The Great Music: Perfecting Love in Order and in Chaos

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Abstract

This paper starts from the observation that the modern world is characterised by a particular sense of discord, which seems to be broadly shared and to pervade multiple domains. To understand this discord, the paper proposes that the prevailing order of the modern world is driven by a logic of chaos elimination, within which we are prone to conflate chaos with discord, and order with harmony. But in fact, fields ranging from information theory to physics indicate that harmony is defined by a kind of divine marriage between order and chaos, meaning it is precisely the attempt to eliminate chaos that results in discord. The modern order also fulfils its own prophecies, while failing on its own terms, by provoking a corrective form of chaos that truly threatens it. The paper goes on to demonstrate that the creation myth of Genesis amounts to a defence of chaos, which, as propagandised in the earlier Babylonian myth, the imperial order sought to eliminate. Following the arrival of discord that accompanied the Fall, the Law represented an order that left room for the divine chaos, while the Prophets represented a chaos that reopened the door to the divine order; yet the hope of harmony remained unseen. The paper draws on the work of J. R. R. Tolkien to illuminate the way that this hope can be realised, pointing to a 'higher harmony' that is capable of including and transcending even the discord of the world. Examining the New Testament correlation between *agape* (self-giving love) and *teleiotētos* (consummative harmony), the paper concludes that it is Love, and only Love, which achieves the higher harmony, and in so doing recreates a world uniquely conducive to the flourishing of all things.

Finding a foothold

Is the modern world excessively chaotic or excessively ordered? One would be hard pressed to settle for either response at the exclusion of the other. Paradoxically, the answer seems to be both. We feel both more secure and more precarious than ever; more certain and more confused than ever; more confident and more powerless than ever. As the absurdist philosopher Albert Camus wrote some sixty years ago, "The modern mind is in complete disarray. Knowledge has stretched itself to the point where neither the world nor our intelligence can find a foothold."[1]

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[1] Albert Camus, *Carnets 1942-1951*, trans. Philip Thody (London, UK: Hamish Hamilton, 1966), 9.

On the one hand, our agricultural, industrial, and metropolitan systems have become so advanced that they have given rise to a new ecological age. Yet while this Promethean mastery has afforded us prosperity of a kind, the price is to threaten our very existence, as our attempts to subdue nature ultimately provoke its wrath. Similarly, our systems of trade and finance have evolved into vast architectures of byzantine sophistication, spanning the entire globe and all it contains. Yet crisis after crisis has exposed that these houses are built on sand – and when they fall, their fall is all the greater.

Nowhere is the clash of order and chaos more apparent than in the domain of computer technology. The virtual networks which purport to offer authentic relationships and instant information present themselves as Renaissance gardens, carefully curated and intricately interconnected. Yet we find ourselves lost in the digital labyrinth – a lonely, demented place, where the darker angels of our nature lie in the wait. Hyper-technical algorithms have also succeeded in codifying much of our intellectual labour, including creative endeavours which most would have assumed to be beyond the scope of automation. But we have seen this film before, and we know that apocalypse, dystopia, and pandemonium are among its alternate endings.

At a philosophical level, society languishes in an incoherent limbo between modernism and the postmodern alternative that claims to succeed it. From medicine to civil rights, the pinnacles of human achievement that we take for granted were arguably enabled by the Enlightenment, which declared that the world is characterised by an objective, ascertainable order. Yet the relativistic worldview that has emerged in the last century has undermined this bedrock of truth, leaving humanity cynical, disoriented, and hopeless. At the same time, science itself is struggling to reconcile competing paradigms. While the classical model of Newtonian mechanics succeeds in explaining the laws of the macroscopic world, the enigmatic findings of quantum theory indicate that the most elementary aspects of the universe cannot be reduced to cause and effect. Instead, randomness and uncertainty reign supreme.

To the extent that science, philosophy, technology, and economics are all distinct domains, they are not amenable to generalised comparisons. Yet in the modern world, there does appear to be a common thread of what I would identify as *discord* or *dissonance*, in contradistinction to *harmony* or *consonance*. This discord results from a jarring combination of order and chaos – two voices which are talking past each other and speaking over each other, louder and louder and louder.

The present paper seeks to understand this discord from a Biblical perspective and, conversely, to employ it in our interpretation of the Bible. This kind of dialectical analysis is

inevitably prone to reflecting and projecting the author's own experiences and emotions - hence the presumptuous 'we'. But to the extent that such subjectivity *is* shared by the audience, the analysis will have served its purpose, which is precisely to help us diagnose our common sense of discord - and, hopefully, to point towards a more harmonious existence.

A theory of harmony

Before delving into a Biblical study of discord and harmony, we should begin by establishing a shared framework for these concepts and placing them within our own life-worlds. My proposal is that each arises from a particular relationship between order and chaos, rather than from the presence of one and the absence of the other. Indeed, it is the particular relationship that we call harmony from which we as human beings derive meaning, for this relationship forms a kind of Goldilocks zone in which life, broadly conceived, seems to emerge and flourish.

