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Creation

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Popular understandings of the Christian doctrine of creation are subject to two common misconceptions. Firstly, it is often viewed as a scientific hypothesis or historical claim about the origin of the world. Secondly, it tends for this reason to be treated as less a matter of faith (and thus as carrying greater apologetic potential) than seemingly more Christian-specific doctrines like the Trinity or original sin. However, contradicting these positions, it is important to stress that the Christian doctrine of creation is a matter of faith (see Heb 11:3) and therefore not a claim that is open to empirical testing by reference to scientific accounts of the world's origin or structure. For while it is indeed part of the Christian belief that the world is not eternal, the doctrine of creation is primarily a claim about God's relation to the world (i.e. to all that is other than God), rather than about natural history. In its classic form, it claims that God created the world from nothing (*ex nihilo*), meaning that God is the only antecedent condition of the world's existence, such that every creature exists at every moment and in every respect only because God wills that it should exist. While this teaching has been subject to significant criticism in the modern period, careful attention to the meaning and implications of the doctrine can answer these critiques. Moreover, while creation from nothing does raise significant theological questions (especially with respect to the origin of evil), its prominence in the Christian tradition arguably derives from its coherence with fundamental Christian convictions regarding faith, grace, and salvation.

Keywords: Christian doctrine, Creation ex nihilo, Chaos, God's will, Deism, Environmentalism, Process theology, Free will, Divine omnipotence, Suffering, Science

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1 Introduction

Since at least the second century, Christian creeds have typically opened with an affirmation of belief in God as Creator. In making such an affirmation, Christians characterize the world in its entirety – not only the visible ‘heaven and earth’, but also, in the expanded version of the Nicene Creed, ‘all that is, seen and unseen’ – as *creation*. To speak of the world as creation is to claim that it is both contingent and intentional. In other words, because the world is created it does not exist necessarily (i.e. it does not have to exist and might not ever have come into being), nor is its existence the product of impersonal forces (e.g. chance or the laws of physics). Instead, the world is the product of the will and activity of a personal agent: God.

In its simplest form, the Christian doctrine of creation teaches that the world is produced by God (specifically the God of Israel). Moreover, because Christians believe that God is complete and utterly blessed in God’s self, and therefore has no need of anything to increase the inherent perfection of his life, it follows that God’s work of creation is a perfectly free and gracious act. Creation is not motivated by any self-interest on God’s part (i.e. God is not driven by any personal need in creating the world, nor does God gain anything by creating it); rather, creation originates solely in God’s desire to share the blessings of existence outside of God’s own life. In this way, to speak of the world as creation is also to characterize it as a gift.

2 Development of the doctrine

2.1 Biblical accounts of creation

The Bible opens with not one but two accounts of creation: the first in Gen 1:1–2:4a and the second in Gen 2:4b–3:24. Because these two accounts disagree in various respects (e.g. the point in the narrative when human beings are created) and are structured on very different narrative principles (e.g. the first has a cosmic scope while the second is more focused on the earth and human beings), Christians from the earliest centuries have devised various ways of harmonizing them (e.g. Origen of Alexandria’s proposal that the first story referred to an initial creation of incorporeal spirits, and the second to a subsequent bestowal of spiritual and then physical bodies on human souls). Contemporary biblical scholarship views the two stories as the product of two distinct literary sources that have been combined in the course of the editorial process that produced the book of Genesis in its current form. Whatever the source of their differences, however, both accounts agree that the God of Israel, YHWH, is the sole source of the world. In sharp contrast to other ancient Mediterranean accounts of the world’s origin, the accounts of creation in Genesis are characterized neither by violence nor by a plurality of actors; God alone gives the world its order.

As rightly influential as the Genesis stories have been in shaping Christian understandings of creation, they are not the only points at which the theme arises in the Bible. Scattered poetic texts display echoes of other ancient Near Eastern traditions according to which the creation of the world was the product of God's defeat of a primordial sea monster (see e.g. Job 26:13, 23; Ps 74:14; 89:10; Isa 51:9). Alternatively, Proverbs 8 describes God as creating the world in partnership with the personified female figure of Wisdom (vv. 1–3, 22–31; cf. Wis 7:22). Psalm 33:6 coincides more with Genesis 1, emphasizing the creative power of God's word alone, without reference to any other actors: '[b]y the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth'.

The New Testament continues this emphasis on the creative power of Israel's God – and, more specifically, of God's word – with the claim that 'the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible' (Heb 11:3; cf. Rom 4:17). But the New Testament also goes beyond the Old in the Fourth Gospel, the opening of which deliberately echoes that of Genesis 1 but introduces a new twist by personifying the speech through which God creates the world as 'the Word' who both 'was with God' and 'was God [...] in the beginning' (John 1:1–2). Of this Word it is said not only that '[a]ll things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being' (John 1:3), but also that he 'became flesh and lived among us' (John 1:14) as Jesus of Nazareth. This linking of creation with Jesus is continued in other New Testament texts, which echo the language of Proverbs 8 in declaring that Jesus Christ is 'the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers' (Col 1:15–16) and in describing the Son as the one 'through whom [God] also created the worlds' (Heb 1:2).

