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CREATION, GRACE, AND REDEMPTION

NEIL ORMEROD

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The God of Creation

LET US BEGIN WITH AN EXERCISE we can perhaps all try. Go out in the evening air on a cloudless night and stare up into the sky. Look up at the moon and the stars—perhaps you can see the Milky Way—and just get lost in the vastness, the immensity of it all. Such activity has been part of our history since the beginning of human culture. People have stared in wonder and awe at the heavens. Over time they have sought out patterns among the stars, patterns with links to their emerging mythologies of the gods, and so they named the constellations. Eventually people identified stars that did not fit into the fixed patterns of the majority of stars, and they called these stars planets, because they wandered the sky (from the Greek, *planaiō*, “to wander”). With increasing leisure and intellectual curiosity people developed theories that sought to account for both the fixed patterns of the stars and the erratic wanderings of the planets. The primordial wonder we feel in the face of the immensity of the sky yields to the search for order, for cosmos in the apparent chaos, for some explanation for the movements of stars and planets. Ptolemy (85-165 C.E.) put forward a system whereby the Earth was the center of the universe, with the moon, the sun, the planets, and the stars on fixed spheres that moved around the Earth. Despite its flaws, it dominated the scientific imagination for over a thousand years, until Copernicus (1473-1543) argued the case for a heliocentric system, placing the sun at the center with the Earth just one of a number of planets that circled the sun. With meticulous calculations Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) added further refinements, while Galileo (1564-1642) added the power of both calculation and observation through newly invented telescopes. Finally, the towering genius of Isaac Newton (1643-1727) brought the power of mathematics, his newly discovered calculus, to bear and with a few simple equations was able to provide a basic explanation for the movements of the planets. The basic intelligibility of what we now call the solar system had been laid bare, and we now knew with some certainty that our universe was an ordered system.¹

1. Of course it is always possible to argue that the order we “find” is a projection onto otherwise unordered data, that it is basically a construction of the human mind. This reflects a basically Kantian

Scientific observation and Einstein's theory of general relativity have long since moved beyond even the grand synthesis of Newton to reveal a universe billions of years old, billions of light years across, with hundreds of billions of galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars.² The universe is far bigger and far older than we could ever have imagined. But one thing that has not changed in the whole process is the movement from wonder and awe to the search for patterns and order. Deep within our search for order is the conviction that the universe has not just been thrown together in some random jumble, but that it is patterned, intelligible, and ordered in ways that we can discover and understand. Inevitably, as our constant desire for intelligibility is fulfilled, we ask the question, Why? Why does the universe display such profound patterns? Are these patterns simply the "creation" of our minds, or do we truly "discover" them, so that they really "belong" to the universe itself? Further, is it reasonable that these patterns emerge by chance, or does the intelligibility of the universe reveal a hidden yet powerful intelligence who is in some sense the source of all that is? In facing such questions, even the most committed scientist may develop the conviction that there must be some source for it all.³

We find the same conviction at work in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis. In mytho-poetic language the author of the first chapter of Genesis puts forward a powerfully religious vision of a universe that finds its source and origin in the divine command: "Let there be light . . . let there be night and day . . . let there be lights in the vault of heaven . . . let the earth produce vegetation . . . let the waters teem with life . . . let the earth produce every living creature . . . let us make human beings in our own image and likeness." God speaks and so it happens. Every pattern, every element of order that we find in the universe, from the "lights of the sky" to the complex interacting patterns of living things, has its source and origin in God's creative work. And this same conviction that the universe finds its origin in God stands behind the fundamental belief in the goodness of that creation: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen 1:31).

Biblical scholars tell us, however, that the source of this conviction regarding creation began not with speculation about the cosmos, as we have outlined

epistemology that separates knowledge and being. Some would counter, however, by arguing that the intelligibility of reality is the a priori condition for the possibility of science. See Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1978).

2. It is perhaps worth noting that it was only in the 1920s with the scientific observations of Edwin Hubble, that we learned there were galaxies other than our own. In cultural terms this is very recent.

3. The best example of this is the physicist and natural philosopher Paul Davies, who has moved from a scientific rationalist position to a broad theism, on the basis that the order of physical reality points to a source for order which transcends that reality.

it above, but with a much more concrete experience, that of the establishment of order in society. What emerges from these scholars' work is the strong connection between cosmogenesis and the "creation/redemption" of Israel as a social body. This interrelationship between the cosmological and social is common among what Eric Voegelin would call "cosmological cultures," in which the individual is ordered to the society and the society is ordered to the rhythms of the cosmos.⁴ The creation of Israel as a nation, achieved through the gift of the Law, or Torah—out of the social *chaos* of lawlessness emerges the nation built upon the *order* of the Torah—is the basic model of creation within Hebrew thought forms. It is a reminder of the close connections between creation and redemption within this horizon. The creation of social order is the basic experience of redemption. People who have experienced the breakdown or fragility of the social order, such as the recent devastation in New Orleans, will know what this means. These biblical creation texts are not metaphysically speculative, but historically grounded.⁵

Nor should the Bible be read as providing us with a scientific account of the origins of the universe, in particular of the origins of life. The Bible does not seek to provide us with scientific information about the origins of life, but with a faith conviction that everything finds its origins in the divine command. Ultimately God, through divine wisdom, is the source of order and of life, but the Bible does not seek to tell us how God created these things, or the mechanisms for that creation. To read the Bible literally in this case, as found in so-called creation science, is to fundamentally misunderstand the literary form of the text.⁶ Science is free to develop theories such as evolution in order to understand the emergence of life, so long as scientists remain faithful to the empirical data, not to a literal misreading of the biblical text.

