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St Andrews

St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology  
**Sabbath in the Christian Tradition**

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First published: 29 August 2024

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Sabbath>

### **Citation**

Alexander, Philip. 2024. 'Sabbath in the Christian Tradition', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Sabbath>  
Accessed: 6 April 2026

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ISSN 2753-3492

# Sabbath in the Christian Tradition

*Philip Alexander*

The present article focuses on the Christian idea of the Sabbath, bringing in Judaism to the extent that it provides the necessary context for Christianity. It describes Sabbath in terms of the practices that define it. The most notable of these is abstention from everyday work. That is seen as an end in itself: humanity needs rest from its God-given task of maintaining and developing God's world. However, the free time thus generated should never be divorced from the worship of God: within the week Sabbath is the day of worship par excellence. Sabbath as praxis is thus defined negatively by abstention from work, and positively by worship. Sabbath is also defined in terms of theological ideas that have been associated with it, which give its praxis meaning. Among these are Sabbath as an *imitatio Dei* (imitation of God), Sabbath as a fundamental element in the structuring of salvation history, and Sabbath as the basis of a theology of work. This discussion of Sabbath, in terms of both praxis and theology, focuses synchronically on the biblical sources, because these have been regarded as normative by all later tradition. A final section traces the history of Sabbath observance down to the present day, outlines the main views that have been developed on the basis of the biblical texts, and shows how, in the midst of a revival of interest in Sabbath in Christianity, Christian thinkers are exploring its potential to address some burning issues of the day.

**Keywords:** Sabbath, Jubilee, The Lord's Day, Sabbatarianism, The Decalogue, Work, Rest, Leisure, Natural law, Late capitalism, Ecological crisis, Nature mysticism

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# 1 Introduction: overview

In Judaism, Sabbath is the seventh day of the week, running from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. It is a day on which Jews are required by Torah to abstain from their weekday work and devote time to worshipping God. The institution was observed by Jesus and his early Jewish followers, and it thus passed over into Christianity. The majority of Christians, however, came to identify their day of worship and rest not with the seventh day of the Jewish week (Saturday) but with the first (Sunday). This was known as ‘the Lord’s Day’, because it was the day on which Jesus rose from the dead. It was widespread within Christian tradition to transfer to the Lord’s Day many of the regulations stipulated for the biblical Sabbath, to such an extent that many Christians referred to Sunday simply as ‘the Sabbath’. There is thus an ambiguity in the Christian term Sabbath: it can refer to the seventh-day Jewish Sabbath (Saturday), or to the first-day Christian Sabbath (Sunday).

Sabbath is central to biblical and Jewish theology; it has been recognized as important in Christian theology as well. Since the Second World War, however, for complex historical and sociological reasons it has become marginalized among Christians both in faith and in practice, though there are signs recently of a revival of interest. Sabbath can be defined in terms of praxis and theology. It is both a constellation of customs, ceremonies, and laws, and also a set of theological ideas which underpin the praxis and give it meaning. With regard to its praxis, the two central issues are: (1) what constitutes ‘work’: what activities does the Bible directly or by implication ban as not permissible on Sabbath? And (2) to what extent do these prohibitions, which are based on the Torah of Moses, remain binding on Christians after the coming of Christ, the inauguration of the new covenant, and the establishment of Sunday as the weekly day for Christians to worship and rest? With regard to its theology, Sabbath is closely bound up with the doctrine of God, the doctrine of humanity, and the doctrine of salvation. This article explores three specific theological issues: first, Sabbath and the image of God; second, Sabbath and the structure of salvation history; and third, Sabbath and the theology of work.

There is no single Christian view of Sabbath. The dominant position, at least in the West, has been to regard Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, and to apply to it, to greater or lesser degree, the laws relating to the Old Testament Sabbath. Sabbath observance has plummeted in Christian societies since the Second World War, but even in post-Christian countries, ‘ghosts’ of it remain (such as the British weekend). These ‘ghosts’ continue to embody some of the fundamental values of the old Sabbath (e.g. time off from ordinary work) and retain popular support. However, instead of attending church, for the most part people now devote this free time to leisure activities. How these relate to work and to the Sabbath rest poses a challenge for Christian theology. There are signs that interest in Sabbath is undergoing a revival across the Christian world, and that it is proving useful in

defining Christian positions vis-à-vis some of the burning issues of the day – the crisis of late capitalism, the ecological crisis, and the new turn to nature in post-industrial societies.

## 2 Sabbath as praxis

### 2.1 Sabbath in the Old Testament and early Jewish law

The Christian Sabbath is based on the institution as laid down in the Old Testament and as observed in early Judaism, and it cannot be understood apart from its Jewish matrix. That matrix embraces not only the Old Testament, but Sabbath as understood and practised in postbiblical Judaism all the way through to modern times. The dialogue between Jewish and Christian understandings of Sabbath has remained intense, and this explains the constant cross-referencing to Judaism in the present article. Influential contemporary Christian thinkers on Sabbath such Jürgen Moltmann acknowledge a huge debt to Judaism, especially to Jewish thinkers such as Franz Rosenzweig and A. J. Heschel (see [section 4.4.2](#)). Heschel's essay *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (1951) has done as much to revive interest in the subject in Christianity as it has in Judaism – maybe more. The influence has been in both directions: Rosenzweig and Heschel were themselves indebted to Christian thought.

The idea of Sabbath is found in all strands of Old Testament tradition, and it is clearly pre-exilic in origin. The verbal root *shabat* means to cease from a given activity, and the noun *shabbat* was used to designate every seventh day, which was marked by a cessation from everyday work. There is no obvious antecedent to the Israelite institution in the ancient Near East. In Babylonia the seventh day may have been seen as inauspicious, a taboo day, and hence one on which it was unwise to undertake any activity. If this is the origin of Sabbath, then the institution has been totally transformed, because in the Old Testament the seventh day is a day which God has singled out for blessing, and the cessation of labour is seen in a positive light as a time of rest and refreshment – one of 'delight' (*'oneg*: Isa 58:13).

Of the numerous references to Sabbath in the Old Testament, the key text is Exod 20:8–10, where it forms one of the Ten Commandments:

Remember (*zakhor*) the sabbath day to keep it holy (*le-qaddesho*). For six days you shall labour (*ta'avod*) and do all your work (*mela'khah*). But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God: you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the resident alien (*ger*) in your towns.

The later repetition of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5 has the same commandment in substantially the same words (5:12–14).

The prescriptions of the commandment are given in very broad terms, and require clarification before they can be fully implemented. The key term is ‘work’. This is defined as what one does on the six days of the week, presumably for the maintenance of life – growing and processing food, trading and business, building and manufacturing – but we need to be more explicit. Some other verses of scripture help to fill out the picture. In Exod 16:23–30 (even prior to the giving of the Decalogue on Sinai), the Israelites in the wilderness are enjoined to rest on the seventh day. This involved them not going out on that day to collect the Manna on which they were relying for food. Indeed, the Manna did not fall on the seventh day. Instead, a double portion fell on the sixth, and they were supposed to prepare on the sixth the food that they would eat on the seventh: ‘bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil [on the sixth day], and all that is left over put aside to be kept till [Sabbath] morning (v23).’ There was to be no cooking on Sabbath itself. Numbers 15:32–36 condemns gathering sticks, presumably to light a fire for the purposes of cooking, as a violation of Sabbath. What constitutes work is further clarified in Neh 13:15–16: treading grapes, loading donkeys with produce to sell, transporting and selling it (cf. Neh 10:31) – all these activities profane the Sabbath. There is a hint that bringing goods into Jerusalem from outside (in other words, crossing a clear boundary between separate domains) was in itself a problem (v15), which Nehemiah solved by closing the city gates before Sabbath came in. That there was indeed a problem here is suggested by Jer 17:21, where not only carrying is forbidden but carrying into the city from outside, or from a house into the street, is implicitly regarded as an additional and separate offence. All this helps to clarify what is meant by ‘work’ – but even if we maximize each of the prohibitions by treating them casuistically (i.e. as given only for the sake of example; a single, concrete case representing a class of similar actions) we are still left with many grey areas as to what is or is not forbidden. Later Jewish law tried to address this problem. An example of this can be found in the Sabbath Code of the Damascus Document from Qumran (CD X 14–XI 18). More important and exhaustive are the discussions in Rabbinic literature, particularly in the tractates *Shabbat* and *Eirubin* of the Mishnah, Tosefta, and the two Talmuds.

The Rabbis defined thirty-nine categories of activity which constituted work to be avoided on Sabbath (*b. Shabb.* 73a–75b). They themselves are unclear as to where this classification came from. They speculate that the categories correspond to the types of work involved in building the Tabernacle (*b. Shabb.* 49b). This may reflect the idea that the Tabernacle was a microcosm, and that the building of it reflected the sort of activities in which God engaged when making the world. Implied would be a parallelism between God’s resting on the Sabbath and humanity’s resting on the Sabbath. Parallels have long been noted between the account of the building of the tabernacle and the account of the creation of the world (cf. Exod 39:43 with Gen 1:28, and Exod 40:33 with Gen 2:1–2). The erection of the tabernacle could be seen as marking the true end of the work of creation,

because, until the means by which human sin (which constantly threatens to destroy creation) could be atoned for had been constructed, the future of the world hung in the balance. The cult maintained the cosmos. A more prosaic explanation of the number thirty-nine was that it represents the number of times the word 'work' (*mela'kah*) is mentioned in the Torah (*b. Shabb.* 49b). (For the tabernacle and temple as model of creation, see The Temple in the Christian Bible, section 2.4.)

The thirty-ninth category of work is transferring 'from one domain to another' (*me-reshut lirshut*). As seen above, there were hints of this idea already in Neh 13:15 and Jer 17:21. It was greatly developed and expanded in Halakhah, but generally in the direction of mitigating the potential rigours of Sabbath law. Carrying was permitted within a clearly defined area – a domain. It was only forbidden to carry from one domain to another. So, one could carry within the four walls of a house but not from the house into the street, which was clearly a different domain – not only because it was physically demarcated from the house but also because it constituted a public area as opposed to the private area of the house. If rigorously applied, this idea could impose severe restrictions, so the rabbis developed the idea of blending (*'eiruv*) one domain into another. It was deemed permissible, under certain circumstances, to designate a wider area embracing a number of houses and the communal areas that connected them as a single domain, and allow transfer within that wider area. A whole settlement, if it had a clearly defined boundary, such as a town wall, could also be so designated. In this way, life on Sabbath could be rendered much less onerous.

Another activity which was deemed problematic on Sabbath was travel. Exod 16:29 clearly stipulates that 'each of you should stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day'. This is seen as a consequence of the fact that Sabbath is designated as a 'day of rest', of 'complete rest' (*shabbat shabbaton*, Lev 16:31; 23:3; cf. Exod 16:23; 31:15). Clearly travel for purposes of work, even if the work itself was not done till after Sabbath ended, would be problematic, but that was not the only reason why one might want to travel on Sabbath. For instance, what if it was for the purpose of preserving life – a purpose widely acknowledged to override the laws of Sabbath (see below)? And if one is allowed under certain circumstances to travel on Sabbath, are there limits to the distance one can go? Various authorities defined a Sabbath limit (*tehum shabbat*). The Damascus Document sets it at 1000 cubits beyond the city limits (CD X 21). The Rabbinic limit was more leniently placed at 2000 cubits beyond the city limits, and the Rabbis devised ways that, exceptionally, this could be extended (*Mekhilta* Exod 16:29; *b. Eruv.* 51a; *Targum Ps-J* to Exod 16:29). The existence of a Sabbath limit is incidentally acknowledged in Acts 1:12. It is implied in biblical law that the mode of travel on Sabbath could only be walking, since using an animal as a means of conveyance would deny it the Sabbath rest to which it is entitled (Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14; see below).

As just noted, it was accepted by some authorities that the laws of Sabbath could be violated in order to save life. This was certainly the position adopted in Rabbinic Halakhah, where the principle is known as *piqquah nefesh* (usually translated 'preservation of human life'). *Piqquah nefesh* had wide application and was seen as overriding all but a few of the Torah's commandments, the prohibition of idolatry being one of the exceptions (one should be prepared to embrace death rather than commit idolatry). Its application specifically to Sabbath is discussed at length in *b. Yoma* 84b–85b. There it is illustrated by a number of concrete examples. If a building collapses and someone is buried beneath the rubble, it is permissible to clear the rubble on Sabbath to save them. If a child falls into the sea, it is permissible to save them from drowning using a fishing net to pull them out, even if fish are caught in the process. If a child falls into a pit, it is permissible to dig down and create a step, so that they can climb out. The Rabbinic position is notably lenient. Even if there is uncertainty as to whether there is a danger to life or whether the person is still alive, one should assume that there is, and that they are still alive, and not hesitate to act. The Sabbath Code from Qumran seems to be stricter: 'In the case of any living person (*kol nefesh 'adam*) who falls into a place of water, or a pool – no-one should take them out with a ladder, or a rope, or any implement' (CD XI 16–17).

