

The World as Created, Fallen, and Redeemed
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Back in the summer of 1995, three other Benedictines and I had the opportunity to spend five weeks in Tibet and North India, mainly to visit Buddhist sites and engage in dialogue with Tibetan monks and nuns. I well remember how on one occasion at a monastery in India I had just begun a brief presentation on some basic Christian doctrines when, as soon as I mentioned our belief in a creator God, many of the Tibetan monks in the audience started giggling. They certainly didn't intend to be offensive, but the very idea of a creator of the universe seemed to them so preposterous that they inevitably found it humorous. I am actually grateful for their response, for it prevents me from blithely assuming that Buddhists and Christians are merely saying the same thing in different words. Indeed, some Buddhist authors, both classical and modern, have written severe critiques of the doctrine of a Creator God. Whether or not there is a possibility of bridging the gap between our two traditions on this point—as has been suggested in one recent book—is something that we could discuss. [1] I'll broach one way of possibly building such a bridge at the end of my presentation, but first I want to discuss as briefly and accurately as possible what the Christian doctrine is.

In order to give a particularly clear example of what Christians mean by creation as brought about and preserved in being by God, let me present another anecdote, this one from the life of one of the most prominent Catholic theologians of the past fifty years. By the time Avery Dulles graduated from a New England prep school in the spring of 1936 he was a thoroughgoing materialist, holding that every notion of God was merely an invention of the human mind to explain things that could otherwise not be accounted for. He entered Harvard College that fall, still ensconced in what he called a “cold, amoral world ... governed only by chance and by the selfish actions of human persons engaged in the cruel quest for pleasure.”[2] Then, early in the spring semester of his sophomore year, his whole world was suddenly and unexpectedly turned upside down. Here is how he later described what happened:

... I was in Widener Library poring over a chapter of [Augustine's City of God] which had been assigned as reading in one of my courses in medieval history. On an impulse I closed the book; I was irresistibly prompted to go out into the open air. It was a bleak rainy day, rather warm for the time of year. The slush of melting snow formed a deep mud along the banks of the River Charles, which I followed down toward Boston.... As I wandered aimlessly, something impelled me to look contemplatively at a young tree. On its frail, supple branches were young buds attending eagerly the spring which was at hand. While my eye rested on them the thought came to me suddenly, with all the strength and novelty of a revelation, that these little buds in their innocence and meekness followed a rule, a law of which I as yet knew nothing. How could it be, I asked, that this delicate tree sprang up and developed and that all the enormous complexity of its cellular operations combined together to make it grow erectly and bring forth leaves and blossoms? The answer, the trite answer of the schools, was new to me: that its actions were ordered to an end by the only power capable of adapting means to ends—intelligence—and that the very fact that this intelligence worked toward an end implied purposiveness—in other words, a will.... Mind, then, not matter, was at the origin of all things. Or rather not so much the

“mind” of [the Greek philosopher] Anaxagoras as a Person of Whom I had had no previous intuition.

Nor were the operations of this Person confined to flowers and foliage. The harmonious motions of the stars, the distribution of the elements, and the obedience of matter to fixed laws were manifestations of the same will and plan. Looking, then, into myself, I beheld energies coursing through the human person, the greater part of them beyond the realm of consciousness, tending constantly to preserve, to nourish, and to restore the weary body and soul. These forces were not of our own making ... yet they had from their inception a legitimacy which was conferred upon them by Another—the same as Him Who moved the stars and made the lilacs bloom....

... As I turned home that evening, the darkness closing round, I was conscious that I had discovered something which would introduce me to a new life, set off by a sharp hiatus from the past.

That night, for the first time in years, I prayed. I knelt down in the chill blackness at my bedside, as my mother had taught me to do when I was a little boy, and attempted to raise my heart and mind toward Him of Whose presence and power I had become so unexpectedly aware.[3]

Dulles goes on to say that this event, which was the beginning of his conversion even though he did not become a Catholic until he started law school a few years later, did not rest on some sort of rational proof. In his words, “My own acceptance of the existence of God rested on something more like an intuition. It was as though I had seen, at least for an instant, the divine power at work, infusing the whole universe with goodness and being.... I recorded it as best I can.”[4]

This well-known theologian, who was raised to the rank of cardinal by Pope John Paul II a few years ago and who just retired from an endowed chair in the department of theology at Fordham University, would be the first to admit that his experience along the banks of the River Charles held but a glimmer of the rich doctrine of creation and divine providence that has developed over the centuries. So, too, in my own short paper I can do no more than point to some of the most salient aspects of this doctrine.