CREATION *EX NIHILO*

It is commonly stated that Christian belief holds that God created the universe *ex nihilo*, that is, out of nothing (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* no.

4. See Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 502-13, for an account of cosmological and anthropological cultures. Inuit and other First Nation peoples represent contemporary expressions of cosmological cultures.

5. Richard J. Clifford, "The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation," *Theological Studies* 46 (1985): 507-23.

6. Of course Catholics are relatively latecomers to the notion of literary form as a significant factor in reading the Scriptures. The teaching of Pius XII in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1942) that Catholic scholars should attend to the literary form of the text was reasserted at Vatican II in *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. More recently the Pontifical Biblical Commission has endorsed the use of historical-critical method by Catholic biblical scholars.

338).⁷ When we look at the account in chapter 1 of Genesis, however, we do not find such an account. Rather there is a suggestion that God created the universe out of something preexistent: “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” (Gen 1:2).⁸ Given what we stated above, that the basic analogue for creation is one of social order out of the chaos of lawlessness, this is not surprising. The view of creation “out of nothing” is very sophisticated—indeed unimaginable—and we should not read it into this early biblical text.

The material in Genesis, however, is only one source for a Christian understanding of creation. The Psalms, wisdom literature, and prophetic literature also provide some interesting material. Of particular interest is the hymn to Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 (also Wis 9:9-12, Sir 24:3-22), which forms the background of New Testament reflection on the divine Word and its role in creation. However, we shall turn attention to the initial emergence of belief in creation *ex nihilo*, a belief that begins in the period of the Maccabean persecutions. Thus, in 2 Maccabees 7:28 we find: “I beg you my child, to 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.” What is interesting here is the context of the affirmation that God did not create “out of things that existed.” The context is not one of metaphysical speculation, as found in the Greek philosophers. Rather the concern is with the possibility of resurrection from the dead, in the face of a major historical problem faced by the Jewish people. Prophetic literature had always understood the defeats and sufferings of Israel as a punishment for their infidelity to the Law. This was the standard prophetic line, particularly in the Deuteronomistic school of thought.⁹ The Maccabean persecution was something different. Now they were suffering precisely because they were being faithful to the Law. The traditional prophetic response no longer worked. One feature of this period is the emergence of apocalyptic works such as the Book of Daniel, which seek to give the people hope that their suffering from persecution will not be too long. Nonetheless, the conviction that God is both creator of all that is, and just, required a better solution than simple perseverance—what about those who

7. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Strathfield, N.S.W.: St Pauls, 2000). Henceforth referred to as *CCC* followed by the number of the article.

8. Claus Westermann notes that “the question, ‘Is it *creation ex nihilo* or not?’ is not relevant to the text” (*Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* [London: SPCK, 1984], 109).

9. For an example of the judgment of the Deuteronomistic Historian on the fall of Samaria, see 2 Kings 18:9-12. The northern kingdom fell because they violated “all that Moses the servant of Yahweh had laid down.”

had died in the persecution? What justice could they expect? The solution was the hope/expectation of resurrection:

The creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origins of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws. (2 Macc 7:23)

This same linking between belief in resurrection and creation *ex nihilo* is found in the New Testament. There Paul speaks of God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17). The significance of this runs parallel to what we have already seen in the Old Testament, that the issues of creation and redemption cannot be separated. The God who creates is the God who saves and vice versa. Christian faith resists any attempt to separate the two functions, as found in the Marcionite heresy, which set the God of the Old Testament (the creator) in opposition to the God of the New Testament (the redeemer).¹⁰ The work of salvation, of bringing good out of the evil of sin, is truly an act of creation *ex nihilo*, a fundamentally creative act. We shall have more to say on this when we consider the problem of evil.

Now while the roots of the biblical belief in creation *ex nihilo* lie in the saving power of God, it remains a belief rich in metaphysical meaning. Metaphysically, creation *ex nihilo* means creation without prior conditions or constraints, whether these be the constraint of preexistent matter or of some form of necessity imposed on the divine being. It does not mean creation of matter into empty space at a certain point in time, as we might commonly imagine. Space and time are already things that are themselves created. In this sense creation *ex nihilo* is, strictly speaking, unimaginable. We can form no image of it, since any image we might develop evokes notions of space and time. We can try to understand it in terms of an analogy of personal causation, for example, the creative work of an artist creating a work of art, or an engineer building a bridge. But all our analogies break down because God’s creative act is complete and without any prior conditions or constraints, whereas in all our analogies people work with something that already exists and transform it into something new. Moreover, on this account God is not constrained to create; God’s creative act is entirely free. There is no cause for creation apart from God’s free act, God’s loving will. Finally, God is not constrained by the

10. Marcion (110-160 C.E.) sought to distinguish between the God of the Old Testament (an evil creator God) and the God revealed by Jesus in the New Testament (a loving redeeming God). To achieve this, however, he had to cut out large slabs of the New Testament, leaving only the Gospel of Luke and the writings of Paul. His position was quickly rejected as heretical by the early church.

limits of some preexistent material that confines the divine options. The freedom of this act is complete and sovereign. This sovereignty is the ultimate guarantee that creation is good. There are no prior conditions that limit God's creative act, nothing preexisting that lies beyond God's will or power.¹¹

In order to clarify further the significance of creation *ex nihilo* we can compare it with some of the alternatives that others have explored in the history of religious and philosophical thought.