The observation of Sabbath is enjoined first and foremost on the head of the household, but he in turn is obliged to see that it is kept by his family, his servants, his livestock and any non-Jew (*ger*) resident in his town (Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14). The inclusion of the *ger* has occasioned discussion in Jewish tradition. Some suggest that the *ger* is a convert to Judaism, but then their individual obligation to observe Sabbath is the same as for any other Jew. There would be no need to single them out; if they have not converted, then is the householder obliged to compel them to observe Sabbath? Much would depend on whether Jews could enforce compliance, either because they controlled the town, or because they could, out of zeal for the Torah, threaten the *ger* with dire consequences, if he did not comply. If observation of Sabbath was a creation-ordinance (see below) then the non-Jew might be deemed bound by it as much as the Jew: it is a universal obligation. However, against this is the fact that it is not one of the seven commandments to the sons of Noah. The most likely explanation is that what is envisaged is work that the Jewish householder might request the *ger* to do on his behalf. The householder should not employ the *ger* on Sabbath. This seems to be the line taken by the Damascus Document: 'He is not to send a foreigner (*ben ha-nekhar*) to do what he wishes on the Sabbath day' (CD XI 2). This would seem to fly in the face of the custom of using a *Shabbos goy*: that is to say, employing a gentile to perform on Sabbath an act which would not be permissible to a Jew, on the grounds that the laws of Sabbath are not binding on non-Jews. It is not clear when this practice, which has been widespread in modern times, originated.

The extension of Sabbath rest to domestic animals is noteworthy. The underlying idea is that they should not be made to do any act which furthers the work of their masters, e.g. ploughing, or carrying a load, whether it be goods or a human. The animal becomes the agent of its master, and performs activities on his behalf. They too should be allowed to rest like his servants. In farming communities it was well understood that the care of domestic animals had to continue over Sabbath: they still had to be fed and watered, and this could involve their owners in actions that were, on the face of it, forbidden on Sabbath. The question is discussed in *b. Shabb.* 155a–156a. There it is conceded that animals have to be cared for on Sabbath, but the underlying principle should be that one should exert oneself as little as possible in doing so, in order to minimize the amount of effort expended on the day of rest. So the animals should be provided, if possible, with feed that they can eat as it is, without preparation (such as chopping). The Damascus Document already recognizes problems with animal husbandry on Sabbath. It rules that an animal can be taken outside the city on Sabbath to pasture, provided it remains within the 1000 cubit limit. If it doesn't want to leave its stall it should not be forced to do so (CD XI 5–7). This chimes with the discussion in *b. Shabb.* 155b as to whether it is permissible to force-feed a domestic animal on Sabbath. It should not be forced but left to its own devices.

The cessation from work on Sabbath is not an end in itself: rather it is to allow the people to engage in positive acts of worship towards God. It is a day that is 'holy [i.e. set apart] to the Lord' (Exod 31:15). It is a day of 'holy convocation' (*miqra' qodesh*), an 'appointed festival' (*mo'ed*; Lev 23:2), that is to say, a day of communal worship. Sabbath heads the table of festivals in Leviticus 23. This injunction was fulfilled by attendance at the temple, while the temple still stood, or at synagogue if the temple was too far away, or no longer existed. In the temple the Sabbath day was sanctified by special offerings, over and above the regular daily offerings (Num 28:9–10; Ezek 46:4–5 envisages the future Prince [*Nasi'*] consecrating the Sabbath with his own distinctive offering in the restored temple). According to 2 Chr 23:30–31 the special Sabbath offerings were one of the occasions when the sacrifice was accompanied by the singing of the Levitical choirs. The document known as The Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (*Shirot 'Olat ha-Shabbat*, 4Q400–407, 11Q17) from Qumran claims to give the text of the songs they sang. These, like the Synagogue Qedushah and the Christian Sanctus, are all about the worship of the angels in the heavenly sanctuary. The time of the Sabbath sacrifice in the temple was clearly seen as a moment of great liturgical power – a moment when the worshipping community on Earth became one (*a yahad*) with the worshipping community in heaven. Sabbath was also the day par excellence when Jews in the Diaspora came together in synagogue to pray to God and hear the Torah. Philo, writing in the first half of the first century CE, stresses the importance of the reading and exposition of Torah on these occasions:

Now in these [laws of Moses] they [the Jews] are instructed also at other times, but most especially on the seventh day, for the seventh day is accounted sacred, and on it they abstain from all other work, and frequent the sacred places which are called synagogues. There they sit decorously as becomes the occasion, according to their ages in rows, the younger below the elder, listening attentively. Then one takes up the books and reads them aloud, and another of the men of greatest experience comes forward and explains what is not understood [...] and thus the people are taught piety, and holiness, and justice. (*Quod omnis probus*, 81–83; see further Eskenazi, Harrington and Shea 1991; and McKay 1994)

## 2.2 Jesus and Sabbath-observance in the gospels

The complex laws of Sabbath probably reached full expression within Rabbinic Judaism only in the third to sixth centuries CE, but that they already existed in some form in the time of Jesus is highly likely, because they are echoed in controversies between him and his opponents, recorded in the gospels. Though the evangelists interpret the traditions they received in their own way, and so reflect later Christian thinking, there seems little doubt that Sabbath was a major issue between the historical Jesus and his opponents. It is only against the background of contemporary Jewish observance of Sabbath outlined above that these Sabbath controversies can be understood. Jesus did not reject the Sabbath or attempt to abrogate it. He observed it, but in such a way that he incurred criticism from Jewish legalists of his time. He took the position of a teacher in Israel and was often found giving instruction in synagogues (e.g. Mark 1:21; Luke 4:31). It was therefore unsurprising that he would take a view on such a debated subject as Sabbath. He seemed inclined towards the more permissive end of the legal spectrum, but this brought him into open conflict with more rigorist Jewish teachers of his day.

A notable example of this is the incident in the grainfield, recorded in all three synoptics (Mark 2:23–28; Matt 12:1–8; and Luke 6:1–5). Some Pharisees point out to Jesus that his disciples are plucking grain to eat on Sabbath in violation of the Sabbath laws. The Pharisees' view here would certainly accord with later Rabbinic Halakhah: plucking would fall under the forbidden category of 'reaping', and, if Luke is right that the disciples rubbed the plucked grains in their hands (presumably to separate the kernel from the husk), they would have been guilty of a further offence of 'grinding' (*b. Shabb. 73a*). Yet Jesus refuses to rebuke them. He offers a number of legal arguments in defence of his position, one of which turns on the precedent created by David when he took the Bread of the Presence from the Tabernacle to feed his young men (1 Sam 21:1–6) – bread which is reserved for the consumption of the priests alone. The implication appears to be that just as David's young men's need for food overrode the sanctity of the holy bread, so Jesus' disciples' need for food overrode the sanctity of the Sabbath. The Sabbath should not be used as an excuse to deny people the gratification of their basic human needs. In Mark, Jesus'

argument culminates in a general principle: 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath; so (ὥστε) the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath'. The other two synoptic gospels only have the second part of this statement. The saying in this shorter form became important in later Christian tradition, and was often quoted as proof of Jesus' absolute authority to redefine the content of the Torah, including the Sabbath laws, for the new, messianic age.

The fuller version in Mark hints at another possibility: since the Sabbath was made for the benefit of humankind (a reasonable deduction from Gen 2:1–3), then humankind (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου here being equivalent to the Aramaic *bar nasha*, in the sense of 'a human being') has discretion to do on Sabbath what ministers to its needs. The principle may seem alarmingly wide, and would doubtless have been hedged about with restrictions and qualifications, if it had been developed further, but that is the nature of such general principles (*kelalim*) in Jewish law.

By far the most contentious issue in the gospels is whether or not it is permissible to heal on Sabbath. Sabbath healings by Jesus are recorded in Mark 1:21–29 (parallels in Luke 4:31–43); Mark 3:1–6 (parallels in Matt 12:9–21; Luke 6:6–11); Luke 13:10–17; 14:1–6; John 5:1–17; 9:1–17. In some cases, the question of lawfulness is explicitly raised; in others it is not, but even then the question should be seen as implicit. The simple mention of the fact that the healing happened on Sabbath would have been enough to alert the knowledgeable reader to this. Jesus is represented as justifying healing on Sabbath on two grounds. The first involves an appeal to the universal principle that it is 'better to do good than to do harm, to save life than to destroy it'. He asserts that that principle should operate on Sabbath as much as on any other day (Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9). This claim is backed up, secondly, by an analogy – an argument *a fortiori* (*a qal va-homer*, in Rabbinic parlance): if it is permissible to save a domestic animal from harm on Sabbath (Jesus assumes that his opponents will accept it is), then it is *a fortiori* permissible to save a human being, whose life is worth more than an animal's (Matt 12:10–12; Luke 14:5; cf. Luke 13:15 and John 7:22–23). Such arguments are understandable within the parameters of Jewish legal reasoning, but there is a problem with identifying the position which Jesus is supposedly opposing.

The implication in the gospels is that Jesus' opponents were rigidly opposed to healing on Sabbath. They are identified as Pharisees (Matt 12:14; Mark 3:6; Luke 14:3; John 9:13). It is not at all clear, however, that the Pharisees would have opposed healing on Sabbath. As noted above, their legal heirs, the Rabbis, developed the principle of *piqquah nefesh*, which was open to a wide and liberal interpretation. Where the grounds for Jesus' opponents' objections are stated, they do not seem to have to do with the healing itself, but with incidental aspects of it. When Jesus cured the man at the Pool of Bethesda and told him take up his mat and walk, he incited him to break the Sabbath law against

carrying (John 5:10–11). This was surely unnecessary. The man could have waited till Sabbath had ended, and then carried off his mat. When Jesus made ointment out of mud and spittle to cure a man from blindness, he was ostensibly doing work forbidden on Sabbath (John 9:13). That might still have been permissible if the case had been an emergency, but this does not seem to have been the case: the man had been blind from birth (John 9:1). Waiting a few more hours would surely have made little difference. It is striking how few of the cases Jesus deals with are obvious emergencies: they tend to involve chronic conditions, which surely did not need to be healed there and then. This is precisely the point made by the leader of the synagogue in Luke 13:14, when he says to the crowd, '[t]here are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day!' Surely he has a point: he did not want the Sabbath services to be disrupted – the synagogue to be turned into a clinic. But if, from a Christian perspective, these miracles of healing are signs of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God, then, arguably, they shouldn't wait: the good news should not be delayed. Indeed, given the symbolism of the Sabbath as a foretaste of the kingdom, it could be seen as particularly appropriate they should be done on that day. Jesus' Sabbath healings embedded within Christian tradition a principle of the preservation of life (analogous to the doctrine of *piqquah nefesh* in Judaism), which permitted even strict Christian Sabbatarians to do things on Sabbath which might otherwise have been deemed forbidden, but he cannot be seen as abolishing the Sabbath. He can be regarded, in Jewish terms, as a liberal halakhist.

## **2.3 Sabbath observance in the rest of the New Testament**

### **2.3.1 Paul and Sabbath-observance**

Sabbath-observance became a divisive issue in the Pauline churches. Paul's mission resulted in the conversion of numerous Gentiles, and the question arose as to whether or not those converts should be obliged to keep the law. If they had converted to Judaism, they would have been expected to have taken upon themselves the 'yoke of the commandments'. But there was debate about whether they were converting to Judaism, or if turning to Christ was something different; whether they were entering the community of the old covenant, or the community of the new, and if the latter, what difference did that make? Some argued that they should observe the major stipulations of the old covenant – circumcision (for males), food laws, and festivals. After all, the rite by which they had entered the church – baptism – was the rite by which converts publicly pledged their allegiance to Judaism. Paul was adamantly opposed to this.

The issue became critical in the Galatian churches which he had founded, in which the majority if not all the members were of pagan background. Some, after Paul had left them, had clearly advocated that Gentiles should obey the law, to the point that they were now keeping 'special days, and months, and seasons and years' (Gal 4:10). The

reference here is to the Jewish festivals, prominent among which, though it is not explicitly mentioned, would have been Sabbath (cf. the language of Col 2:16, where it is named). The keeping of the festivals, which form a major part of the law, is probably here cited only as an example of the Galatians' attempts to keep the law. Paul's condemnation is savage. To keep the law is a return 'to the weak and beggarly rudiments (τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα)', a return to slavery (Gal 4:9). Interestingly, Paul addresses the problem not in terms of Jesus' teachings on the matter – stories regarding Jesus' views of the Sabbath must surely have been in circulation when Paul wrote – but in terms of his doctrine of the role of the law in the scheme of salvation. For Paul, the law was 'the rudiments' because it was a *praeparatio evangelica*. It was a 'tutor' (παιδαγωγός) to bring humanity to Christ (Gal 3:21–26). It could not itself save, because it could not be perfectly kept, but it could and did establish beyond doubt the need for salvation. That salvation was brought by Christ:

When the fullness of the time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Gal 4:4)

As children of God, Christians were freed from the necessity to keep the law. Playing possibly on the Hebrew phrase 'the yoke of the commandments', he exhorts the Galatians: 'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Gal 5:1).

On its own, describing the law as 'weak and beggarly rudiments' would have been strongly derogatory, but Paul goes even further. It seems clear he is addressing former pagans. He describes his readers as those who formerly 'did not know God', who 'were enslaved to beings who were by nature not gods' (Gal 4:8). One might then ask how Paul can refer to them as 'turning back to the weak and beggarly rudiments', if the 'rudiments' are the law. In their pre-conversion life they had not observed the Jewish Law. The solution to this conundrum has vexed commentators, but one way of understanding it would be to suppose that in the present context Paul saw no distinction between paganism and Judaism. Turning to the law was to reject the salvation Christ had brought; it was no different from returning to paganism.