To begin, consider the opening verses of the first book of the Bible: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:1-3; NRSV translation). In the Bible, the Hebrew word that is here translated as “created” is regularly used of God alone, as distinct from another verb that could be translated as “made” and that applies also to human activity. When we humans “make” something, there is always some material at hand out of which we fashion whatever we intend. God, however, creates merely by his word, as is abundantly clear by the frequently repeated phrase “And God said” throughout this first chapter of the Book of Genesis. By the end of the second century b.c.e., what later Christian theologians called *creatio ex nihilo* (“creation out of nothing”) was expressed by the Jewish author of the Second Book of Maccabees in the

following words: “Look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being” (2 Maccabees 7:28).

That God created merely by his word eventually had major implications for Christian theology. The Fourth Gospel, commonly called the Gospel according to John, significantly begins in a way that clearly reflects the opening verse of the Book of Genesis. The evangelist writes: “In the beginning was the Word,” and then proceeds to say that “the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1-3). The prologue to the Fourth Gospel goes on to say that this divine Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth and lived among us. One finds here the seeds of a Trinitarian understanding of creation: In Christian terms, God the Father creates through the Word, otherwise called the Son of God, incarnate in Jesus the Christ. The one whom Christians call the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is likewise involved in creation. When the Book of Genesis says that in the beginning “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters,” the Hebrew word for “wind” could just as well be translated as “breath” or “spirit.” One of the longest and most beautiful of the Psalms, Psalm 104, reflects this understanding when it says of living creatures: “These all look to you to give them their food in due season; . . . When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth” (Psalm 104:27, 30). It was natural and even inevitable for Christians to understand such a verse as referring to the Holy Spirit. For this reason, creation is understood to be the work of the entire Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A question worth pondering, at least briefly, is whether such creation implies a beginning in (or better, “with”) time. Early Christian theologians like Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century and Augustine of Hippo in the fourth certainly thought so, and in the Middle Ages the Franciscan theologian Bonaventure even held that one could prove philosophically that the world had a beginning in time. However, his still more influential contemporary Thomas Aquinas disagreed. Noting that in the most fundamental sense creation refers to a relationship of utter dependence upon God even if this relationship is from all eternity, Aquinas taught that it is only by revelation that we can know that the world did not always exist. According to him, such revelation was manifest in the opening words of the Bible, the Latin text that he used being literally translated as “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.” Some prominent theologians today, such as Jürgen Moltmann and Ted Peters, agree on this point, the latter writing that to reduce the doctrine of creation “to a vague commitment about the dependence of the world upon God . . . simply moves the matter to a higher level of abstraction. We still need to ask: just what does it mean for the world to owe its existence to God? One sensible answer is this: had God not acted to bring the space-time world into existence, there would be only nothing.”[5] Other theologians, however, are of a different mind. For example, Keith Ward writes that the notion that the universe had a beginning “was usually accepted because of a particular reading of Genesis 1. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* simply maintains that there is nothing other than God from which the universe is made, and that the universe is other than God and wholly dependent upon God for its existence.”[6]

Despite disagreement on that particular point, there is a solid consensus among Christians that

creation is fundamentally good, even as God is goodness itself. Six times in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis we read that after God created one or another thing, “God saw that it was good,” while in the final verse of that chapter this phrase is even intensified: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Often in the course of Christian history saintly writers have exulted over this fact, and not only with respect to what are usually considered the more momentous signs of God’s love. The fourth-century Syrian poet and hymnist St. Ephrem once composed some beautiful lines expressing his wonder and gratitude for even the smallest tokens of God’s goodness:

Let us see those things that He does for us every day!
How many tastes for the mouth! How many beauties for the eye!
How many melodies for the ear! How many scents for the nostrils!
Who is sufficient in comparison to the goodness of these little things?
Who is able to make thousands of remunerations in a day?[7]

Nine centuries later St. Francis of Assisi echoed something of St. Ephrem’s delight in the goodness of creation, above all in his *Canticle of Brother Sun*, part of which reads as follows:

Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.[8]

Much of what I have said up to now refers to what is sometimes called “original creation,” that is, to God’s creating “in the beginning,” but this ought never be understood apart from “ongoing creation” (*creatio continua*), that is, God’s providentially holding everything in existence. Perhaps no one has expressed this in such memorable imagery as the fourteenth-century Englishwoman Julian of Norwich, whose book of *Showings* has become enormously popular in recent decades. In one of the best-known passages from her work, Julian writes that

our good Lord showed a spiritual sight of his familiar love. I saw that he is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help.... And so in this sight I saw that he is everything which is good, as I understand.