2.2 The emergence of creation *ex nihilo*

Yet if the Bible clearly taught that God was to be confessed as Creator, it was less clear in describing how God created the heavens and the earth. The difficulty here is encapsulated in the opening verses of Genesis, where the grammar of the Hebrew is ambiguous; the first verse can plausibly be read either as an independent sentence ('In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' [NIV, RSV]) or as a dependent clause linked to v. 2 ('In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void' [NRSV]). The difference is significant; the first option implies that the 'formless void' of v. 2 was itself the product of God's creative work, whereas the second suggests that the 'formless void', 'deep', and 'waters' mentioned in v. 2 were already present when God began to create. In other words, the second option suggested that in the process of creating, God made use of matter that was already there, although matter that was not yet organized into discrete 'creatures'.

This latter model of creation (sometimes called ‘creation from chaos’ in contemporary theology) is similar to that proposed by the Greek philosopher Plato in his dialogue *Timaeus* (section 27D–30C), which also envisions the process of creation as a matter of God giving order and form to already existing but disordered matter. Some early Christians were quite happy to understand creation in this way. For example, Justin Martyr, writing in the mid-second century, thought that the account of creation in the Old Testament agreed with Plato’s picture (Richardson 1970: 280–281). In the ensuing decades, however, Christian thinkers became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that God might have created the world from already existing matter. For if matter were viewed as already there when God began to create – and thus as co-eternal with God – that might be taken to imply that matter too was divine. Still more seriously, if God created the world using already existing matter, then God’s creative intentions were limited by that matter’s characteristics. Plato himself had recognized this problem; he taught that God wanted to make the material world reflect the timeless perfection of the eternal and immaterial forms that existed above the material sphere. However, because matter was prone to change, the created world could be only an imperfect image of that perfect model that, due to it being constantly changing, invariably deviates from the ideal in the same way that any physically drawn circle will not have the properties of a perfect, mathematically defined circle.

This created a theological problem, because if the shape of the world God created was constrained by properties of already existing matter over which God had no control, then those properties set a limit on God’s ability to realize God’s intentions in creation, just as a carpenter’s ability to make a table to a given set of specifications is constrained by the properties of the wood they use. This fact directly impacts the Christian doctrine of salvation. For how can Christians trust that God is able to fulfil his promise to save us if his control over the basic characteristics of human life is limited? In order to forestall this threat, Christian theologians in the second half of the second century (beginning, so far as we know, with Theophilus of Antioch in his treatise *To Autolycus*; see Roberts and Donaldson 1994 [vol. 2]) began to teach that God did not make use of any already existing materials in the work of creation. Instead, God created the world from nothing (*ex nihilo* in Latin). Since everything in creation has its origin in God alone (that is, since nothing except God was involved in creating the world), then there could be no limit to God’s ability to realize his intentions for creation. God’s promise to save us in the face of every possible threat to our existence could therefore be trusted unreservedly. For these reasons, creation from nothing quickly became recognized as orthodox teaching in the church and remained largely unchallenged as a piece of Christian (as well as Jewish and Muslim) teaching until the twentieth century.

3 The content of the doctrine

3.1 The meaning of creation *ex nihilo*

The adoption of the doctrine of creation from nothing thus seems to have been motivated by soteriological concerns, but what more precisely does it mean for how Christians understand God's relationship to the world? That question can be answered by considering each of the components in the sentence, 'God created the world from nothing'.

Firstly, to say that *God* created the world from nothing is to confess that the world has its grounding in a person. The world is not self-constituting, nor is it the product of the blind and purposeless interaction of impersonal forces, whether the latter are conceived as physical processes (like gravity or quantum fluctuations) or metaphysical principles (like the Hindu karma or the Chinese categories of yin and yang).

Secondly, to say that God created the world from nothing is to clarify the way in which the world is grounded in God. The world is not a part of God or a manifestation of divinity (pantheism). Rather than an outgrowth or modification of God's nature, the world is instead a product of God's will and is therefore contingent rather than necessary (that is, it might not have been created). Moreover, it is a characteristic of willing action to have an aim; the confession that the world is the product of God's will implies that it both can and should be understood in terms of the end God intends for it.

Thirdly, to say that God created the world from nothing is to say something about the nature of the world God creates. Most fundamentally, this world is other than God. In fact, at the most general level 'the world' may be defined as everything that is other than God. Moreover, by virtue of this otherness, the world has its own integrity and unity; despite the diversity of creatures that make it up, all are equally dependent on God. Because it has been created, every creature is far more like other creatures than any creature is like God the Creator. The differences that distinguish creatures, from the highest angel to the most isolated whisp of interstellar dust, from one another are less than the infinite qualitative difference between every creature and God.

Finally, to say that God created the world from nothing means that God is the sole antecedent condition of the world's existence. Again, God does not make use of anything external to God when creating the world. In this context, it is important to stress that in the phrase 'from nothing,' the word 'nothing' does not designate the material out of which the world was made, as is the case with a sentence like, 'The carpenter made the table from wood'. Instead of naming the material out of which the world was made, the force of the phrase 'from nothing' is to deny that in creating the universe God made use of any pre-existing materials. And this means that in distinction from entities, like tables, that are created from pre-existing materials, the world and its creatures cannot exist apart from the continuous creative activity of God. Once fashioned, a table will continue to exist on its own even if the carpenter who made it leaves the scene. By contrast, the world does not

have any capacity to continue to exist on its own; because it is created from nothing, the world (and every creature in it) depends on God for its existence at every moment of its existence. Because God is the only antecedent condition of the world's existence, were God to suspend his creative will for even a moment, the world would cease to exist.