There may be an element of rhetorical exaggeration in Paul's language here. In Romans, he speaks in more measured tones:

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God;

while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord, and give thanks to God (Rom 14:5–6).

Again, the term Sabbath is not used, but it must surely be embraced by ‘the day’. Here Paul seems to leave it to the individual conscience whether or not one observes Sabbath, provided one acts, either way, ‘in honour of the Lord’. Paul’s considered position seems to be that keeping Sabbath is a ‘work of the law’, and as such it cannot be mandatory for believers in Christ. However, once that principle is accepted, Sabbath observance becomes a matter of indifference, and in that case those who do not keep Sabbath should tolerate those who do, while those who do should not condemn those who do not (Col 2:16–17).

On the face of it, this proposal seems eminently reasonable, but hidden problems quickly emerge when one tries to implement it. Paul was deeply aware how diversity of practice could lead to disharmony within a church. His reference to Sabbath-observance in Rom 14:5–6 is in the context of a broader discussion about food laws. Food-laws (*kashrut*), like festivals, are an important part of the law, and they are clearly in the background of the discussion here in Rom 14 and in the parallel passage in 1 Cor 8. However, in both cases the problem focuses precisely on a somewhat different issue: whether or not Christians should eat ‘meat sacrificed to idols’ (1 Cor 8:1). A proportion of the meat sold on the open market in the eastern Mediterranean in antiquity originated from animals that had been sacrificed to pagan gods in the temples. This posed a problem for Diaspora Jews. Not only was such meat not kosher, because it would not have been properly slaughtered, but having been sacrificed to an idol, their consumption of it would involve them – however indirectly – in idol worship, in violation of the second commandment (Exod 20:5). There were Christians who had similar scruples, some going so far as to eat only vegetables, in order to avoid the possibility of unsuspectingly consuming ‘unclean’ meat (Rom 14:2). Others, however, among whom Paul counted himself, were happy to eat meat that had originated from the temples. The social implications could not have been more serious, since, as with *kashrut* (cf. Gal 2:11–14; Acts 10:9–16), the ability of Christians to share a meal together – that most basic manifestation of fellowship – was at stake.

Paul realized that an even-handed approach to this problem would not work: while the ‘stronger’ believers might happily eat kosher or non-kosher, the ‘weak’ believers might be offended by this, and be caused to stumble. There is, therefore, an asymmetry in the relationship: the ‘stronger’ should accommodate the scruples of the ‘weaker’. He puts the point this way:

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord

Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. (Rom 14:13–15; cf. 1 Cor 8:7–13)

Paul clearly sees an analogy between keeping or not keeping Sabbath and eating or not eating meat sacrificed to idols, so he presumably saw the principle of accommodation as applying to the former as well as the latter. It is far from clear whether this means that the stronger believers, who realize they are no longer obliged to observe the Sabbath laws, should nevertheless keep them so as not to offend the consciences of the weaker believers, who are convinced that they should keep Sabbath. The issues raised by Paul's view of the law, and its implications for Sabbath observance became a major topic of debate in later Christian thought, particularly at the time of the Reformation (see [section 4.1](#); and, for a more in-depth discussion, [Law in the New Testament](#)).

### **2.3.2 The 'Lord's Day' and Sabbath observance**

There is one other tradition in the New Testament which has had a profound influence on Christian attitudes to the Sabbath, the tradition that from earliest times the church set apart another day of the week as special – the 'first day' in the Jewish reckoning, that is to say Sunday. The clearest reference to this is in Acts 20:7 (ἡ μία τῶν σαββάτων τὰ σάββατα here is similar to the Aramaic *shabbata* in the sense of 'week'), where it is described as the day 'when we meet to break bread'. In the same passage Paul not only breaks bread with his fellow believers on this day, but uses it as an opportunity for teaching. In 1 Cor 16:1–2, he instructs the Corinthians, as he had the Galatians, to set aside on the first day of the week any surplus money they may have had to form a collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. The choice of this day makes sense, if it was already a day on which the churches gathered together.

This day also came to be known as 'the Lord's day' (ἡ κυριακὴ [ἡμέρα]). The earliest occurrence of this phrase is at the end of the first century in Rev 1:10, where the author says that it was 'on the Lord's Day' that he received his commission to write to the seven churches in Asia. There has been some dispute as to what day is referred to here, but there is little point in not applying it to Sunday. This was certainly how the phrase was used in contemporary writings (*Didache* 14.1; Ignatius, *Magnes.* 9:1), and in the later church. The first day of the week was known as 'the Lord's Day' because it was the day on which Jesus rose from the dead. Note the references to the 'first day' in the accounts of the resurrection: Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1. It was regarded, therefore, as a suitable day for Christians to gather and remember Christ's death and resurrection, and in particular to celebrate the Eucharist. It was the 'weekly Easter' – the day on which Christians celebrated the death and resurrection of Christ, before Easter became an

established festival in its own right. Easter Sunday, from which all subsequent Sundays are counted (just as all Sabbaths are counted from the seventh day of creation) was invested with eschatological significance. It was the eighth day of the old creation, the first day of the new (*Epistle of Barnabas* 15), and just as the first day of the old creation was marked by the emergence of light out of darkness (Gen 1:1–3), so light symbolism played a central role in the liturgy for Easter Day. The seventh day of the Jewish Sabbath commemorated the culmination of the old creation. The Lord's Day commemorates the inauguration of the new.

How the first day of the week (Sunday) related to the seventh (the Sabbath/Saturday) in the life of the first Christians is far from clear. It is possible that some would have observed both days, keeping the Jewish Sabbath as a day of rest, according to the law, and even going to synagogue (there is evidence that some Christians continued to attend synagogue into the second century), but then gathering with their fellow Christians on the following day to celebrate the Eucharist. This would have made sense particularly for Jewish Christians. But it is not clear what point it would have had for Gentile converts, though some of them may have attended synagogue as 'God-fearers' before their conversion (and possibly after). However, as Christianity separated more and more from the Jewish world, Sunday became the dominant day of worship for the church, as opposed to Sabbath. Sunday-observance became a distinguishing mark of a Christian, just as Shabbat was for a Jew (for later developments, see [section 4.3](#)).

### **3 The theology of Sabbath**

The Sabbath is not only a set of actions, the most cardinal of which is abstention from everyday work and attendance at divine service. Those actions are seen as flowing from certain theological beliefs which are fundamental to the Christian worldview. Some of the theological hinterland of Sabbath is already sketched in the Bible. In other cases, the theological connections have emerged over time as Christian thinkers have explored the rich theological potential of the idea. The idea of Sabbath is so bound up with the doctrines of God, humanity, and salvation as to make it arguably a central element of Christian faith and practice. Like the Eucharist and baptism, it is a major locus where theology and action meet. This makes it all the more puzzling why it is so little stressed in contemporary Christianity, at least in the Christian West, though there are signs that this is changing. In the case of Britain and America, there may be historical reasons for this neglect – a desire on the part of the Churches not be identified with what are seen as the kill-joy extremes of Puritan Sabbatarianism (see [sections 4.1–4.3](#)). Yet the links to core beliefs remain, and some see the time as ripe to explore them again with new vigour, because the idea of Sabbath intersects with some burning contemporary issues (see [section 4.4](#)).

#### **3.1 Sabbath and the image of God**

Exodus 20:8–11 justifies the keeping of Sabbath on the grounds that it is an *imitatio Dei*: ‘For in six days the Lord made heaven and Earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it’. This brief statement is spelled out in detail in the first account of creation (Gen 1:1–2:3), with the work of each day itemized, culminating in the creation of humanity on day six. This is followed by the first Sabbath, which humanity and God observe together. All subsequent Sabbaths are counted from that Sabbath. The centrality of the Sabbath to the created order could not be more plainly put. The primary purpose of the first account of creation is, arguably, to provide an aetiology of ‘Sabbath’. Its aetiology of the material world is secondary to that. The reason why humanity observes the Sabbath is because humanity has been created in God’s ‘image and likeness’ (Gen 1:26–27). This is said only of humanity, and it asserts humanity’s uniqueness within creation. There has been much speculation on the meaning of ‘image and likeness’ but in the immediate biblical context the primary idea is that humanity is God’s vice-regent on Earth. It rules creation under God. Like God it works (*oved*), and like God it abstains from work. Every Sabbath that it observes becomes a reaffirmation and a resetting of its unique relationship to the created world and to God.

No other creature of God is enjoined to observe a seventh day of rest, and, as observation of nature shows, none in fact does. To them one day is like another. However, as we have seen, humanity is enjoined to make a Sabbath for those domesticated animals which are intimately bound up with its work. When humanity stops work, they should stop work as well and be allowed to rest. Just as God out of compassion has made a Sabbath for humanity, so humanity out of compassion should make a Sabbath for its animals.

The Earth too is to have its Sabbath, not the Earth in general, but the Earth as worked by humankind. There is an implicit recognition here that human cultivation takes something out of the land, and the land should be given time to replenish its strength: if worked without respite it too will become exhausted. The weekly Sabbath rest, for obvious reasons, will not achieve this, and so a longer cycle is needed: every seventh year is to be observed as a Sabbatical year:

When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a Sabbath for the Lord. Six years you will sow your field, and six years you will prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during the

Sabbath – you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you. (Lev 25:2–6)

So important is this commandment that if Israel fails to obey it, she will be expelled from the land, so that it may have the rest which she has denied it (Lev 26: 32–35, 43).

### **3.2 Sabbath and the structure of salvation-history**

Sabbath is intimately bound up with the structure of time. In the first account of creation time is seen from a human standpoint – it is structured, i.e. differentiated time. Time as a dimension of the physical world may have come into existence with the first act of creation, as Augustine and others have argued, but the undifferentiated time of the primordial *tohu va-bohu* ('formless and void' in Gen 1:2) has no meaning for humankind. Humankind lives and flourishes according to temporal rhythms set by the rising and setting of the sun (day and night), the phases of the moon (months), and the position of the sun in the sky at noon (the seasons). Sabbath, by imposing on human activity a steady pattern of work and rest, generates a pulse for lived time which is essential for human flourishing. The rhythm is imposed by more than the alternation of work and rest: it is imposed by the alternation of the holy and the secular. The Sabbath is a holy day, i.e. one dedicated to the worship of God. This alternation between the holy and the secular in both space and time is fundamental to biblical religion. The pressure to blur the boundaries between the two has always been strong, and it is not just a question of the secular encroaching on, or even overwhelming, the sacred, but of the sacred encroaching on, or even overwhelming, the secular. The latter happens in acts of hyper-piety which fail to recognize that the secular is also a God-given dimension of creation. Without it the holy has no meaning – and vice-versa. So those who call for a 'diffused Sabbath' in which less stress is put on a specific day and specific times, the characteristics of Sabbath being spread throughout the week, are arguably sowing theological confusion (see [section 4.3.6.1](#)).

There is an aspect of this Sabbath pulse which should not be missed – it has no external marker in nature. It is, of course, defined (in the original biblical reckoning) as the stretch of time between one sunset and the next, but so is every other day. There is no way that one can tell from nature that Sabbath has come in or gone out. God imposed it externally, so to speak, and it relies on human attentiveness for its realization. This is the force of the injunction, '*Remember (zakhor) the sabbath day, and keep it holy*' (Exod 16:23, emphasis added). Day and night, summer and winter, new moons and full moons will happen whether we remember them or not, but Sabbath will not.

One corollary of this distinctive feature of Sabbath is that it becomes an event in human history only through human activity (or, rather, the absence of it). God keeps an eternal Sabbath in heaven, but it is humanity that actualizes Sabbath on Earth. This opens up the

possibility of linking it to other events in history, specifically in salvation history, for which it can be pressed into service as a symbol. The parallel Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5 does not mention creation but sees Sabbath rather as a suitable time to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day'. (Deut 5:15)

Here the 'remember' of Exod 16:23 is not an act of human attentiveness, but the recalling of a past historical event for which Sabbath can serve as a symbol and reminder. The connection is made through slavery. When the master of the house allows his slaves to enjoy the Sabbath day without work, he should recall that he was himself once a slave in Egypt, and God freed him. This is in keeping with the spirit of the traditional Jewish Passover Seder, according to which the celebrants should put themselves back in the position of their ancestors, and imagine that they were there in person, and experienced the redemption first hand. The obligation to abstain from work on Sabbath lies on each individual, whatever their social status, but of course a householder can prevent his slaves from fulfilling the commandment by giving them work to do. If he allows his slaves to rest, he engages once again in an *imitatio Dei*: just as God delivered the Israelites from slavery, so in a small but meaningful way he is delivering his servants from slavery. The freedom of Sabbath can thus serve as a memorial of the freedom brought about by the redemption from Egypt. Although the going out from Egypt is celebrated by its own dedicated major festival, Passover, held on the anniversary of the first event, people are still encouraged to remember it every Sabbath.