The point can be effectively illustrated by sound, which is of course the literal referent of both harmony and discord. Arguably, and perhaps surprisingly, the most offensive noise in the world is not cacophony (chaos) but rather monotony (order). We find an alarm clock to be rude not only because it disturbs our precious slumber, but also because of the stridency of its tone and the stringency of its rhythm. The brazen lack of irregularity feels off-key and off-beat with our own constitution – particularly at the beginning of a new day, when the music of creation is still echoing in our souls. In fact, not only music, but art of any kind, seems to be defined by its ability to marry order and chaos. While preferences may vary over time and space, we would generally consider neither an architect's masterful blueprint nor their accidental ink spillage to be strictly artistic; rather we insist that elements of both of these modalities commingle.[2]

Information theory offers a more prosaic example.[3] In a truly random sequence of symbols, each symbol represents new information in that it cannot be deduced from the symbols that preceded it. But *ipso facto*, the sequence as a whole contains no information – it may as well be reduced to a single symbol with some arbitrary significance. Conversely, if the sequence is merely a single symbol repeated numerous times – the most orderly of sequences possible – it is again devoid of information and again collapses into a single, arbitrary symbol. It is only when arbitrary sequences

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[2] See for example Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London, UK: Penguin, 1993). Nietzsche argued that the Greek tragedy represents the highest form of art because it was able to integrate what he called the "Dionysian" and "Apollonian" aspects of the human condition, broadly corresponding to chaos and order.

[3] Claude Elwood Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," *Bell System Technical Journal* 27, no. 3 (July/October 1948): 379–423/623–656.

are repeated in predictable ways, or when predictable sequences are repeated in arbitrary ways, that we have information in the form of a pattern or code.

Cosmology tells a similar story. The second law of thermodynamics holds that entropy, a scientific notion of disorder, is always increasing. Sandcastles do not form spontaneously; and even if we build them, they are eventually washed away by the waves or blown over by the wind, leaving a more or less random distribution of sand across the beach. This may sound dispiriting to modern ears, for it not only reminds us of our own mortality but points to the death of all things as such. Yet if it were not for entropy, we would not exist in the first place, nor would anything other than the singularity of maximal order that followed the big bang – a place of fire and brimstone, too dense and uniform to be habitable, let alone beautiful. It was only through the expansion of disorder that we were gifted planets, solar systems, and galaxies; land, sea, and air; animals, plants, and insects; and of course, ourselves. Reality as we know it - life, the universe, and everything - is the result of a cosmic union between order and chaos.

And finally, consider that old chestnut, free will. A fully deterministic theory of behaviour, in which all of our choices can be reduced to some unseen order, be it biology, society, or destiny, is a recipe for fatalism - not only in the direct, philosophical sense, but also in terms of the diminishment of the human spirit. But a model in which behaviour has no explanation is hardly more comforting, let alone conducive to human flourishing: imagine if every decision was made Joker-style at the flip of a coin, blindly and mercilessly. A central plank of meaning, free will seems to reside at the intersection between order and chaos, demanding both but resisting either.

We have established that meaning is found in harmony, which must contain both order and chaos. Either extreme results in discord, which we perceive not only as meaningless, but as antithetical to meaning, and indeed to life itself. Yet the examples in the previous section – our modern systems of philosophy, economics, and so on – are both highly ordered and highly chaotic. How then do such systems produce discord? The answer is that order and chaos do not occupy opposite ends of some kind of unidimensional spectrum. Instead, they represent qualitatively distinct forces which can relate to each other in any number of ways – and it is this relationship that is operative.

The relationship imposed by the modern world order is one of chaos elimination. Chaos, which by definition cannot be understood or controlled, is construed as a barbarian land which must be conquered – at best an unexploited resource, at worst a mortal enemy. The envisaged utopia is one of total dominion, in which all things are subject to the divine will of capital, bureaucracy, science, or reason. Such an order is hardwired to produce discord. In the short term, expunging our

lives of chaos only detracts from our experience of meaning, with all of the adventure, mystery, and passion of life reduced to a sterile simulacrum. And ultimately, the enterprise fails on its own terms by provoking an equal and opposite reaction: chaos merely shifts to a higher level of reality, which then threatens our hallowed order and all that is vested within it. The organising principle of the modern order thus fulfils itself, and the result is cataclysmic discord.

We experience this discord in a multitude of ways: anxiety, nihilism, shame, resentment, and the inconsolable grief of witnessing an unspeakable desecration. But confusion is perhaps the most tell-tale symptom of the disease, for it is implicated in a vicious cycle of reality and perception. The systems of the world programme us to conflate order and harmony, chaos and discord; and so, like a madman chasing after the wind, we grasp to grasp the unknowable chaos until we collapse into the very meaninglessness that we have thus laboured to create. To quote Camus once again, this time from his reflections on the myth of Sisyphus: "Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."[4]