And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.[9]

Thirdly, in addition to original creation and ongoing creation, there is our Christian belief in a “new creation” (*creatio nova*). Both Christians and Buddhists recognize that there is suffering and incompleteness in the world, even if our respective understandings of the origin of suffering are not exactly the same. For Christians, at least much of what is unsatisfactory about our life is due to that self-centered turning away from God that we call “sin.” Already St. Paul, in a well-known passage from his Letter to the Romans, sensed that sin has affected not only us human beings who perpetrate it but also the very world in which we live. In his words, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that 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” (Romans 8:18-21).

I will be the first to admit that a passage like that is open to various interpretations. Nowadays most scientists believe that after some incalculable number of years the forces of entropy will lead the entire universe to devolve into a state of low-grade radiation with a temperature approaching absolute zero, unable to support any kind of life. Some theologians have found that scenario so troubling that they interpret Paul’s words in Romans, along with similar passages in the Book of Isaiah about “a new heavens and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:17), in a very literal sense as portending an eventual, momentous renewal or redemption of all creation. I myself am far more cautious in this regard. As I have written elsewhere, “One of the most constant themes in the spiritual teaching of the world’s religious traditions is that human beings ought not to cling to possessions of one sort or another and that things will in fact normally be much more appreciated and enjoyed if one does not cling to them or yearn for them to have a permanence that is not appropriate.”[10] This surely holds not just for objects in our immediate vicinity but for the universe as a whole. As William Blake wrote in his short poem “Eternity,”

He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity’s sun rise.

As I approach the end of my presentation, there are two further issues that should be addressed. The first is whether there is something in Christian doctrine that tends to make Christians ecologically irresponsible. Even those Christians who have written most ardently about the goodness of creation recognized that it is not ultimate, and many of them have used expressions that do denigrate the world around us. Julian of Norwich, immediately after speaking of God as creator, protector, and lover of all that God has made, writes: “God wishes to be known, and it pleases him that we should rest in him; for everything which is beneath him is not sufficient for us. And this is the reason why no soul is at rest until it has despised as nothing all things which are created.”[11] This is the kind of language that led Karl Marx to speak of religion as “the opium of the people,” people yearning for “pie in the sky by and by” while despising material reality. A related criticism is that the Christian tradition in particular is largely responsible for the exploitation of nature, as famously argued by Professor Lynn White, Jr. in an often-anthologized article first published in 1967.[12] White claimed that “in Antiquity every tree, every spring,

every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit.... Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.”[13] Still others have asserted that when God, in the first chapter of Genesis, tells humans to “fill the earth and subdue it; and 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” (Genesis 1:28), this command gives us carte blanche to treat the world around us in any way that seems to be for our benefit.