Yet the Sabbath respite for the slave is only temporary. Slaves were actually released at the Jubilee, celebrated every fifty years (Lev 25:8–55). This formed part of a larger Sabbath cycle, of which the weekly Sabbath was the lynchpin. It came at the culmination of seven cycles of sabbatical years ('seven Sabbaths of years', Lev 25:8). Like the Sabbatical year it is a Sabbath for the land, but with the added elements of a remission of debts and the freeing of slaves. The latter two were linked, in that the slavery that is envisaged is debt-slavery in which people contract to work-off debts they cannot repay in money or in kind. But even this release might only be temporary: people could fall into debt once again and be re-enslaved. Thus the Jubilee came to be seen as a foreshadowing of a final deliverance when these problems would be put right once and for all. This idea underpins the Book of Jubilees and the Melchizedek document from Qumran (11Q13). The trumpet-blast that will bring in the eschaton (Matt 24:31; 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16) is to be traced back to the trumpet-blast on the Day of Atonement which inaugurated the Jubilee (Lev 25:9): the eschaton is the final Jubilee. This is the background to Jesus'

proclamation of release for the prisoners in Luke 4:16–30. There he quotes from Isa 61:1–2, which uses the Jubilee (cf. Lev 25:10) as a symbol for the coming redemption, and proclaims: ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’. Though Sabbatical years may have been observed (at least intermittently) in biblical times, the Jubilee, which had more radical social implications, may not (though see Jer 34:8–10), and this may have encouraged projecting its fulfilment into an eschatological future.

Like the Jubilee, and indeed the Passover, the Sabbath came to be seen as a foretaste of the final redemption (see Bergsma 2007; Gunjević 2018). The consummation of all things was cast as a cosmic Sabbath at the end of time in which God would finally bring the work of creation to a triumphant completion. It looks back not only to the beginning of time, but to its end. It is a fulcrum on which the Urzeit and the Endzeit balance. That end was already latent in the beginning. When God rested on the seventh day and (implicitly) invited humanity to join him in that rest, it was for him already an eternal rest, an eternal Sabbath – not the beginning of a cycle of rest and work. Humanity’s work, however, was only beginning, but every seventh day humanity would cease from that work and partake for a time in God’s rest. At the end of time humanity would fully and finally enter into God’s eternal rest: all toil and trouble would be past. Sabbath, if rightly understood, should be shot through with gleams of eschatological deliverance and joy.

These ideas are explored in Heb 4:1–11. The exposition typically turns on the interpretation of a Psalm. In Ps 96:11, God addresses his people with the words: ‘As I swore to them in my wrath, they shall not enter into my rest (Septuagint [LXX]: τὴν κατάπαυσίν μου; Hebrew: *menuḥati*)’. In the immediate context of the Psalm, these words are spoken to the wilderness generation who rebelled against God, which at once suggests that the ‘rest’ referred to is the land of Canaan. Hebrews argues, however, that this cannot be the ultimate reference, because the Psalm was written long after the entry into the Promised Land had been accomplished under Jesus/Joshua (following the view, current in his time, that the Psalm was composed by David; Heb 4:7), and the warning to the wilderness generation is nevertheless repeated: David’s generation runs the risk of repeating their mistake and suffering the same fate of exclusion from God’s rest. Therefore another rest, another ‘Sabbath-keeping’ (σαββατισμός), must be in view; but what can it be? What is ‘God’s rest’? It is the rest into which God entered on the seventh day of creation, into which the people of God will enter eschatologically, after they have finally finished their work. Hebrews picks up neatly the *imitatio Dei* element of Sabbath: ‘for he who has entered into his rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from his’ (Heb 4:10). For Hebrews, the entry into that rest lies beyond the present world. It is pictured as the ‘heavenly country’ in Heb 11:16 (a term which implicitly invests the exodus from Egypt, the wilderness wanderings, and the entry into Canaan with typological significance as a foreshadowing of the ultimate redemption brought about by Christ). It is pictured as ‘the heavenly Jerusalem’ in Heb 12:22–24, to which Jesus has already

ascended as a forerunner of the many children whom he will lead to glory (Heb 2:10). Peter Abelard, in his famous hymn *O quanta qualia sunt illa sabbata* (O how much, how great the sabbaths), rightly envisages the ‘festal gathering’ of the heavenly Jerusalem in Heb 12:22 as an endless Sabbath.

### **3.3 Sabbath and the theology of work**

Sabbath gives substance to the doctrine of humanity as the *imago Dei*, but there is another way in which it is integral to biblical anthropology. It helps to define humanity’s place and purpose in creation: humanity was put on Earth to work. This is expressed somewhat obliquely in the first account of creation. It is implied in the invitation to join in God’s seventh-day rest in 2:1–3. That would have little meaning if humanity was not working the other six days of the week. The nature of that work is related to the commandment to be ‘fruitful and subdue the Earth’, and take from it the food that is necessary to sustain human life. That food is explicitly restricted to ‘every green plant’ (Gen 1:28–31). In the biblical story it is only after the flood that meat-eating was permitted (Gen 9:3), though what meats could be consumed and how they were to be slaughtered was hedged about with restrictions in biblical law. The second account of creation clarifies the situation somewhat. There it makes an implicit distinction between the Garden and the lands that lie outside it. God plants the Garden and puts humanity into it ‘to work it and keep it’ (*le-‘ovdah ule-shomrah*, Gen 2:15).

Two distinct actions are implied here: preservation and development. Both are suggestive as to the nature of the work that humanity is supposed to do. Preservation implies that the Garden will not look after itself: human activity is needed to maintain the order which God bequeathed to humanity to preserve. Development (‘to work it’) suggests the drawing out of the potential that God has put into creation. The same verb (*‘bd*) is used of God’s work in making the world, and its use here posits an analogy between God’s and humanity’s relationships to nature (once again humanity in God’s image). The sense may be that God so made the world that scope has been left for humanity to continue his work – to preserve order against encroaching wilderness, and to develop the potential he has invested in it. Humanity, in a sense, becomes a co-creator with God. The balance between these two activities is sensitive, and has become critical in contemporary times as exploitation threatens to overwhelm conservation – a point that is being increasingly addressed by Christian and Jewish environmentalism (see [section 4.4.2](#) and [Ecotheology](#)).

There is a tension between the two accounts of creation in Gen 1–3 as to the extent of Adam’s domain. In the first account his dominion is universal (Gen 1:28–30) whereas in the second account he is given control over a Garden, which contrasts with the wild world that lies beyond, and it is into this wild world that he is expelled. This sets up a confrontation between him and nature. He is encroaching on a domain that was not

originally his. The Garden presumably disappears: robbed of Adam's maintenance it reverts to wilderness. Adam seeks to cultivate the world beyond the Garden in the way that he cultivated the Garden: he creates little gardens – sown areas as opposed to the unsown – but nature resists him:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. [...] By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. (Gen 3:17–19)

Thus 'work' (*'avodah*) – that noble activity which God assigned Adam in the garden – degenerates into 'toil' (*'itzavon*), the unceasing struggle to wrest food from the soil. Tiredness is natural, it is an outcome of honest work, and it is repaired by rest and sleep, which are part of God's order. Toil, however, creates pain and exhaustion, and is a reminder of the fall.

In broad terms, the work from which humanity is required to desist on Sabbath relates to the maintenance and development of nature, and in particular to the varied activities that are required to sustain human life. This clearly needs to be filled out and further defined, so that it can be implemented in the real world, and that task has been addressed at some length in Christian as well as Jewish tradition.

The period of rest is not to be confused with a time of sheer inactivity and idleness. At the very least it is expected that the free time should be used for the worship of God. This is logical, since central to the concept of Sabbath is the idea that humanity joins with God in his rest. However, there are other activities in which humanity engages which have nothing to do with working and preserving God's world – for example, play, that whole area of human culture caught by Johan Huizinga in his classic study *Homo Ludens* (1949). Historically speaking, the status of what we would call leisure and recreational activities vis-à-vis the commandment to work is perhaps the most contentious practical issue in the observance of Sabbath. If those activities are what we choose to do, and are not part of our everyday work, if they give us respite from everyday work, and intensify that respite, they could be seen, as chiming in with the spirit of Sabbath. In Western post-Christian societies these activities now dominate peoples' weekly rest. The Puritans were notoriously negative about them, but paradoxically it was more often because of the poor attitude they displayed towards work – they were seen as a sign of laziness – rather than because they violated the Sabbath. Time out was time not working. Leisure was seen as an aspect of labour, and could only be countenanced if it made people work better and be more productive. It was on this basis that employers were in the end persuaded to give breaks to their workforce. This attitude forms an important part of the so-called Protestant

work ethic, which has played a central role in the development of western capitalism (see [section 4.4.1](#)).

Seeing leisure and recreational activities as fulfilling the requirements of Sabbath rest can be problematic, if for example they detract from worship. The commercialization of leisure also creates problems. Leisure has become an industry in which people now earn their living. An obvious case would be professional footballers. For them to play a game on Sunday would, arguably, be for them to engage in work. However, many amateurs also play football on Sunday purely for recreation. Many contemporary recreations require facilities which have to be staffed by people for whom this is their livelihood. For one person to use those facilities on a Sunday might be recreation, but they can only do so if other people work. Work-life balance has become a major issue in Western post-Christian societies, and arguably it is Puritanism that helped generate this problem.

This cannot be analysed further here (see [section 4.2](#) and [4.4.1](#)), but enough has been said to indicate how, starting from the doctrine of Sabbath, there are in Bible and tradition resources to develop a Christian theology of work and leisure. The leisure side of this theology is as important as the work side. Observation shows that play is as integral to human nature as work, and this suggests that it is part of the created order. Moreover, technology is taking over more and more work from humanity. One current estimate is that developments in artificial intelligence (AI) could eventually eliminate a quarter of the jobs now done by humans. This will presumably leave humanity more leisure time. This raises the question of how that time is to be profitably filled, in ways that fulfil the creation mandate given to humanity to develop and preserve God's world.

A paradox lies at the heart of the notion of God resting. Historical critics are inclined to write this idea off simply as a primitive anthropomorphism: God's labours tired him out, and so he needed a rest. Such an idea is theologically unacceptable, a point already expressed by a near contemporary of the Priestly author of the first account of creation: 'Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is an everlasting God, the Creator (*bore*) of the ends of the Earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable' (Isa 40:28). What then does God's resting mean? Karl Barth's analysis in his *Church Dogmatics* is suggestive. God's resting indicates his satisfaction with the world that he has made. It is the natural response to him seeing it as 'very good'. One should not hesitate to see here an aesthetic dimension: God derives pleasure from the beauty of his world, just as humanity does, and his invitation to humanity to join him in his Sabbath rest is an invitation to enjoy with him his artistry. Yet resting also expresses God's decision that this and no other world is the world with which he will enter into a relationship. This world is only one of a number of possible worlds God might have created, but he actualized only this one, and he intends to hold true to it. This is nowhere more clearly seen than in his decision, when things apparently went wrong, not to destroy this world but rather

to redeem it. God is not going to abandon this world. This resting could not be further from the deistic notion that God, having set the world going, has left it to run under its own inherent laws. God's creative activity in the strict sense of the term has ceased. The creative potential that he has placed in that world he has left to humanity, his 'image' on Earth, to develop. But he remains deeply involved with the history of the world, and committed to its future. His standing invitation to humanity each seventh day to join him in his satisfaction with that world offers recurring reassurance. Barth stresses Sabbath as a gift of love to humanity: God instituted it with humanity in mind. He did not need to rest from toil, but humanity does, and so God, out of love, instituted a day of rest even before humanity had lifted a finger to work (Barth 1957–1988: 214ff. [III/1]; further Lilley 2018).

There is another paradox that should not be missed. The biblical account of creation makes work a fundamental human activity. Adam was created to work, and the implication is that that work is an essential element of his flourishing. Without it the Sabbath rest is meaningless, but the eternal rest into which redeemed humanity finally enters is apparently characterized precisely by the total absence of work: it is a never-ending Sabbath. That it should involve an absence of 'toil', that aspect of work which came in with the fall, is understandable, but that it should be totally devoid of 'work' is problematic: how can humanity flourish without work? What will it do for eternity? How will it avoid what the British philosopher Bernard Williams calls 'the tedium of immortality' (Williams 1973; Burley 2009)? How will it satisfy those creative faculties which God implanted in it, for which work provides a legitimate outlet? How can we avoid the absence of work in the world to come reflecting back negatively on work in this world as a monotonous chore?

It is precisely these problems which have made it difficult for theologians to give a convincing description of the eternal state, and, not surprisingly, it is standard to deny that it can be adequately comprehended from our standpoint here and now. It is most commonly imagined in terms of worship. Hebrews describes it under the analogy of a city (the heavenly Jerusalem) – a complex organization made up of many elements – celebrating a festival (Heb 12:22–24). Revelation 4:1–11 uses similar imagery. Much depends on whether the final state is envisaged as disembodied or embodied, and, if the latter, what kind of body is involved. Answers to these questions within the tradition can hardly be said to be clear and consistent. Western theology expresses the final state of humanity in terms of the beatific vision (*visio beatifica*), Eastern theology in terms of divinization (*theosis*). Both foresee human destiny as being to be so taken up into the life of God as to participate in his blessedness. This will presumably more than satisfy all those needs which God implanted in humanity at creation. This will be the realization, the consummation of God's invitation to humanity on the first Sabbath of the world to participate in his rest.