Why does order tend to become untethered from, and even antagonistic towards, the chaos on which life depends? For Martin Heidegger, who recognised the perils of chaos elimination in his theories of Being if not in his political affiliations, the answer lies in Western philosophy.[5] The "technological" worldview that was planted by Plato and Aristotle and reached fruition with the Enlightenment - what Heidegger called *Gestell*, or "Enframing" - fertilises itself because technology in this sense is both a way of doing and a way of seeing. As life is increasingly instrumentalised for the sake of efficiency, humankind loses sight of its own existence. Yet while this metaphysical cancer may be particularly advanced in the modern West, it is surely confined neither to the West nor to modernity. Dysfunctional orders seem to be a pervasive feature of the human experience; and we must anyway ask why particular patterns of thought arose in the first place, whether they promote harmony or discord. To take one example, Buddhism, whose teachings on impermanence, emptiness, and non-attachment resonate with Heidegger's call for "authentic life", emerged and developed partly as a response to the rigid hierarchies of the Indian caste system.[6]

For a more generalised explanation, we can instead look to systems theory. Niklas Luhmann seminally proposed that all social systems – law, the economy, and so on – at some level exist to

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[4] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York, NY: Vintage, 1991), 28.
[5] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York, NY: Garland, 1977).
[6] B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Delhi, India: Samyak Prakashan, 2019), Book III.

reduce the complexity of their environments.[7] By complexity, Luhmann was referring to the infinite potentiality of human action, which exceeds the limitations of human cognition. Social systems enable action by filtering this potentiality, which they in turn achieve by developing their own internal logic. However, a corollary of this introversion is that they become increasingly self-referential, losing touch with the environments on which they depend – even when the actions that they enable damage those very environments.[8] If we conceive of complexity and systems as the societal manifestations of chaos and order, we can see why even a benign order has the potential to become malignant, metastasising to the point of threatening the organism as a whole. On this view, sustainable orders (social systems) are those which limit themselves, leaving room for chaos (complexity) rather than attempting, vainly and fatally, to eradicate it.[9]

The theoretical canvas that I laid out is intentionally broad, for it is precisely the generalism of the concepts that I wish to demonstrate. The trade-off is a lack of rigour; but this can be mitigated by using the canvas as an umbrella for other, more specialised theories. One example is Giorgio Agamben's analysis of sovereignty, which is rooted in his distinction between *zoe* and *bios*.[10] At the risk of oversimplification, we can understand *zoe* as natural life and bios as social life. Both are intrinsic to humanity; yet the particular *bios* of sovereign power treats the "creaturely life" of *zoe* as merely "undesirable chaos".[11] It attempts to eliminate this chaos by subjecting it to, yet excluding it from, the order of law. At the extreme - which according to Agamben is the rule that proves the exception, and the paradox that reveals the truth - the state exercises this power by excluding itself from the very order that it brings to bear, that is through extrajudicial means. In a forthcoming book,

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[7] Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[8] Vladislav Valentinov, "The Complexity- Sustainability Trade- Off in Niklas Luhmann's Social Systems Theory," *Systems Research and Behavioural Science* 31, no. 1 (January 2014): 14-22.

[9] Spencer Thompson and Vladislav Valentinov, "The Neglect of Society in the Theory of the Firm: A Systems-Theory Perspective," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 41 (February 2017): 1061-1085. The correspondence between complexity and chaos, insofar as it is valid, raises interesting philosophical questions. Ontologically speaking, complexity need not be chaotic; in fact it may be more reasonably conceived as highly ordered. Yet once complexity passes some critical, qualitative threshold, we are no longer able to perceive any order that it possesses - so from the perspective of human knowledge and human action, it may as well be chaos. The scientific field of chaos theory is illustrative, for the systems in question are not ontologically chaotic in the sense of being random; rather, their deterministic mechanisms are so sensitive to their initial conditions that they become de facto unpredictable. This is perhaps another way that chaos elimination is bound to fail: an order that seeks to eliminate chaos may not only provoke chaos, but it may become chaos. Yet the opposite may also be true as well: chaos theory also indicates that common, recognisable patterns can emerge from apparent disorder. This underscores the way that harmony, defined as a marriage between order and chaos, is woven into the fabric of the universe.

[10] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1-12.

[11] David Benjamin Blower, The Messianic Commons: Images of the Messiah after Modernity (forthcoming), 63.

David Blower explains how this enterprise of chaos elimination is ultimately self-destructive, for the *bios* "emerged out of *zoe*" and remains "helplessly dependent upon it".[12]

To reiterate, what determines harmony and discord is not simply the relative degrees of chaos and order, but rather the relationship between them. Harmony and discord are therefore emergent phenomena: they are constituted not precisely by their components, but by the interaction between those components. Notice, though, that this interaction must be determined by the order, not by the chaos: a given order can be decomposed and reconfigured, or destroyed and replaced, but chaos is simply chaos. The modern world is characterised by discord because its prevailing order is hostile to chaos; but we can imagine an alternative world in which chaos and order sing the same song. Indeed, such a world is central to the metanarrative of the Bible, to which we now turn.