CREATION *EX DIVINO*

According to such a view, creation is out of the divine substance itself. This view divinizes the created order and makes the universe the physical manifestation of God, leading to a form of pantheism. Such a view is increasingly popular among ecologically oriented groups who are seeking to preserve the natural environment. The claim made is that the created order is sacred in some sense.

One can argue that this position is rejected in the creation account of Genesis 1, which is at pains to stress the transcendence, or otherness, of God, and the nondivine nature of the created order.¹² The biblical author was rejecting the then widespread "pagan" view that failed to distinguish between the divine and the created. In fact, on this pagan view, creation is no longer "created" as such; rather it is a manifestation of divine being. Some might even speak of the divine as the soul of the cosmos, so that the cosmos is the body of God.

Many might find this an attractive position; however, there are questions to be addressed. Apart from the severe compromising of divine transcendence, one should also ask how this view of creation accounts for the problem of evil. If creation is from the very stuff of God, what "space" is there for evil? Evil becomes less a moral issue than an epistemological one. It becomes the failure to acknowledge one's own divine nature. Such positions are becoming more common in various new age belief systems. Some might refer to this view as neopaganism, as evidenced in an increasing interest in the occult and witchcraft, found in some popular television programs. In its present form it can be a reaction to the perceived failures of traditional Christian belief to

11. See CCC no. 338, "*Nothing exists that does not owe its existence to God the Creator.* The world began when God's word drew it out of nothingness; all existent beings, all of nature, and all human history are rooted in this primordial event, the very genesis by which the world was constituted and time begun."

12. See Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 119, who notes that even "heaven in the Old Testament is simply something created; it has no divine character at all."

protect and preserve the natural environment. Most notable has been the critique of Christianity by Lynn White. White argues:

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the 2nd century both Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.¹³

In a sense, Catholic thought is better placed to respond to this criticism because of its sacramental view of reality, which recognizes that the material order may mediate the divine, though without a strict identification that blurs the divine transcendence. The reaction is more in relation to a rationalistic understanding of God and religion that is seen in some forms of Protestant thought that place a greater emphasis on the divine Word received through the preaching of the gospel than on the sacraments as mediating God's grace.

CREATION BY EMANATION

Another alternative to creation *ex nihilo* is found in emanationist accounts of creation. These positions are impressed by the divine transcendence but misconstrue the nature of that transcendence as remoteness. Examples can be found in Neoplatonic and Gnostic sources.¹⁴ In order to protect divine transcendence, creation is conceived as a series of emanations from the divine, a graded hierarchy of emanations, with each grade in the hierarchy giving rise to the next lower grade. In this way the divine creative power is mediated through a series of increasingly degraded beings. Not only did this "protect" the divine transcendence; it also accounted for the "coarse" nature of material creation. The physical world is not directly created by God, but by a lower-order being, sometimes referred to as the demiurge, with more limited power. Often these emanations are construed as "necessary," not the product of

13. See <http://www.bemidjistate.edu/peoplenv/lynnwhite.htm> (accessed July 3, 2006) for a copy of White's 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."

14. A number of early Christian authors were very influenced by Neoplatonic thought, including Origen, Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, and Maximus the Confessor. Of these, Origen, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Maximus reflect something of an emanationist perspective.

God's freely willed activity, in order to protect God from being such a poor creator!

While the strength of this view is its desire to protect the divine transcendence, it does so at the expense of the goodness of creation, which is severely compromised. This approach feels the need to protect God from the "obvious" flaws of the material order. God could not possibly have created such a coarse material reality. Moreover, by misconstruing transcendence as remoteness, the emanationist notion requires an imagined bridge between the remote divine being and the material order of creation. The fault with this image is that given the infinite difference between God and creation, no amount of bridging bridges the infinite gap. The imagined graded hierarchy in fact solves nothing.

Christian belief, on the other hand, implies God's direct creative action with the entirety of creation. Because of divine transcendence God needs no intermediaries to create, and so God is directly and immediately present to the whole of the created order. Transcendence does not imply remoteness, but in fact guarantees divine immanence. Nor do we need to protect God from the coarseness of creation. Creation is good, even in its materiality.

Emanationist accounts emerge wherever people argue that somehow God must create the world. The language is often one of the necessity of God sharing the divine goodness, or of the overflowing of that goodness. This captures the fact that creation has its roots in the divine love and will. But by making creation necessary and not freely willed, in fact these positions eventually compromise the goodness of creation, which is made not because of love alone but because of some necessity—or even need—on the part of God

DUALIST ACCOUNTS OF CREATION

Perhaps the notion of creation that most captures the popular imagination is dualism. This position posits two distinct but opposed creative forces: one good, God; the other evil, usually depicted as Satan or the devil. The beauty of this approach is that it provides a direct and simple theoretical solution to the problem of evil. The fact of evil is traced back not to the creative act of God but to the malevolent act of the anti-God figure of Satan. In this schema, God is the creator of spiritual realities while Satan is the creator of material realities. Spirit (reason, intellect, will) is good; matter (body, sexuality, feeling, etc.) is bad. This approach has many historical manifestations such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Catharism, and some forms of Gnosticism. Overall, Christianity rejects this type of ontological dualism, while maintaining a moral dualism, that is, the objective distinction between good and evil actions

and decisions. Nonetheless, some Christian heterodox sects such as the Cathars and some popular forms of Christian belief tend to fall over into an ontological dualism.¹⁵

In rejecting ontological dualism, Christian belief asserts the sovereign power of God over all creation, including evil spirits. It rejects any notion that creation is evenly poised between forces of good and evil. The ultimate source of all that exists is the divine will, God's love and wisdom. Because of this we can have ultimate confidence in the triumph of good over evil. However, it does raise questions of theodicy, or justifying God in the face of evil, which we consider later.