3.2 Creation and Jesus Christ

As already noted, the New Testament teaches that the word (Ps 33:6; cf. Gen 1) or wisdom (Prov 8) by which God created the world became flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:1–3, 14; Col 1:15–16). It thereby implies that a complete exposition of the Christian doctrine of creation requires reference to Jesus. As Paul writes, 'there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (1 Cor 8:6). In line with the trinitarian understanding of God implicit in both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, Christians confess that God the Father is the Creator – but only with and through Jesus Christ the Son (Heb 1:2).

The logic that led Christians to identify Jesus with the Creator seems to have been similar to that lying behind the emergence of the doctrine of creation from nothing. In the latter case, Christians reasoned that only a God who was constrained by no external power in dealing with creation could have the power to enact fully the divine intentions for creation. Similarly, Christians from the beginning have confessed that Jesus is the world's Saviour. But if Jesus were less than God, then it would not be appropriate to have faith in him as Saviour, since it is possible that God might block or otherwise qualify Jesus' will to save us. Only if Jesus were himself fully divine (that is, only if he is one in whom, following the teaching of Col 2:9, 'the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily') is it possible to have faith in him as Saviour. In the words of the early Christian sermon known as *2 Clement*, 'we ought to think of Jesus Christ as of God, as the judge of the living and the dead; and we ought not to belittle our salvation. For when we belittle him, we hope to get but little' (Richardson 1970: 193).

But what can it mean to say that Jesus Christ, who was not born until the time of the Roman Emperor Augustus, is the Creator? It is one thing to say that the Word who was not yet incarnate was active in creation, but Paul clearly identifies that the one in whom 'all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible' with the same Jesus who made peace 'through the blood of his cross' (Col 1:16, 20). In addressing this question, it is important not to understand the incarnation as an episode in the life of the eternal Word, as though the Word's taking flesh were equivalent to a king's choosing to take on the appearance of a beggar. For in that case, it would not be true that in Jesus '*all* the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Col 1:19, emphasis added), since the content of the Word's life prior to taking flesh would necessarily be excluded from what is seen in the flesh, in the same way that the life of the king disguised as a beggar could not disclose the

king's identity prior to assuming that disguise. In short, if the incarnation is conceived as a stage, however significant, in God's career, then it cannot reveal God in a definitive or final way, because there remains a further and more fundamental divine identity that remains impenetrably hidden 'behind' (or 'before') the life of the Word made flesh.

For these reasons, the incarnation is not rightly located as an event on a more extended divine timeline, but must instead be understood as a complete projection or translation of the Word's life into the realm of time and space. It is on this basis that Christians confess that Jesus simply *is* the eternal Word and, therefore, that he is also the Creator. Furthermore, because it is in and as Jesus that God realizes God's desire to live in communion with creatures, Jesus is also the first among creatures – the one who is both 'before all things' and in whom 'all things hold together' (Col 1:17). In other words, Jesus is not only creation's source but its end, since in willing to become a creature as Jesus, God also assumed the task of willing the whole of the created order within which Jesus exists. To see why this is the case, consider that God could not become Jesus (that is, a first-century Jew living in Roman-occupied Galilee) without also creating other human beings (and a world for them to inhabit) in order to be Jesus' ancestors and companions, as well as the agents of the history within which categories like 'Rome', 'Galilee', and 'Jewish' emerged. In this way, Jesus must be confessed to have been with God 'in the beginning', not because his life comes first temporally in the world's history but because he is first logically as the reason why all other creatures were made.

It follows that Christ is not only creation's ground but also its end; that is, as the incarnate Word, he is not only the Creator *through whom* all things were made but also the creature *for whom* the world was created (Col 1:16). In him God's life has been bound irrevocably to a creature, such that Jesus might be 'the firstborn within a large family' (Rom 8:29) and the one through whom 'the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rom 8:21). Therefore, in Christ we see the purpose of creation is not simply that creatures other than God should exist but that they should exist in communion with God.

3.3 Modern challenges

3.3.1 Deism

From the end of the second century until the Reformation, the doctrine of creation from nothing was uncontroversial. Although during this period the church was rocked by debates over the Trinity, Christology, icons, the Eucharist, and justification, creation from nothing was not a matter of dispute. Moreover, when traditional Christian teaching on creation came to be challenged in the early modern period, it was largely on the basis of developments outside the church rather than specifically theological considerations. In particular, the emergence of modern science in the seventeenth century brought about a

profound shift in Western European attitudes towards the world. In earlier periods there was no sense of incompatibility between natural processes and divine activity as means of explaining worldly events. However, science brought the promise not only of explaining natural processes in terms of quantifiable variables like mass, velocity, temperature, and force but also of being able to predict and control these processes. The success of the scientific method suggested that there was no need to appeal to God to explain why things behaved as they did, either in terms of their cause or purpose – the predictable operation of nature and nature's laws was sufficient (see The History of Science and Theology).