In the beginning was chaos

The first chapter of Genesis recounts the creation of the world as occurring over six days. However, before the advent of light on the first day, the scripture speaks of a kind of primordial soup: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." Consistent with other creation myths, and with the rest of the Bible, the sea evidently symbolises chaos. Meanwhile, the prior idea of empty land evokes the motif of wilderness as a place outside of the (yet-to-be) established order.[13]

This elementary chaos is not exactly nothingness, despite the frequent emphasis by theologians on the *ex nihilo* implications of verse 1.[14] Either *Elohim* first created a kind of chaotic canvas on which They proceeded to paint for the next six days, or this canvas already existed – perhaps in some kind of non-physical world, within the Creator Themselves, or even in the realm of potentiality. Of course, we should be wary of cosmological anachronisms, and we should be sensitive to the poetic genre of the text. More than anything, we should be willing to embrace the mystery

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[12] Blower, Messianic Commons, 67.

[13] Van Wolde argues that the description of the earth as "without form and void" refers to a state that "has nothing to do with chaos, and simply denotes the unproductive and uninhabited earth". The Old Testament word for wilderness, midbar, has a similar meaning in the ancient Hebrew. But ipso facto, these are places that have yet to be touched by any human order. We can aptly construe such a state as chaotic, particularly given the indistinction between the ontological and epistemological natures of chaos (see footnote 7). Ellen Van Wolde, Stories of the Beginning: Genesis 1-11 and Other Creation Stories (London, UK: SCM Press, 1996), 20. See also David Toshio Tsumura, "Chaos and Chaoskampf in the Bible: Is 'Chaos' a Suitable Term to Describe Creation or Conflict in the Bible?" in Conversations on Canaanite and Biblical Themes: Creation, Chaos and Monotheism, ed. R. S. Watson and A. H. W. Curtis (Berlin, GR: De Gruyter, 2022), 253–281.

[14] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London, UK: Routledge, 2003), 213-228.

(chaos) of the story. Yet all of these caveats apply at least as strongly to interpretations which ignore or downplay the second verse of the Bible.

Among interpretations which do pay heed to verse two, a common refrain is that the Creator fashioned order from chaos. There may be some truth to this reading, even if it reverses the entropic sequence of modern cosmology. But in any case, following our discussion above, the notion of order and its relationship to chaos need to be critically examined. To assist this exercise, we can take a historical perspective, recalling that Genesis was composed by Hebrew exiles as an alternative to the Babylonian creation myth, the Enuma Elish. The similarities and differences between the two texts are too rich and varied to cover in full, but some broad and selective brushstrokes will suffice to highlight the intentionally subversive way that Genesis deals with these themes.

The Enuma Elish was a thoroughly imperial myth.[15] The protagonist is Marduk, whose motivation for creating the world is to gain for himself a royal city. This he does by murdering the sea-goddess Tiamat, explicitly an archetype of chaos, and rending her in two. Once the city is built, it is named Babylon, meaning "gate of the gods" – beyond which lies "chaos, wilderness, the realm of wild beasts and even wilder people".[16] The essence of the story is that chaos is to be feared, vanquished, and supplanted by a divine order in the form of empire. Man's sole reason for existence is to serve this imperial order - and that of the woman is to serve the man.[17] Indeed, the entire cult of Marduk revolved around and legitimated the empire's political, economic, and social hierarchy, rising to prominence just as Babylon was developing from a city-state into an empire proper.[18]

The clash between chaos and order presented in the Enuma Elish conveys a distinct sense of discord, starting with the discord between the gods themselves. Even before Marduk comes on the scene, bringing forth the world from the carcass of his enemy, we read of a generational feud characterised by "confusion", "trouble", and "disorder". By contrast, the first verse of Genesis introduces a pluriform Creator who, as elaborated in the doctrine of the Trinity, lives in harmony since before the foundation of the world. It is from the harmony within God, rather than the discord between gods, that the world is born.

When creation does occur, there is no indication that chaos and order are at odds with each other. The God who gifts order to the world is the same God who "was moving over the face of the

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[15] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 14-15, 26.
[16] Wes Howard-Brook, *Come Out My People: God's Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 19.
[17] Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 43.
[18] Jeremy Black, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London, UK: British Museum Press, 1992), 128.

waters". Moreover, rather than violently defeating chaos, this order preserves and even exalts the rawness of its material: the sea, the darkness, and the feminine remain integral to the harmony of creation, with all of their wild mystique, just as the Spirit remains integral to the harmony of God. This harmony - which, as expressed in the dualities that make up the fullness of the seven days, is not confined even to the Garden of Eden but rather spans all of creation - God calls "good" or "beautiful". The role of humanity is to help maintain this harmony, and to partake in it, through the exercise of free will. Indeed, the very composition of Genesis 1, which can be read as a poem or a song, is itself an example of this harmonisation.