## 4 Sabbath in the life of the believer and the community

### 4.1 Are Christians obliged to observe Sabbath?

Sabbath is a Jewish institution, which was kept by Jesus and his first disciples, but Christians in subsequent generations have debated whether they are obligated to keep it, and if so how. Over the centuries different answers have been given to these questions. The problem has been complicated by the fact, noted earlier ([section 2.3.2](#)), that from the earliest times the church set apart another day in the week as special – the first day (Sunday), also known as ‘the Lord’s day’. This was deemed special because it was the day on which Jesus rose from the dead. It was regarded, therefore, as a suitable day for Christians to gather and remember his death and resurrection, and in particular to celebrate the Eucharist. Easter Sunday, from which all subsequent Sundays are counted (just as all Sabbaths are counted from the seventh day of creation) was invested with eschatological significance. It was the eighth day of the old creation, the first day of the new (*Ep. Barn.* 15), and just as the first day of the old Creation was marked by the emergence of light out of darkness (Gen 1:1–3), so light symbolism played a central role in the liturgy for Easter Day. The seventh day of the Jewish Sabbath commemorates the culmination of the old creation. The Lord’s Day commemorates the inauguration of the new. The question then arises of how it relates to the old Jewish Sabbath mandated by the Law of Moses.

The commonest view on the relationship of the Lord’s Day to the Jewish Sabbath is that it has replaced the Jewish Sabbath. The Sabbath was an injunction of the Old Law, which in Christ had been abrogated as a requirement for salvation, every bit as much as the Levitical prescriptions had been abrogated. Those who adopted this view appealed to Paul’s view of the law. Paul’s view of Sabbath was, to say the least, lukewarm. While he certainly did not see it as mandatory, or its observance as garnering any saving merit, he held that there was no great harm in observing it, provided one observed it ‘in honour of the Lord’, and did not condemn other Christians for not observing it (see [section 2.3.1](#)).

Martin Luther and John Calvin were both adamant that for Christians the commandment to observe the Sabbath had been abrogated. Luther, in his *Large Catechism* of 1529, puts it this way:

In the Old Testament, God separated the seventh day, and appointed it for rest, and commanded that it should be regarded as holy above all others. As regards this external observance, this commandment was given to the Jews alone, that they should abstain from toilsome work, and rest, so that both man and beast might recuperate, and not be weakened by unremitting labour. [...] This commandment, [...] according to its gross sense,

does not concern us Christians; for it is altogether an external matter, like other ordinances of the Old Testament, which were attached to particular customs, persons, times, and places, and now have been made free through Christ. (Luther 1529)

Calvin in his *Institutes* inveighs against

the trifling of the false prophets, who in later times instilled Jewish ideas into the people, alleging that nothing was abrogated but what was ceremonial in the commandment [...] while the moral part remains, viz., the observance of one day in seven. But this is nothing else than to insult the Jews, by changing the day, and yet mentally attributing to it the same sanctity; thus retaining the same typical distinction of days as had place among the Jews. And of a truth, we see what profit they have made by such a doctrine. Those who cling to their constitutions go thrice as far as the Jews in the gross and carnal superstition of sabbatism; so that the rebukes which we read in Isaiah (Isa. 1:13; 8:13) apply as much to those of the present day, as to those to whom the prophet addressed them. (Calvin 1962: 343–344 [vol. 1])

Nevertheless, both Luther and Calvin, and others who follow this line, recognized for pragmatic reasons the value of having a day set aside especially for worship, and, following the practice of the early church, Sunday was as good a day as any for this purpose. Their followers could end up defining quite strictly what could or could not be done on that day, but the guiding principle for them was not what was prescribed for Sabbath in the Old Testament but what was deemed necessary to engage in worship, and this obviously involved freedom from everyday work. There was a tendency to see the whole day as devoted to worship: time not taken up with attendance in church should be devoted to private devotions, either individually or in the household. Time devoted to leisure per se was frowned upon.

Catholic teaching also stresses the centrality of public worship to the definition of Sunday: attendance at Mass is an obligation, and that requires time off from work, but the pursuit of other activities on the day is legitimate: 'The institution of Sunday helps all to be allowed sufficient rest and leisure to cultivate their familial, cultural, social and religious lives' (Roman Catholic Church 1999: 2194). The Catechism sees Sunday as the 'fulfilment of the sabbath': it

fulfils the spiritual truth of the Jewish sabbath and announces man's eternal rest in God. [...] The celebration of Sunday observes the moral commandment inscribed by nature in the human heart to render to God an outward, visible, public and regular worship 'as a sign of his universal beneficence to all'. Sunday worship fulfils the moral command of the

Old Covenant, taking up its rhythm and spirit in the weekly celebration of the Creator and Redeemer of his people. (Roman Catholic Church 1999: 2175–2176; see further John Paul II 1998)

Some, however, argued for a closer link between Sabbath and Sunday. Sunday, it was claimed, is the Christian Sabbath, and this opened the way to invoking the Old Testament Sabbath laws in defining what should and should not be done on the day. Some argued that the Sabbath of the Mosaic Law and the Sunday of Christian practice were both instantiations of a universal law of seventh-day abstention from work to worship God, which God imposed on humanity at creation. This was regarded as a natural inference from Gen 2:1–3, and some tried to strengthen the appeal to scripture by claiming that the universal human practice of setting aside regular specific times for worship can be seen as a reflex of the original commandment. This universal law remains binding on Christians, but as a moral obligation enshrined in natural law, not as part of the Law of Moses. That it should be observed on the seventh day of the week was specific to the Mosaic Law, and so binding for Jews but not for Christians. In principle the original law could be fulfilled by setting aside any day, provided a seven-day interval is maintained; it is matter of indifference which day is chosen (cf. Aquinas' inflection of this view in [section 4.3.6.2](#)).

That Christians are obliged to observe specifically the first day is deduced from the practice of the early church, which, it is claimed, must have been adopted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had indicated the supreme importance of this particular day by on it rising from the dead. This position was advocated by a number of English Puritans. Notable versions of it are found in the Westminster Confession (Chapter 21: Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day), and in the writings of John Owen (1855: 263–460 [vol. 2]) and Richard Baxter (1830b: 363–516 [vol. 13]). Owen succinctly summarizes his view thus:

I doubt not but that the Mosaical Sabbath, and the manner of its observation, are under the Gospel utterly taken away. But as for the weekly Sabbath, as required by the law of our creation, and reinforced in the decalogue, the summary representation of that great original law, the observation of it is a moral duty, which by divine authority is translated unto another day. (Owen 1855: 402)

Baxter's proof that Sunday observance is a *ius divinum* (divine law) is summarized in his *Catechizing of Families*, chapter 37 Q25 as follows:

Christ commissioned his apostles to teach the churches all his doctrines and commands, and orders, and so to settle and guide them. [...] Christ promised his Spirit to them, to enable them to perform their commission, and lead them into all truth. [...] Christ gave them the infallible Spirit accordingly to perform their commissioned work. [...] Christ himself laid the foundation, by rising that day (as God did of the Sabbath by ceasing from his work). He appeared to his disciples congregate on that day; he sent down the Holy Ghost (his Agent and the Perfecter of his work) on that day: the apostles settled that day as the stated time for constant church assemblies and communion; and all the churches in the world have constantly called it the Lord's day, and kept it as thus appointed, and used by the apostles, from their days till now with one consent. (Baxter 1830c: 191)

The arguments for a first-day Sabbath as mandatory for Christians are rather tortuous, and can rather easily be turned round to support the view that Christians are actually still obligated to keep the original seventh-day Sabbath. This was precisely the line taken by James Ockford in his *Doctrine of the Fourth Commandment* (1650). Ockford concentrated on the fact that the Sabbath law is one of the Ten Commandments, which he argued were a summary of the moral law and still remain in force. In the context of the debate this argument was strong, because the basic premiss – that the Decalogue embodied natural law that had not been abrogated – would have been accepted by his opponents. It was embraced by Baxter, Owen, Luther, and many others. What they chose to ignore was the specificity of the fourth commandment. The Sabbath there is clearly the Sabbath of Gen 1:2–3, which is the seventh day of the week. But the Achilles' heel of the first-day Sabbatarians was their claim that the switch from the seventh to the first day was a *ius divinum*: there was simply no direct evidence that this was mandated by either Christ or by any of the apostles. Ockford saw the shift as influenced by more external factors such as Constantine's edict of 7 March 321 (see [section 4.3.2](#)).

Ockford was one of the founders of the Seventh Day Baptist Church which, along with the Seventh Day Adventist Church (founded in Battle Creek, Michigan in 1863) in its various branches, have carried the standard for seventh-day Christian Sabbatarianism down to the present day in the Western church, though there are also smaller Sabbatarian Christian sects. Messianic Judaism, which has grown in importance within Christianity, also observes the Jewish Sabbath from Friday evening to Saturday evening, replicating many of the standard Jewish rituals for the day (see Pasche Institute 1995). In the Eastern church an example of seventh-day Sabbatarianism is the Orthodox Tewahedo Church, in both its Ethiopic and Eritrean branches. This is typical of the judaizing tendencies within Christianity in the Horn of Africa. (The Beta Israel, commonly known as Falashas and sometimes referred to as the Black Jews of Ethiopia, who also observe the Jewish Sabbath, probably originated in a judaizing Christian movement.)

## **4.2 Christian views of Sabbath work**

Whether one designates the first or the seventh day as the weekly Christian day of worship, there is universal agreement that worship requires abstention from everyday work, and therefore what constitutes work still requires definition. Some Christian definitions of work are almost as precise and legalistic as those of the Rabbis, and from time to time there is cross-referencing to Rabbinic views. This legalism comes out not only in theological discussions of Sunday (see the 1644 *Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God: Of the Sanctification of the Lord's Day*; Owen 1855: 437–460; Baxter 1830a), but even more so in the laws adopted by Christian communities that have decided to enforce a Christian view of Sunday. These laws are attested in England and Scotland in the seventeenth century, when the Puritans were politically in the ascendant. A concerted effort was made to ban or restrict manufacturing, service, business, and trade on Sunday, and to discourage travel. The idea that the abstention from work was not an end in itself but meant to allow people to attend divine service, was emphasized, and attempts were made to enforce church attendance, either through bye-laws or social pressure. The emphasis on church attendance led to bans on sports and pastimes as incompatible with Sabbath observance, on the grounds that, although they could be seen as chiming in with the notion of Sunday as a day of rest and recreation, they would inevitably detract from it as a day of worship (Solberg 1977; Parker 1988).

This debate over the status of sporting and leisure activities – a debate which arose well before the commercialization of sport and leisure (up until the twentieth century sportsmen were amateurs not professionals) – did much to sharpen the idea of sport and leisure as definable activities over against work. Many of the restrictions introduced by law to what was permitted on Sundays (the so-called ‘Blue Laws’ or Sunday Laws) survived in Britain right down to the twentieth century, and there are still Christian organizations (such as the Lord’s Day Observance Society, now Day One Christian Ministries) which campaign for their reinstatement in some shape or form. Christian advocates of abstention from work on the Christian Sabbath, like their Jewish counterparts, face the problem of whether the laws of Sabbath can in certain circumstances be overridden. Broadly speaking, they have come to the same conclusion, sometimes with specific reference to Jewish arguments, viz., that they can be set aside if there is need to preserve life or to provide necessary care for domestic animals.

## **4.3 A history of Sabbath observance in the Christian world**

### **4.3.1 The ‘parting of the ways’**

The most important development in the post-apostolic era was the emergence of Sunday as the definitive day in the week for communal Christian worship. As noted in [section 2.3.2](#), Christians already in the first century were meeting regularly on Sunday (‘The

Lord's Day') to celebrate the Eucharist ('The Lord's Supper'). For a time, some (Jewish) Christians may have continued to also attend synagogue on the Saturday (the biblical Sabbath), but this practice seems to have rapidly decreased in the second century as the churches became more and more gentile in membership and the synagogue authorities made Christians unwelcome. Under the growing influence of the Rabbinic movement, an important moment came with the insertion into the standard daily Hebrew prayer, the Eighteen Benedictions (*Amidah*), of a benediction cursing the heretics (*minim*, the Christians). In Palestine, a watershed was probably marked by the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132–135 CE. Bar Kokhba had messianic pretensions and seems to have persecuted the Christians, who followed another Messiah (Justin, *Apology* I, 31). In parts of the Diaspora, however, Christians may have continued to frequent synagogues for some time thereafter.

#### **4.3.2 Constantine's Sunday laws and Eusebius' reaction**

The preeminence of Sunday as a Christian day of rest as well as of worship was given an enormous boost by two edicts of the emperor Constantine in 321, making Sunday (*Dies Solis*) an official day of rest throughout the Roman empire. The first edict (7 March) stipulated: 'On the venerable Day of the Sun let the magistrates and the people residing in the cities and the workshops of all crafts be at rest'. It allowed, however, persons engaged in agriculture in the country to 'freely and lawfully continue their pursuits' (Code of Justinian 3.12.3). The second edict (3 July) added an additional exemption – for the legal processes involved in the manumission of slaves (Theodosian Code 2.8.1) – on the grounds that since Sunday is a day of joy (*die festo*), 'it is pleasant and fitting that those acts which are especially desired [such as manumissions] should be accomplished on that day'.

There is no reference to Christianity in either edict, and it is usually supposed that they reflect the devotion of the imperial house to the cult of Sol Invictus rather than any desire to favour Christians. Up to this time, as already noted, the Lord's Day was not regarded by Christians as a special day of rest, and some have seen the imperial edicts as an infringement of Christian liberty. Christian Sabbatarians (i.e. Christians who continue to observe a Saturday Sabbath) appeal to the link between Sunday and the cult of *Sol Invictus* to argue that Sunday, as subsequently observed by the church, was in origin a pagan festival. This argument rather ignores the fact that Christians were worshipping on Sunday long before the time of Constantine, but it has a valid point, in that Constantine's edicts undoubtedly encouraged Christians to view their Sunday as a day of rest and so to assimilate it to the Jewish Sabbath.