Dualism remains common in popular discourse. Whenever someone or something is labeled "pure evil," then a dualistic mind-set is evident. Such language is sometimes used in political rhetoric, for example, in speaking of terrorists. In Christian belief there is no such thing as pure evil. It is self-contradictory to think of pure evil, since everything that exists, inasmuch as it exist, has some goodness. Again, this will be explored further when we raise questions of theodicy.

PROCESS ACCOUNTS OF GOD AND CREATION

A more recent contender for addressing the question of God and creation is found in process theology. Initiated in the writings of Alfred North Whitehead and promoted by Charles Hartshorne and John Cobb, process thought seeks to present an alternative to "classical theism" as found in the Christian tradition.¹⁶ There are serious concerns about process theology's interpretation of Christian tradition, which is read largely through second-rate neoscholastic sources.¹⁷ Nonetheless, process theology presents itself as a serious alternative to the classical Christian belief in creation and God's relationship to creation.

Process thought reconceives the God-creation relationship in terms of mutuality. That is, not only does God effect creation; creation also has a real effect on God. Strictly speaking, God is not a creator in the classical sense, as process thought employs elements of both emanationist and preexisting-

15. Many films that have explicitly Christian religious themes border on the dualistic, for example, *Stigmata* and the apocalyptic *End of Days*.

16. For example, Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, corrected ed. (New York: Free Press, 1978); Charles Hartshorne, *Aquinas to Whitehead: Seven Centuries of Metaphysics of Religion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Publications, 1976).

17. David Burrell, "Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?" *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 125-35.

matter versions of creation. God needs to create, and God is not the source of all that is. Indeed, in some forms of process thought God is not the highest principle; rather, something like “creativity” is the highest principle. Further, because God is affected by creation, God is subject to change and development. Process theology speaks of a dipolar conception of divinity, with antecedent (i.e., apart from creation) and subsequent (i.e., in relation to creation) divine natures.¹⁸ Classical divine attributes and perfections such as being impassible and eternal relate to the antecedent nature, while the subsequent nature is passible, temporal, and so on. Many process thinkers would argue that this account is more in line with the biblical account of God.

Although many find this approach more conducive to modern scientific understandings of creation, one must realize that the process account of the God–creation relationship severely compromises divine transcendence. God is no longer sovereign lord of creation, but is subject to the vicissitudes of creation. In particular, it is not clear how process thought deals with the problem of evil, particularly in an eschatological sense. Because God is not sovereign, there is no secure basis for eschatological hope. In the final analysis, within a process account God could well be overcome by evil.¹⁹

There is a very difficult question here with which various ancient and modern authors struggle in terms of the doctrine of creation. Since God is sovereign Lord of creation, God’s will is efficacious. That is, what God wills to happen, in fact happens. How, then, does one avoid the conclusion that everything is determined? This is an issue not only in relation to free will but also in terms of scientific accounts of the world based on indeterminacy of physical phenomena, as found in quantum mechanics. Process “solves” this problem by a reversion to an account of creation based on preexisting matter, in an effort to restore real “chance” in the universe. It is significant, then, that early Christian belief sought to overcome Greek accounts of creation based on preexisting matter precisely because they believed in a provident God (Matt 6:25-34; Luke 12:6-7). Thus, we find a relationship between Christian notions of creation and divine providence.

PROVIDENCE, CREATION, AND CONTINGENCY

Christian belief in creation *ex nihilo* places God apart from the spatio-temporal-material order. God does not create material being in space and time; God creates space, time, and matter. There is no “before” creation, since

18. See John Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965).

19. There are other, more philosophical concerns with process thought. See Neil Ormerod, “Chance and Necessity, Providence and God,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 263-78.

“before” implies time and time is as much a created reality as space and matter. God exists not in time but in an “eternal now.” Consequently, God’s creative act is one and simultaneous. In one act God creates the whole of the created order, past, present, and future. All is immediately present to God and willed by God in the single divine act of creation. Nonetheless, although the act is one and timeless, the consequences are many and temporal.

A consequence of creation *ex nihilo* is that what God wills necessarily happens. There is no disjunction between God’s will and the reality of the event, at least in the divine now, though for us the events created by God are divided among past, present, and future. The problem that then arises is: how can there be room for the contingent (chance) in creation? For example, Aristotle allowed for the contingent by appealing to the existence of preexistent matter, which God did not create. If we remove any notion of preexisting prime matter through belief in creation *ex nihilo*, do we then remove any possibility of contingency?

In fact, the view that a creator God removes any possibility of contingency has become part of the common mind. This is most evident in thinkers such as biologist Richard Dawkins, who argues that because evolution depends on contingent events such as chance mutations, God can have nothing to do with it.²⁰ The claim is made that real chance is incompatible with divine causation. The clear contention is that a notion of divine creation eliminates chance or contingency and eventually eliminates human freedom itself.

Though expressed in modern form, the problem was not unknown to Thomas Aquinas. In *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas notes: “You object that providence is necessarily efficacious; I retort that therefore what providence intends to be contingent, will inevitably be contingent” (3, c. 94).

In other words, Aquinas would argue that God can use chance/contingency to achieve a desired outcome, and achieve it inevitably, even while the event remains chance.