The creation story of the Bible thus affirms our intuition that harmony is to be found not in the elimination of chaos, as per the Babylonian myth, but rather in its embrace. Yet since nothing expounded in this section is theologically novel, it raises the question as to how mainstream Western interpretations have ended up drawing the propagandistic message of the Enuma Elish from Genesis 1, which represents a deliberate and unequivocal counternarrative to that very message. The obvious answer, which I lack the space to substantiate, represents a cautionary tale: that the hermeneutical universe occupied by mainstream Western theologians has itself been colonised by the imperial order.[19]

Beyond jots and tittles

Having established that chaos is intrinsic to the harmony of the world, Genesis proceeds to demonstrate that it is precisely the attempt to eliminate chaos that gives rise to discord. The Fall is characterised by an insistence on knowing, possessing, and controlling to the point of being "like God" - hallmarks of the imperial order. This order takes shape not only in the consciousness of Adam and Eve, who manifest its symptoms by becoming self-referentially aware of their own nakedness, but also in society at large. Perhaps the most overt critique is found in the story of Babel (a pun on 'Babylon') in which man's attempt to supplant the order of Heaven results, ironically yet inevitably, in confusion. Thus, with the infiltration of the imperial order, humankind finds itself not inside the gates of harmony, but outside; not atop the tower of the royal city, but scattered across the face of the earth.

The counternarrative of Genesis focuses especially on the centralised agricultural system around which the Babylonian empire revolved. Such a system, the essence of which is still fundamental to our own society, purports to replace the chaos of nature with a man-made order.

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[19] See Roger Mitchell, Church, Gospel, and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

Yet this order is manifestly discordant: under its thraldom, the relationship between humans and nature becomes extractive; the relationship between humans themselves becomes exploitative; and the relationship between humans and God is corrupted by a morbid, transactional illusion. It is, moreover, self-defeating, as both the means by which a predictable surplus is secured and the systemic dependency that this enterprise engenders leave the civilisation vulnerable to famines, floods, and other unnatural disasters - not to mention societal scourges such as debt, which can ultimately have similar effects.[20]

Much of the remainder of the Torah and the historical books consist of the people of Israel experiencing the horrors of the imperial order, along with the corrective chaos that it provokes, and attempting to establish their own alternative that allows them to live in harmony with God, humanity, and nature. On the surface, the minute ordinances of the Law appear to be guilty of excessive ordering; but as per our earlier discussion, we should resist the temptation to measure such things on a scale. Putatively enshrined after liberation from slavery in Egypt, and most likely documented following the exile in Babylon, both the content and the context of the Law reveal that it served to protect against the discordance of empire.

The Sabbath, along with its septennial and semi-centennial extensions, is perhaps the clearest example. In stark contrast to the imperial order, with its imperative of eliminating chaos, the order of the Sabbath is designed to embrace the divine, elemental chaos of creation. To be sure, this order is codified in strict stipulations, but these essentially act to prevent the encroachment of imperial discord. This interpretation is evidenced by comparing the Sabbath commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5: in the former, the rationale is to accord with the pattern of Eden, while in the latter it is remind the people that they have been delivered from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). These are two sides of a coin: an espousal of the harmony of creation on the one hand, and a rejection of the discord of empire on the other.

Yet the Law was eventually co-opted by the very order that it sought to resist. A poignant example adduced by Wes Howard-Brook is the imperial project of Ezra and Nehemiah.[21] The rebuilding of Jerusalem, and particularly the Temple, was evidently sponsored by Cyrus as a means of extending the military and economic reach of the Persian Empire. In this context, the Law is rendered as a chauvinistic purity code, with the purpose of excluding outsiders who may otherwise undermine the clientelist arrangement between Persia and Judah by blurring the strict, clear-cut

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[20] Wesley Howard-Brook, Come Out My People! God's Call Out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), Part 1.
[21] Howard-Brook, *Come Out My People*, 249-264.

boundaries on which imperial control was predicated.[22] This mandate to outlaw chaos plays out in the issue of intermarriage, but is also apparent, literally and figuratively, in the fixation on building walls, mirroring the imperial imagery of the Babylonian creation myth. Yet this pathological order only sows discord, and ultimately fails on its own terms: the exclusion of the Samaritans initiates a bitter, persistent feud which delays the reconstruction of the Temple and later sees it desecrated.

The Old Testament Prophets serve to resist and reverse this sort of co-optation, along with its detrimental consequences. Following the pattern of the Sabbath, their mission is to confront the discordant order of the past, present, and future by reintroducing the primordial chaos of creation (cf. Jeremiah 4:23-26). The motif of wilderness serves to betoken this mission: Elijah and John the Baptist were wild people; Ezekiel, Hosea, and Isaiah all perform wild acts; and most of the prophets speak of or interact with wild places as symbols of judgement and restoration. The rewilding of the world is often a conflictual and agonising process, as the prevailing order must be retrenched or even relinquished. Yet the Prophets warn that the corrective chaos that will otherwise ensue, often depicted as God's wrath or judgement, will be far more devastating - and promise that, in the end, the harmony of creation will be more than worth it. Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66) is a neat example: it critiques the exclusionary narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah (56:3-14); reiterates the true meaning of the Law in general and the Sabbath in particular as a bulwark of social justice (58:3-14, 61:1-3); and foretells of the day when Heaven and Earth are once again one, as it was in the beginning (65:17-25).[23]

