing more on the combination of flesh and logos but losing the critique of gender power structures. (2) *Carnal-logocentrism*: This translation attempts to metaphorically combine gender and power through 'carnal' while maintaining the critique of logos. Given Derrida's critical stance and his deconstruction of the Western philosophical tradition, a translation that encompasses critiques of gender, power, and reason might be more appropriate. Thus, 'carnal-logocentrism' might be more suitable.

(2002) argue that *logos* threatens the *Lebenswelt* with violence by collapsing the multiplicity of life into one universal 'animal'. This position states that human moral transcendence and superiority justify the sacrifice of animals for spiritual gains, positioning animals as occupying a 'lower state'.[20]

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, Derrida and Wills (2002) summarise several of the traditional philosophical approaches illustrated by Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lacan and Levinas. He critiques these philosophers for seeing animals as tools rather than as subjects of perception or response. Derrida and Wills (2002) philosophically ground the critique of the essential human-animal separation, thus questioning the hierarchical grading of beings.

Christian platonic theology and divine diversity

While the medieval theological worldview downgrades material life based on its theoretical backgrounds, modern studies present Christian Platonism, which affirms the value of all life forms, including humans. We should not demean or lower the existence of other beings and creatures based on traditional hierarchies. Instead, we should recognise that every creature embodies divinity in its own way and possesses intrinsic moral worth. When considering the impact of human life in Scheler's expanded sense, alongside non-human entities – from rocks and trees to goldfish or viruses – on fewer-than-all humans, as well as all other creatures, from an explicitly theological perspective, Jähnichen suggests: 'From a theological perspective, humans and all other living beings are closely connected and jointly embedded in creation'.[21] Thus, he argues that human behaviour should be grounded in ethical considerations towards other living beings and not used as an excuse to justify hierarchical systems.

Jähnichen (2021) highlights the shortcomings of common theological interpretations in two key ways: they are heavily anthropocentric and largely ignore the intrinsic worth and inviolability of creatures other than humans. This perspective provides a tool to reframe the critique of the 'Great Chain of Being', emphasising the need to move beyond anthropocentric hierarchies.

It challenges anthropocentric attitudes by questioning the assumption that humans occupy the highest rank. This shift helps us to reconsider our place and value compared to other creatures on Earth. Unfortunately, projecting anthropomorphic traits onto the divine distorts our understanding, making humans poor validators of divinity in other species. This bias stems from our predisposition to empathise more with beings closer to us. While our relationship with the divine may grant humanity a certain value, this does not mean it serves as God's measure of divinity – other beings reflect the divine in their own unique ways.

As Wallace (2020) writes, Christianity is, at its core, an animist religion that takes pleasure in its many god-birds – or bird-gods. From this vantage point, organic life is seen as a mirror of God in its manner. As Jähnichen (2021) notes, we should not place a lesser value on the existence of other beings based on traditional hierarchical values, while Wallace (2020) argues that each being reveals divinity through its countless forms. Hierarchical comparisons typically evaluate beings based on a single characteristic, such as rationality or spirituality. However, a more honest evaluation acknowledges the various manifestations of divinity. God incarnates in many forms, such as humans, birds and other living beings, all possessing unique attributes and modes of existence.

Wallace (2020) theorises a dual incarnation of God, with Jesus as a human and birds representing the Holy Spirit. By embracing this diversity, we can develop a more expansive and inclusive appreciation of God-given reality, acknowledging not only how divine connectedness is experienced differently by various beings but also exploring the unique and relative ways in which life forms connect with divinity:

> My point is that a thoroughgoing incarnational model of Christianity sees no division between the God of the biblical texts, on the one hand, and the sacred and divinized character of creation, on the other. Indeed, the two affirmations mutually support each other. In this regard, dialectically speaking, God and nature are one. Here I have sought to show that Christianity is a faith that celebrates the embodiment of God in many forms – and not only in human form in the person of Jesus but also in animal form in the person of the Spirit. Christianity, as I have suggested, is a religion of double incarnation: in a twofold movement, God becomes flesh in both humankind and otherkind. Just as God became human in Jesus, thereby signaling that human beings are the enfleshment of God's presence, so also by becoming avian in the Spirit, God signals that other-than-human beings are also the realization of God's presence. (Wallace 2020:85)

Source: © Author: Zhang, A., 2024, God and Birds (watercolor), (40cm x 25cm), Private collection

Note: The middle section depicts various types of birds, illustrating the manifestation of God in the natural world.