Deism arose in this environment as a means of explaining God's relationship to the world without reference to Christian claims for special divine revelation. Deism was not an organized religion but rather an intellectual movement that appealed to many educated people in Europe and North America between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries (including Voltaire, Benjamin Franklin, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Jefferson). Deists believed that talk about God should be governed by the same sort of rational inquiry found in science. On this basis, Deists argued that belief in God could be justified as the best rational explanation for the origin of the world. They therefore accepted belief in God as Creator. But because the laws of nature described by science provided complete explanations of phenomena in the world, they saw no basis for appealing to God as the cause of events subsequent to the world's beginning. They therefore rejected belief in miracles, prophecy, and other instances of divine revelation.

Deism restricted the idea of creation to a single moment of divine activity at the beginning of history and rejected the idea that God's creating work included the ongoing work of sustaining the world and its creatures in existence. Because the natural laws discovered by science gave a complete account of observed phenomena in the present, God was necessary only as an explanation of how those natural processes got started, as the one who brought the world and its laws into being. Deists viewed the universe as a clock and God as the clockmaker who, once he had built the mechanism and set it going, no longer had any role in the universe's ongoing development. Deism thus challenged traditional theology to clarify the role of the doctrine of creation in a context where reference to God is not necessary to explain the everyday course of worldly events.

3.3.2 Process theology

Unlike Deism, process theology represents a specifically Christian critique of the doctrine of creation from nothing. Based on the metaphysical system developed by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead in the book *Process and Reality* (1978), process theology proposed wide-ranging changes to Christian doctrine. The aspect of process teaching that is most salient for the doctrine of creation is the denial of God's omnipotence and thus the rejection of the defining principle of creation *ex nihilo*: that God is the sole antecedent condition of the world's existence. Instead of creation from nothing, process theologians

advocate a reappropriation of the Platonic model of creation from chaos, in which God's creative work involves giving order and structure to pre-existing but disorganized matter.

Process theologians' objection to the traditional picture of God as the 'almighty' Creator is partly based on two implications of this belief that they see as deeply problematic.

The first has to do with the freedom of creatures, particularly of human beings. If, in line with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, God is the sole antecedent condition of all created reality, then creatures' dependence on God is total; not just their being, but their every movement depends upon God, so that they can act only as God continually empowers them to act. But if creatures' actions are completely dependent on God in this way, then it would seem to follow that they are not genuinely free; instead, their actions are ultimately determined by God. In other words, it is the contention of process theologians that creaturely freedom requires some degree of independence of God that is inconsistent with the doctrine of creation from nothing.

Process theologians' second concern is in the area of theodicy, or the problem of evil. They argue that if God is the sole antecedent condition of all created reality, then God must be responsible for evil. After all, if there is no factor other than God that lies behind the world's processes (including the actions of rational creatures like human beings), then it seems impossible to avoid the implication that evil is caused by God – which runs counter to the Christian belief that God is entirely and perfectly good (Mark 10:18). While defenders of creation from nothing have tried to address this problem in various ways, they have nevertheless also generally conceded that the existence of evil is a mystery. Process theologians argue that the incoherence entailed by affirming both that God is all-powerful (and thus that God could prevent evil) and that God is not responsible for evil is just too profound to be addressed satisfactorily by appeal to mystery.

Instead, process theologians argue that in order coherently to affirm God's perfect goodness, it is necessary to deny that God is all-powerful. According to the process perspective, God is not the sole antecedent condition of the world's existence, but rather just one such condition. In the beginning there is not just God, but God alongside a vast expanse of other entities that lack any structure or purpose. Because these entities, though simple and disorganized, are genuinely independent of God, they have real freedom. God's creative activity consists in giving each of these entities a possible course of action or 'initial aim'. Because God is good, the aims God provides will, if followed, produce a good outcome (specifically, a state of greater order and harmony in the universe). But because the entities for which God provides these aims are free, they can and sometimes do disregard God's aims; that is, they may make choices that are evil rather than good. So, while for process theology God is at every point acting in the world to maximize the good by providing creatures with aims that will lead to good outcomes,

God cannot ensure that such outcomes will in fact be realized. Process theology thus challenges defenders of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to show how traditional claims about God's power as Creator are consistent with the human experience of freedom and evil (Cobb and Griffin 1976: 41–79).

4 Relationship to science

4.1 God as cause

Strategies for responding to the challenges to creation from nothing posed by Deism and process theology alike may be found through a closer examination of the ways in which the Christian doctrine of creation relates to scientific accounts of the world. Deists, for example, maintain that the success of science in explaining worldly phenomena sharply restricts the arena in which rational talk about God is possible. If the causes of events in the world can be explained adequately by appeal to natural processes (gravity for the motions of the heavenly bodies, natural selection for the development of species, plate tectonics for the rise of mountain ranges, and so on), then there is no need to speak of God as a cause – except as the initial cause of the universe itself (that is, of the matter of which the world is composed and the natural laws that govern its movement in time). In short, scientific accounts of causation render theological claims about God as cause largely redundant.