Whether or not Constantine had Christians in mind, his legislation would have had a direct practical impact on church services by allowing them to become longer and more elaborate on Sundays, because of the enforced free time now available. Eusebius, a

contemporary of Constantine, is in no doubt that the imperial legislation had implications for the church (see Eusebius, *Life of the Constantine*, 4.18).

That Eusebius was inspired to read Christian meaning into Constantine's edicts, by now defining the Lord's Day as a day of rest, and interpreting it as the Christian Sabbath is clear from his Commentary on Psalm 91 (Psalm 92 in English versions), written some ten years after the edicts were promulgated. The Psalm in the Hebrew, the Septuagint, and the Vulgate bears the title 'A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath Day', and Eusebius could not resist the temptation to see here a reference to the Lord's Day. He argues that, because the Jews to whom the Sabbath was first given failed to keep it,

the Word, through the New Covenant, translated and transferred the festival of the Sabbath to the rising of the light, and gave to us an image of the true rest, namely, the salvific Lord's Day, the first day of light, on which the Saviour of the world, after all his labours among men, having won the victory over death, passed through the gates of heaven, transcending the work of the six days of creation. [...] And all things that were required to be done on the [Jewish] Sabbath, these we have transferred to the Lord's Day, as more appropriately belonging to it, because it has precedence and is first in rank, and is more honourable than the Jewish Sabbath. (*Commentary on Psalms to Psalm 91*, PG 23, 1170C; 1172A–B)

No Christian writer before Eusebius states the transfer of Sabbath to the Lord's Day with such conviction, and it is clear that in his case a crucial influence on his doing so was the Constantinian legislation making Sunday – the Day of the Sun – a day of rest.

#### **4.3.3 Post-Constantinian Sunday legislation, ecclesiastical and civil**

In the post-Constantinian era it became widespread for church councils to declare Sunday a day of rest. The first to do so was the Council of Laodicea in the 360s:

Christians must not judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honouring the Lord's Day, and, if they can, resting then as Christians. But if any should be found to be judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ. (Canon 29)

This seems to imply that there were even in the mid-fourth century some Christians still observing the Jewish Sabbath, but whether they were remnants of an older Jewish Christianity, or new gentile Christians attracted to Judaism, is unclear. The apparent lukewarmness with which Sunday rest is imposed ('if they can') is noteworthy, and might suggest it is being imposed somewhat reluctantly, under external pressure. On the other hand, the language may be compressed and simply reflect an awareness of possible agricultural exemptions, as in the Constantinian legislation.

Later church Councils in the Latin West, however, became more emphatic. The Council of Orleans of 538, Canon 28 (ed. Mansi 9.19), begins by noting that some were forbidding travel, preparation of food, house-cleaning, and personal adornment on Sunday, and rejecting this as savouring more of Jewish than Christian practice, but then proceeds to introduce a new stringency by reversing the Constantinian exemption of farmwork. Canon 1 of the Council of Mâcon of 585 (Mansi 9.949–50), and many later councils in France and Germany, also defined Sunday as a day of rest on the model of the biblical Sabbath. The term ‘servile work’ (*opus servile*) emerged as the umbrella term for work forbidden on Sabbath in Mosaic law. There was a certain irony in this, in that several of these councils, like the earlier Council of Laodicea, inveighed at the same time against ‘judaizing’, without any sense that in observing the Jewish definition of a day (*a vespera ad vesperam*, ‘from evening to evening’: see [section 4.3.4](#)), and applying Mosaic law to Sunday, they could be (and were), held guilty themselves of ‘judaizing’. When the Decretals of Gregory IX (1234) declared Sunday the Christian Sabbath on which Christians should not work, this became the universal law of the Roman Church:

We decree that all Lord’s Days be observed from evening to evening with all due veneration, and that unlawful work (*illicito opere*) be abstained from, so that on them trading and legal proceedings shall not take place, nor anyone condemned to death, nor any oaths be administered, except for peace or other necessary reason. (2.9 [*De Feriis*] 1)

Canon law was paralleled by civil law. The two legal traditions evolved together and danced round each other throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages, but they should not be confused, and the role of civil law in the evolution of Sunday should not be forgotten. Sunday as a social institution observed over the centuries in Christendom is as much a creation of civil authority as of ecclesiastical. Civil rulers continued to legislate Sunday as a day of rest. In a sense they were simply following the precedent set by Constantine the Great, and asserting their power, but some undoubtedly wished at the same time to burnish their credentials as good Christian princes. They took their cue from the church council (an unusually detailed example of Sunday civil legislation is found in Charlemagne’s *Admonitio Generalis* of 789, see *Admonitio Generalis* 79; Mordek, Zechiel-Eckes and Glatthaar 2012: 231–232).

What was explicitly forbidden varied widely from legislation to legislation, and indeed throughout remained somewhat vague. Vague global terms such as ‘servile work’ (*opus servile*), ‘unlawful work’ (*opus illicitum*), or ‘corporeal work’ (*opus corporale*) were used. The implication seems to have been that if definition of these terms should be sought for, the first port of call should be the biblical laws of Sabbath. Thus these terms underscored the point that Sunday was being treated as the Christian Sabbath, but from a legal

point of view they were alarmingly imprecise. Constantine in 321 explicitly forbade legal proceedings and manufacture, but he exempted agriculture, and he may not have been averse to Sunday trading, since only a few years earlier he had authorized Sunday markets at Aquae lasae in Upper Pannonia (Orelli 1848: 140 [no. 508]). Considering the legislation as a whole, at one time or another the work of the courts and the civil administration in general, manufacturing, trade, entertainment, travel, cartage (by land or water), and even housework, personal grooming, and adornment were all explicitly forbidden, though never all together. The most detailed list is found in the Admonitio Generalis of Charlemagne quoted above, but even this lacks the comprehensiveness and precision attempted in Jewish law (see [section 2.1](#)).

#### **4.3.4 How effective was the legislation?**

Though the civil and the ecclesiastical authorities agreed in declaring Sunday the Christian Sabbath, there were differences and even tensions between them. The civil laws tended to focus on the forbidden work, and not surprisingly attempted (though not very successfully) to define it. The ecclesiastical laws tended to focus on the necessity of church attendance, and to regard other activities as forbidden only to the extent that they detracted from attending Mass. In church circles there was a degree of confusion as to whether church-going was the nub of the matter, and one could actually sit easy to other activities if they did not interfere with it, or whether the whole day was holy and should be devoted totally to the things of God. The question was whether the key criterion was 'holiness' and any activity, however innocent in itself it might be (e.g. playing music), if deemed incompatible with 'holiness', was forbidden. This tension remains down to the present, with the contemporary Catholic Church notably advocating the more lenient position (see [section 4.1](#)).

The holiness of Sunday is regularly stressed in the legislation. An example of treating it as 'holy' was the attempt, in an act of arguably misguided piety, to extend the holy time of Sunday backwards and forwards into the secular time before it and after it. This is a concrete example of the pietistic tendency to obscure the division established at creation between secular and holy time, and to make the latter intrude into the former (see [sections 3.2](#) and [4.3.6.1](#)). The duration of Sunday was regularly measured in late antiquity and the Middle Ages 'from evening to evening' (a vespera ad vesperam). This was the standard way of reckoning the day. It followed biblical/Jewish custom, and differed from Roman practice which measured from midnight to midnight, but some wanted to bring in Sunday from mid-afternoon or even midday on Saturday and extend it till dawn on Monday. This principle is explicitly recognized in the Decretals of Gregory IX 2.9.2: 'It seems good to us that as the magnitude of the days to be celebrated [i.e. the Sabbaths] demands, so, according to just computation, they shall be commenced earlier and terminated later'. This principle is well known in Judaism, and applied notably to Sabbath. In order to put a 'fence'

around the holiness of Sabbath, and avoid inadvertently transgressing it, it is brought in early and goes out late.

There could also be confusion and tension between civil and ecclesiastical authorities over the enforcement of Sunday laws, and as a result Sunday as a day of rest may have been laxly observed at best. The church could impose various forms of excommunication, and the effect of these in a Christian society could have been devastating for the individual. Ecclesiastical authorities could impose penances or public censure. As in much early law, sanctions are often not set out in the law itself. How to punish the infringement rested with the judge (whether civil or ecclesiastical). The state may have been content to leave it to the church to enforce them. All this must have engendered considerable confusion over the policing of the Sunday laws.

### **4.3.5 The theological response**

#### **4.3.5.1 Augustine: the spiritual Sabbath**

Both ecclesiastical and the civil legislators post-Constantine agreed in defining Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, the Christian day of rest. Yet in doing so they outran their theological justification, in the sense that Christian thinkers of the same period were reluctant to provide their position with theological cover. Leading theological authorities were lukewarm, to say the least, towards the idea of observing Sunday as a Christian Sabbath. Eusebius confidently asserted the transfer of the Mosaic laws of Sabbath to the Lord's Day, but his confidence was in inverse proportion to the persuasiveness of his theological reasoning. The contrast with Augustine (354–430), the most influential theologian in the medieval Latin West, could hardly be more striking. He has much to say of importance on Sabbath and Sunday (notably in *Epistle* 55.10–13 [18–23], and in *City of God* 22.30), but none of it supports seeing either day as special for a Christian in any practical sense. The meaning of both days was spiritual. Augustine lived under Constantine's Sunday legislation but he pointedly refused to give it any Christian meaning or justification.

Against Manichaean rejection of Old Testament law, Augustine maintains that the Decalogue remains at the heart of Christian morality, and this at once gives Sabbath a continuing importance for Christians, but that does not mean that they are obliged to keep it in any literal sense. On the contrary, Sabbath is the one commandment of the Decalogue that they are not obliged to observe literally. It was never intended to be implemented literally, and that Jews do so is a mark of their carnality. Following a pagan trope, he mocks Jewish abstention from work on Sabbath as nothing but laziness (*City of God* 6.11, quoting Seneca). The Sabbath symbolizes the divine rest into which Christians will enter at the eschaton. Its essence is caught by the words of Ps 46:10: 'Be still and know that I am God'. It is fundamentally contemplative, and it will only be finally realized in the vision of God in the world to come: 'You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless, till it

finds its rest in you' (*Confessions* 1.1.1). However, it is anticipated in this life through the work of the Holy Spirit in believers' hearts, which is an earnest of their final resting in God, and in the peace of mind which results from their embracing of God's promises for the future (see *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 91.2, PL 37.1172).

If for Augustine to keep Sabbath is to cultivate a state of mind, it would seem to follow from this that it makes little sense to confine Sabbath to a particular day of the week. The logic of this position was succinctly spelled out by the medieval Benedictine theologian, Rupert of Deutz (c.1075/1080–c.1129): 'The spiritual man is not content to observe the Sabbath one day in the week, but at all times' (*In Genesim* 2.19, PL 167, 263). This idea of a 'Sabbath of the heart', resulting in a 'diffused Sabbath' in which every day is turned into a (spiritual) Sabbath and so Sabbath is decoupled from any specific day, has been a persistent feature of certain strands of Christian piety, and is undergoing something of a contemporary revival (see [section 4.4.3](#)). However, it raises theological problems. As noted earlier, the biblical concept of Sabbath turns on the contrast between secular time and holy time, and if one eliminates the secular one arguably eliminates the sacred as well. That may finally happen in the world to come, though even then the idea is not straightforward (see [section 3.3](#)), but it is questionable whether it is appropriate to the conditions of this world, or fully realizable here and now. It can only be properly attempted if one withdraws from the distractions of everyday life, and gives oneself over wholly to contemplation, and since that is possible only for certain people (and then only with the material support of those who remain immersed in the world), it creates two types of Christian – the lay and the spiritual. Augustine's position shows the influence of negative aristocratic and philosophical attitudes of his day towards banal labour. Moreover, his casual assumption that Jews only observe the Sabbath externally, by legalistic abstention from certain activities, is highly questionable. Such purely external observance of the law is regularly condemned by the prophets (e.g. Isa 1:13–17), but to assume that formality and externality is characteristic of Jewish Sabbath-keeping betrays ignorance of the Jewish experience of Sabbath, which is often shot through with experiences of inner rest and joy, and, indeed, eschatological hope (Heschel 1951).

Given such views of Sabbath it is not surprising that Augustine did not favour carrying across traditional views of Sabbath as a day of rest into Sunday. The two days had to be kept distinct, because they symbolized eschatologically two different ages. For him Sunday, as commemorating the first day of the week when Jesus rose from the dead, is inextricably bound up with the idea of resurrection. Eschatologically it is the eighth day which looks forward to the ultimate state of blessedness which awaits the redeemed beyond the seventh day of the eschatological Sabbath. Having expounded the six days of creation as corresponding to the six ages of human history, he continues:

The seventh [age] shall be our Sabbath, which shall be brought to a close, not by an evening, but by the Lord's Day, consecrated by the resurrection of Christ, and prefiguring the eternal repose not only of the spirit, but also of the body. There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. That is what shall be in the end without end. For what other end do we propose for ourselves, than to attain to the kingdom of which there is no end? (*City of God* 22.30; see Daniélou 1960: 275–286)

#### **4.3.5.2 Thomas Aquinas: Sabbath and natural law**

Towards the end of the Middle Ages an influential attempt to provide a theological justification for treating Sunday as analogous to the Jewish Sabbath was provided by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). His argument rests on his doctrine of natural law. This natural law comprises certain moral precepts which are indelibly inscribed on the hearts of all rational creatures (cf. Rom. 2:14–16). These moral precepts are of a general nature, such as the duty to preserve human life. They cannot be eradicated from the human mind: human beings, whether they obey them or not, however depraved they may be, can never totally lose a sense of these precepts, nor the recognition that to violate them is morally wrong (*Summa Theologica* [ST] I–II, 94.1–6).