FIGURE 3: *God and Birds* features a luminous abstract representation of God at the top, labeled 'God'.

20 Wolfe (ed. 2003). In *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, Wolfe explores the blurred boundaries between humans and animals and their implications for our understanding of life and ethics through a series of essays. He critiques human privilege and traditional value hierarchies, emphasising the interconnectedness and ethical responsibilities between humans and animals. See Wolfe (2003:23).

21 Because, from a theological perspective, human beings exist a close relationship to all other creatures, being as it were 'embedded' in creation, they must therefore preserve the ethos of their fellow creatures in their actions (Jähnichen 2021).

This theory emphasises a sacred and corporeal unity, where the body and soul are inseparable. In Christian incarnation theology, God does not distinguish between his nature and the natural world. This is evident not only in Jesus as a human but also in animals, where God is incarnated as the Holy Spirit. This dual incarnation underscores that the divine is present not only in humans but also in non-human creation: birds of the air, fish of the sea, beasts of the field, inanimate objects and wooded trees (see Figure 3). At its core, Christianity asserts that God is fully immanent and incarnate in human form, with nature reflecting his divinity in countless shapes. In all its varied forms, fauna symbolises the inherent link between God and His creation.

Traditional Christian perspectives, especially the dualism that separates matter and spirit, are criticised by Wallace (2020). He contends that such dualism fails to recognise the sacredness of nature and advocates for a newly emergent theology of nature, which situates material reality within a framework of natural sanctity. Aquinas (1947), in a similar argument from the *Summa Theologica*,[22] critiques some of Plato's views, asserting that forms exist within individual entities rather than outside them. Aquinas rejected Plato's idea of the independent existence of forms, arguing that forms are wholly connected to their material aspects:

> Hence, we must say that the distinction and multitude of things come from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever. (Aquinas 1947:Issue 47: 1046)

Aquinas (1947) argues that goodness comes from God, who is the fundamental reality and the source of all good. All things in the universe are founded upon him. God cannot express his goodness as an isolated entity because he is the essence of all things. Thus, goodness is diverse and distributed among various living beings. As a result, God created diverse life forms suited to embody His goodness.

We can compare this to the Sun, which represents total goodness, radiating fire just like our world's sun. Angels, humans, and all living beings receive will and benevolence from the heat of this Sun. Each creature receives God's goodness according to its capacity, form and proper disposition.

In a broad sense, Christian Platonic theology has long projected a hierarchical structure. We argue that this approach is flawed. Both Aquinas (1947) and recent scholarship in Christian Platonism suggest that no corporeal creatures or natural entities serve a higher purpose than living beings and humans. Specifically, the goodness of God is imparted to natural beings in varying degrees and forms. Aquinas (1947) developed a framework critiquing Plato's transcendent dualism, insisting on the existence of forms within individual entities. Wallace (2020) and Jähnichen expanded on this, proposing a concept of dual incarnation, in which God manifests not only as a human but also through the manifold forms of nature. These perspectives remind us that when considering nature and living beings, we must detach from traditional hierarchies and recognise the sacredness of each form of life.

Reconstructing the dualism in Platonic theology

In this sense, the creation value of totems and ecological wholes shared a common framework with Christian Platonic theology, in which both individual entities were seen as possessing some indwelling divine presence reconciling biological organisms like salmon or the Thunderbird and divinity. This reading also denies the notions of human attachment to a divine image likened to a hierarchical order that gives ethical value simply because we are human and living beings. It permits a theological critique of those value hierarchies. Aquinas's (2014) and Wallace's (2020) studies show that every living thing has a unique copy of creation, each designed to manifest divine energy in its own way. It highlights the need for biodiversity and views it from a theological perspective.[23]

However, despite the ethical commitments of this viewpoint, it also faces particular challenges. Two extreme cases warrant attention:

Totemic beings and human equality

To the extent that all of nature is seen as being in balance with humanity, this angle implies equal rights for non-humans and humans alike – for example, the right to life. However, does current tribal totem worship represent an excessive pursuit of the divinity within itself, treating it as a God responsible for heavy or wrongful conduct, worshipped only in certain aspects, and entering into material forms as divine blossoms, until even a lost god outside replaces nothing yet again? As in many tribal rites, a given beast is venerated, as if it were an angel or an interchangeable relative. In Australian indigenous communities, natural elements symbolise their territorial bonds to animals or nature; in the sky, they trace star trails. In the same way, totems are connected with their spiritual affinities, such as in American tribes. These are more than merely symbolic totems; they are living conduits of

22.Specifically, the publication year for Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* should reflect the period during which it was written, approximately 1265–1274 AD. As I was unable to find the original publication dates, the works cited in the text are from the current editions, specifically the 1947 version of Aquinas' work.