Defenders of traditional accounts of creation have responded to this challenge in a variety of ways. One line of response takes its bearings from the recognition that scientific understandings of natural processes have undergone significant change since the heyday of Deism. In the twentieth century, quantum mechanics and chaos theory have, in different ways, disrupted the picture of nature as a clockwork governed by the regular, predictable operation of natural laws. Chaos theory teaches that in complex systems (e.g. the weather) tiny and humanly undetectable differences in initial conditions lead to enormous variations in the systems' future states, rendering scientific prediction of their evolution impossible. And most quantum theorists hold that at the subatomic level, individual events (e.g. the radioactive decay of a particular atom of uranium) do not have an identifiable physical cause at all, rather they are strictly random.

The upshot of both these theoretical developments is that there are inherent gaps in strictly scientific explanations of events that allow space for scientifically credible talk of divine activity in the world and thereby upend the claim that reference to God as a cause of natural events is necessarily redundant. Chaos theory allows that God could act at undetectable levels to change key variables in a complex system and thereby influence its future evolution (Polkinghorne 2009). Similarly, in the absence of any identifiable physical cause for a quantum event, divine intervention would not violate any natural laws and could be invoked to affirm God's directing the course of events in the world (Russell 2009).

However, there are significant difficulties with both these attempts to find scientifically credible space for divine causation in the world. While chaotic systems are indeed extremely sensitive to even the tiniest variation in initial conditions (so that, to use a famous example, the flap of a butterfly's wing over the Amazon could contribute to the formation of a typhoon in the Philippines), those systems nevertheless evolve according to the regular, quantifiable dictates of physical laws. Thus, while any intervention on the part of God would be undetectable, such intervention would not be necessary to explain the evolution of any complex system. To appeal to divine activity in such cases thus remains redundant – and runs the risk of suggesting that God needs to interfere with the natural processes that God created in order to achieve the outcomes in the world that God wants.

In the case of quantum mechanics, the charge of divine interference can be avoided, for if quantum events are truly random, then there is no natural process already in place with which God might interfere. The difficulty here is that while individual quantum events are indeed random and thus unpredictable, collectively they follow strictly quantifiable probabilistic laws. For example, it is impossible to predict when any given uranium-235 atom will decay, but it is entirely possible to predict that exactly half of any collection of uranium-235 atoms will decay in 703,800,000 years. Thus, while at the smallest level individual events are unpredictable, this randomness evens out in the aggregate, so that at the macroscopic level it disappears and the world operates according to the regularities of natural law. Thus, although God could act at the quantum level without violating any natural laws, once again it does not seem that appeal to such activity is necessary or helpful for explaining human experience of the observable world.

An alternative way of answering the Deist challenge to the confession of God as cause emphasizes God's transcendence of the world. Instead of seeing God as one cause alongside (and in potential competition with) the natural causes that science observes and measures, God is conceived as acting at a different level – as the cause of all causes. Importantly, this is not the same as viewing God as temporally first in an ongoing sequence of causes (which is what Deism teaches); rather, it means that God acts *above* the whole sequence of temporal (i.e. natural) causes as the one who brings that whole sequence into being and sustains it in being.

This way of conceiving God's role as cause in relation to the world is analogous to the relation between a novelist and the 'world' of their novel: on the one hand, everything in the novel is equally, directly, and absolutely dependent on the novelist; but on the other hand, the world of the novel has its own causal structure, in which some things happen by natural laws (e.g. rain falling, airplanes flying, dogs eating), others by the free decisions of the characters (e.g. choosing to get married, to move house, to start a new job), and still others by chance (e.g. an unexpected meeting, a stray bullet striking someone). Within this framework God may be described as the *primary cause* that both founds and sustains

the whole system of the world, while the various causes that operate within the world are designated *secondary causes*. There is no competition between the primary cause and secondary causes, as though the activity of one displaced the other; quite the contrary, the two operate in tandem, because at every point secondary causes depend for their operation on the primary cause. Thus, scientific explanations for things that happen do not render reference to God's activity redundant because God's causal activity operates on a different level than the natural causes explained by science. In the same way that one can explain why something happens in a novel by reference either to the intentions of the author (at the level of primary cause) or in terms of the interaction of characters and circumstances in the story (at the level of secondary cause), so one can say that the falling of an apple is caused by God (at the level of primary cause) or by gravity (at the level of secondary cause).

In addition to addressing the Deist worry about competition between divine and natural causation, the distinction between primary and secondary causes also provides an answer to the process theologians' charge that creation from nothing undermines human freedom. For just as in a novel everything that happens is equally dependent on the author, and yet the reader can recognize the difference between things that happen by necessity and things that characters freely choose to do, so there is nothing inconsistent in viewing God as the primary cause of all that happens in the world, and yet to affirm that God should will at the level of secondary causation that some things happen by the inexorable operation of natural laws *on* creatures and other things by way of the free decisions taken *by* the creatures themselves.

At the same time, it is important to concede that the distinction between primary and secondary causation does not provide any ready answer to the problem of evil. It is easy to imagine a case where a novelist has no sympathy for and would even condemn an evil act committed by one of their characters – but the fact remains that the character can commit that act only because the novelist decides that they should. Likewise, while it may be possible to deny that God approves of the evil creatures commit, it is hard to see how on a doctrine of creation from nothing God can be cleared of responsibility for it. Given the conviction of God's perfect goodness and sovereignty, the only alternative under a doctrine of creation from nothing to suggesting that evil is finally an illusion (because, e.g. it somehow serves the good and so is not truly evil at all) is to confess that its place in the divine economy is a mystery.