Transposing this into a modern context, the question can be rephrased thus: Is there any intelligibility in, or science of, chance events? Aristotle denied that there was a science of the contingent, because prime matter lacked intelligibility. Consequently there was no providence for Aristotle, only fate. Aquinas affirms the reality of providence and the complete intelligibility of the created order. Consequently, the logical conclusion is that there must be a “science” of the contingent. In the modern context we would recognize the

20. Dawkins in fact argues that “the Argument from Design, then, has been destroyed as a reason for believing in a God.” See his article at http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/dawkins_18_3.html (accessed October 8, 2004). See more fully Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: Norton, 1996).

role of statistics in science, for example, in quantum mechanics. Thus, even what appear to be random events occur within a certain statistical pattern or probability. We can even use statistical means to achieve desired outcomes, which will nonetheless remain chance. And if we can, so can God! For example, we know that smoking causes lung cancer, but we cannot know who will develop cancer and who will not. We know that if we reduce smoking we will reduce the incidence of lung cancer, but we cannot point to one person whose life has been saved by reducing the incidence of smoking. In reducing the incidence of smoking we will the particular individual outcomes because we will the general outcomes (i.e., fewer deaths by cancer). In choosing to adopt a statistical causation, we accept the fact that there will be a spread of outcomes, within our desired outcome. The difference between our acting and God's in such a case is that while our willing of the particular is mediated through the general approach, God's is immediate because God is the creator of all. All creation is immediately present to God as its fundamental cause and origin.²¹

To invoke statistical lawfulness with contingency is to invite comparison between necessity and the classical mechanical laws such as those of Newtonian science.²² These laws seemed to offer the possibility of a completely deterministic universe. For example, mathematician Simon Laplace (1749-1827) boasted that, given the position and velocity of every particle in the universe, the future would be as accessible as the past.²³ On such a view, to invoke statistical laws is always a cloak for ignorance. On the other hand, to invoke the reality of contingency is to recognize the irreducible character of statistical lawfulness. Quantum mechanics and evolution have embedded the notion of statistics into the heart of modern science. The realization of the chance nature of events does not exclude the guiding hand of divine providence, but it does indicate the mode of operation of that providence, through both classical and statistical means. Further, Bernard Lonergan has shown how classical and statistical lawfulness combine to lead to what he calls emergent probability, the development of schemes of recurrence that allow evolutionary

21. Bernard Lonergan states it thus: "Such a positive statement is the affirmation that God knows with equal infallibility, he wills with equal irresistibility, he effects with equal efficacy both the necessary and the contingent. For however infallible the knowledge, however irresistible the will, however efficacious the action, what is known, willed, effected is no more than hypothetically necessary. And what is hypothetically necessary, absolutely may be necessary or contingent." Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 1* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 109.

22. It should be noted that Einstein's theory of general relativity is also deterministic in nature, as are the equations governing "chaos theory."

23. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/determinism-causal/> (accessed July 11, 2006).

processes to arise.²⁴ This transposes Aquinas's categories of necessity and contingency into a modern scientific worldview.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND SUFFERING

So far we have been presenting a classical "strong" understanding of the nature of creation and of divine transcendence and its implications in terms of God's efficacious providence. The big question that hangs over our whole discussion has been, What about evil? How do we account for the "presence" of evil in a creation that has been deemed to be "very good" (Gen 1:31)? Indeed the presence of evil undermines our arguments that the universe is an ordered cosmos, since evil injects a pall of meaninglessness into our human experience that threatens to overcome whatever sense of order we might claim to be present. It is not surprising that people turn to dualist accounts of evil as a way of escaping from the obvious dilemmas posed by classical Christian faith.

The problem of evil is perhaps the most pressing existential issue that we face in proclaiming the gospel. Indeed, it may lead us even to doubt the existence of God. The classical rejection of arguments for the existence of God runs along the following lines: *You say God is all good and all powerful; yet evil exists, and God does nothing to stop it. Therefore either God is all good, but not all powerful; or God is all powerful but not all good. Therefore your concept of God is incoherent and so God does not exist.* My own experience tends to indicate that behind such argumentation lies a more pressing existential context of personal suffering and experience of evil. This leads us to the first important issue. Are we dealing with the problem of evil or the problem of suffering?

Suffering or Evil?

Popular author Scott Peck, when planning *People of the Lie*, his study of the nature of evil, was asked by a friend, "Maybe you will help me understand my son's cerebral palsy?" His response was to say he was writing on evil, not suffering.²⁵ Is there a difference? Is the problem of suffering the same as the problem of evil?

A similar question arises in relation to Buddhism. Buddhism identifies the

24. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 126-61. We shall consider this further in the next chapter.

25. M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 45. Peck is better known for his book *The Road Less Traveled*.

fundamental problem of human living as one of suffering, or *dukkha*, sometimes now translated as “unsatisfactoriness.” The saving message of the Buddha is one of the elimination of suffering through the extinction of desire, which is viewed as the source of all suffering. Nirvana is the total elimination of desire, and so the total cessation of suffering. Given the current popularity of Buddhism in Western countries, this analysis of the human condition deserves deeper reflection.

The question of suffering and evil requires both delicacy and firmness in response. The two are related but distinct; however, the existential linkage is strong. Evil can and does lead to great suffering, but evil may also involve little or no suffering whatsoever. In fact, some evil may even be perpetrated in the name of reducing suffering, such as in cases of euthanasia, where life is taken to alleviate suffering. On the other hand, some suffering may be freely entered into as good, not as a masochistic thing, but like the training of the athlete who must “break through the pain barrier” in order to achieve success. Pain is also an important indicator for the presence of harmful activities—if we did not feel pain, would we pull our hands out of a fire? Pain serves a useful purpose in such cases. Then there is the ultimate pain, the “pain” of death, involving bodily pain, psychological pain, and the pain of separation from friends and loved ones.