What are we to make of such charges? First, there has unquestionably been a world-denying quality in many expressions of Christian spirituality, though this is so much less the case today that some feel the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. With regard to Professor White’s main point, it is crucial to recognize that if the Judeo-Christian tradition rejected the notion that every natural object had its own genius loci, there is a real sense in which Judaism and Christianity are themselves animistic. When the 104th Psalm says that God’s spirit “renews the face of the earth” (v. 30) and the Book of Wisdom affirms that “the spirit of the Lord has filled the world” (1:7), this implies that the multifarious guardian spirits of ancient animism have given way to a single, omnipresent Spirit abiding in every creature. It was this awareness that led a mystic like the Jesuit scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to pray to God in the following words: “Blazing Spirit, Fire, personal, super-substantial,... be pleased yet once again to come down and breathe a soul into the newly formed, fragile film of matter with which this day the world is to be freshly clothed.”[14] Moreover, Teilhard and many others, including St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecologists, have sensed the kinship that humans have with all other creatures, a kinship that led Francis to speak of Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Wolf and Sister Water, even as contemporary science has shown us that we share our DNA, to one degree or another, with every living being on earth. As Jürgen Moltmann writes in his book *God in Creation*, “If the Holy Spirit is poured out on the whole creation, then [the Spirit] creates the community of all created things with God and with each other, making it that fellowship of creation in which all created things communicate with one another and with God, each in its own way.”[15] In the simplest terms, this means that we humans are not above nature but are part of nature and that Christians, no less than Buddhists, can rightly speak of a certain interdependence of everything on earth. Some have indeed interpreted the biblical charge to “subdue” the earth and “have dominion” over other creatures in a way that justifies exploitation, but the contemporary environmental crisis surely stems primarily either from human greed or the direst need and not from some scriptural text. After all, there are regions on earth that have suffered tremendous environmental devastation and yet have scarcely been touched by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Our call as human beings, regardless of our particular religious tradition, is to be responsible stewards, mindful of our kinship with other creatures and of our responsibility to care for them and for the earth itself with a love that reflects what we Christians believe to be God’s own love for all creation. The practical challenge is to allow this awareness to influence the way we actually live on our fragile planet.

Finally, there is a point I alluded to earlier: Is the Christian understanding of creation ineluctably at odds with Buddhist teaching? An entire book could be devoted to this topic, not least because there are different emphases within various schools of Christian thought and also within

Buddhism. It is worth noting, however, that for a great theologian like Thomas Aquinas the world, whether or not it had a beginning, exists because of God, and “ultimately, this ‘because of’ needs to be understood as a ‘final cause’ ... that is, as a telos.”[16] In other words, everything in the cosmos exists for the reason or for the purpose of moving toward this ultimate divine goal. When one considers that in Buddhist teaching all sentient beings have an inclination toward nirvana, there does appear a certain parallelism that deserves further reflection and investigation. To be sure, the God whom Christians worship is primarily described in personal terms whereas nirvana is not, but the difference is not absolute. Christian thinkers like Paul Tillich and Henri Le Saux have written eloquently of an impersonal aspect to the Godhead, while the Japanese Buddhist monk Shinran, who died in 1263 c.e., claimed that “the utmost we can say about ultimate reality before admitting its ultimate ineffability is that, for us, the ultimate is like an infinitely compassionate father/mother.”[17] Regardless of whether or not we conclude that the Buddhist and Christian approaches to the question of creation are compatible, we can surely agree with Perry Schmidt-Leukel when he writes: “Both Christians and Buddhists could challenge and encourage one another to practice an attitude [toward the world] which combines loving involvement with selfless detachment. Buddhists may remind Christians that creation is not an end in itself, but has its goal in redemption, and Christians may remind Buddhists that the path to salvation and the existence in salvation are acted out here, in communion with all others, and nowhere else.”[18]

[1] See Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *Buddhism, Christianity, and the Question of Creation: Karmic or Divine* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

[2] Avery Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946), 34.

[3] *Ibid.*, 50-54, passim.

[4] *Ibid.*, 65.

[5] Ted Peters, “On Creating the Cosmos,” in *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, ed. Robert John Russell et al., 3rd ed. (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Foundation, 1997), 288.

[6] Keith Ward, “God as a Principle of Cosmological Explanation,” in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature*, ed. Robert John Russell et al., 2nd ed. (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Foundation; Berkeley, CA: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1996), 248-49.

[7] Ephrem, *The Hymns on Virginity and on the Symbols of the Lord 20:16-17*, in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 349.

[8] Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, in *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist, 2001), 119.

[9] Julian of Norwich: Showings, chap. 5 of the Long Text, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and James Walsh, S.J. (New York: Paulist, 1978), 183.

[10] James A. Wiseman, *Theology and Modern Science: Quest for Coherence* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 107-8.

[11] Julian: Showings, chap. 5 of the Long Text, 184.

[12] Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (10 March 1967):1203-07.

[13] *Ibid.*, 1205.

[14] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Mass on the World," in *Hymn of the Universe*, trans. William Collins Sons & Co. (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1965), 22.

[15] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 11.

[16] Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Bridging the Gulf," in *Buddhism, Christianity, and the Question of Creation* (note 1 above), 167.

[17] *Ibid.*, 154

[18] *Ibid.*, 176.