4.2 Cosmology

The doctrine of creation is often understood as a scientific claim about how the world began. This is understandable, for when understood in these terms, the doctrine arguably has apologetic value in connecting the claims of Christian faith to more general human

reflection on the world's origin. After all, even those, like the Deists, who were for the most part highly critical of Christian beliefs, were prepared to concede that the doctrine of creation was a defensible theological claim. For, quite independently of Christian claims regarding divine revelation in the history of Israel and the life of Jesus, many philosophers have thought it possible to defend the existence of a Creator on purely rational grounds, whether by arguing that the sequence of causes behind worldly states of affairs must terminate in an originating uncaused cause (the cosmological argument) or by maintaining that the order and harmony manifest in the world's physical and biological systems imply the existence of an originating designer (the teleological argument).

This tendency to regard the doctrine of creation as providing at least partial evidence for the truth of Christianity has received additional stimulus with the emergence of scientific consensus around the 'Big Bang' theory, which holds that the universe originated at a particular time (generally dated as 13.7 billion years ago) in a process of sudden rapid expansion from an initial state of infinite density and temperature. In contrast to the idea of an eternal universe existing in a steady state, modern scientific cosmology seems to paint a picture of a beginning that is analogous to the sudden blazing forth of light from darkness described in Gen 1:3. On this basis, Pope Pius XII judged that 'the science of today, by going back in one leap millions of centuries, has succeeded in being a witness to that primordial *Fiat Lux*, when, out of nothing, there burst forth with matter a sea of light and radiation' (1951; see 2003).

Yet there are difficulties with efforts to coordinate scientific theories about the universe's origins and Christian doctrinal claims in this way. Firstly, the degree of consonance between the Big Bang cosmology and the biblical account of creation is not necessarily as straightforward as it may first appear, given that some scientists hold that the 'beginning' defined by the Big Bang is not absolute but rather just one in a (possibly infinite) series of cycles of universal rebirth. Secondly, while Genesis certainly describes God's creation of the world as taking place 'in the beginning', whether or not this narrative is to be understood as a strictly historical account is debated. For example, neither Augustine (1991: 246–272) in the ancient world nor Karl Barth (1958: 81–94) in the modern read it in that way.

Thirdly, the quest for scientific confirmation of Christian teaching about creation mistakes the essential character of that teaching, which the Bible declares to be a matter of faith (Heb 11:3) and therefore presumably not subject to verification in scientific terms. In this context, it is important to stress that the doctrine of creation from nothing does not describe an *event* but rather a *relation*; God relates to the world as its source and grounding, and the world, in turn, exists in a relation of absolute and continuous dependence on God. This relation does not depend on the world having originated at a particular point in time. Rather, just as the causal relation between an imprint in wax produced by a seal would

hold even if the seal and wax had always been there, so, too, God's status as the world's Creator describes a causal relation that holds whether or not the world had a temporal beginning.

4.3 Environmentalism

Genesis states that the creatures brought into being by God (who is inherently good) are themselves good (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), and that the whole created order is 'very good' (1:31). With the exception of the heavenly bodies (which are specifically said to be 'for signs and for seasons and for days and years' and 'to give light upon the earth', 1:14–15), this goodness is evidently not a matter of utility, as though it depended on creatures' being good *for* human beings, or their being a means to some other end. Instead, it seems to be a matter of their corresponding to God's intentions; creatures are good simply in that they turn out just as God wished them to. A similar theme is found elsewhere in scripture. The psalmist writes that God formed the great sea monster Leviathan just 'to sport in it' (Ps 104:26); and when speaking to Job from the whirlwind, God emphasizes divine care for creatures in spite of the fact that they are of no benefit to human beings (e.g. Job 38:39–39:18; 40:15–41:34). Likewise, Ecclesiastes teaches that God 'has made everything suitable for its time' (3:11).

These biblical features of creation reflect God's status as primary cause. Because God is the sole source of every feature of the world, God does not need any particular creature in order to realize the ends God intends for creation. To be sure as Creator (or primary cause), God may choose to realize those ends using creatures as mediating (or secondary) causes; and Christians have traditionally maintained that God in fact does so. That is, God has so created the world that human beings, for example, depend not only on the sun and moon but on the air, water, microbes, plants, animals and their various interactions in order to survive and flourish; and other creatures are similarly dependent on one another. But God need not have done so; although God has formed creation in one way, God might have done it otherwise. And that means that whatever role any given creature may play in sustaining another creature, no creature's value can be reduced to that function. Because God might have chosen to obtain the very same end by other means, every creature must be held to have a value in God's sight that is not exhausted by its utility to other creatures. In short, every creature is 'good' in and of itself.

This has implications for the way in which humans understand their place in creation. In Genesis, God decrees that human beings are to 'have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth' (1:28; cf. 1:26). This verse is sometimes taken to mean that human beings are given power to rule over the rest of creation, but there are several problems with this interpretation. Firstly, only animals are mentioned, but at this stage of the biblical narrative, humans are

not given leave to eat animals (that comes only in Gen 9:3) but only plants. Secondly, human beings clearly do not exercise dominion over all animals. In fact, the number of domesticated animal species (i.e. those animals over whom human beings can plausibly be said to rule) is a vanishingly small percentage of the total. Nor is it plausible to view this diminished range of dominion as a product of human beings' expulsion from the garden in Genesis 3. Not only does God make no mention of any change in humans' relationship to animals (with the single exception of the serpent) in describing humanity's punishment for their disobedience, but even apart from the fall it is hard to see how humanity could possibly rule over the animals in the ocean's depths, which even today are little explored and largely unknown.