We shall begin with an “ontological” examination of the question of pain and suffering. A finite being, such as a human being, will always “suffer” the impact of other beings upon it; that is, a finite being will be passively affected by other beings, precisely because it is limited. Because of its limitations there will be occasions when limits are reached that threaten the existence of a finite being. Then a finite being faces damage or destruction. When a finite being is conscious, it will consciously experience the reaching of its limits; this conscious experience is felt as pain or suffering. It occurs when a conscious finite subject reaches physical, chemical, biological, and psychic limits, when it is pushed to these limits by forces in its environment or its own free actions. The suffering incurred indicates that limits have been reached, and unless we act to protect ourselves we may incur serious damage. Limits may not be absolute, however, but relative to a current state of development. In this case we may overcome our limits through a developmental growth or act of self-transcendence, which moves us, with some discomfort, beyond our current limits. On the other hand, other limits are absolute, and we transgress them only at the cost of serious suffering and possible death.

In all these ways we can identify a certain intelligibility to suffering. Suffering has an intrinsic relationship to finitude. The only way to avoid the possibility of suffering is to avoid finitude. It is not suffering *per se* that is a problem, but suffering that is without any apparent meaning, suffering that is caused by

callous indifference, or malicious intent, suffering that is caused for no good reason. This is meaningless suffering. This is where we find an overlap with the problem of evil.

We have already considered some of the “solutions” to the problem of evil when we considered different approaches to creation. When we consider evil “ontologically,” in terms of determining its causes, we have limited options:

1. Evil is caused, and caused by some anti-God being such as the devil—this is dualism.
2. Evil is caused, and caused by God—this seems blasphemous.
3. Evil is uncaused—this is the classical Christian ontology of evil, that evil is privation, the privation of the good (*privatio bonum*).

The fundamental privation involved is a privation in the will, that is, sin. The decisions of the will are meant to be caused by “good reasons.” A privation of that causation is where the will is moved by something other than good reasons. This absence of “good reasons” is the basic experience of the meaninglessness of evil. When we look at acts of terror, such as the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, we simply cannot find any “good reason” why anyone would do such a thing. It is evil because it is so pointless. The classical exposition of this in the Christian tradition is found in Augustine’s *Confessions*, book 2, where Augustine examines his own childhood motivations for stealing pears from his neighbor. Each possible motivation evaporates on examination, leading him to conclude that his act has no good reason whatsoever. Book 7 of the *Confessions* then gives a more ontological analysis of evil as the privation of the good, of being. Evil has no substance, no being; rather, it is the privation of being, the being of *meaningfulness*.

The complexity here is that suffering can be viewed as a privation too. Suffering is a privation of the fullness of being proper to a conscious being. It indicates a diminishment of our being. However, this is not evil in the proper moral sense of the word. It is sometimes referred to as “physical evil” as distinct from “moral evil.” Nonetheless, the ground of so-called physical evil is finitude, and even finitude itself can be considered a privation, the privation of unlimited being—hence the temptation of the serpent, “you will be like God” (Gen 3:5). But to view finite being primarily in terms of privation is to go down the path of various dualistic accounts that are implicitly suspicious of the goodness of finite created realities.

On the other hand, much of what we identify in terms of physical evil—for example, earthquakes and other natural disasters, diseases, malformations, and so on—arise out the real contingency of the universe, because it is constructed on the basis of both deterministic and statistical causation. Because God chooses that there be real contingency, including the most highly valued

contingency of human freedom, there will always be a statistical spread of outcomes. What is possible, with however small a probability, becomes inevitable over long periods and for large numbers. The very processes that drive evolutionary development allow for the possibility of genetic deformations and diseases (e.g., Down's syndrome, cystic fibrosis, sickle cell anemia, and so on) with all their painful consequences. In that sense God wills these sufferings because God wills the world to be a world in which such things can and will happen. The fact that people overcome such illnesses and disabilities is a constant reminder that suffering is not the greatest evil, and even in these sufferings meaning can be found. There can be dignity for us even in times of great suffering. To quote Pope John Paul II:

Suffering as it were contains a special call to the virtue which a human being must exercise on her own part. And this is the virtue of perseverance in bearing whatever disturbs and causes harm. In doing this, the individual unleashes hope which maintains in her the conviction that suffering will not get the better of her, that it will not deprive her of her dignity as a human being, a dignity linked to awareness of the meaning of life. (*Salvifici Doloris* 23)

Sin and Suffering

It is important to acknowledge that there is a strong existential linkage between the problems of suffering and evil. Even in the Christian context we find assertions of the link between sin and death—"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned" (Rom 5:12). Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden to face trial, suffering, and death, because they ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of life. Do we in fact believe that "if Adam had not sinned then we would not have suffered and died"?

We know from scientific accounts that death and suffering have been part of the biological order since the very beginning of life. The death of organisms is often the basis for the life of another organism, and the decay of one generation of living beings becomes the fertilizer for the next generation of living things. Surely death is "natural," part of the natural order of things? What difference does sin make in such a situation?

It is difficult to speculate on what human life would be like if there were no sin. Clearly the biological capacity for death and suffering are intrinsic to one's bodily constitution. However, one suggestion we can make is that sin changes the meaning of death and suffering. Because of sin, suffering and

death become ambiguous realities, tinged with a sense of loss and even punishment—Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve it? Why do we spontaneously link suffering with punishment in this way? Why is suffering only “fair” if it is linked somehow with guilt? Is death a joyous “return to the Father,” or does it lead to judgment and the possibility of condemnation?