23.When discussing the distinctions between Incarnation, the Platonic idea of things reflecting divine goodness, and Pantheism, it is essential to clarify the uniqueness of these concepts. Incarnation, a core doctrine in Christian theology, refers to God becoming human through Jesus Christ, manifesting concretely in history. Plato's theory of forms posits that the material world reflects eternal and unchanging ideas, emphasising the relationship between the material and the ideal world. Pantheism asserts that God and the universe are one, viewing everything as part of God, and emphasises the omnipresence of divinity in all things. Although these three concepts differ in their specific meanings and expressions, they all address the relationship between divinity and the world, acknowledging that the material world reflects divinity in some way.

spiritual power and identity expressed through collective myth that transcends mere names, faces or narratives. In this respect, totems are not merely ancestor spirits or wisdom bringers but may be worshipped in the form of religious beliefs and practices; each sacred substance plays a role through dreams as well as oneiric rituals that include all sorts of sacred (and random) media mysteriously interacting with humans – offering political guidance and general enlightenment for faithful followers. Another angle, though, is one that readers should pause longer before assessing.

Biblical prohibition of idolatry

The Bible explicitly condemns the worship of idols, with God prohibiting and expressing anger towards such practices:

> You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me. (Ex:3–5, The Ten Commandments, NKJV)
>
> Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it. I am the Lord your God. (Lev 26:1, NKJV)
>
> Cursed is anyone who makes an idol – a thing detestable to the Lord, the work of skilled hands – and sets it up in secret. (Dt 27:15, NKJV)
>
> Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. (Rm 1:22–23, NKJV)

These passages are often cited (as in the first section on the debate about totem worship among medieval theologians) as proof that idols and idolatry, from their beginnings onward, are condemned by God, who is angered unto punishment. However, based on a literal reading of such passages, the medieval theological rejection of idolatry (to which totemism would inescapably be linked) created an obtuseness towards the totality and other living things. This literal interpretation took the commandment not to make an idol – 'You shall not make for yourself a carved image' – and turned it into its most extreme form, thereby unnecessarily shunning all totemic associations. They are not taken seriously if our theory is true.

We can understand this standpoint by exploring two main perspectives: the flow of divinity and its effect on beings – both biological and human. For starters, divine multiplicity and sharing are incompatible with an anthropomorphised divinity held in singular stasis. Living beings and the natural world are material in form. However, they contribute to a process of being that continues into the Divine (Moltmann 1985). Swedenborg (2014) claims that living beings are the most divine and part of the divine flow, while humankind is a particular type of divinity. This way of thinking allows us to consider the animals that humans count among their companions from a much more nuanced perspective, rather than merely determining them in an absolute hierarchy or demanding pure equality regarding divine responsiveness.

First reason: Early ancient myths or Totemic symbols and the generativity of God

During the Middle Ages, the thoughts of ancient Greek philosophy, especially those of leading figures in that field like Plato and Aristotle, profoundly influenced theological discussion. Nevertheless, the Platonic dualism of the material world and the ideal world from his time was oversimplified, resulting in frequent misunderstandings. In their debates on totem worship, which are covered in greater detail in that section, it is helpful to illustrate a common aspect here: dualism often comes across as an attack against materiality. However, this misreading helped theologians generate the wrong thinking about symbolic entities like totems, demanding a more deconstructive re-evaluation of these intellectual legacies.

A liberal Christian theologian, Moltmann (1985), has observed acutely that the dualistic readings of Platonic doctrines are problematic in his theological work *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*:

> This distinction between God and the world was also seized on by modern theological apologetics as a way of adapting the biblical traditions to the secularizing processes of modern European times. The ruthless conquest and exploitation of nature which fascinated Europe during this period found its appropriate religious legitimation in that ancient distinction between God and the world. (Moltmann 1985:13–14)

This passage tells us that Moltmann (1985) regards the relationship between God and the material world as not dualistic at all. He tries to break this dualism by stressing God's immanence, suggesting an ecological theological perspective that sees nature as a sacred creation and communing entity that shares life with God.