In this context, it seems much more plausible to interpret the 'dominion' mentioned in Genesis 1 in terms of humans' more explicitly defined responsibility 'to till [...] and keep' the garden mentioned in Gen 2:15. This duty to work the earth becomes more onerous after the fall (see Gen 3:17–19), but it remains intact. If one interprets humans' peculiar role in creation in this way as care for the environment, it becomes much easier to see how it might extend even to those species of birds, fish, and land animals over which human beings have no immediate control; for (as the contemporary climate crisis demonstrates) human activity can have profound effects across the whole range of terrestrial ecosystems even apart from humans directly interacting with individual creatures. In light of the biblical teaching that all creatures are good in God's sight (even though exactly how they are good may not be clear to us, especially in those instances where their flourishing comes at our expense), humans, as that creature made to till and keep the land, have a responsibility to work to maintain the health of the terrestrial environment to preserve the capacity of every creature to live out its peculiar form of goodness. Quite simply, creation from nothing implies that absolutely every creature is of immediate concern to God, and what is of concern to God cannot be a matter of indifference to human beings, who are called to life in communion with God.

Although it is in this way possible to make a case that creation from nothing is consistent with respect and care for the non-human environment, many have argued that the doctrine is not well suited to that end. Feminist theologians in particular have seen this in more traditional theological talk of divine sovereignty and human dominion. Working from a process perspective, Catherine Keller (2003) has argued for a more cooperative relationship between God and the world, in which God honours the integrity of creatures as genuinely independent agents, thereby modelling for humans a model of engagement with rather than management of their environment. Based on similar worries Grace Jantzen (1984) – as well as, in somewhat different terms, Sallie McFague (1993) – rejects Christian theology's traditional insistence on a radical ontological distinction between God and the world, advocating instead not for pantheism (the claim that everything is God) but a form of panentheism (the claim that everything is *in* God), in which the world

is understood as God's body, and thus the medium through which God is at all times intimately present to us (see also Christian Feminist Theological Ethics).

5 The believer and the community

5.1 Why the doctrine matters

The previous section indicated one way in which the doctrine of creation matters: it can remind human beings of their obligation to honour the inherent goodness of creation by pursuing forms of living that maximize the capacity of other creatures to flourish. The Heidelberg Catechism offers a still more expansive account of the doctrine's importance when it teaches that the doctrine of creation offers a basis for trust in God by its affirmation 'that no creature shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot even move' (*Book of Confessions* 1991: 63). Christians proclaim God's promise of salvation and urge people to trust that promise. But why should they? The authors of the Heidelberg Catechism rightly recognized that God is worthy of ultimate trust only if it is true that nothing can separate us from God's love (cf. Rom 8:39). That conviction demands the belief that there is no factor other than God that grounds our existence – and therefore no factor other than God that determines our ultimate destiny.

But there is more to the doctrine of creation than that. To say that God creates from nothing certainly implies that God is able to realize his intention to bring creatures to glory, but the question of why we should trust God does not simply question God's ability to keep his promises (i.e. God's power) but also God's willingness to do so (i.e. God's goodness). Granted that God is able to keep all of his promises in a way that human beings (whose intentions can always be thwarted by outside factors) are not, can we be sure that God intends to do so? Could God not be in fact evil? The doctrine of creation from nothing suggests that God could not be evil, because the idea that the Creator is evil and created from nothing a thoroughly evil world designed only to torment does not seem to be coherent. After all, in order for the misery creatures experience to be evil, their existence must be good – otherwise their misery would not be anything to regret. But if the world is created from nothing, then the only source of creatures' goodness is God. And a God who is a cause of creatures' goodness cannot be other than good, for any admixture of evil would necessarily render creatures less than good. In short, if creaturely suffering is truly evil, it can only be because creatures – and the God who made them from nothing – are truly good. Such a God can be trusted to will only the good.

It might nonetheless be objected that God's work of creation is not fully good because it is arbitrary, meaning that it is motivated by caprice rather than love. Although it might seem appropriate for a God who is Trinity, and whose own being is therefore characterized by the eternal 'production' of the Son and the Spirit, would extend this productive activity

outside of God's own life, the question of arbitrariness arises with respect to why creation should take the form it does. In other words, it seems that God's creation of this particular world, with its disconcerting mix of life, beauty, and joy on the one hand, and cruelty, violence, and pain on the other, is inherently arbitrary, because God might have created a different (and conceivably better) world. Once again, however, such reasoning fails to grasp the radical character of what it means for God to create from nothing. Such creation is not a matter of God actualizing one possibility out of many, in the way that a carpenter might choose to make a table rather than a chair. For in creating from nothing, God does not actualize one possibility among others; rather, God makes it that there can be such a thing as the actualization of possibilities (that is, possibilities are themselves part of creation, not one of its presuppositions).