Questions such as these indicate that suffering and death have taken on a new meaning in the light of sin and evil. Because of this new meaning the reality of suffering and death has changed for us. In this case we can say, “death came through sin” (Rom 5:12), in that the form of death we now experience is a different reality from the nature of death without sin. It has the character of “punishment for sin,” which it did not have before. It is now an ambiguous event in our lives, one we face with fear and trepidation, because of the ambiguity of our lives affected by sin.

Why Evil?

Finally, we can ask, why is there evil anyway? Perhaps the most shocking response to the question of “why evil?” is that in fact it has no answer. Why evil occurs is a fundamental mystery, and one that completely lacks an intelligent answer. Even God cannot answer the question of why someone sins. No satisfactory response can be found that would provide an intelligent answer to the question. The mystery of sin is a mystery even to God. Lonergan put the matter this way:

We can know sin as a fact; we cannot place it in intelligible correlation with other things except *per accidens* [accidentally]; that is, one sin can be correlated with another, for deficient antecedents have defective consequents; but the metaphysical surd of sin cannot be related explanatorily or causally with the integers that are objective truth; for sin is really irrational, a departure at once from the ordinance of the divine mind and from the dictate of right reason. The rational and the irrational cannot mix, except in fallacious speculation. And this precept is not merely relative to man; it is absolute. The mysteries of faith are mysteries only to us because of their excess of intelligibility; but the *mysterium iniquitatis* [mystery of iniquity] is mysterious in itself and objectively, because of a defect of intelligibility.²⁶

One might weaken the question by asking rather, Why does God allow evil? One immediate response is to state that God does not allow evil—in fact God forbids evil through the moral law: “hate what is evil, hold fast to what is

26. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 115.

good” (Rom 12:9). Further, God offers us divine grace so that we may resist the specious attraction of evil. So God enjoins us to resist sin and empowers us to do so.

One might further weaken the question to, Why doesn’t God do something about evil? The presumption is that God is not doing something about it. Even our own moral indignation at evil is itself a movement toward good, which God creates in us. Further, God acts through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to offer us forgiveness of our sins, and sends the Spirit to empower us to resist evil. The life of Jesus is an extended parable for how God deals with the problem of evil, namely, through redemptive suffering. The real question is not whether God is doing something, or should be doing more, but whether we are doing enough in response to the actions God has taken. For the problem of evil is a practical problem requiring a practical response. It is not a theoretical problem that we can “think away” or rationalize.

Finally, we might weaken the question even further, Why does God create a world in which evil occurs? Now human freedom is a great good; with freedom certainly comes the possibility of sin. There is a gap, however, between the possibility and the actuality of sinning. Could God have made a universe in which in fact no one ever sinned? Perhaps, but even in a world where sin occurs, responsibility for that sin remains with the sinner, not God. Certainly God could have made a world without freedom, but freedom is among the highest created values, a great good. And the fact of evil, unintelligible though it is, makes possible a new type of good, that of mercy, forgiveness, and redemption. This is not a “reason” for evil, or even for allowing evil. It is God’s response to the problem of evil, drawing good out of the evil that arises. In the end all we can really assert is that, despite the presence and fact of evil, this creation is still good—indeed it is very good.²⁷

PERSPECTIVES FROM OTHER RELIGIONS

Christians derive their belief in creation from the Scriptures, though Christianity also upholds a strong tradition of natural theology that would argue that these beliefs are congruent with and even derivable in some sense from reason alone (DS 3004).²⁸ Nonetheless other religions have their own perspectives in

27. It is perhaps worth noting here that the argument regarding this world being the “best of all possible worlds” because God creates it as good, is entirely fallacious. It assumes some uniform scale against which all possible worlds can be measured, and it assumes in addition that the scale has an upper bound. Without an upper bound the notion becomes vacuous.

28. H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, 36th ed. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1965) (hereafter DS). This

relation to the question of creation and the related issues of providence and evil. We shall now consider two of these.

Buddhism

We have already considered some of the differences between the Christian understanding of the human condition and that of Buddhism. Buddhism focuses attention on the problem of suffering, while Christianity views this as secondary to the problem of evil. This also reflects divergent approaches to the question of creation. For Buddhism there is no real sense of creation as the product of a divine creator. The world simply is, and is eternal. Buddhism has no creation myth, and the Buddha was not interested in metaphysical speculation about the origins of the world. For Buddhists, what “creates” the world is the mind, and this is in some sense an illusion. The materiality of the world is “unreal,” an illusion that we create in living our lives. The aim of Buddhism is enlightenment, to see through the illusion of the world and the desires that go with it. When we see through the illusion of creation we can eliminate our desires, and with it the suffering (*dukkha*) that these desires cause. When all desire is finally eliminated, we reach nirvana, or extinction.

We can analyze this position from a Christian perspective in light of some of what we have discussed above. If one assumes that the world has no creator, no origin, but is eternally existing, then it has no fundamental intelligibility grounded in a creative act of a wise and loving God. It comes closer to the view of Aristotle that God creates out of preexistent matter, only without God. Hence, there is not real order in creation, only the order imposed on it by the mind, in a desperate attempt to avoid total chaos. But this order is illusory, and our desperation for order leads us to desire the things of the world and so leads to suffering. In a sense, Buddhism is overwhelmed by the omnipresence of suffering, in which it can find no value or meaning. The only solution can be escape from our suffering and finitude by the elimination of all desire and resultant personal dissolution.