The symbolic schemas crafted by those early ancient humans, like the Great Earth Mother (or Gaia), might be described as mythical panentheism – all in God. Building on these concepts, Moltmann (1985) in his book *God in Creation* proposes the ideas of 'mythical schema' and 'symbolic scheme', explaining how everything within creation interrelates with one another through the divine:

> The interpretation of the world which emerges right down the line, from the symbol of the World Mother to the symbol of the redeeming cosmic human being, Christ, is the panentheistic understanding of the world as the sheltering and nurturing divine environment for everything living: in him we live and move and have our being' (*Acts* 17.28). Scientifically, this ancient symbol of the world led to the Gaia hypothesis which I have already described: all higher forms of life on earth develop in multi-layered system-environments … With this thesis they have called into play elements of truth in the ancient symbol of the world as 'Gaia', the World Mother, Mother Earth. (Moltmann 1985:300)

The preceding paragraph provides an example of how ancient human archaic and animistic conception and spirit apprehension were incorporated into the Christian frame throughout history. However, rejecting totem worship does not imply that the tradition developed from nothing – indeed, for their medieval contemporaries, this can be seen as a form of pseudo-historical interpretation, elaborately constructed. The medieval church's efforts to eliminate every possible pagan element were aimed at keeping doctrine pure. This rejection of totem worship is partly because of the desire for ideological purity and fear that syncretism would spread heretical beliefs.

The change from the symbol 'Mother of the World' to redemptive cosmic Christ represents panentheism's continual contouring and recontouring (reimagination) throughout history. Firstly, early human devotionals to matriarchal graven images (animals) functioned as primordial emblematic tropes: the world was conceived on a grand scale as Gaia, 'The Mother World', where every life form is created by maternal forces. Secondly, Moltmann (1985) shows how this symbolism was not merely absorbed but transformed in the history of Christianity. In the Stoic account of natural philosophy, the world was God's body (from which proceeded Imperial theology), and Christian soteriology conceives this as a 'cosmic Adam'.

Here, symbolism coincided with a message that found modern scientific expression in the Gaia hypothesis. This message proclaimed that life forms on Earth should be seen as having developed within multilayered systemic environments, reintroducing the concept of 'the Mother of all things', combined with an emphasis on holistic sacredness.

As interpreted by Moltmann (1985), early goddess worship and totemic symbols carried a very deep understanding of the world and life, which in turn was acknowledged as redeemed within the Christian idea. He claims that these early symbols were not simply discarded in the development of religion and culture but remained powerful resources. Hence, the medieval rejection of totem worship may have been born out of a misconstrual and reductionism regarding Pagan culture.

Humans and nature, made by God, all share in his Glory, as ecological theology leads us to infer. The creatures interact and exist for one another as part of creation, playing their roles in manifesting the glory of God. Moltmann (1985) goes to great lengths to critique the anthropocentric, one-sided nature of Christian creation theology, hoping for present-day cognisance and wonder at all God produces. He critiques the dualistic oppositions in Platonic theology and offers a communicative and participatory, evolutionary, process-oriented theological position as an alternative. Theology holds that the divine is not one image permanently fixed in stone but manifests continuously and through ever-changing forms.

The second reason is the dynamic cosmology associated with early ancient human idolatry

In the context of Platonic dualism and the overlap of philosophy and theology, Swedenborg (2014), a Swedish philosopher and mystic, also holds great importance. The highly imaginative and debatable ideas of Swedenborg (2014) were also reported by 'parallel cultures', an impossible mecca to listeners that, if aggregated together, would form a civilisation, with mainstream science believers having equivalents to the faithful religious devotees who believe in spirits over matter. On the other hand, Swedenborg (2014) discovered a way to harmonise science and religion, for there was no duality between them in his eyes.

Swedenborg (2014) coordinated between the material and immaterial aspects of existence, thus weakening dualism. This serves as a precise rendering of the Christian teaching on Incarnation, proposing that life and spirit are united. This perspective challenges the traditional dualistic worldview and offers an alternative way to gain more comprehensive knowledge concerning how these two realms, physical and divine, interconnect:

> In short, we understand the connection between heaven and the world and their corresponding relationships. The Lord's Kingdom is one that aims for 'altruism', 'and thus the divine created the universe to manifest its 'usefulness '(i.e., contribution) in material form, initially in the heavens and then extending gradually to the lowest things in the natural world. This demonstrates that the correspondence between the natural and spiritual realms, or between the world and the heavens, is established through 'altruism'. In the Lord's heaven, everything created according to order is an external form of its use and result. This is also why all things that arise there have corresponding relationships. (Swedenborg 2014:69–70)

Hence, the theory of parallelism is a modern rendering of this ancient philosophical view that nature reigns and becomes an 'arena' where phenomena occur because there are no strict boundaries between naturalistic power and supernatural powers. The mind is to the body as the spirit is to nature. Every natural feature must correspond to a spiritual relationship, discovered through how it functions and is used. Swedenborg (2014) closely relates the natural world to the spiritual world through his theory of correspondence.