In this way, creation from nothing matters because it is a means of reminding us that the utterly unique character of God's work as Creator gives rise to a very particular understanding of the purpose of creation – which is exclusively God's will that entities that are not God should exist and flourish in their existing. The acts of 'creating' experienced within time and space do not have this absolutely gratuitous character, because in all earthly examples of creation, the creative act is at some level self-interested. This is not to say that they are therefore bad or inappropriate; on the contrary, to the extent that the creatures' acts of making are ways in which they realize the characteristics of their own particular natures, such acts are good. But because creatures – precisely as creatures – are characterized by need, they are not self-constituting, and therefore their acts cannot be purely gracious. God alone, as one who needs nothing and therefore can gain nothing from anything God does, can create in that way. It is this God – a God whose relationship to us is from the beginning marked by pure, free, and total generosity – that the doctrine of creation reveals to us.

5.2 Creation and public worship

Creation does not play the same role in public worship as the events and symbols associated with Christ's birth, ministry (including his baptism, transfiguration, and entry into Jerusalem), death, and resurrection. Though the creation narratives in Genesis are included in most lectionaries, there is no feast day on which creation is celebrated. Likewise, though there are many hymns that have creation as their central theme ('Great Is Thy Faithfulness' and 'How Great Thou Art' are two prominent English-language examples), they are far fewer in number than those associated with the seasons of the church year, with themes like redemption, hope, and witness, or even with the liturgical actions of gathering and dismissal. In some ways this is appropriate. Since creation is best understood as a relation rather than an event, it arguably makes sense that it should have more the status of a background belief – the presupposition of all that God does to reconcile and redeem human beings – than the liturgical centre of attention.

And yet the theme of creation is not entirely relegated to the liturgical background, or to occasional appearances tied to the lectionary readings appointed for a given day. It assumes a very clear place in the church's public worship through the collective recitation of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, both of which begin with the affirmation of belief in God as 'Creator of heaven and earth'. Recitation of one or the other of these creeds is a defining feature of most eucharistic liturgies, and the Apostles' Creed is also included in Anglican rites for daily morning and evening prayer. Moreover, congregational prayer across traditions regularly includes thanksgiving for the gifts of creation, as well as petitions asking God to continue to bless the land and its produce (most especially in the tradition of Rogation Days). In this way Christians are reminded that the God whom they worship can be trusted to save now and in the future because this God is already, and from all eternity, sovereign over the whole world as its sole source and sustainer.

5.3 Creation and private devotion

In his *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther interpreted the first article of the Apostles' Creed in the following terms:

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul [...]. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides [...] all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me from all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all. For all of this, I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. (Luther 2000: 354–355).

Luther's intent here is to focus on the implications of the doctrine of creation for the individual believer ('me'). In so doing, Luther emphasizes that the doctrine is not in its essence a historical claim about something that happened long ago, 'in the beginning', but rather a description of the way in which God relates to the world in the present. For he argues that to believe in God the Creator is to believe that God sustains my life in all its aspects *now*, and that God does so not out of any need or obligation but solely because of God's own goodness. The implications of this for private devotion are clear: in response to God's generosity to me, I should give God thanks and praise.

Yet a little further reflection suggests that things are not quite so straightforward. For while it is certainly true every living human being has a body and soul, many do not have the 'necessities and nourishments' that the body requires in abundance. Moreover, it seems impossible to affirm that anyone is protected from all danger and shielded from all evil, given the plain facts of human experience as reflected in Job's observation that human life is 'few of days and full of trouble' (Job 14:1). And some people are afflicted by levels of both danger and evil in ways that are agonizing in terms of duration and intensity, in line with Ecclesiastes' description of 'all the oppressions that are practised under the sun [...]

the tears of the oppressed – with no one to comfort them!’ (4:1). Following Luther’s own reasoning, if we are to praise and thank God because God provides for us abundantly and protects us from danger, does it follow that we should withhold our praise and thanks when we are afflicted by want and pain?

Luther is well aware that human life in general (and, given the risk of persecution for the faith, Christian life in particular) is subject to all manner of afflictions. The point he is making in the catechism is therefore not that human beings are blessed with idyllic lives that are free from suffering. Quite the contrary, for Luther it is precisely in the context of our suffering that we need to remember that we are creatures of a good and loving God. His intention is not to deny or minimize the reality of the evil that we experience but to hold onto the fact that whatever the character of our affliction (and remembering once again that within the context of belief in creation from nothing the existence of evil remains an impenetrable mystery this side of the eschaton), the very fact that we continue to live is testimony to God’s care for us, since we only continue to exist at any moment because God holds us in existence.

The upshot of this line of reasoning is that our very existence in situations when we are afflicted by evil is testimony that God is struggling with us against that evil. To acknowledge oneself as a creature is therefore to be called to recognize that one’s life is at every moment a witness to God’s desire that the good should prevail. Even in circumstances of great want, even when facing great danger, even when afflicted by profound suffering, to remember that God is Creator is to be reminded that one’s life is held in God’s hands, sustained at every moment for no reason other than God’s ‘pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy’ (Luther 2000: 354–355). And when convicted by that truth, one cannot help but offer thanks and praise:

As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the Lord;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the Lord! (Jonah 2:7–9)

Attributions

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