While the most salient feature of the Prophets may be their appeal to chaos as an antidote to discord, their ultimate mission of restoring harmony also requires them to propound an alternative order. Here the Prophets once again allude to creation, applying its primordial order to the moral, political, and technological realities of the contemporaneous age. At some level, then, the task of the Prophet is to reclaim, reinterpret, and reimagine the original spirit of the Law. This is the realm of visions and dreams, which invite the mystery of chaos back into the world of the sacred, unfiltered and unmediated. An illustrative example is given by the Temple. While purportedly containing the remnant of Heaven on Earth, its institutional form effectively became an instrument of empire. The Prophets, particularly Ezekiel and later John of Patmos, therefore recast the Temple as a Heavenly blueprint that has not yet been fully realised on Earth (Ezekiel 8-10, 40-41; Revelation

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[22] Even the Sabbath/Jubilee operates within these boundaries, since it is enacted in order to prevent the order from collapsing and to "avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies" (Nehemiah 5:9). However, that is not to say that its appearance is not redemptive at some level.

[23] Howard-Brook, *Come Out My People*, 264-273. Howard-Brook also argues that Genesis itself contains an allegorical critique of Ezra-Nehemiah, for example through the divine care afforded to Hagar.

21). The detailed measurements of the Temple, originally set out in the Law, remain; but an eschatological space is opened, capable of accommodating an alternative, more harmonious existence.

The Great Music

Before we continue through the Biblical narrative, it is worth treating ourselves to an inkling of how this more harmonious existence might emerge. In his magical masterpiece *The Silmarillion,* Catholic fantasy author J. R. R. Tolkien tells his own story of creation. Tolkien's myth is evidently influenced by Genesis, but introduces elements that help to triangulate our theory of harmony.

Eru Ilúvatar is the supreme deity in Tolkien's legendarium. Ilúvatar begins by creating the Ainur, a host of angelic beings whom he then invites to participate in the creation of the world. Echoing the musical overtones of Genesis, this creation occurs through the *Ainulindalë* – the Great Music of the Ainur. Thus, creation is initially characterised by harmony, in literal and figurative terms:

> "And it came to pass that Ilúvatar called together all the Ainur and declared to them a mighty theme...Then Ilúvatar said to them: 'Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. But I will sit and hearken, and be glad that through you great beauty has been wakened into song.'…"[24]

There is an aspect of chaos to this creation. Though Ilúvatar sets the initial order, he involves agents with free will, whose creative expressions even he does not seem to foreknow: the Ainur, endowed with Spirit, are only to participate "if [they] will". The result is harmony:

"Then the voices of the Ainur, like unto harps and lutes, and pipes and trumpets, and viols and organs, and like unto countless choirs singing with words, began to fashion the theme of Ilúvatar to a great music; and a sound arose of endless interchanging melodies woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing into the depths and into the heights, and the places of the dwelling of

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[24] JRR Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 15.

Ilúvatar were filled to overflowing, and the music and the echo of the music went out into the Void, and it was not void...”[25]

But the Great Music is interrupted by discord. Here we encounter Melkor, a Marduk-like character embodying the traditional conception of Satan as a chief musician who seeks his own glory over God's:

“But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself...

“Some of these thoughts he now wove into his music, and straightway discord arose about him...Then the discord of Melkor spread ever wider, and the melodies which had been heard before foundered in a sea of turbulent sound. But Ilúvatar sat and hearkened until it seemed that about his throne there was a raging storm, as of dark waters that made war one upon another in an endless wrath that would not be assuaged.”[26]

At this point in the tale, Tolkien expands our theory of harmony. We have the harmony of Ilúvatar, and we have the discord of Melkor, each representing a distinct relationship between chaos and order. But what of the relationship between harmony and discord? We may assume that discord will carry the day when the two forces collide, for they are themselves at odds with each other. At first, this intuition appears to be born out in Tolkien's story through the “raging storm”, which grows into a “war of sound”:

“Then Ilúvatar arose, and the Ainur perceived that he smiled; and he lifted up his left hand, and a new theme began amid the storm, like and yet unlike to the former theme, and it gathered power and had new beauty. But the discord of Melkor rose in uproar and contended with it, and again there was a war of sound more violent than before, until many of the Ainur were dismayed and sang no longer, and Melkor had the mastery. Then again Ilúvatar arose, and the Ainur perceived that his countenance was stern; and he lifted up his

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[25] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 15. Notice that the “Void” does not disappear; it is only no longer “void”, since it is now married with the divine order. The Void, of course, harks back to Genesis 1, in which the chaos of 'the Deep' remains integral to the harmony of creation.
[26] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 16.

right hand, and behold! a third theme grew amid the confusion, and it was unlike the others."[27]

The struggle continues, with Melkor's discord increasingly resembling the imperious monotony of the alarm clock as it seeks to eradicate the uncontrollable variations that arise from chaos:

"For it seemed at first soft and sweet, a mere rippling of gentle sounds in delicate melodies; but it could not be quenched, and it took to itself power and profundity. And it seemed at last that there were two musics progressing at one time before the seat of Ilúvatar, and they were utterly at variance. The one was deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow, from which its beauty chiefly came. The other had now achieved a unity of its own; but it was loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes. And it essayed to drown the other music by the violence of its voice..."[28]

But then something surprising happens. Miraculously, in an act of redemptive creation, Ilúvatar subsumes the discord of Melkor into a kind of meta-harmony. It begins with a "solemn pattern" that includes and transcends the "most triumphant notes" of Melkor's un-music. And then we reach the decrescendo:

"In the midst of this strife, whereat the halls of Ilúvatar shook and a tremor ran out into the silences yet unmoved, Ilúvatar arose a third time, and his face was terrible to behold. Then he raised up both his hands, and in one chord, deeper than the Abyss, higher than the Firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Ilúvatar, the Music ceased.