Swedenborg (2014), at some level, critiques and re-interprets the traditional Platonic dualism about the relationship of the spiritual to the natural world. The philosophy of Swedenborg (2014) suggests an interaction between the spiritual world and nature, proposing a more fluid cosmological framework than Plato, who sharply divides forms from phenomena. Swedenborg (2014) conceptualised an energetic cosmology where nature and humans functioned in partnership rather than humans being at the top using what they needed from any part labelled as nothing but 'stuff'. Likewise, he argues that divinity streams and animates animals equally as well as men.

We argue that Swedenborg (2014) and Moltmann (1985) embrace the notion of divine diversity and participation, questioning fixations on divinity in its static singularity. Their ideas are based on humans' interaction with nature, and they dismiss any hierarchical beliefs in beings above or below them.

This suggests that they would not support two opposing extreme positions: either that all totemic beings are perfectly interchangeable with humans – that is, absolutely identical categories of existence (all living creatures should have equal rights equivalent to those accorded human protection) – or that survivors from old tribal traditions lose their forest wealth in a total biodiversity sprawl while continuing to adore only the outer appearances of former totems without recognising their divine inner boundlessness. They prioritise an interactive and fulfilling relationship that respects the sanctity and otherness of beings and recognises the divine relation of dominion to humans.

In one interpretation of Platonism, we find a different paradigm that underscores a new theological appreciation for premodern totemic symbolism. This totem worship and its art, which has always been misunderstood for Platonic reasons in the past, was often branded as a lie. However, if we return to the criticisms of dualist opposition in Christian Platonic theology made by Moltmann (1985) and Swedenborg (2014), this imagery makes more sense.

Moltmann (1985) and Swedenborg (2014) also criticise the one-dimensional opposition in ancient Greek philosophy, especially from Plato and Aristotle. This dualism divides the material from the ideal worlds absolutely and separates fleshly from spiritual life forms, thus degrading worldly value. Both of them, in turn, stress a more fluid and interactive cosmology. According to Moltmann (1985), the theology of all living things is incorporated within a single divine nature, and this process occurs interactively in dialogue with one another. On the other hand, Swedenborg (2014) likes to see living beings and humans as not high above God but rather intimately connected with divinity, which means being part of the divine flow. Such critiques of classical Platonic ideas and sacred totemism can aid us in our quest to avoid negative views concerning the sacred fool. The people have totemic markers, but the totems are less like iconography and more like portraits in process – each living being is part of divinity within an interactive natural world.

As Darr (2024) explains, contrary to appearances, this non-hierarchical view is better grounded in Christian Platonic theology. This perspective denies the traditional dualism and hierarchical systems, underlining that all living beings have an intrinsic sacred worth. The writer further argues that the old 'Great Chain of Being' not only allowed humans to dominate non-human creatures but also used animals as an excuse to justify racialism and colonial violence. Integrating Darr's non-hierarchical view offers a better approach to seeing all entities as carrying divinity in some manner, which is also similar to Moltmann's (1985) and Swedenborg's (2014) interactive and evolving cosmology.

Following these notions through medieval scholastic philosophy, we can see that what has previously been written off as pagan symbols (totemic beliefs, for instance) are reconsidered rather than summarily dismissed. In this way, the totemic beings back then were more like gods than we are organic, and only by bowing our heads all at once can we realise how deeply rooted the living things around us are in the divine life. This is an ethical protection of biological rights and the recognition that some see them as belonging to a divine-flow category. Thus, we not only refrain from rationalising the natural or material but also re-interrogate biological totems (and their role in the ecological whole) by way of theological and philosophical consideration.

Conclusion

By examining Christian Platonic theology and medieval theologians' critique of totemic or idol worship, one finds an intrinsic value for biological totems within religious philosophy. Although Christian Platonic theology has historically proven to be a dualistic system that emphasised tension between matter and spirit, contemporary scholars have reinterpreted this classical philosophy by shifting the perspective. Totems are no longer mute artifacts or religious insignia; they bridge the divine and earthly within medieval mysticism.