Aquinas argues that the substance of this natural law is written down in the Decalogue which is part the Mosaic Law (the 'Old Law' as he calls it). Following a well-trodden path, going back to the New Testament itself, he argues that the Mosaic Law is no longer binding on Christians, at least in its ceremonial precepts (which constitute the bulk of the legislation). These have been superseded by the 'New Law' in Christ, but the Decalogue, which contains universal moral precepts, remains in force for Christians, and indeed for the whole of humanity (ST I–II, 98–106, esp. 100). It would seem to follow from this that Christians should therefore keep the Mosaic Sabbath, but Aquinas introduces a refinement here which problematizes this conclusion. The Sabbath law in the Decalogue does not correspond precisely to its natural law form. It contains an element in its current formulation which belongs to the ceremonial law, and which, therefore, is not binding on Christians. That element is the timing of it ('every seventh day of the week'): this was only binding on the Jews (ST II–II, 122.4 ad 1).

Aquinas is not explicit as to the form the moral precept of the natural law took, but presumably it had to contain a duty to acknowledge the existence of God and set aside time to worship him. What it did not specify was exactly when that time should be set aside. The Sabbath law of the Decalogue is, therefore, a secondary precept: it fulfils the requirements of the natural law, but has reformulated the primary precept for a very specific purpose, that is, to regulate the life of ancient Israel. Christians are not, then, obliged to observe the seventh day of every week, but they are still obliged to set aside

regular time for divine things (*res divinae*). They do this by setting aside the first day of every week, the Lord's Day. However, putting the relationship between Sabbath and the Lord's Day solely in terms of their shared relationship to natural law does not do justice to their rich historical, theological, and symbolic connections. The Lord's Day bears a far closer relationship to Sabbath than to any other secondary instantiation of the primary precept (of which there must surely be many), and Thomas holds that it is legitimate to take advantage of this. He states the relationship in the following terms:

In the New Law the observance of the Lord's Day took the place of (succedit) the observance of the Sabbath, not by virtue of a precept of law, but by the institution of the Church and the custom of Christian people. (ST II-II, 122.4. ad 4)

Aquinas' choice of language is careful. The verb *succedere* on the one hand is designed to rule out the idea that Sabbath law has simply been transferred in its entirety to Sunday, and the only thing that has changed is the day. Thomas notices, correctly, a difference between the two days. Sabbath was established by 'a precept of law', indeed by a divine precept. It was directly legislated by God himself; it was a *ius divinum*, one Christ himself observed. Sunday, however, was instituted by the church and by Christian custom: for Aquinas that would still be strong authority, but it is not quite the same as direct, divine legislation. The status of Sabbath law being so high, and the instructions for Sunday observance in the New Testament being so minimal and imprecise, it is reasonable to turn to Sabbath law for guidance on how to observe the element of rest which Sunday shares with Sabbath, and which goes back (implicitly) to the primary precept of natural law.

Aquinas spends a considerable amount of time discussing the sorts of things which were forbidden by the Old Law on Sabbath (ST II-II, 122.4 ad 3). He sums these up under the heading of 'servile and bodily works' (*opera servilia et corporalia*). Following the lead of the New Testament, and particularly the attitude of Jesus to the Sabbath laws, he offers a liberal interpretation of the original Sabbath laws. He disagrees with the stringent, over-legalistic Pharisaic interpretation of the laws:

By those things which he [our Lord] did on the Sabbath, he did not break the Sabbath in reality [...] because his works were concerned with the salvation of man, while the Pharisees were concerned for the wellbeing of animals even on the Sabbath; and again because, on account of urgency, he excused his disciples for gathering ears of corn on the Sabbath. But he did seem to break the Sabbath according to the superstitious interpretation of the Pharisees, who thought that a man ought to abstain from doing even works of

kindness on the Sabbath; which was contrary to the intention of the Law. (ST I-II, 107.2 ad 3)

As was already observed, Aquinas is here following a common prejudiced and erroneous Christian view of the Pharisaic-Rabbinic laws of Sabbath, but his intention is clear: he wants to present as liberal as possible a reading of the original Sabbath law because he wants to argue for a liberal view of Sunday law. Yet, at the end of the day, those Sabbath laws for him remain advisory, not binding on Christians. The laws of Sunday come under the New Law not the Old, and, in fact, Aquinas concedes, they allow actions which in no way would have been permitted under the Old Law:

The prohibition of work on the Lord's Day is not so strict as on the Sabbath: and certain works are permitted on the Lord's Day which were forbidden on the Sabbath, such as the cooking of food and so forth. And again in the New Law, dispensation is more easily granted than in the Old, in the matter of certain forbidden works, on account of their necessity. (ST II-II, 122.4 ad 4)

This lenient attitude of Aquinas was influential in later Catholic tradition, and helps to explain the generally relaxed attitude towards Sunday-observance adopted within the Catholic Church (provided one goes to Mass), in contrast to some Protestant Churches.

#### **4.3.6 From the Reformation and the Puritans to the present day**

The Reformation marked another important moment in the evolution of Christian attitudes towards Sabbath/Sunday. The importance of Sunday grew within the early Protestant communities, and nowhere more so than in Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it became a storm-centre of theological and political debate. New arguments were deployed and the old arguments of Aquinas, Augustine, and others formulated with a new fulness and precision (see [section 4.1](#)). This debate was exported from Britain to the American colonies and to mainland Europe, and rumbled on into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It constitutes the baseline from which the present-day situation has to be understood, at least in the West. However, beginning in the eighteenth century, the church found itself fighting a losing battle against the rising tide of secularization. Sabbath died, but it died slowly. Even after the Second World War, public transport remained restricted in Britain on Sunday. Shops and workplaces were closed by law, and a significant proportion of the general population attended church. Since then, however, the restrictions have largely been lifted: shops are now open (though with certain residual restrictions); workplaces can function, if they so wish; public transport runs, though many operators still have a Sunday timetable; and church attendance has dropped off dramatically.

Christians now find themselves in much the same position as their forerunners in the period before Constantine's edict, or as contemporary Jews and Muslims, whose worship-days (Saturday and Friday respectively) were never part of the general shutdown. Many now have to negotiate church-going with the demands of their employment. Attempts have been made in British employment law to protect religious sensitivities, and to prevent people being compelled to work on Sunday against their consciences, but experience suggests the safeguards are weak. The restrictions have not entirely disappeared. There is still a ghost of the old order in the British concept of the weekend, when people will still expect time off from their normal work, if not at the weekend itself then at least time in lieu at some other point in the week, or if they do work the weekend will expect to be paid overtime in compensation (something which employers have increasingly opposed). The fundamental principle that people should not be required to work seven days a week remains widely supported, and has the backing of Trade Unions. However, the free time thus generated is now largely devoted to leisure, and sport, or to private hobbies and private interests. Church attendance has plummeted, and continues to fall. In late capitalism enormous pressure has built up to run the economy 24/7. This has been fuelled in part by globalization, in part by the desire to maximize productivity and profits, and in part by a business philosophy that assumes one's job (one's career) should take precedence over all other aspects of one's life.

## **4.4 Sabbath and contemporary issues**

### **4.4.1 Sabbath and late capitalism**

That such a system is detrimental to the wellbeing of those caught up in it is increasingly recognized. This recognition opens up the way to advance a Christian critique of western capitalism based on the theology of work outlined earlier – a theology in which the doctrine of the Sabbath can play a central part. Christian critiques of capitalism are by no means new. One could think of Christian Socialism in Victorian Britain, which arose in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, or late twentieth-century Liberation Theology in South America, or mainstream Catholic social thinking inspired by Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum: On Capital and Labour* (1891; see Atherton 1994). Yet it is noticeable how little Sabbath is invoked in the literature of these earlier movements. A reason may be that, however oppressive the bosses may have been, under strong religious pressure they let their workers have Sunday off, and in many cases organized their attendance at church, and saw church-going on Sunday as a useful means of control. Now that Sunday has become more or less like any other day in the Western, post-Christian world, this has allowed the Sabbath question to be thought through afresh, and has encouraged bringing the idea of Sabbath back into the centre of public debate, to address contemporary issues.

Walter Brueggemann, who writes in an American setting and addresses primarily American audiences, provides an example of how Sabbath is now used by some to

critique capitalism. Brueggemann sees American society as dominated by consumerism – the insatiable desire for more and more goods, coupled with the sense that the possession of these goods will somehow produce happiness and wellbeing. The economic system is totally skewed towards feeding and creating desires through advertising, ‘the liturgy of consumerism in the service of market theology’ (Brueggemann 2017: 13–14).

Invoking Marx’s idea of ‘commodity fetishism’, Brueggemann argues that the whole economic system is based on commodification – the packaging of as many aspects of the world as possible into ‘goods’ and ‘services’ that can be promoted and sold to people (Brueggemann 2017: 8–9). It is commodification which drives present-day capitalism – the insatiable urge to produce, promote, and sell ever more ‘goods and services’, which exploit people’s desires rather than address their needs. It is this which generates the search for endless economic growth that will generate ever greater personal wealth, consisting in the possession of ever more ‘goods’, and access to ever more ‘services’. This in turn engenders ever more restlessness, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with what one has already got, with what one has already achieved, and ties one into the unrelenting grind of ever-expanding quotas and increased productivity.

Into this world bursts the idea of Sabbath, which calls for abstention from all this frantic economic activity one day in seven. Brueggemann sees the observance of Sabbath in such a world as a powerful and radical counter-cultural critique, as resistance and rejection (Brueggemann 2017: 20–21). He could have argued a case from the mere fact of the divine command to abstain from labour on the seventh day, but he enriches and strengthens his argument by drawing on the wider context of Sabbath in the Bible. As primarily a biblical scholar, his case is built on exploiting in detail the potential of the biblical doctrine of Sabbath (see section 2.1). Thus he draws on the clear link between Sabbath and the exodus in order to see Sabbath as a relief from the slavery which the people endured in Egypt (Brueggemann 2017: 4–5). He draws analogies between that slavery and modern capitalism. The underlying argument is that if the ancient Sabbath laws acted as a negation and antidote to the system of slavery that operated in Egypt, then they will operate in the same way against a modern system which shares its key elements. The systems may economically be very different, but to those labouring within them they oppress in similar ways. The laws of Sabbath promulgated at Sinai underpinned an economic model which was antithetic to the Pharaonic model, and they are equally antithetic to contemporary capitalism.

Brueggemann also exploits the expository potential of the position of the Sabbath commandment within the Decalogue to bolster his case. He argues that it plays a pivotal role between the three opening commandments, which define the relationship between humanity and God, and the six concluding commandments, which define relationships between humankind: the latter have to do with what he calls ‘neighbourliness’. God

demands that his relationship with those he has brought out of Egypt is exclusive: they cannot go on any longer worshipping the gods of Egypt, and that means rejecting the restless economic system which they validate, and, in imitation of God, entering into the divine rest. To do otherwise is to engage in idolatry: it is to serve Mammon (capital, wealth) rather than God (cf. Matt. 6:24; Brueggemann 2017: 17). Sabbath also forms the basis and discipline of true neighbourliness. All equally enjoy the Sabbath rest: masters, families, and servants, even the economically vulnerable – aliens, widows, and orphans. ‘Sabbath is not simply a pause. It is an occasion for reimagining all social life away from coercion and competition to compassionate solidarity’ (Brueggemann 2017: 45).

Brueggemann is not the only contemporary Christian theologian to turn Sabbath against the prevailing economic order. Jürgen Moltmann does the same, though he is invoked in another context below (section 4.4.2). One might also note the Jubilee 2000 campaign which arose in Christian circles and drew explicit inspiration from the biblical concept of the Jubilee to call for remission of debt borne by Majority World nations. Many churches supported this because of its perceived biblical roots, but Brueggemann’s views would not be universally accepted within the Christian world. Those who advocate the Prosperity Gospel are much less critical of the capitalist system, and see successful participation in it as a mark of God’s favour. However, Brueggemann is undoubtedly representative of an influential trend in contemporary Christian thought. A weakness of his position lies in the fact that it remains broad-brush and impressionistic. Much heavy theological lifting remains to be done. Brueggemann speaks throughout in terms of the biblical Sabbath, but that is Saturday. How does it relate to Sunday, the Christian day of rest? Are Christians supposed to carry over the biblical laws of Sabbath to Sunday, and if so, why and how?