"Then Ilúvatar spoke, and he said: 'Mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor; but...thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.'"[29]

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[27] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 16.
[28] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 16-17.
[29] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 17.

I am reluctant to analyse Tolkien's vision for fear of smothering its artistic truths, which breathe for themselves. The maker of Middle Earth famously expressed a "dislike [of] allegory in all its manifestations", preferring the reader to experience "enchantment" rather than be goaded along by the author's own agenda.[30] To dissect the "inner consistency" of this "sub-created" world would therefore be to impose an artificial order onto a medium whose magic lies precisely in its ability to let us glimpse the chaos of raw reality, including that of our own subconscious.[31] Yet, like Gandalf passing through the great underground realm of Dwarrowdelf, "let me risk a little more light" by summarising a few broad lessons.[32]

First, in keeping with Genesis, the overriding theme of the Great Music is not discord, but harmony, which is achieved through a graceful marriage of chaos and order rather than the conquest of the former by the latter. Indeed, and secondly, it is precisely the untethering of order from chaos that brings about discord. But thirdly, what prevails in the end is once again harmony, which transcends the discord not by overpowering it, but by including it. This is a story set in the present; for while the higher harmony is woven into the very fabric of the world, it yet remains mysterious. Like the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New, Tolkien portrays it as a kind of eschatological hope: a "sweet singing" that comes to us from afar and from within, faintly but unmistakably, "like a pale light behind a grey rain-curtain".[33]

Perfecting love

At its core, the Christian faith holds that this mystery is revealed in the person of Jesus. The Law was the order that left room for the divine chaos, and the Prophets were the chaos that reopened the door to the divine order; yet while the harmony of creation was thus preserved, its suffusion into all things remained an inherited memory and a faraway dream. Through Jesus, we finally discover the key to realising the hope of universal harmony: Love. For Love is the spirit of the Law and the message of the Prophets, fulfilling them both (Matthew 5:17-18, 22:34-40; Galatians 5:14; Romans 13:8). It is, in fact, the very harmony of God, through which the universe was created (1 John 4:8).

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[30] JRR Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, Part 1: The Fellowship of the Ring* (London, UK: Collins, 2001), xv; JRR Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London, UK: Harper Collins, 2006), 142-143.
[31] Tolkien, "Fairy Stories", 138-140.
[32] This line appears in the 2001 film directed by Peter Jackson, but not in the original text.
[33] Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 132; JRR Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, Part 3: The Return of the King* (London, UK: Collins, 2001), 1007.

This is merely a recapitulation of the Gospel message. Yet the eschatological role of Love in manifesting the 'higher harmony' merits closer examination, for it is a remarkably frequent theme in the New Testament. In particular, a correlation can be observed between *agape*, the highest form of Love characterised by reciprocal self-giving, and *teleiotētos* or *teleiósis*, a notion of "perfect harmony" referring to "the final stage (fulfilment, end-phase) of the consummation process".[34] Consider the following verses, written by multiple authors decades apart:

> "And above all these put on love [*agapēn*], which binds everything together in perfect harmony [*teleiotētos*]." (Colossians 3:14, RSV)

> "God is love [*agape*], and whoever abides in love [*agape*] abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love [*agape*] perfected [*teteleiōtai*] with us…" (1 John 4:16-17, RSV)

> "Love [*apage*] never ends…our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect [*teleion*] comes, the imperfect will pass away." (1 Corinthians 13:7-13, RSV)

The first verse predicates our thesis - that Love is uniquely capable of realising the universal harmony that must represent the *telos* of any life-affirming religion. The second makes the remarkable claim that Love is not only divine, but also participatory: while it is the very substance of the persons of God, it is somehow activated, perhaps like yeast, by the people of God. Love therefore perfects, but is also perfected. The final verse then reminds us that this is an ongoing process: while Christ has revealed Love to be, as Martin Luther King, Jr. once declared, "the answer to mankind's problems", we can only imagine what the world will look like when Love has "the final word in reality."[35]

If this all sounds rather twee, fear not, for Jesus characteristically brings it down to earth. Consider his teaching on enemy love:

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[34] Strong's Bible Dictionary, "5050. *teleiósis*", available at https://biblehub.com/greek/5050.htm. See also Strong's Bible Dictionary, "5047. *teleiotés*", available at https://biblehub.com/greek/5047.htm. Whereas *teleiotés* refers to a "culmination" that in turn "supports a future consummation", t*eleiósis* is the consummation itself. Strong's, "*teleiotés*".