This is very different from the Christian position, which affirms both the reality and the goodness of the material world, grounded in the wise and loving act of God. For Christians the problem of the human condition is not suffering and desire but evil and the distortions of desire that occur in sin. Indeed, Christianity can envisage a positive role for suffering in overcoming evil. Rather than eliminate desire, the redemption that Christianity seeks lib-

teaching of Vatican I is repeated in *Dei Verbum* 6, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.

erates our desires to embrace the totality of the good, the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice and peace. Christians are actually called to a life of desire, but a desire for all things that are good, each desired in its proper proportion. Death then brings not extinction but the fulfillment of our ordered desire in the vision of God.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a very complex religious phenomenon. It comprises deep mystical elements, profound philosophical thought, together with popular manifestations that strike many Western moderns as bordering on the bizarre. In seeking some point of comparison with Christianity I shall consider a particular school of Hindu thought, Advaita Vedanta, which offers a “nondualist” interpretation of creation.²⁹ Many interpret Hindu teaching on creation as a form of monism whereby there is in fact only one reality, *Brahman*, the changeless, eternal ground of all being. The world that we experience is mere illusion, an appearance of being. The main “problem” of human existence is ignorance resulting in a dualistic consciousness that fails to see the fundamental oneness of all things. This stress on oneness is not just a philosophical position, but is also affirmed in the experience of Hindu mystics. Redemption is the overcoming of dualist consciousness and the realization that there is only one reality, that the higher self (*atman*) is Brahman. When the illusion of the world is stripped away, all that “remains is the impersonal, perfect *Brahman*-consciousness beyond relation, which is infinite, simple, eternal, joyous self-shining. Nothing remains to compromise the radiance, simplicity, fullness and transcendence of this One.”³⁰

A Christian response to this would want to say yes and no. On the one hand, terms such as “infinite,” “simple,” “eternal,” and “transcendent” resonate with the Christian understanding of God. On the other hand, the Christian conception is of a personal God who exists in a loving relationship with creation. The Vedantan response to Christian belief is to view Christianity as an inferior religion, caught up in a dualistic understanding whereby “God and the world . . . appear in relation to each other as limited parts of a larger whole.”³¹

29. I am drawing on Bradley Malkovsky, “Advaita Vedanta and Christian Faith,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 36 (1999): 397–422. The work by Francis Xavier Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), also provides some useful comparative material with a fuller methodological basis; see esp. 153–208.

30. Malkovsky, “Advaita Vedanta and Christian Faith,” 402.

31. *Ibid.*, 404. This criticism from Advaita Vedanta can be directed more to process theology than to classic Christian theology.

To them Christian belief in a personal God is little more than an anthropomorphic projection, particularly when they read biblical stories of God being angry, or destroying nations, or changing his mind.

However, just as we must distinguish popular Hinduism from its more philosophical expressions, so too we must recognize the same distinction in Christianity. While many Christians may take biblical stories at face value, early church fathers were aware of the difficulty in taking such stories literally. Origen warned against anthropomorphism in reading biblical stories about God, and Thomas Aquinas presents an account of God as creator in which few would recognize the God of the biblical narrative. For Aquinas, while the world is really related to God, God is not really related to the world, in the sense that creation cannot change or impact God in any way (*Summa Theologiae* I q. 3 a. 7).³² God is wholly Other from creation, not limited by it in any way. God is not just another being, but Being itself (*subsistens esse*).

In fact, some have argued that there are striking similarities between these two philosophical accounts of creation. The Vedantan position of the illusory character of the world is similar to the insistence of Aquinas on the radical contingency of creation. Creation is contingent not in terms of the chance and necessity we experience in creation but in terms of the more fundamental contingency of the very being of creation. Only God is necessary being, just as for the Hindu thinkers only Brahman is truly real. The insistence of the Vedantan position that Brahman is impersonal can act as an important corrective to Christians who too easily anthropomorphize God, reducing the reality of God to the same level as ourselves, only bigger!

CONCLUSION

Christian belief in creation, notably in the goodness of creation, is a fundamental base for all our theology of grace, redemption, and eschatology. Nonetheless, it is a belief that has been subject to vigorous questioning in modern times, particularly from process thinkers. As we move into a broader multifaith perspective, it is important to recognize the distinctive features of that belief, especially in relation to Eastern belief systems. Christianity's commitment to the goodness of creation is unequivocal, and it is precisely because of this commitment that it feels with greatest urgency the problem of sin and evil. The Christian story, however, speaks of more than creation and sin; it speaks of grace and redemption. The aberration that is sin is never the last word, for God responds to our human plight with love and forgiveness. These

32. Henceforth *ST*.

culminate in an eschatological future, the “resurrection of the dead,” which we can scarcely imagine. These issues and concerns, then, set the agenda for the present work, to explore these classical concerns in the light of modern science, contemporary Christian thought, the best of the Catholic tradition, and an increasingly multifaith global context.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Modern science speaks of the beginning of the universe in terms of a Big Bang. How is this different from the Christian conception of creation *ex nihilo*?
2. Many Christians take Genesis literally. How can we reconcile the biblical account of creation with a scientific account that tells us that the universe is billions of years old?
3. Often we have experiences that appear to be chance but are very meaningful, such as a chance meeting with a friend. Can you illustrate from your own experiences the meaning of “providence”?
4. People often identify the problems of evil and suffering. How would you distinguish them?
5. If the problem of evil is one of a lack of meaning, how do we then work to overcome evil?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING AND STUDY

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