Although he seeks to re-establish the centrality of Sabbath in Christian life, he provides little concrete guidance as to how to do so, personally and collectively. He clearly is not advocating a return to the Puritan Sabbath. Quite the contrary:

It is unfortunate that in U.S. society, largely out of a misunderstood Puritan heritage, Sabbath has gotten enmeshed in legalism and moralism and blue laws and life-denying practices that contradict the freedom-bestowing intention of Sabbath. Such distortions, moreover, have led to endlessly wearying quarrels about ‘Sunday activities’ such as movies and card playing and, currently in my state, purchasing liquor on Sunday. (Brueggemann 2017: 20)

From a historical perspective it is not so clear that such ‘life-denying’ practices are a ‘misunderstanding’ of Puritanism. There are very practical problems of implementing Sunday the Puritans try to address which Brueggemann simply skirts round. The Puritans would also probably have rejected the trenchant critique of the economic order which he

draws from Sabbath. Though there were movements in seventeenth-century England which developed radical critiques of the existing social, political, and economic order (the Diggers, and, to a degree, the Fifth Monarchists and the Levellers), they were regarded as dangerous by mainstream Puritanism. Puritanism subscribed deeply to the so-called 'Protestant work ethic', and so (if Max Weber is right) contributed to the rise of modern capitalism.

#### **4.4.2 Sabbath and the ecological crisis**

The idea of Sabbath also plays a central role in the Christian response to the ecological crisis (see [Ecological Ethics](#)). The full extent of this crisis has only become clear in recent times as scientists have devised ways of measuring climate change and of predicting its imminent catastrophic effects, and have identified human activity as its major cause. Theology cannot dodge the ecological challenge, since it is commonly argued that it is the traditional Christian understanding of humanity's place in creation that lies at the root of the problem – a particular interpretation of God's command to Adam to dominate and subdue the Earth (Gen 1:28). At stake is the Christian view of humanity's place in creation, its relationship to nature.

One of the most influential Christian theological attempts to address this issue is by Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann also develops a strong Christian critique of social and economic injustice, which he sees this as inextricably bound up with justice towards nature (Moltmann 1999: 132), but it is the ecological side of his thinking that is the more original, and Sabbath is absolutely central to his case, which, like Brueggemann's, is deeply rooted in Bible. His approach to Bible has drawn fire for not paying close enough attention to historical-criticism, but while he does not entirely ignore it, his relationship to scripture is fundamentally different. He thinks with scripture, creatively developing the theological potential of the ideas about Sabbath which it contains (see especially [section 3](#) above). His approach is rather reminiscent of the classic Jewish way of reading the Bible – Midrash, and this is not surprising, because he freely acknowledges that he has developed his ideas in dialogue with Jewish theology, as represented by the thinking of Franz Rosenzweig, A. J. Heschel, and the Kabbalah (the Jewish mystical tradition), which exemplifies midrashic exegesis.

The 'crown of creation' for Moltmann is not humankind but the Sabbath. God sanctified that day by resting, and that rest expresses his pleasure in what he has made. His pleasure embraces the whole of the cosmos – animate and inanimate. Sabbath involves not only humankind, but animals and the Earth. God invites humanity to share in his rest and that means sharing in his attitude towards his world. (Moltmann 1981: 277)

As the image of the Creator, human beings will love all their fellow creatures with the Creator's love. Otherwise, far from being the image of the Creator and lover of all the living, they will be his caricature. (Moltmann 1999: 132)

Thus Sabbath inculcates respect for nature.

God's indwelling in his world (for which Moltmann uses the Jewish term *Shekhinah*) is the goal of creation, but because of human sin this has not yet been fully achieved. To put things right God entered into his world, and through the death and resurrection of Christ laid the foundation for finally achieving his purpose. The doctrine of God's pathos – 'God's empathy, his feeling of identification with what he loves' (Moltmann 1992: 51) – is a distinctive feature of Moltmann's theology (one for which he is again indebted to Jewish thought). It vividly expresses God's deep engagement with his creation. He is not some remote being 'without body, parts or passions': he suffers with the sufferings of his world. Redemption will embrace the whole world, not just humanity (Moltmann 1990: 307). Creation will finally be completed in the eternal Sabbath of the messianic future, when God will be 'all in all' (1 Cor 15:28). The redeemed creation will be taken up into the life of triune God, and, conversely, God will dwell in his creation. Following a patristic line of thought, Moltmann envisages the persons of the Trinity as interpenetrating each other in a perichoretic relationship. The world will be taken up into this divine fellowship and exist within it. God will become 'the eternal home of everything he has created'. Conversely the world will become 'God's eternal home country' (Moltmann 2004: 157–158; this panentheism may, again, owe something to Jewish thought, particularly the Kabbalah).

This eternal Sabbath is anticipated in the Sabbath rhythms of historical time. In a typical midrashic move (anticipated by Augustine, *City of God* 22.30; see [section 4.3.6.1](#)), Moltmann observes that, unlike the other six days, there is no mention of an evening bringing to a close the first Sabbath of creation (Gen 2:3), and this can be taken as a hint that the Sabbath of creation is open to the future. The Sabbath not only looks back to the creation but forward to the eternal Sabbath (Moltmann 1990: 27).

This anticipation of the eternal Sabbath is the foundation of the theology of hope, which is central to Moltmann's theology. The church is a messianic community, which should exercise agency in bringing in the messianic era of the Kingdom of God. The church can do this in two ways. First, by proclaiming the message of hope to a world which is falling into ever deeper desperation and despair that it has left things too late: a 'tipping-point' has been passed, and catastrophic climate change is irreversible. Christians should proclaim that God remains in control: he will not allow humanity to destroy his world; he will ensure that his creation is completed and his eternal Sabbath is finally attained. That eternal Sabbath will be enjoyed by this world; it is this world that will be redeemed and

transformed. The 'new creation' does not involve the obliteration of the present creation, but rather its transformation (Moltmann 1996: 44–46, 104).

The second way in which the Church can exercise its messianic agency is by activism to mitigate the harms caused by climate change. Moltmann's views have ethical implications for Christians both individually and collectively ('Biblical creation ethics is essentially Sabbath ethics, for Sabbath is the law of creation', Moltmann 1989: 62). He is better at enunciating principles and offering general guidance than formulating concrete policies for action, but practical suggestions are scattered throughout his works. He argues, for example, that

The first ecological law is that for every intervention in nature there must be a compensation. If you cut down a tree you must plant a new one. [...] If your city builds a power station, it must plant a forest which produces just as much oxygen as the power plant uses up. (Moltmann 1999: 94)

His views have implications for liturgy. If the Sabbath is as important as he claims, then surely Christians should be actively and intensively observing it – to refresh their personal relationship to God and nature, to anticipate the coming of the eternal Sabbath and so strengthen their motivation for mission in the world. The logic of his position might seem to favour carrying over into Sunday the practices of the Jewish Sabbath, since it is in those practices that the meaning of Sabbath is played out, but Moltmann strongly resists this:

The Christian Sunday neither abolishes Israel's sabbath, nor supplants it; and there should be no attempt to replace the one by the other. To transfer the sabbath commandment to the Christian Sunday is wrong, both historically and theologically. The Christian feast-day must rather be seen as the messianic extension of Israel's sabbath. (Moltmann 1985: 294)

This needs to be worked out in practical terms:

We must again seek the link between the Christian 'Lord's day' and Israel's sabbath. We have to find a Christian way of sanctifying the sabbath. It would be a useful practical step in this direction if the eve of Sunday were allowed to flow into a sabbath stillness. The Saturday evening devotions which are held in many congregations, and which many Christians like to attend, always unconsciously and involuntarily contain something of the rest and happiness of Israel's sabbath. After the week's work one comes to rest in God's presence, sensing on this evening something of the divine 'completion' of creation. Worship on Sunday morning can be set wholly in the liberty of Christ's resurrection for the new creation. This worship should spread the messianic hope which renews life. Sunday will

again become the authentic Christian feast of the resurrection if we succeed in celebrating a Christian sabbath the evening before. (Moltmann 1985: 296, with no recognition that Saturday evening was traditionally part of the Christian Sunday; see [section 4.3.3](#))

Moltmann is clearly not interested, as were some earlier Christian thinkers, in carrying over wholesale into the Christian Sabbath the Jewish Sabbath laws. Rather what he seems to favour is an evocation of Israel's Sabbath, sufficient to recall its meaning. Nevertheless, he senses a need for Christian actions to mark the Sabbath, and he suggests that as 'the ecological day of rest' it 'should be a day without pollution of the environment – a day when we leave our cars at home, so that nature too can celebrate its sabbath' (Moltmann 1985: 296). This is a rather neat Christian inflection of the traditional Orthodox Jewish ban on driving on Shabbat, and encapsulates Moltmann's ongoing dialogue with Judaism.

#### **4.4.3 Sabbath and the turn to nature**

There seems little appetite among those who are advocating a renewed focus on Sabbath to reinstate the old 'legalistic' Puritan Sunday. New ways of observing a Christian Sabbath are beginning to emerge, and some of these chime in with broader cultural trends in western post-industrial societies. This opens up both possibilities and pitfalls. The ecological turn suggests that celebration of nature could and should be an element of Sabbath-keeping. If God's Sabbath rest involves his delighted contemplation of the goodness of the world he has made, then when humans who bear his image enter into his rest they too should contemplate and celebrate the goodness of creation, and praise him for it. This should have a transformative effect, in that it should remind them that this is God's world, and that they should hold it in stewardship and not selfishly exploit it. (This view was argued as early as Eusebius; see [section 4.3.2](#).)

Nature has figured increasingly in Christian liturgy in recent years, over and above the traditional celebrations linked to the agricultural year (Harvest Festival, Lammas, Plough Sunday). Some churches have introduced specific festivals or seasons of creation into their calendars: e.g. the United Methodist Church has designated one Sunday each year, usually the Sunday nearest to Earth Day (22 April), as a Festival of God's Creation; the Anglican Communion now specifies from 1 September, the Global Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, to 4 October, St Francis of Assisi Day, as Creationtide. This raised awareness of nature has led to the development of appropriate liturgies. The great nature Psalms (already part of the prayerbooks) are commonly supplemented, e.g. by nature poetry 'in the Celtic tradition'. None of this is as yet sharply focused on Sabbath, but Sabbath is liturgically and theologically its natural home.

Heightened Christian contemplation of nature chimes in with a growing trend in western societies at large to evince greater respect for the natural world. The origins of this latter

turn are complex. One of its roots lies in Romanticism, which fostered a new appreciation of untamed nature. Romanticism was in part a reaction to the destruction of nature and the squalor produced by European industrialization. The degradation of the environment has only increased over time, and with it the desire for contact with ‘unspoiled nature’, linked at times to a nostalgia for a supposedly simpler, less pressured, kinder, pre-industrial world. There are numerous claims (probably well founded) that being close to nature and contemplating it can be therapeutic for anxiety and stress. An influential Christian inflection of this mood is found in the writings of Wendell Berry, an American poet who for many years has gone out on the Sabbath (Sunday) into woods near his farm on the Kentucky River to contemplate nature, and has embodied his experiences in popular collections of Sabbath poems (e.g. Berry 2014).

The extent to which this trend will generate new ways of worshipping, new ways of keeping Sabbath, remains to be seen. The movement known as Forest Church, which advocates holding services out of doors in natural places, and has the backing of several Church of England dioceses, can be seen as an early offshoot. Certainly, the link between Sabbath and nature is well-founded biblically and theologically, and there may be reasons, drawn from the needs of the hour, for strengthening this link in traditional Sunday liturgies, but there are also potential pitfalls. Sabbath in Christian thought is linked not only to creation but also to new creation, and if the theme of redemption is not adequately stressed, then celebration can become religiously etiolated, little more than the expression of a vague pantheistic/panentheistic nature mysticism that is prevalent in society at large. The difference between this and a rich, full-bodied Christian response to nature is the difference between William Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ and Gerald Manley Hopkins’ ‘God’s Grandeur’ (poems from 1798 and 1877, respectively).

If, as in some cases is already happening, an initiative like Forest Church fosters an anti-institutional narrative that decries formal liturgy and ceremony, then it has potentially radical repercussions. Popular nature mysticism is strongly individualistic, and often contrasts itself with organized religion. Its advocates quote (probably unfairly) Dorothy Frances Gurney’s verse: ‘The kiss of the sun for pardon / The song of the birds for mirth, / One is nearer God’s Heart in a garden / Than anywhere else on Earth’ (‘God’s Garden’, 1913). Even a committed Christian like Wendell Berry admits to the pull towards nature sometimes prevailing over the pull towards church:

I am a bad-weather churchgoer. When the weather is good, sometimes when it is only tolerable, I am drawn to the woods on the local hillsides or along the streams. [...] In such places, on the best of these sabbath days, I experience a lovely freedom from expectations – other people’s and also my own. [...] The idea of the sabbath gains in meaning as it is brought out-of-doors and into a place where nature’s principles of self-sustaining wholeness and health are still evident. In such a place – as never for me under a roof –

the natural and the supernatural, the heavenly and the earthly, the soul and the body, the wondrous and the ordinary, all appear to occur together in the one fabric of creation. (Berry 2014: xxi–xxii)

There is no doubt that Christianity has found room for such private devotion in the past (e.g. in anchorite monasticism), but it is important to recognize that, historically and theologically speaking, the norm has always been collective worship: one should celebrate God's creation and his new creation together, in the context of the communal Eucharist, and that link is especially important in our own times when creation is so manifestly groaning and travailing as it awaits its redemption (Rom 8:22–23). Any move to weaken the connection between creation and redemption will have profound implications.

## **Attributions**

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