The theories of scholars such as Moltmann (1985) and Swedenborg (2014) propose a departure from traditional dualistic discourses, explaining that all living things, including their habitats, are interconnected with the universe infused by spiritual processes, which are dynamic in nature. When we do so, they claim that we will need to dismantle this hierarchy to perceive the divine power residing within nature and its inhabitants.

Recognising the divine within and among a diverse and participatory process in this way means that we are morally mandated to decentre dominant academic and religious narratives, which allow for access only through marginal perceptions of iconic or hallucinogenic imagery. We urgently need to rewrite the stories that have marginalised totems.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are extended to the Shanghai Academy of drama for its support for the publication of the article.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Z.Y. made important contributions to the concept. A.Z. contributed to the writing, design of the subject, data acquisition, analysis or interpretation, and made key modifications to important knowledge content.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

Funding information

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

Aquinas, S.T., 2014, *Summa theologica*, Catholic Way Publishing, London.

Aquinas, T., 1947, *Summa theologica*, vol. 1, Benziger Brothers, New York, NY.

Bede, 1969, *The Ecclesiastical history of the English People*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Bunnin, N. & Yu, J., 2009, *The Blackwell dictionary of Western philosophy*, p. 289, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden.

Calvin, J., 1909, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: By John Calvin*, Presbyterian Board of Publication, Philadelphia.

Cooper, J.W., 2015, *Panentheism--The other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present*, Baker Academic, Ada, Michigan.

Cornford, F.M., 1922, 'Mysticism and science in the Pythagorean tradition', *The Classical Quarterly* 16(3–4), 137–150. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838800002718

Darr, R. 2024, 'The great web of being: Environmental ethics without value hierarchy', *Religions* 15(5), 520.

Delport, K.M., 2020, 'Towards a Platonic critique of ideology: On method and metaphysics', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 6(4), 213–246. https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n4.a9

Derrida, J. & Wills, D., 2002, 'The animal that therefore I am (more to follow)', *Critical Inquiry* 28(2), 369–418. https://doi.org/10.1086/449046

Derrida, J., 1994, *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the New International*, transl. P. Kamuf, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxfordshire.

Durkheim, É., 2006, *Les formes élementaires de la vie religieuse* 宗教生活的基本形式, Shanghai People's Publishing House 上海人民出版社, Shanghai.

Eliade, M., 1959, *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion*, vol. 81, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston.

Harlan, V. & Beuys, J., 2012, *What is art? Conversation with Joseph Beuys*, Clairview Books, Clairview Books, East Sussex.

Haraway, D., 2013, *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*, Routledge, New York, NY/London.

Irenaeus, S. & Dillon, J.J., 1992, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons against the Heresies*, vol. 1, The Newman Press, New York, NY.

Irigaray, L., 1993, *An ethics of sexual difference*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Irigaray, L., 1985, *This sex which is not one*, Cornell university press, Ithaca, NY.

Irigaray, L., 1999, *The forgetting of air in Martin Heidegger*, University of Texas Press, Austin.

Jähnichen, T., 2021, 'Respect for every living being–Theological perspectives on the bioethical imperative', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(3), a6775. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6775

James, W., 2012, *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*, Huaxia Publishing House, Beijing.

Koterski, J.W., 2008, *An introduction to medieval philosophy: Basic concepts*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA.

Lévi-Strauss, C., 1971, *Totemism (No. 157)*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Moltmann, J., 1985, *God in creation: An ecological doctrine of creation*, transl. M. Kohl, SCM, London.

O'Brien, M., 2021, 'Irigaray and Plato–Unlikely Bedfellows', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 52(2), 169–182. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2020.1796514

Plato 柏拉图, Guo, B. & 郭斌和, Zhang, Z. 张竹明, 2009, *The Republic* 理想国, The Commercial Press 商务印书馆, Beijing.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, 2011, *Mystical theology*, transl. J.D. Jones, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, WI.

Swedenborg, E., 2014, *Heaven and hell* 天堂与地狱, Descendants Publishing 笛藤出版, Taipei.

Thomas, A., 2008, *Summa theologica*, Bishan Society & Dominican Order in China 碧岳學社／中華道明會, Taipei.

Tillich, P., 2011, *Systematic theology*, vol. 3, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Wallace, M.I., 2020, *When God was a Bird Christianity, Animism, and the Re-enchantment of the World*, Fordham University Press, New York, NY.

William, J., 2012, *Experiences of religion in all their forms: A study of human nature*, transl. S. Xinjian 尚新建, , Huaxia Publishing House, Beijing.

Wolfe, C. (ed.), 2003, *Zoontologies: The question of the animal*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.