[35] Martin Luther King, Jr. "Where Do We Go From Here?," Annual Report delivered at the 11th Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 16 August 1967; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech", 10 December 1964.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love [*agapēseis*] your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love *[agapate]* your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…You, therefore, must be perfect [*teleioi*], as your heavenly Father is perfect [*teleios*]." (Matthew 5:43-48, RSV)

To love one's enemies, as Jesus uniquely epitomised on the cross, is to transcend the discord of the world by including it. We cannot simply abolish enemyship, any more than we can banish a thought by trying not to think about it; for such abolition could only be enforced through the very means that make enemies out of people in the first place. To quote the Reverend King once again, "love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power."[36]

In another teaching, Jesus brings the message of enemy love full circle. Responding to a legal scholar, Jesus affirms that loving one's neighbour as oneself is the key to harmony, in this case expressed as eternal life. He then drops a bombshell in parable form: because Love defines neighbourship rather than being defined by it, it is not bound even by the discordant distinction between Jew and Samaritan, which had been drawn all those years ago by the orders that be. To love one's enemies is therefore not to deny the reality of discordance; rather it is to absorb this discord into a higher harmony, which recreates a world that is indeed more wonderful than any of us could have imagined.

Absolute power

The Apostle Paul once declared that if he spoke in the tongues of men and of angels, but had not Love, he would be but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1). We hear the noise of this gong, the clang of this cymbal, all too loudly in the modern age. Any notion of overpowering the discord would be a contradiction in terms; but perhaps, following Paul, the idea is rather to *under*power it. By bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things - even the discord of a fallen world - self-giving Love not only heals but revolutionises the relationship between order and chaos. Martin Luther King, Jr. proved as much through his approach to non-violence, which he so eloquently (if male-centrically) articulated in his own sermons on loving one's enemies. "[O]nly by doing this," he urged his congregation, and the world, "are you able to transform the jangling

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[36] Martin Luther King, Jr. "Loving Your Enemies," sermon delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, 17 November 1957.

discords of society into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood and understanding…Love," he concluded, surely with more than a smidgeon of irony, "is the absolute power."[37]

For MLK, to practise Love was to perfect it - to participate in the inauguration of the "beloved community" that he envisioned in his Dream.[38] Yet this ceremony is ongoing; and every generation must decide which notes to play next. If we put our ears to the ground - if we block out the noisy gong and attune ourselves instead to the wordless groans and sweet singing in which all real things partake - we might make out a theme of *openness*. In the religious and political spheres - the separation between which is itself collapsing - David Benjamin Blower has identified "a breaking open of the religious enclosures, an opening up of messianic commons".[39] This is apparently, and hopefully, an embodied kind of politics in which *bios* lives "on the ground of *zoe*, not removed from it".[40] It is not difficult to see the connections with a politics of love, in which the self-emptying incarnation of God serves as a model for human relationships.

My own specialism leads me to ponder the economic implications. If social life has been removed from natural life, we can also say that economic life has been removed from social life.[41] Under capitalism, economics has been sublimated into a kind of inviolable law, which orders natural and social life to the detriment of both; yet at the same time, and for the same reason, the notion of economic life as such has become curiously unfamiliar. Cooperatives, mutuals, non-profits, and other organisations bracketed with the so-called 'social economy' offer a way to reverse this double estrangement. Whereas conventional businesses tend to pursue self-referential goals like share-price maximisation, corporate growth, and market dominance, these organisations remain open to their systemic environments by variously incorporating the interests of workers, users, the local community, disadvantaged groups, and the earth.[42] Governance in the social economy tends to be more complex - but that is precisely the point, since the failure of mainstream enterprises to reckon with this complexity is precisely the problem.[43]

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[37] Martin Luther King, Jr. "Loving Your Enemies," sermon delivered at the Detroit Council of Churches' Noon Lenten Services, 7 March 1961.

[38] Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Birth of a New Nation," sermon delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, 7 April 1957.

[39] Blower, *Messianic Commons*, 15.

[40] Blower, *Messianic Commons*, 70.

[41] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1957 [1944]).

[42] Thompson and Valentinov, "Neglect of Society," 1076-1078.

[43] Spencer Thompson and Vladislav Valentinov, "The Supply and Demand of Social Systems: Towards a Systems Theory of the Firm," *Kybernetes* 48, no. 3 (February 2019): 577-580.

So, as is customary, we can conclude with a ray of hope: that while we are confronted by the discord of the world order and the corrective chaos that it provokes, perfect harmony is ever on the horizon. Yet this very conclusion obliges me to reconsider the universal 'we' that I have employed throughout this article. While rightly assuming a shared humanity, such a construct betrays a desire to transcend the discord that exists between persons without first including it, to act as if Love had already been perfected. For privileged Westerners like myself - a more specific 'we' - the first step on the road to harmony may be to recognise that we do not speak for the vast majority of the earth's population, nor indeed for the earth itself; that, in fact, our voices have for too long drowned theirs out; and that even our well-intentioned words can often add to the noisy clang of the world order. To hear the Great Music, we may instead have to listen.

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